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ANDREI CODRESCU: THE MULTI-IDENTITY MAN

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Abstract: *The main goal of the present study is to sketch the multi-faceted personality of the Romanian-American writer Andrei Codrescu. Significant aspects derived from both his biographical background and interviews to various literary magazines will help in determining the author's profile: a person released from the obsession of a unique cultural and linguistic identity and fully integrated into the new context of a global culture.*

Keywords: *exile, cultural and linguistic identity, heteronyms, lyric masks.*

1. Biographical Guidelines

Andrei Codrescu (b. Perlmutter), a Romanian-American poet, novelist, essayist and translator of Jewish origin, was born on December 20, 1946 in Sibiu, Romania. After having graduated from "Gheorghe Lazăr" High School in his native town (1965), he leaves the country along with his mother, as part of a ransom program initiated by the Israeli government. Following very brief relocations to Rome and Paris, the writer eventually settles in the United States, where he starts learning English. For a couple of years he will live in New York City, where he meets the most prominent figures of contemporary American poetry: Ted Berrigan, Robert Creeley, Joel Oppenheimer, Paul Blackburn, Anne Waldman, Lewis Warsh, etc. After having grasped the basics of the adopted language, Codrescu becomes acquainted with the artistic entourage around the *New York School*, an informal group of American poets, painters, dancers and musicians active in the 50's and 60's, who drew inspiration from Surrealism and the contemporary avant-garde art movements. As part of this artistic circle, he starts publishing in one of the School's mimeographed magazines (*The World*), in parallel with his literary contributions to *Work*, a 'mainstream' magazine. This early experience as an American writer is charmingly evoked by Codrescu in an interview given to Constantin Pricop:

"*The World* was the monthly magazine published by St. Marks Poetry Workshop in New York, the main publication of *New York School* movement. It was edited by Anne Waldman and Lewis Warsh, with the help of my friend and mentor, Ted Berrigan. *Work* was a 'serious', quarterly magazine, promoting 'academic' poets, which made "Tristan Tzara's" unpublished poems to be taken seriously. At *The World* we used to have a ludicrous attitude and seized any opportunity to defy the mainstream culture, represented by *Work.*" (Pricop, *Sensul diferenţei...*)

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In 1970 Codrescu moves to San Francisco "where the psychedelic revolution, the Pacific Ocean and Zen meditation rendered the contemporary experiences more mystical" (Pricop, *Sensul diferenței...*). Here, he becomes a regular participant in poetry reading sessions at Coffee Gallery, together with Tom Veitch, Terry Patten, Michael Palmer, Aram Saroyan, Pat Nolan, etc.

In 1974, the writer changes residence to Monte Rio, in northern California. Yet—interestingly enough—he fails once again to settle down, as if predestined to perpetual exile in the grand scheme of Life.

There follows a stay in Baltimore over a span of seven years, from 1977 to 1984. During this period, he contributes with an opinion column to *The Baltimore Sun*, and teaches literature at Johns Hopkins University. Since 1983, Codrescu has been a regular commentator on National Public Radio's news program "All Things Considered".

In 1984, the author moves to Baton Rouge, where he becomes a McCurdy Distinguished Professor of English and Comparative Literature at Louisiana State University. Apart from this, he works as the editor of the online magazine *Exquisite Corpse: A Journal of Letters & Life*. According to his own confession, "the South was, in a way, for me a return to the roots, as here I have found the Balkans' love of life and southern indolence, associated with a particular attachment for the vernacular language, exhausted in most other regions by television and urban discomfort." (Manolescu, 178)

The writer revisits his native country on two dramatic occasions — in December 1989 and June 1990, respectively — as a reporter for National Public Radio and ABC News. These journeys back home will result in a much acclaimed autobiographical book, *The Hole in the Flag* (1991), which includes a vivid coverage of the tensions during the Romanian Revolution and the miners' invasion into the Capital, as well as touching episodes depicting his encounter with the native places, the last surviving relatives, or few of his former schoolmates. In the *Preface* to the Romanian edition, Vladimir Tismăneanu notices: "this book captures the gloomy political intrigues of those who have unfairly derived benefits from the Revolution, as well as that mixture of heroism, innocence and desperation that made possible the miracle of December 1989."

2. "I'm an amalgam, a crossbreed…"

Andrei Codrescu started publishing poetry under the pen-name Andrei Steiu, first in his native town (*Tribuna Sibiului*), and then in Bucharest (*Luceafărul*, *Gazeta literară*). It is only in 1967—during his stay in Italy—that he first signs with his current pseudonym a poem published in *Revista Scriitorilor Români*. It will not be long until the poet will create fictitious biographical 'masks' in the manner of Pessoa:

"I conceived a feminist and traditionalist poet, Maria Parfenie, who was published both in exile—in magazines such as *Revista Fundațiilor Regale, Limite, Destin* —and in the country, in M. R. Paraschivescu's *Luceafărul*. Even Andrei Codrescu, who was somehow more 'vanguard' than Maria Parfenie, published in these magazines. The poems were very 'beautiful', written in a classical, crystal-like language, with nothing colloquial or informal. […] They were dark, regretful, sad poems, *in memoriam* for my adolescence, country, and Romanian language." (Pricop, *Sensul diferenței...*)

Yet "regrets" will shortly come to an end with the first lyric productions in the adopted language — as the author confesses with a touch of humor: "my first poems in English were written straight on the arms of these girls that I met at Wayne State

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Cafeteria back in Detroit". The writer's "ludicrous attitude" of his early American experience is still visible in the bookish play of projecting the *self* in the biography of some imaginary poets, under whose names Codrescu publishes several poem cycles: "Julio Hernandez 'is a Puerto Rican poet in detention, born in the East Side of New York in 1967' […]; Peter Boone is 'an ex-beatnik who, in Vietnam or somewhere else, became a sort of mystic fascist' […]; Alice Henderson-Codrescu, 'whose name I shamelessly borrowed from my wife, is the man turned into a woman—maybe the most unknown woman there has ever existed'; and Calvin Boone is 'a Dominican monk, Peter's relative'." (Manolescu, 179)

By means of these *heteronyms*, Andrei Codrescu "charts a vast existential and cultural territory, located at the junction between Europe and America, between the liberalism of the 60's and the recession of the next decade". (Corniş-Pop, *Incursiuni în noi limbaje...*)

Interesting and symptomatic of the manner in which the exiled writer relates to his own identity is the fact that Andrei Codrescu pushes this game of psychological doubling to the 'fraudulent' limit of substituting himself with the founder of Dada movement, by attributing Tzara the paternity of several would-be 'unpublished' poems:

"I also published in *Work* a poem cycle 'by Tristan Tzara', which had been written by me in English and then translated into Romanian. Tristan Tzara's 'unpublished' poems were much debated by the critics. The aim, I guess, behind this 'translations' was to bridge the gap between the languages, to find a way of justifying my lay knowledge of English." (Pricop, *Sensul diferenței...*)

Beyond the ludicrous aspect of this postmodern-like bravado, however, one might perceive the grimace of the exiled writer, transplanted into an allogeneous, linguistic and cultural environment, and confronted with the necessity to recreate himself. This process of identity mutation is actually deep-rooted in the author's own biography — whose Jewish origin had to be concealed in the public space of communist Romania. The carnival-like play of lyric masks was intended to undermine the obsession of a unique identity and, equally important, to legitimate a 'multi-identity' ego:

"When I conceived Maria Parfenie, I was already in favor of self-invention. I was born Andrei Perlmutter, I became Andrei Steiu (with the aid of a 'natural' anti-Semitic state of mind at home, which would have frowned upon a printed 'Perlmutter'), and after that, in Italy, I became Codrescu. […] My other inventions (not only Maria Parfenie, the Romanian poetess, but also the American poets Julio Hernandez, Peter Boone, Alice Henderson-Codrescu, 'Tristan Tzara') were, on the one hand, the expression of a skilful schizophrenia, and on the other hand the school where I've learned how to imagine the 'others': A kind of dramaturgy, if you like, — characters of my auto-pedagogical theater. As for my intention to remain a Romanian author in America — it doesn't exist! My only intention was to be a poet — how and of what expression, I didn't know. I think I wanted to be both a Romanian and an American poet." (Pricop, *Sensul diferenței...*)

This sort of nonchalance in front of 'otherness'—equally favored by the destination of his exile (i.e. hippie America of the 60's) and the subsequent evolution of society toward an age of plurilingualism and multiculturalism — facilitated the writer's access to, and ascension within, the American cultural environment:

"For me, my only fortune was that I wasn't American, that I embodied differences, oddity, and exoticism. The sense of otherness has been there with me since I was born — I'm Jewish, so I was also different back in Romania. Unfortunately,

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Romanians see otherness as something menacing. In Romania, the prudence of a child who feels himself 'different' makes him hide, wipe out his traces, blur his identity. In 1966 Americans saw otherness as something interesting." (Pricop, *Sensul diferenței...*)

Being asked by Nicolae Stoie, the chief editor of *Astra* magazine, what means to the American writer Andrei Codrescu to 'return home', he replied: "As a writer, my 'home' has always been the language, the language in which I've written and lived. I've lived in both Romanian and English, and I'm home in both of them. In our time it's possible, thank God, for a man and a writer to be home in two or five countries, in two or five languages." (Stoie, *Obsesia unicei identități...*)

This conclusion — the ubiquity of the concept of 'home' by cultural and linguistic expansion — Codrescu reaches once he has grown aware of the disappearance of the 'outside', within the political context of the fall of the 'Iron Curtain' and the abolition, within the European area, of the great historical dichotomy *capitalism* vs. *communism*: "Having escaped 'outside' — in the Occident and, eventually, in the United States, where he became a famous poet, essayist, and journalist—Andrei Codrescu first lost his 'inside', and today, with the dissolution of the communist Gulag, also discovers the disappearance of the 'outside'." (Culianu, *O lecție de politică*)

Unlike the majority of his fellow-writers in exile — who take steady pains to preserve their linguistic identity and their affiliation to Romanian culture — Andrei Codrescu opts for the metaphor of the American *melting pot* in defining his multi-faceted identity:

"Once again, it's not about two distinct identities: my 'American' identity isn't torn apart from the 'Romanian' one — I'm an amalgam, a crossbreed. This amalgam also consists of my Jewish origin, of my childhood in Sibiu, of Transylvania, of all the cities I've lived in and all the languages I've spoken, including the German and Hungarian of my early childhood." (Stoie, *Obsesia unicei identități...*)

From this standpoint, the writer overcomes the 'nostalgia of origins' with its inherent tragic echoes, joining—alongside Petru Popescu and other fresher names of our literary exile—the group of those released from the obsession of a unique cultural and linguistic identity.

In Codrescu's view, it is nowadays possible—within the new context of a global(ized) culture—that a writer make himself *at home* in more than one geographic and linguistic space, by resorting to the diverse means of communication in today's society: "The present-day richness and the gift of immediate communication make it possible the multi-identity man, enriched by 'homes' and languages. The obsession of a unique identity only diverts us away from the contemporary reality and pushes us off the history's track." (Stoie, *idem*)

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