



Analysis of the Russian Translation of the Short Story “With Ears on the Back” by Mircea Cărtărescu (from the Collection “Why We Love Women”)

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Abstract: This article presents a comprehensive philological and translation studies analysis of Mircea Cărtărescu’s short story “With Ears on the Back” (*Cu urechile pe spate*) from the collection “Why We Love Women” (*De ce iubim femeile*). The research focuses on the deconstruction of male egocentrism and the mechanisms underlying the formation of a “narrative of repentance.” Particular emphasis is placed on the translation strategies employed by Anastasia Starostina. The work reflects on how “emotional autism” can be concealed behind an intellectual persona and examines how the translator identified Russian lexical choices capable of conveying a visceral sense of guilt.

Keywords: contemporary Romanian literature; literary translation; comparative analysis; postmodernism; autofiction.

1. Literary Context: Mircea Cărtărescu and the “Phenomenon of Femininity”

Mircea Cărtărescu (b. 1956) is a central figure in contemporary Romanian literature and an acclaimed master of European postmodernism. He is frequently dubbed the “Balkan Márquez.” As noted by scholar Andrei Bodi, Cărtărescu’s prose is characterized by a “ludic universe” (*universul ludic*), wherein the boundaries between reality and dream (*fluctuația între realitate și vis*) are entirely blurred

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(Bodiu, 2000, p. 42). Critics identify autofiction, ontological surrealism, and the metaphysics of corporeality as key features of Cărtărescu's artistic method. The author is constantly present in the text as a character, providing commentary on the very process of writing. Cărtărescu's artistic world synthesizes sensuality and intellectuality, postmodernism and profound emotionality, the Balkan "corporeal" tradition, and Latin American magical realism, all expressed through dense poetic language and epic scope.

The collection *Why We Love Women* (2004; Russian ed. 2011) became an absolute bestseller in Romania, with a record circulation of 150,000 copies. Despite the apparent lightness of its title, the book represents a memory space where Cărtărescu captures the fleeting "feminine" in his own destiny. The collection operates by the laws of association: childhood memories of his mother flow seamlessly into fleeting encounters in the metro and complex romantic plots.

The prose clearly echoes the works of Nabokov and Salinger, yet this is not dry imitation but an acknowledgment of the extent to which literature permeates real life. The author captures mysticism in the simplest things—scents, dreams, or sudden flashes of passion—viewing them as the sole path to self-knowledge. This is an intensely personal, at times uncomfortable confession, in which the admission of one's own weaknesses evolves into a profound reflection on how time transforms us. Here, woman acts as the "ontological axis" of the universe: "...from them we emerged and to them we return, and our mind revolves like a heavy planet, again and again, around them alone" (Cărtărescu, 2011, p. 211; cf. orig.: Cărtărescu, 2004, p. 168).

An attempt to dissect Cărtărescu's prose inevitably confronts the researcher with a multilayered ideological core where reality does not merely coexist with fantasy but literally germinates through it. Female images in Cărtărescu's work are not characters in the conventional sense but rather powerful gravitational centers that hold the narrator's fragile consciousness in orbit.

2. The Short Story "With Ears on the Back": A Vivisection of Egocentrism

The short story "With Ears on the Back" (*Cu urechile pe spate*) stands apart in this cycle. It is not a hymn to love, but a merciless vivisection of one's own egocentrism. It serves as the ethical center of the collection, where the author ruthlessly dissects

his own past. The text is structured as a retrospective confession by a forty-six-year-old protagonist, reflecting on his life and the actions of his youth. At twenty-six, the narrator sincerely believed he had done nothing wrong in life. Twenty years later, he realized that his life was a “long series of cruelties, negligences, and misunderstandings,” coming to the conclusion that maturity is the understanding that you are a “scoundrel, fundamentally and utterly.”

The narrator emphasizes that his most agonizing memories are not isolated mistakes but rather the most vivid manifestations of a systemic behavioral model. He recalls his “coldness and insensitivity” toward his mother, the “sadism” with which he ridiculed his sister, and the “despotism” he exercised over domestic animals. Against this backdrop, the episodes involving the cat and Rodica cease to be accidental incidents and become a concentrated expression of his personality. These “vivid images from the past, my most distressing, most shameful, and most oppressive deeds” constantly haunt his memory, destroying any possibility of spiritual peace. These two memories illustrate how cruelty, manifested in different forms, leads to a single result—an indelible sense of guilt, which becomes the bitter price of the protagonist's insight. Through the retrospective of these two key episodes, we observe the various facets of the protagonist's egocentrism and indifference, which form the foundation of his later self-condemnation.

The incident with the domestic cat was provoked by a trifle—she had “gnawed the corner of a book.” The protagonist's reaction is disproportionate and irrational: seized by a “mad rage,” he throws a defenseless creature—one raised indoors and utterly unsuited for survival—out into the street. Crucially, the protagonist was fully aware of the fatality of his action even in that moment. He admits: “I perfectly understood that she, a domestic cat, stood no chance of surviving on the street and that, in fact, I was effectively killing her with my own hands.” Years later, this memory does not merely weigh on him; it transforms into a symbol of eternal self-accusation. He describes this sensation with physiological precision: the memory of the cat is “a bloody nail driven straight into my brain.”

While the cruelty toward the cat was a spontaneous outburst, the story of Rodica is an example of cold, calculated, and prolonged heartlessness. The protagonist enters the relationship not out of sympathy, but from loneliness and a longing for a lost “great love.” He views Rodica, whom he describes detachedly (“there was no attractiveness in her,” “resembled a teddy bear”), merely as a means to fill an internal void. Later, upon receiving her only childhood black-and-white photograph—in which Rodica was no more than twelve years old and looked “quite fat” and “even

more defenseless”—he begins to see something more in her: “so the Aleph shone in the dungeon of Borges’s hero,” a hint at an entire world contained within this nondescript image, which he had failed to discern at the time. Consequently, for the narrator, the photograph kept in the top drawer of his desk, a constant reminder of Rodica, becomes a “world center of longing.”

His cruelty manifests in a series of deliberate actions toward Rodica. For instance, to break up with her the first time, he recounts in detail his affair at a writers' camp, where he was “submerged up to his ears in the filth of sex, drinking, and jealousy,” coolly observing as she turns “white as chalk.” He then seeks her out again purely “out of boredom” to escape his oppressive loneliness. He enters into an intimate relationship with Rodica—her first—without feeling “even a trace of tenderness”; on his part, it is an intimacy without emotion. Later, upon learning she is not pregnant, he feels relief and decides that this is the “most suitable moment to break up with her again, this time finally,” employing trite and false phrases.

The consequences for Rodica prove devastating: the protagonist learns “that she was very ill and that from that summer she could no longer leave the house.” Years later, the depth of his remorse is such that he compares his feelings to those of Shakespeare’s murderer, Macbeth, “looking at his blood-stained hands.”

The systematization of these two stories (the cat and Rodica) reveals the common nature of the protagonist’s guilt. Both acts, whether impulsive or calculated, stem from a single fundamental flaw: a solipsistic inability to perceive the vulnerable “other” (a dependent animal, an emotionally open girl) as anything other than an object to serve one’s own emotional needs—be it anger or boredom.

3. Symbolic Keys: The Phrase “With Ears on the Back” and the Metaphor of the Pearl

Beyond the direct narrative, Cărtărescu employs two powerful symbols that deepen the understanding of tragedy and guilt: the mysterious phrase “with ears on the back” and the image of the pearl.

Rodica’s strange expression, “with ears on the back” (*cu urechile pe spate*), which she inserts into her speech “absolutely out of place,” functions as an idiosyncratic leitmotif, emphasizing her emotional isolation and childlike defenselessness. The phrase appears at moments of peak emotional tension or confusion. The first time is after the protagonist quotes Ezra Pound’s complex poetry to her; the second is after

their first kiss; and the third occurs during their final, most painful breakup. Thus, it is not merely adolescent slang, but a kind of idiolinguistic shield. It represents a retreat into a private, non-referential language when the external world becomes too complex or cruel. By uttering these words with tears in her eyes at the end of their relationship, Rodica uses the only means available to her to express pain and bewilderment. For the protagonist, however, this phrase remains forever a symbol of his inability to understand and hear another person or to penetrate their unique inner world.

Following their separation, the narrator attempted for twenty-two years to learn something about Rodica, but discovered only the public fact: she had been very ill and had not left her house since that summer. Occasionally, he would come across her small articles or poems in literary newspapers. The image of the pearl appears at the end of the story when the hero recounts one of Rodica's poems, written years after their breakup.

“One poem tells of a sick, very sick woman. No one knows what is wrong with her. But when, after long suffering, the woman finally dies and they perform an autopsy, they extract from her abdomen a pearl with an ashen luster the size of a bowling ball. The largest and heaviest pearl in the world” (Cărtărescu, 2011, p. 150; cf. orig.: Cărtărescu, 2004, p. 71).

Analyzing this metaphor requires attention to detail. Recall how a pearl is born: a grain of sand—a foreign body—enters the shell, causing pain to the mollusk, which then protects itself by coating this pain layer by layer with nacre. This enormous, grotesque, heavy, ashen pearl is the sum of all the pain he inflicted upon her. All her humiliations, unrequited love, illness, and loneliness crystallized within her. He became that very grain of sand that entered her life; he was the source of her suffering. And for the rest of her life, she transformed that suffering into something else—into poetry, into this metaphorical pearl. It is the culmination of her life and, simultaneously, a silent verdict upon the narrator.

Thus, the pearl is a symbol of vast, hidden internal pain that has crystallized into something weightless and even beautiful in its own way—into a work of art. However, the key is the context of its discovery: an autopsy. This implies that the massive, heavy treasure was not just hidden from the world but was also the cause of the fatal illness. It is beauty born of suffering that ultimately killed its bearer. The “ashen luster” points to a scorched soul, while the enormous weight signifies the unbearable burden of what was endured. The pearl becomes a tragic symbol of

Rodica's deep and complex inner world, which the narrator failed to discern during her lifetime.

4. Translation Method of Anastasia Starostina

Literary translation is always something more than the mere transfer of information from one language to another. Anastasia Starostina's translation warrants a separate philological analysis. Her work with Cărtărescu represents a constant search for a balance between intellectual sophistication and the emotional rawness of life. A telling example from the story under analysis occurs when the protagonist realizes the magnitude of his baseness. In the Romanian text, the rather expressively neutral word *rău* ("bad") is used: *A fi matur... nu înseamnă altceva decât a înțelege că ești rău.* However, in the Russian translation, it is transformed into the biting "scoundrel" (*сволочь*): "And being mature... means nothing other than understanding that you are a scoundrel, fundamentally" (Cărtărescu, 2011, p. 142; Cărtărescu, 2004, p. 69). Within the Russian context, this decision is uniquely correct. "I was bad" would sound like a childish excuse, whereas "scoundrel" serves as a definitive self-sentence—that very moment of bitter maturation of which the author writes. Starostina does not shy away from this harshness, understanding that in Cărtărescu's world, honesty is always more paramount than euphony. The word "scoundrel" unsettles the reader, forcing them to experience the very physical pain and self-loathing described by the author.

Table 1. Key Phrase and Confession

Original (RO)	Translation (RU)	Translation Features and Transformations
„Cu urechile pe spate”, mi-a șoptit ea.	Со спины уши, — ми-а прошептала она. (With ears on the back)	Functional Equivalence: Starostina creates a strange, "shifted" phrase that sounds just as mysterious and absurd in Russian as it does in the original.
A fi matur... nu înseamnă altceva decât a înțelege că ești rău.	Зрелость... означает не что иное, как понимание, что ты сволочь . (Maturity... means nothing other than understanding that you are a scoundrel.)	Logical Modulation: The replacement of <i>rău</i> ("bad") with "scoundrel." According to Ya. I. Retsker, this is justified by the expressive concretization of the context.

Table 2. Description of Rodica (The Aestheticization of the Unattractive)

Original (RO)	Translation (RU)	Translation Features and Transformations
...semăna cu un ursuleț de pluș.	...походила на плюшевого медвежонка. (...resembled a teddy bear.)	Direct Translation: Preservation of the key comparison-leitmotif.
...o fetiță scundă, blondă, gene și cu ochi de porțelan.	...приземистая коротышка, белобрысая, без ресниц, фарфоровыми глазками. (squat little thing, flaxen-haired, lashless, with porcelain eyes.)	Semantic Development (Modulation): <i>Fetiță scundă</i> ("short girl") is transformed into "squat little thing" (<i>приземистая</i>). Starostina deliberately roughens the text to convey the narrator's cynical gaze.
Chiloți cu elasticul înnodat într-o parte.	Большие трусы на резинке, соборившейся набок. (Large type of fabric in Romania. The translator replaces the technical term with a bunched to the side.)	Cultural Adaptation: <i>Tetra</i> is a specific descriptive image that evokes similar associations for the Russian reader (Soviet childhood, poverty).

The scene in the pancake house (**clătitărie**) serves as the emotional and compositional finale of the characters' relationship. Here, Cărtărescu's "controlled orality" reaches its peak: the mundane banality of the situation contrasts with Rodica's existential catastrophe. A comparison of Mircea Cărtărescu's original text and Anastasia Starostina's translation demonstrates a blend of philological precision and deep stylistic adaptation, which helps to convey the specific "viscous" atmosphere of the author's prose.

We shall highlight the main aspects upon which this comparison is built:

1. **Lexical Substitutions:** The translator frequently resorts to substitutions that intensify the existential weight of the text. For example, ***Penibil vs. Oppressive (Тягостно)***: Starostina translates the Romanian *penibil* (awkward, distressing, pitiful) as "oppressive." This shifts the emphasis from the outward awkwardness of the situation to its psychological unbearableness. Another example is ***A dărâme masa vs. Tear down the walls (Разнести стены)***: In the original, Rodica stands up so abruptly that she is ready to "overturn the table" (*dărâme masa*). In the Russian version, she is ready to "tear down the walls" (*разнести стены*). This hyperbole underscores the scale of her hidden despair, which at that moment bursts forth with destructive force.
2. **The Central Challenge:** The phrase "**Cu urechile pe spate**" represents a significant hurdle. Starostina decides to translate it literally: "With ears on the

back” (*Со спины уши*). The translator keeps the phrase unchanged throughout the text, establishing it as a meaningless yet sacred symbol of Rodica’s shattered world. The narrator himself notes the strangeness of this phrase, dismissing it as “lyceum argot.” The literal translation preserves this distance—for the Russian reader, the phrase sounds just as absurd and enigmatic as it does to the protagonist himself. This underscores the narrator’s “emotional autism”: he hears the words but fails to grasp their inner meaning for Rodica.

3. **Rhythm and Syntax:** Cărtărescu writes in short, clipped sentences when describing the narrator's cynical decisions (*Am făcut-o din plictiseală / I did it out of boredom*). The translation strictly adheres to this rhythm. ***Stângaci și artificios vs. Clumsy and false (Сбивчивую, фальшивую):*** The translator selects the epithets precisely. “Clumsy” (*сбивчивая*) conveys the uncertainty (*stângaci* — awkward), while “false” (*фальшивая*) conveys the artificiality (*artificios*) of the protagonist’s speech.

4. **The Sensory World:** Starostina treats Cărtărescu’s sensory world with great care. ***Lacrimile în ochii ei fără gene / Tears welling in her lashless eyes:*** This vital detail of Rodica’s appearance is preserved, serving throughout the collection as a marker of her defenselessness. ***I-am telefonat insistent / Calling her insistently (Названивал её настойчиво):*** A successful choice of the Russian verb *nazvanival* (to call repeatedly/persistently), which conveys the duration and nagging nature of the process better than a simple “called.”

5. Conclusion

The narrator is an intellectual, a teacher immersed in the texts of Ezra Pound. His tragedy lies in his “emotional autism”—an inability to empathize with the object of his boredom. Rodica is the antithesis of classical beauty. Described as a “teddy bear,” defenseless and infantile, she becomes the embodiment of vulnerability. Her strange phrase, “with ears on the back,” is a hermetic code of innocence that the protagonist is powerless to decipher. The metaphor of the Pearl is the materialization of accumulated suffering. The pearl is born from pain, and its immense weight at the end is the weight of the guilt that the narrator now carries. This pearl is a kind of “Aleph” of suffering, a symbol that no number of books read can justify a lack of compassion. Just as art, a pearl, or a poem is born from Rodica’s suffering, so too is the story “With Ears on the Back” born from the guilt and suffering of the matured protagonist—the author’s alter ego.

Anastasia Starostina's translation is not merely an equivalent but an "experience" of the text. She does not attempt to smooth over the edges or make the characters' speech more natural. On the contrary, by preserving strange turns of phrase and intensifying sharp epithets, she recreates the very atmosphere of male egocentrism and late-onset repentance that forms the core of Cărtărescu's prose.

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