

From *Craii de Curtea Veche* to *Rakes of the Old Court*: Mateiu Caragiale's Novel in Sean Cotter's Translation

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Abstract: In the early autumn of 2019 Sean Cotter who, before 2000, translated some of Nichita Danilov's poems and two essays by Mircea Eliade, followed, in the new century, by some of Nichita Stănescu's poems and Mircea Cărtărescu's novel *Orbitor*, came to Iași for the Festival of Literature and Translation (FILIT). Sean Cotter's latest feat of translation is *Rakes of the Old Court*, which the translator deems to be one of the "reperformances" of Mateiu Caragiale's *Craii de Curtea Veche*. In 1995, this particular novel was chosen by a poll of more than one hundred literary critics as the best Romanian novel of all times. On the 4th of October 2019 Sean Cotter gave a talk about his translation of the novel in a FILIT-related event organised by the Faculty of Letters of "Alexandru Ioan Cuza" University of Iași, and answered some questions about translation in an interview published in *Revista de Traduceri Literare*. This study looks into the cultural, aesthetic and linguistic challenges posed by a text which is an intersection of Balkan and Western, Latinate and Turkish, Roman and Greek, seasoned with French and German elements. This cultural and linguistic mix of coarseness and elegance, a dense forest of symbols, heraldic emblems and myths, shaped by Mateiu Caragiale in a refined novel of Romanian decadence, baffles the mind. The question is: how does it translate? I am inclined to give credit to Walter Benjamin's approach to translation contending that "the kinship of languages manifests itself in translations" and "this is not accomplished through the vague resemblance a copy bears to the original." I argue, therefore, following the line of Benjamin's argument, that Sean Cotter's *Rakes* is contained in Mateiu Caragiale's *Craii*, as an "abyeme" is in a "mise en abyeme."

Keywords: translation, Mateiu Caragiale, Sean Cotter, Decadence, transtext, paratext, *topos atopus*

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PREAMBLE

Set in 1910, Mateiu Caragiale's *Craii de Curtea Veche* is redolent of a cosmopolitan and decadent bohemia, dwellers of a city whose centre is the Old Court, the oldest feudal monument in Bucharest, which in the 14th century was the political and economic pivot of the city, expanded in the next three centuries. However, echoing Raymond Poincaré's words in the motto of Mateiu's novel ("Que voulez-vous, nous sommes ici aux portes de l'Orient"), the Old Court seems to be the epitome of a culture "at the gates of the Orient," where "tout est pris à la légère" because nothing will endure. The repeated arsons, earthquakes, floods, epidemics, wars and plundering expeditions had left the Old Court in ruins, which metaphorically translates the *genius loci* as a spirit that alters before it is chronicled.

According to the Romanian literary critic G. Călinescu, Mateiu took the title from an anecdote published by his father, the famous writer I. L. Caragiale, in a magazine of the time:

O ceată de mahalagii în frunte cu grecul Melanos s-a răsculat, după mazilirea lui Gr. Ghica, și a început a jefui orașul. Melanos, cu cucă de domn în cap și cu haine voievodale furate, trecea prin oraș cu "craii" lui, beat mort, călare pe măgar. Vechii crai erau deci un fel de boemi dezvățați, bucureșteni, cărora le corespund la altă epocă eroii cărții¹ (Călinescu 1985, 899).

This anecdote contains, in a nutshell, the carnivalesque atmosphere of Mateiu's novel: orgiastic, rule defying, truly a text that reflects its author's affinities with Poe's catoptric and dreamy tales, Huysman's decadence in *À rebours*, and Proust's temporal archeology. The novel was published in 1929 by Cartea Românească Press. Sean Cotter's translation of Mateiu Călinescu's novel under the title *Rakes of the Old Court* was published by the Northwestern University Press on the 15th of August 2021.

¹ A bunch of outskirt dwellers led by Melanos the Greek caused a riot, after Grigore Ghica had been dethroned, setting out to plunder the city. Melanos, wearing a ruler's Turkish top hat and stolen ruler's garb, would ride his donkey along the city streets, blind drunk, in tow with his "rakes." So the old rakes were a kind of debauched bohemians of Bucharest, whose counterparts are the book's heroes, in a different age. (My translation)

SEAN COTTER'S PARATEXT

Sean Cotter's *Rakes* is introduced to the readers of the English text by a Preface, a paratext whose opening passage draws them in by a minute and picturesque depiction of Mateiu, the text's author:

Dressed in a green frock, buttoned shoes, cape, and bowler hat, with his mustache waxed, face lightly powdered, and head held aloof, Mateiu stood out from the crowd on the streets of Bucharest, a Symbolist decadent lost in the Romanian capital. He kept his journal (written "only for myself") in French. He had a passion for heraldry, titles, and noble families, a drive many critics attribute to his extra-marital birth; his works often feature escutcheons and blazons, decorations that blend with his already highly ornamented writing. (Cotter, in Caragiale 2021, ix)

Cotter's portrait in English draws on G. Călinescu's portrait in *The History of Romanian Literature from Its Origins to the Present*. Thus, in Cotter's transtext, the book's author becomes a character in his own novel, maybe Pașadia's or possibly the narrator's *alter ego*. The line separating Călinescu's metatext from Mateiu's text is blurred, the line between the author's life and its projection into fiction is crossed. Like Pașadia and like the narrator, Mateiu is a writer, and like his fictional projections, he stands out from the motley crowd of a capital city in the Balkans, to which he reluctantly belongs in a defiant way.

Many linguistic, cultural and intertextual aspects are explained by Cotter in the Translator's Notes, appended to the text. For a model reader (in Umberto Eco's terms), Cotter's note on the difficulty of translating the novel's title sheds light, in a re-perusal, upon the author's portrait. The note refers the readers to the title, connecting it to the scene where blind drunk Pena Corcodușa flings the deprecating words "crai de curtea veche" right in the rakes' astounded faces. The Romanian critic Matei Călinescu insists on considering this scene the book's "stone."² Drawing on the Romanian critic Șerban Cioculescu's remarks, the translator weaves all the connotations of the phrase and brings them together into "the figure" in the text's "carpet"³:

Pena's outburst, "crai de Curtea-veche," may have come to her because they meet near the Old Court ruins, but as Mateiu suggests, it is not her

² „E scena generatoare a cărții, sâmburele ei” (Călinescu 2003, 321).

³ My extrapolation of the analogous intricacies at the core of Henry James's novella "The Figure in the Carpet."

own invention. An archaic word for “king,” sometimes used to refer to the Gospel magi, the term “crai” circulated with some frequency in the nineteenth century, according to Cioculescu (1994), even in the construction, “crai de Curtea Veche.” He asserts that Mateiu would certainly have known this passage from George Ionescu-Gion’s 1899 history of Bucharest. (Cotter, in Caragiale 2021, 105)

This note lays bare the text’s encyclopaedic fabric and its ironic twists. “Crai” has far-reaching linguistic and cultural connotations: its meaning lies in the tension between two opposite meanings, of which one is lofty and the other one debasing. Here, the task of the translator is doubled by that of the critic. Indeed, in it, transtext (the translated text), paratext (material not crafted by the author) and metatext (the critical discourse generated by the text) become compact. Based on Cioculescu’s exploration of the phrase, Cotter explains that the expression appeared in the late 18th century, in the wake of the Russian-Turkish war, which marked the fall of the Old Court from its former glory. A consequence of the Court’s fall was the fall of its dwellers from their former honours. What the expression in *Pena Corcodușa*’s outburst retains is the irony which lies in one meaning replacing another, with the shadow of the old meaning resurfacing here and there. Like the Court, which is a many-layered palimpsest, language, the novel’s “inner chronology” (Călinescu 2003, 312) and the characters are palimpsestic. The three rakes come to us, fantastically, from the 18th century, and they are cultural fetishes rather than characters.

Matei Călinescu speculates on the characters’ number, wondering whether they are four, three, two, or maybe one (Ibid, 321). To increase the eerie sense of their spectral presence as cultural fetishes traversing the ages and spaces (especially in *Pantazi*’s case) like in a dream, the names of three of them begin with the same letter (P), while the fourth (the narrator) is not given a name. However, the no-name narrator feels that *Pantazi* is “another version of myself” (Caragiale 2021, 17), and the reader may feel, in some strange sort of vertigo caused by the novel’s doubles and mirrors and by its erratic inner time, that the author projected himself in the fictional personae of all of them.

As far as the word “rakes” is concerned, Cotter explains why he selected this one by referring us to the Hungarian, Dutch, Spanish, French, German, and Italian translations of the word, plus its translation (by a different word) in an extended English excerpt done

by Alistair Ian Blyth. In this contrastive-comparative context, the translator argues:

“Crai” is a difficult word to match in translation. My choice of the antiquated “rakes” attempts to suggest an aristocratic debauchery. The young, wealthy male seducers implied by “rakes” is close, my colleague Gabriella Koszta tells me, to “Alkony,” the word used in the title of the first Hungarian translation. (Cotter, in Caragiale 2021, 106)

In another note, the translator initiates the reader into one more ironic twist of the many twists in the novel. If Matei Călinescu (2003, 321) notices that Pena’s name also begins with the letter P, Cotter reveals to us the secret of her name in Romanian, paraphrasing it in English: “Pena” is an old word for “punishment”; “corcodușa” is the plum from which țuica is made. In other words, her name means “hangover” (Cotter, in Caragiale 2021, 105). This is one of the many instances when the translator’s notes unlock the doors to the text’s secret chambers. Now that we know what her name means, we realize that in her drunken stupor, which may also be a consequence of time travel, Pena Corcodușa recognizes the “rakes of the Old Court” as companions. She and the rakes come from the old 18th century, when they (possibly?) rioted and plundered the city. Now the rakes may pass for honourable gentlemen, which is the image the narrator projects onto Pașadia in the first chapter and which he saves for Pantazi in the novel’s closure, but their gentlemanly demeanour may just be a trick these rakes have got up their sleeve. In their way of appearing to be what they are not, the rakes are like their author Mateiu, described by G. Călinescu (1985, 897), rather maliciously, as having the air of “a butler on his Sunday leave”⁴.

THE *TOPOS ATOPOS* IN TRANSLATION: THE BUCHAREST OF PANTAZI, PIRGU, PAȘADIA

Contending that “literature remains a vector of counterhegemonic speech deeply rooted in culture and geography”, Bertrand Westphal (2011, 116) situates literature and literary criticism in a larger interdisciplinary context, which is more able to account for their hybridity and dynamism. These two are, according to Homi Bhabha (1994), essential characteristics of culture.

Drawing on Lefebvre’s concept of “architectonics” and on Deleuze and Guattari’s “strata”, Westphal (2011, 137-143) proposes a

⁴ My translation.

“stratigraphic vision” rooted in a “metaphor of stratification”, where space is multilayered and time is asynchronous, and where the city becomes an intersection of spatial strata and temporal slices:

Space does not unfold in pure simultaneity due to the permanent reactivation of temporal layers that constitute and crisscross it. It also incorporates variations caused by the concatenation of diverse temporalities that regulate the rhythms of cultures. From one place to another, the perception of time and timeliness may differ. One’s present does not necessarily correspond to another’s. (Westphal 2011, 141)

This approach to the spatial-temporal dynamics of any place, and especially the stratified and asynchronous *chronotope* of the city (to use Bakhtin’s concept)⁵, led Westphal to his own concept of the “*topos atopos*,” as opposed to the “*topos koinos*, a common place” (Ibid, 145). Thus, “the geocriticism of a place must form a *topos atopos*, integrating what Fink calls “the flux of imaginary variation of possible transformations” (Ibid.). It is through this permanent reconfiguration of the *topos atopos* that Mateiu Caragiale unfolds the layers of his story in *Craii de Curtea Veche*, playing with their surfaces and depths in the reflections of compositional mirrors and doubles, analysed by Matei Călinescu (2003, 302-304).

Being “aux portes de l’Orient,” Bucharest is a liminal space: neither east, nor west, it is in-between. This is also the case of Istanbul, about which Westphal (2011, 147) wonders: “can we succeed in placing Istanbul in Istanbul? Nothing is less sure, because after all the Greek etymology of the place would be Istinpolis ‘toward the city,’ and Roland Barthes spoke of Loti’s Istanbul as a place ‘adrift’.” Linking this “adriftness” to Otherness, Westphal (2011, 146) opposes “*native*,” where “a point of view dominates; a temporality prevails,” to “*alter-native*”, which embraces the Other in time and space. Likewise, in Mateiu’s novel, Pantazi’s story is both a story of roots and one of travels. Pantazi is a Greek of noble extraction, but his “earliest ancestors, as far back as I know,” he confesses, “were seafaring thieves, free and daring men, they ventured after prey far and wide across the seas, from Jaffa to Baleare, from Ragusa to Tripoli” (Caragiale 2021, 42). In Pantazi’s account, there is also a Sicilian branch, but the family might as well be Norse. However, the only

⁵ M. M. Bakhtin theorised the ‘literary chronotope’. See *The Dialogic Imagination*. 1981. Austin: University of Texas Press.

certainty is that Pantazi descends from sailors, and so through him, Bucharest is connected with the whole Mediterranean region in a “counterhegemonic” way. Pantazi’s lineage is hybrid and rather indeterminate, and it is this misty and half dubious-half glorious past of his family that he brings to the place. Paradoxically, Pantazi is rooted in Bucharest, from which his mother “would never have acquiesced to move” (Ibid, 44), where his father was offered a ministry that he refused, and at the same time he is connected to an extravagant aunt who speaks Greek and

an old Court French, wide-ranging and deadly, scented with bergamot and musk. But when she spoke about our family’s past, she switched to Romanian, and then the story took on a mystical light; the woman found sublime pairs of words for the long resistance against the pagan hordes, the unexpected martyrdom, the triumph of faith over the bitter road. (Caragiale 2021, 47)

Mateiu Caragiale’s novel is about this fantastic mix of Eastern and Western cultures and languages, whose *topos atopos* is Bucharest. *Craii de Curtea Veche* is a novel in which the Other of culture and language is such a strong component that it allows its characters, most emblematically Pantazi, to move away from and return to Bucharest, whose heart is the Old Court, with new experiences and stories of the larger world. Having spent all the afternoons of his childhood in the presence of his polyglot and transcultural aunt Smaranda, always dressed in green and enchanting him with stories of betrayals and sufferings, Pantazi embraces all the cultures and languages with which he has been brought up. In his story-telling trance, Pantazi promises the bewitched narrator:

One day, I’ll tell you the entire story, and you’ll learn then, perhaps with surprise, about all her subtle tastes and tiny vanities, her love of flowers and scents, of dear things, adornments and jewels, her appetite for reckless spending that came to us from the Romanian side through her, and not as you might think, from the Greek. (Caragiale 2021, 47)

In its polyglot fabric and cultural liminality, the novel lends itself to translation. In other words, it invites translation, making it problematic at the same time. After all, how does one translate a novel where, like cultures, languages are interwoven in its dense texture to evoke a *topos atopos* like Bucharest and its decadent atmosphere of 1910? And aside from these formidable tasks, how does one translate Mateiu’s ornate

style, which adds an extra touch of exquisiteness to the mix? Aware of the challenge, the translator accounts for it in his Preface:

Rather than its action or characters, the book is prized above all for its ornate style, filled with archaic Romanian and base street language, saturated with Turkish, Roma, German, and Greek vocabulary. The novel's style provides ample demonstration of the complicated history of Romania, a nation at the crossroads of dead empires—the Ottoman, Russian, and Austro-Hungarian. All this complexity flows through the serpentine, opulent sentences, glittering in conflicting linguistic inheritances. The text resembles the turtle, in Huysmans's *À rebours*, that Esseintes covers in jewels—the novel constitutes a melancholy, reptilian world, lavishly ornamented in language. (Cotter, in Caragiale 2021, x)

In a daring feat of translation that equals the Romanian master's aesthetic and linguistic elegance and refinement, the translator selects infrequently used Latinate words in English, which sound rather alien to a user of a Germanic language, to render not only the foreignness and defamiliarising effects of the reading experience, which is at the same time an acquaintance the reader is compelled to make with a place “aux portes de l'Orient,” but also to draw attention to the art of dissonance that translation is. Sean Cotter foreignises his translated text by deploying Romanian words used by Mateiu Caragiale in his original novel. Thus, the reader in English will come across words in the Romanian spoken at the time like “cucoană,” “nene(a),” “conu” or Turkish words with a slightly altered spelling recorded by the English dictionaries like “Kaimakam,” “yatagan,” which coexist with French words (“monsieur,” “la bohème,” “déclassé”) and longer stretches of language in French, German and Latin. Maybe one of the most exquisite passages in Cotter's English text is Pantazi's refined evocation of his polyglot aunt Smaranda:

...In a brightly lit salon, elegant cucoanas decked with bijouterie and hooped malakoffs, boyars with thick sideburns or imperial mustaches, the order of Nizan glittering at their necks, bow deeply to kiss the hand of an old woman dressed in green, a tiny, desiccated old woman, her hair dyed carrot-orange, her eyes a faded blue. (Caragiale 2021, 45)

This is a Mateiesque flare of language, in which words of the most various origins parade graciously in front of a reader mesmerised with their sounds, glitters and colours. The words carefully selected by the

translator are a deluxe collection of flamboyant vocabulary deployed to evoke a cosmopolitan world of decadent elegance and refinement, displayed in the bijou case of Cotter's English.

Cultural hybridity and Otherness in *Craii de Curtea Veche* open Bucharest and its dwellers out to the large world, while at the same time keeping it enclosed in its putrid space haunted by the spectral figures of the rakes of the Old Court. The rakes are of the Old Court as much as they are of other places, languages and cultures that run through their veins. Their families' histories and their stories intersect with the larger canvas of history in the Balkans. And there is yet another face of otherness in Mateiu's novel, which is the abhorrent figure of Poponel led by Pirgu to the rakes' table. To describe him, and especially in Pirgu's company, Mateiu dips his quill in the most loathing shades of ink. However, the last brush of the portrait pardons him ("But still, his was not the blame: that belonged to God"), and so Poponel continues his existence in a Bucharest of sorts as a "person from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs" (Caragiale 2021, 35).

Of all the rakes, Pirgu is as much of his place as he is of his time. Unlike Pantazi and Paşadia, Pirgu has no past and no lineage but only a reckless present in which he struggles hard to climb the social ladder by all means. His role in the novel is to surround the refined rakes with all the roughness Bucharest has on offer, and with the coarseness of his own bawdy language. When he is introduced in the first chapter, he clearly is the embodiment and paragon of what Bucharest has vilest and most ghastly on display. In another feat of Mateiesque flare of language and cultural references, which he explains in the notes, Cotter paints Pirgu Hieronymus-Bosch-style. Taking in the passage, the reader is transported into a translation in words of Bosch's "The Garden of Earthly Delights":

Gore Pirgu was a sack of slime without pair or peer. His uncouth humor, like a cheeky court-jester, earned him the reputation of being a clever boy, to which was added—why, no one knows—also that of being a good boy, although he was only good at being bad. This white clown had the soul of a dogcatcher and gravedigger. Spoiled to the marrow from a young age, cardsharp, crimper, maid-ruiner, running with the pimps and swindlers, he had been the Benjamin of the Cazes Café and the Cherubino of the whorehouses. It disgusted me to research in more detail the complications of this rotten, sad creature, one who felt an unhealthy attraction solely for the foul and the putrid. In Pirgu's blood ran the desire for the depraved, gypsy life of our past ages, for

love affairs on the wrong side of town, shindigs at the convents, songs without decency, for anything one could call disgusting or shameless. (Caragiale 2021, 8)

Pașadia's attraction for Pirgu's company may seem odd but not so much so if one considers Pașadia's cold and calculated hedonism. When introduced to the reader, Pașadia is called "a brilliant star" (Caragiale 2021, 6). He is both Pirgu's and Pantazi's foil. To Pirgu's vulgarity he opposes refinement, and to Pantazi's love of everything Balkan and Gypsy he opposes a fierce loath of these. The eerie effect Pașadia's character has is that, of all the rakes, he most bafflingly leads two lives: one diurnal of bookish askesis and one nocturnal of careless debauchery. While Pantazi tells his own stories, Pașadia's life is told by the narrator "according to the story he seldom told" (Ibid, 47). In one of his visits to Pașadia's, the narrator reads the character's spirit in the atmosphere of the place itself:

When I entered, the vestibule was lit only by the flame of a few gnarled sticks burning happily in the wide hearth; their movement strangely animated the canvases on the walls; they gave startling windows onto the past, scenes from a world of martyrs and passion. Leaning on spears, the centurions of Domitian or Decius and the cavalry of wild beasts delectated on the raw agony of crucified virgins and young men pierced with arrows, under the somber rush of clouds over melancholy branches. I was in Pașadia's home. (Caragiale 2021, 61-62)

In the novel, the characters' homes are their secluded bubbles of fantasy, imbued with their owners' or lodgers' spirit. Nonetheless, the novel is also the public space of restaurants, bodegas and taverns. The weirdest of these public places is Arnoteanu's *lupanar*, where Pirgu rules. Viewed from the yard, Arnoteanu's house is a "ruin," and looking at it the narrator remarks that it "acquired, under the lunar brightness, a mysterious air" (Ibid, 78) that gives him the creeps. Arnoteanu's house is, in the most bizarre way, some sort of miniature replica of the Old Court, which Pașadia describes as

made to house the polloi and Gypsies, without design, without style, cobbled from additions, plaster, and patches, ready to serve, in its ugliness, as backdrop to the miscreancy of powerful gangs culled from foreign cripples and heavily dosed with Gypsy blood. (Caragiale 2021, 13)

“DOLOR AND DECEPTION”

The translator considers that one of the opening passages in the novel, which circularly recurs in its closure, with very slight variations, is emblematic for Mateiu’s ornate style and decadent atmosphere in *Craii de Curtea Veche*:

I would have started conversation, if the musicians had not begun precisely that waltz for which Pantazi had a weakness, a slow, dragging waltz, voluptuous and sad, almost funereal. In its mollitious oscillation, it traced a nostalgic and endlessly somber passion, one so rending that the very pleasure of listening to it became a kind of suffering. When the taut violin strings began to mimic a careworn confession, the entire hall, in profound enchantment, fell mute. Ever darker, lower, and slower, describing dolor and deception, wandering and pain, rue and regret, the song, suffocated in nostalgia, drifted away, withered into a whisper, to a lost, tardy, and pointless cry. (Caragiale 2021, 5)

Cotter sees in this passage, whose euphonic and poetic effects he translates into an English that lets Mateiu’s style shine through, a point when the novel

turns away from the social and toward the aesthetic, as the narration turns away from conversation, toward this long description of the oscillations and tautness that create the effect of nostalgia, the artistry which resolves only in its own decay and pointlessness. In a similar way, the novel turns away from its characters and toward its style, even as this style risks collapsing under its own weight. Mateiu’s rhetorical excess leads to a Romanian so exoticized that, even for many native speakers, it becomes illegible. (Cotter in Caragiale, 2021, xi)

TRANSLATING THE “ILLEGIBLE” AS “RE-CREATION”

Invoking Walter Benjamin’s approach to translation in the 1921 essay “The Task of the Translator,” where the German critic contends that “the kinship of languages manifests itself in translations” and “this is not accomplished through the vague resemblance a copy bears to the original” (Benjamin 1996, 256), Homi Bhabha argues that “unlike the original where fruit and skin form a certain unity, in the act of translation the content or subject matter is made disjunct, overwhelmed and alienated by the form of signification, like a royal robe with ample folds” (Bhabha 1994, 228). There is no unity of “fruit and skin” in Mateiu’s original text to begin with. What makes *Craii de Curtea Veche* such an extraordinarily unique reading experience is its “royal robe” beneath whose “ample folds” translation finds its way of

re-creating “Mateiu’s music” (Cotter in Caragiale, 2021, xiv) in *Rakes of the Old Court*.

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