

Codrescu at Large

Thomas Larson

The Disappearance of the Outside: A Manifesto for Escape. Andrei Codrescu. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1990. 216 pages. \$17.95.

To be exiled — by the State or by personal choice — begins a lifelong psychological struggle. It is perhaps most profound when the exile's mind remains divided between memory and the New World, one mind firmly in the past and one assimilating hesitantly into the present. The mind of memory tells the exile to keep his loss. He may return, if not in fact, then *in* memory. The New World mind tells him that his life, which stands out in ways magical and strange from the natives around him, must become more than he ever expected if he is to mature. Remain the same *and* grow.

Hence Andrei Codrescu — Romanian exile, surrealist poet, U.S. citizen, and a man of two minds, whose plight reminds us that though the East-West conflict may be ending, its individual victims live on.

You can hear the place of exile in his name: Codrescu, the same marble-mouthed rhythm as Ceausescu, the Romanian ex-president and Stalinist butcher whose censors attacked the 19-year-old's Stalin-hating poems in 1966.

Exiling himself to America in the sixties, Codrescu found a place where his New World literary aspirations could grow — New York City. There, beat and surrealist poets influenced him greatly with a poetics that de-emphasized image and re-focused speech or talk as the poem's central expression. (Among his mentors were Ted Berrigan and Allen Ginsberg.) Codrescu has done well with their lessons, publishing 14 books of poetry (beside other works of fiction, essay, and memoir), editing the surrealist journal *The Exquisite Corpse*, and crafting his quirky social commentaries for National Public Radio's *All Things Considered*.

But regardless of his literary feats in the U.S., he remains Romanian — lyrical, aphoristic, hyperbolic, addicted to metaphor.

With this book, an ode to — and display of — intellectual free-

dom, Codrescu traces his being other, being Outside, back to his origins, to the beginnings of a destiny he has always known. In the first of 10 loosely related essays on the subject of exile, he says Romania had to be the land of his birth: It is the land of the exiled. "The myth . . . was imbedded archetypally in our culture. I belong to a country whose main export is geniuses." Ovid, Constantin Brancusi, Tristan Tzara, Eugene Ionesco, Mircea Eliade, and Nadia Comaneci.

The great archetype of the exiled of course is the Romanian national hero, Count Dracula. Nosferatu's story epitomizes the sadness of loss because the Count can never return to the living/dying world he abandoned. The Englishman Bram Stoker re-fashioned the tale to reflect the Westerner's obsession with sex and immortality. But Codrescu says the hell-warning implicit in the story has been turned upside down: "[He] is *the* chief deity, and just as Halloween is displacing Christmas [as the nation's greatest holiday], Dracula is replacing Jesus Christ."

Analyzing Dracula's appeal to the West creates marvelous cacophony, a sort of crash-and-ring continuously sounded by Codrescu's past and present minds. He troubles East-West divisions with insights only an exiled Easterner could have.

Until the recent revolutions in the East, the distinctions were clear: the Censor ruled that world, TV ruled ours. . . . The old Censor has dissolved into the illusionary liberty of our image-making machine. What happens from here on out is no longer a question of ideological oppositions, but a struggle for global reality.

Codrescu does not, like many immigrants, fall prostrate before the flag. He repeatedly harangues the triviality of our politics and media, the info-mania that causes us to adore our technology as it stifles our thought. Here's a desultory attack on the commodification of desire.

All the things that mimic human desires ('sexy guns') are in fact circuit breakers: they increase the need proportionally to the distancing of satisfaction. You can't *always* get what you want because you can *never* get what you want because you don't know *what* you want when you can have *everything that looks like it*. Desire itself eventually becomes false desire until its entire energy becomes the property (and fuel) of power.

Of course many exiles dread being Americanized, becoming middle-class and safe. Some artists (such as Czeslaw Milosz whose resistance to New World ideas Codrescu analyzes) prefer marginality, writing critically about a society that upholds the worldly

principle of their freedom but is deaf to the antinational message of their art.

This loss-after-loss seems to be Codrescu's theme. What is disappearing for him comprises the expressionist art forms — dada, surrealism, modernism — those big guns a few poets keeping firing from the edges of culture to awaken people to the power of imagination. Why is the Outsider's act disappearing? Because such displays of personal power often insult authority and invite censorship. (Recall the attacks on Robert Mapplethorpe's work.) Knowing that art can incite freedom and repression, many artists are frightened of such potential. They comply, censor themselves. Eventually, if unused, the freedom previous generations have won vanishes. Equally important, Codrescu warns, the houses of invention artists traditionally inhabit outside the mainstream, where the wildness of the avant-garde dwells, are being dismantled by the competitive economic demands of both socialist and capitalist states. The growth of the imagination is irrelevant to the production of couches.

To show off his love of marginality, Codrescu often floods his writing with an automatic, associative style. An example:

The only shocking thing in our world is its fearless use. We must eroticize language, ourselves, the world: make the points of contact glow. This may have to be done un sentimentally now, when the war machines are the real sentiment machines (a tank is a hankie) and beautiful to boot. We must preserve the human nomad forms in all their *desuete* charm: gypsy scholars, misfits, politicians, truants, escapees, runaways, stewardesses, bus drivers, train porters, itinerants, night managers, self-born-again, by-themselves, hired guns, Kelly girls, corporate fixers, nurses, malcontents — the drifting globe. . . . We should build an oracular and practical language on the blocked flows of political exiles while retaining the formal liberty of art. We should be capable of conceptualizing our experience to the point where it becomes new experience.

Like reading Emerson, I'm unsure what it all means, but the ideas are exhilarating. Codrescu seems to enjoy making those "points of contact glow," which will prove quite an accomplishment in language but not necessarily a boon to a reader's understanding. And, since Codrescu's consciousness is forever his subject, the expression often becomes more purposeful than the message. Indeed his prose exemplifies a sort of risk-taking he feels is kaput in much American writing. "The weakness of the American poet is not that he has no imagination, but that he does not love poetry enough to *think on its behalf*."

(On this point Codrescu the critic oddly overlooks the Spanish/Latin surrealist influences of Lorca, Neruda, and Vallejo on such

radical poets as Robert Bly and W. S. Merwin, and the fact that these U.S. poets have had innumerable imitators.)

The role of the artist as society's Problem Child is very American. Codrescu's anti-authoritarian stand follows a significant branch of American art, from Whitman and Stein to Pynchon and Morrison. What Codrescu may miss, however, as Granville Hicks once said, is that the Great Tradition in American literature belongs to the Outsiders: it is made up precisely of those writers who are alienated from—and in mortal combat with—the impersonal acquisitive values of American society.

Although Codrescu over-expresses his concept of the ontology of exile, these essays do have immediacy, a verve and toughness that recall some of our best multicultural writers, such as Gary Soto, David Mura, or Michelle Cliff. But be warned. Codrescu's soul is cut like a boxer's, and there is much of the fighter's feint that makes his love of abstraction hard to follow.

Nonetheless, read with the instructive irreverence his minds-in-tandem engage, Codrescu is joyful. His writing enacts his love of freedom. In Romania he says one always had to whisper, hide books under covers, be cautious with whom one joked. Otherwise, prison. Once in America, Codrescu has never stopped talking, often just for the joy of hearing himself speak. 🐼