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IMAGINING MILLENARIAN SCENARIOS WITH A. CODRESCU AND B. SUCEAVĂ

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Abstract: *The main goal of the present study is to draw a parallel between the way two Romanian-American contemporary writers—Andrei Codrescu and Bogdan Suceavă—imagine apocalyptic scenarios of the clash between the good and the evil at the turn of the new millennium in their critically acclaimed novels* Messi@h *and* Coming from an Off-Key Time. *Particular emphasis will be placed upon plot and character construction, atmosphere, style, significance of symbols.*

Key words: *messianism, millennial fear, cyber-identity, salvation, parody.*

1. Millennial Fear

In his world-famous book *Nostalgia for Origins*, Mircea Eliade dwells upon an inherent trend in human nature toward messianism—the belief in, and zealous devotion to, a prophesied Messiah destined to save the world—and notices researchers' growing interest in millenarian movements and utopias. Societies, from primitive, fledgling communities to modern and civilized forms of social organization, equally share an incurable obsession with an imminent, apocalyptic destruction of our world, reaching paroxystic expression around every turn of a new millennium.

For several years now, the fear of a nuclear 'apocalypse' has been fueling up other end-of-millennium obsessions, such as demographic explosion, genetic experiments, depletion of the ozone layer, the greenhouse effect, terrorist menace, solar explosions and, most notably, the approach of year 2012—another eschatological deadline for our planet, according to the prophecy of the ancient Mayan Calendar. Anthropologically, this constant apprehension in the face of historical evolution originates in humans' tendency to turn *nature* into *culture* by means of founding sacrifices. It is particularly this violence—closely linked to the idea of changing a cultural paradigm—that sparks off the fear of a total disintegration so that the world can start anew, on a superior level.

In the light of this pattern of permanent anxiety over a presumable end of time, I will further analyze two contemporary novels very much connected in the way they imagine their millenarian scenarios, difference in setting being fully compensated by many similarities in terms of plot construction, characters, atmosphere, parodic approach, etc.

2. *Messi@h:* The Carnival of Salvation

Andrei Codrescu's novel *Messi@h* (1999) is a masterful parody of all drollery, oddities and obsessions associated with the end of millennium. The story is rather

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intricate and weird, teeming with fantastic characters—both flesh-and-blood and digital—that are engaged in world-scale plots, trying to destroy or save the planet, while at the same time living extremely dull and common lives, specific to petty individuals of rather precarious character, driven by minor ambitions. The book consists of an astonishing collection of literary devices, styles, plots, characters, and even aesthetics. Perhaps the only narrative strategy missing is the so-called 'self-reflexiveness'. It is a matter-of-fact story, with no personal interventions on the part of the narrating author.

To a certain extent, *Messi@h* is a book for those familiar with the American cultural background—a parody for insiders—as from Home Depot to televanghelist campaigns, the New World is majestically mocked at, with an impressive attention to detail and a genuine sense of proportion. And yet, beyond its grip to reality, Codrescu's novel is suffused with a strange atemporality, in which everything is possible.

The plot is centered round two female characters: Felicity Le Jeune, a New Orleans Creole private detective whose "spiky short hair, baggy clothes, pierced nostril, and eight-hole black work boots were the manifestations of the 'be more manly every day' discipline she'd practiced for years" and Andrea Isbik, an orphan girl who has found refuge from the Serbian prison camps in a convent in Jerusalem.

In Codrescu's novel, both New Orleans and Jerusalem are symbolic places of cultural diversity and tensions, where history gains multi-layered significance. New Orleans is a carnival-like *omphalos*, a world of temptation, lust and disgust, this mixture of contradictory features reflecting upon the main character's hybridity in terms of gender and race: she is both male and female (a lesbian), both white and black (a Creole). Moreover, she is constantly negotiating her identity by escaping into the cyberspace and choosing one of her favorite avatars: Virgin Mary, Scheherazade, or Jeanne d'Orleans, depending on her mood. In the world of cyber-identity, Felicity can borrow various social masks in the form of notorious historical figures—a metaphor of the way in which our selfness is constructed in relation to ourselves and society.

In essence, the epic matter of the novel is divided into two intermingled main plots or narrative levels, each following the separate evolution of one heroine up to the point of their junction and union in a New Orleans of cosmic proportions.

As a private detective, Felicity is assigned by her eccentric uncle Major Notz with the mission to solve the enigma round the mysterious disappearance of a woman who might be the savior of the world—a sort of Messiah who seems to be in great danger in the last chaotic days of the century. Disappointed with people and the current state of affairs in a decadent, postmodern world, Felicity hopes for a salvation of humankind that might bring her personal salvation. A weird solution—one may think—but more impressive for that reason, as beyond the humorous and parodic layer of the novel lies a rather tragic heroine, despite the joyful significance of her name (i.e. 'great happiness'). She is highly dissatisfied with her loneliness, her sexual life, and more importantly with the fact that her late grandmother has been bereft of her two-million-dollar lottery jackpot by the venal Reverend Jeremy 'Elvis' Mullin, a greedy televanghelist who collects souls as avidly as he has collected a personal fortune.

Andrea, the complementary heroine, is also a symbol of the complex and uncertain identity of human being in the context of a generalized panic and millennial fervor at the end of the century.

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The circumstances of her arrival at the convent in Jerusalem as well as her real identity are shrouded in mystery. What we know for sure is that Andrea is a very intelligent and charismatic person, able to mesmerize each and every mortal, from the group of religious scholars (The Great Minds) hosted by St. Hildegard convent to the entire Israeli populace, via the local franchise of a world-famous TV show—'Wheel of Fortune'. She obviously is endowed with a prophetic gift, but only her final encounter with Felicity—her severed half—will fully accomplish her/their messianic nature.

Surprisingly, Codrescu's novel combines masterfully ludicrous elements with philosophical infusions in a text in which parody is only a mask in the great carnival of salvation. The ultimate solution to human redemption seems to be that offered by Ruxandra Cesereanu while musing on this great novel:

> *Messi@h* is an exceptional text which—should it be published in several other languages besides English and Romanian—I am convinced that it would achieve worldwide recognition. Last but not least, it should be mentioned that it is about a book of stories, with and referring to stories, where everybody narrates and conceives stories. And, in fact, this is the moral: that the world can only be saved through stories! (Cesereanu, *One man show: Andrei Codrescu*)

3. *Coming from an Off-Key Time:* The Story of a Second-Hand Messianism

Another majestic and artful comedy of entropic tensions and prophetic invasions into the public space is Bogdan Suceavă's well-acclaimed novel *Coming from an Off-Key Time* (2004). Here the spatio-temporal coordinates of the narrative points to the post-communist Bucharest of the 1990s, a setting halfway across the globe relative to Codrescu's New Orleans, but geographic difference is abolished by symbolic sameness, as both cities in fact represent an *axis mundi*—the place of intersection between the physical and metaphysical dimensions.

The novel is a satirical chronicle of those turbulent and confused years of Romania's transition to democracy, immediately after the Revolution and just before the end of the millennium, with all that atmosphere of religious exaltation and democratic tolerance, a breeding ground for would-be prophets and second-hand messianism:

"Do you remember the 1990s, with all their mysteries and untold history? Behold the time has now come to write their true chronicle."

The metaphor of 'time' is central to this work of fiction, "coming from an off-key time" illustrating the fact that the most prominent character in the book—Vespasian Moisa—is the emanation of a sacred time, the messianic figure of the second coming of Christ. He comes equipped with all the necessary signs of a prophet: is believed to be twice-born and has a mysterious birthmark on his chest, illustrating the map of Bucharest:

"Anecdotal evidence concerning his birth in the small town of Weissdorf is inconclusive and resists research, though it is said that the midwife who delivered the child, upon noticing that the birthmark on his chest resembled a comprehensive and detailed map of Bucharest, prophesied, 'this is the sign of the end of all times or the sign of all times together'."

Around Vespasian Moisa will soon gather an ever-increasing group of ardent followers, very picturesque—if not utterly mad: professor Diaconescu is the author of a protochronist theory according to which Dacian civilization is the cradle of Europe and Romanian language is an ancient

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dialect prior to Latin (which derives from it) and contains a secret code with healing powers; doctor Apolodor Arghir claims the existence of a universal 'vibration' which decodes matter and influences history; Pantelimon Georgescu has discovered the star Nemesis—a counterpart of the Sun, capable of emitting vibrations that might influence universal order; Maximilian has the ability to hear ultrasounds; St. Peter is a sort of shaman who believes in angelic matter and uses auroral energy to modify a person's energetic field; etc.

One cannot fail to notice an obvious similitude of these weird characters—forming The Tidings of the Lord sect—to Felicity's group of followers, a 'tribe' of pierced and tattooed young drifters called the Shades.

A rival though less popular sect, the Stephenists—who claim to follow Stephen the Great (a 15th-century Moldavian leader of legendary fame) and have the profile of a neo-legionary faction—appears in the novel as a counterpart to Moisa's peaceful, esoteric group. Here again can be established a connection to the other 'evil side' in Codrescu's novel, the hypnotized First Angels Choir, a brainwashed group of militant religious fanatics under the sway of devilish Reverend Mullin.

As the novel progresses, Suceavă gently increases the number and intensity of absurd moments and characters, culminating in perhaps the novel's most entertaining diversion: the lengthy story behind the Romanian Intelligence Service's most effective spy, a soldier-turned-cat who had the misfortune to find himself on the receiving end of one of the KGB's secret weapons.

All this colorful and intricate network of prophetic movements and bizarre characters has a precise referent in the turmoil and chaos of a fledgling democracy, emptied of political ideology and refilled with mystic fervor:

> The madness of the '90s becomes the madness of the people, the government, and religion, as bombs explode, people die, martyrs are created, institutions die and institutions grow strong—Bogdan Suceavă has captured this chaos on the page, compressing and transferring an impressive quantity of Romania's present and its lengthy and complicated past into a narrative that remains cohesive and effective. (Kelleher)

What certainly brings together the two novels under discussion is the authors' incredible easiness to achieve epic density, memorable characters and biting irony in imagining their millenarian scenarios:

> One can easily notice that in Bogdan Suceavă's novel parody feels at ease … Behind this, however, there is a kernel of soberness in this book, a discreet pleading for social normality and essential objectives on a personal level. *Coming from an Off-Key Time* is a surprising, excellent novel of transition, reducing with intelligence and humor the fault between alienation and consolation. (Cristea-Enache, *Daciada*)

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