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# Andrei Codrescu: King of the Talkies

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“There is a literature that does not reach the voracious mass. It is the work of creators, issued from a real necessity in the author, produced for himself. It expresses the knowledge of a supreme egoism, in which laws wither away.”

—Tristan Tzara, “Dada Manifesto”

“The structure of the sacred in the human consciousness is built on the structure of synchronicity, as opposed to the diachronic structure of radical historicism.”

—Mircea Eliade, “The Sacred in the Secular World”

“That’s just talk, not Logos,  
a getting down to cases.  
I take it as simple particulars that  
we wear our feelings on our faces.”

—Ted Berrigan, “New Personal Poem”

“I am a cross and the idea  
Is to burn twice at the four tips.”  
—Andrei Codrescu, “to my heart”

Andrei Codrescu is today the great American poet of intercultural encounter, absolutely exceptional in his capacity to elucidate with analytical power, emotional sensitivity, and lyric force the most revealing points of tension between ethical and imaginative perceptions in a world under the gun. With sympathy for eruptions against authority, Codrescu has infused child-man rebellion and passionate desire into the many poems of self-recollection that are now presented with incisive comment and context in this 408 page collection entitled *So Recently Rent a World: New and Selected Poems: 1968-2012* (2012). A Jewish exile from Communist Romania, Codrescu arrived in the United States in 1966 with an otherworldly grip on myth and politics. His imagination was enjoined to reveal not only the double-cross of realism and idealism, which had arisen in his homeland of authoritarian mystics, rabid nationalists, and radical materialists, but also the autonomous reality of poetry as the underground counterforce to police state repression.

To the question of earliest influences, Codrescu re-

calls: “Before I knew English, my ideas of poetry were formed by Lucian Blaga, Tudor Arghezi, Geo Bogza, Benjamin Fundoianu, Ilarie Voronca, Eugen Jebeleanu, Villon, Baudelaire, Tristan Tzara, Gherasim Luca, Nazim Hikmet, Nellie Sachs” (“Andrei Codrescu - Poetry & Interview with Mihaela Moscaliuc.” *Connotation Press: an Online Artifact* (Issue VI, Volume IV: February 2013). Web. 12 Feb. 2013). Here, Codrescu’s sources suggest a complex sensibility steeped not only in lyricism and Dadaism but also in Christian and Jewish mysticism. So far as Codrescu’s Romanian inheritance is concerned, it is clear that Tristan Tzara, the Jewish Romanian Dadaist visionary instigator, is his comrade in the revolt against logic; Mircea Eliade, the Romanian Orthodox historian and philosopher of religion, is his comrade in the sacred primordium. From the beginning, then, Codrescu’s voice has been pledged to a sacramental act by which the de-sacralization of poetry through Tzara might be joined to a re-sacralization through Eliade. A playful techno-messianic subjectivity thereby speaks through Codrescu’s assimilation of Jewish Romanian and Romanian Orthodox sources into English language poetry:

the translation machine on mount athos  
has multiple portals for mortals and one for eternity

it comes and goes on its self-devouring path  
leaving behind critical self-sufficiency to doom posterity  
it won’t be doomed boom boom can you believe  
just how much work it is to deconstruct a world  
that was read by everybody in their own language  
though there are many languages and not one for you

ubu dada yahoo bing google wiki

in the kingdom of the one syllable  
check the weather it comes from the outside  
 (“one syllable”, 60)

With a real feel for the Aeolian outgas of religious acts that animates common life and poetic imagination, Codrescu gravitated to the New York scene that had constellated around Paul Blackburn’s commitments to the spoken word and the tribal field of talking poets. In order to learn English, of course, Codrescu had to pick up the vocal gestures of others. From interactions with New York poets, most especially Ted Berrigan, Codrescu would discover the linguistic space for perfecting at the very heart of America’s new oral poetry a dynamic personal art, which could masterfully honor a history of

Romanian Jewish trauma twisted around the Patriarchal double-cross.

“Nothing shocked my Romanian metaphysical sensibilities more than Ted Berrigan’s absolutely insistent attention to the seemingly trivial” (“Introduction,” *Alien Candor: Selected Poems 1970–1995*, 1996, 13), Codrescu once declared. Although Eliade’s phenomenology of the sacred provided Codrescu with a bullet-proof defense against flat-lining the imagination into “the seemingly trivial,” he generously concluded with respect to Berrigan’s practice: “Of course, this wasn’t the case, as it became apparent on further reading: he was employing ‘non-poetic’ language because, amazingly, few American poets had” (13–14). Nevertheless, Codrescu’s metaphysically charged apprehension of the rules for poetry had already crowned his sense of “‘non-poetic’ language.” Therefore he could modulate “the seemingly trivial” with fidelity to Old World convictions about the verticality of consciousness and the esoteric tip of the imagination. In short, he was equipped to take it higher.

the conscious and the unconscious  
are languages in a state of translation  
and their respective losses  
are the gods (168)

In other words, he was possessed by fantastic, quasi-religious, supernatural chops.

All sound is religion.  
Language is merely a choir boy in this religion.  
Sometimes a bishop wind rattles the windows,  
Still, I must speak the most intelligent language available  
While I have this typewriter knowing full well that  
tomorrow  
I might be able to welcome a color Xerox machine into  
my studio  
And with it there will be a revolution in my life.  
(“sunday sermon”, 217)

He could see “the translation machine on mount athos” (60); he could imagine “the gods” (168); he could grok “the self must/be full of the English language” (232).

Consequently, the “chatty abstraction”—ascribed to “New York School Poetry” by Eileen Myles, who recognized “the limitations” within a poetics of self-abnegation (“Long and Social,” *Narrativity*, Issue 2. Web 12 Feb. 2013)—is transmuted through Codrescu’s oracular sacred prism.

i kiss his green hand  
 it tastes like my eyes, I see through my kiss  
 a line of prophets, all blind.  
 some blinder than the others in the dark green  
 of his hand, crossing his lifeline  
 to life.

(from: 'leadership", 106)

Codrescu presents an essential "lifeline" for gauging the evolution of American poetry. "I tried to find a bridge between the dark metaphorical music of my first poets, and the pop insistence on the actual, physical world that was the passionate poetics of my new friends" (97), Codrescu notes with respect to his early personae poems. Now it is easy, with *So Recently Rent a World: New and Selected Poems: 1968-2012* in hand, to see how Codrescu's "bridge" through Berrigan offers a "lifeline" that differs substantially from the abstract and impersonal tendencies which have captured imaginations in the wake of Zukofsky. To be sure, the two opposing currents which propelled the New York School—the impersonal work of Zukofsky and the personal play of O'Hara—become fully illuminated under Codrescu's captivating advance from Berrigan, whose 1972 *Vort* interview with Barry Alpert still marks a crucial fork in the road for American

poets:

In fact at the time we had a great contempt for Zukofsky. It was impersonal. We had Frank O'Hara and a tradition on back through Apollinaire, and we thought that Zukofsky and all the people that were talking about Zukofsky were rock-heads. We were sort of enlightened later by Aram Saroyan and Clark Coolidge who all came out of Zukofsky in a certain way, and who had a lot to show us when they came out. We were the rock-heads in a way but we didn't have much to take from Zukofsky. We were a little too flippant for that. No, I think the man is very respectable, a very respectable poet, but I think he's dull and a sort of nit-picker in a way that Aram Saroyan isn't, although everybody accuses him of being one. Maybe I'm too close to Zukofsky in one way, and a little young on the other hand to really get him. I get it out of Aram Saroyan and Bob Creeley.

(quoted by John Latta, "Notebook (Ted Berrigan, Ron Padgett, Pierre Reverdy, &c.)", Thursday, October 18, 2012. Web. 12 Feb. 2013)

While the impersonal work lineage extended from Zukofsky through Coolidge to the Language Move-

ment, with its Marxist inspired labor theories of poetry, the personal play lineage extended from O'Hara through Berrigan to Codrescu, whose "translation machine on mount athos" (60) could preserve "language" through the "sound" of "religion" (217).

Nothing characterizes the playful Dionysian aspiration in American poetry better than the drive to negate the patriarchy and become the crowned, conquering, always mouthy, and quite often drunk consort of the Great Mother. Codrescu's poetry unfolds, quite marvelously, in relation to this playful Dionysian aspiration whose style of consciousness clusters around such oralist poets as Kerouac, Olson, O'Hara, and Berrigan—all of whom were groomed through Roman Catholic conditioning to honor masochistic experience. What makes Codrescu's poetry so interesting is that the collective historical conscience that binds him to Jewish identity does not stop him from submerging himself in the poetry of ecstasy, lunacy, and punishment that Dionysus had visited upon these Catholic precursor poets who so powerfully shaped America's oralist playbook.

Eventually though, the whole humiliating sweep of masochistic compulsion at the oppositional edge of American poetry becomes evident to Codrescu, whose "blue jew notes" recognizes Sylvia Path's famous entan-

glement with the Jew and the Nazi in "Daddy":

a blue jew  
 a horny jew  
 a jew with blue balls  
 an old boston jew  
 where the snow is blue  
 the blue-cheese burger  
 overdone by the black-blue  
 short order cook from benares  
 with the blue elephant inked on her ankle  
 the sky is blue in benares  
 the snow is eggplant blue in boston  
 oh blue jew blue jew  
 the books are dusty and blue  
 you read them all when they were new  
 oh daddy Sylvia outrhymed you (13)

In "tristan tzara the man who said no" Codrescu grasps again the masochistic tension that bears "humiliation and elegance" through poetry:

sensibility was not what spelled doom  
 but rather forelocks and insouciance, palabras y cadavros,  
 the toasts made ten years before in a cocteau moment.

humiliation and elegance were best of friends for ages.  
 there were rabbis in the crowds entertaining the slaves.  
 no one laughed at anything he couldn't kill.  
 (unless he laughed so hard he couldn't and then he was  
 drunk.)

what we must do now is to conduct the study  
 of that certain laughter no longer known to us  
 who laugh without suffering as if laughing was funny.  
 we'll begin in 1899 when public hangings were thin-  
 ning out,  
 long enough to allow for flounces, wit, and mercy.  
 class, we'll use recordings from the very first chortle  
 thought worth recording by mr. Edison for mr. chaplin.  
 (395)

For Codrescu the struggle to retain an archaic sub-  
 jectivity that can hustle-bump ideology is concentrated  
 in "tzara's laughter" (396). His surface concerns, which  
 include democracy, identity, individuality, language,  
 paternity, pluralism, religion, sociality, and technology,  
 speak to core ethical dilemmas that can be more human-  
 ly calibrated through feeling that generates Old World  
 respect for beauty, children, mystery, love, and nature:

The shadow in my blood will model for a fee.

And yet a lake of absent possibilities has risen  
 To the chin of the folk, and the waters keep rising  
 For what could be a model drowning.  
 I conversed with the drownees. What they said  
 Turned my love for myself into syllables.  
 Will I be a model for my son or only endless buzzing?  
 (from "model work," 234)

Codrescu occupies the vital spot in the 'I' matrix—  
 where poets are possessed by dispositions that speak lyr-  
 ically to a world of common dispossessions and imagi-  
 native possessions. By way of the book's title, he wryly  
 acknowledges the force of zombie capitalism on the great  
 ontological narcissism that drives the poet to do the voic-  
 es and usurp the surplus of the other. "The urge to invent  
 poets seized me often, whenever I heard a 'voice' artic-  
 ulating what I didn't think was 'me,' but it had its own  
 personality" (145), he explains in a note.

With *License to Carry a Gun*, his first book published in  
 1971, Codrescu emerged armed-up for America's count-  
 er-cultural revolution. In kinship with battle-scarred  
 sub-sub personalities, Codrescu staked himself to Rim-  
 baud's claim that "I is an other." As Codrescu's Romanian  
 otherworld fell into the American underground during  
 the Sixties, he found his tongue. "My first poems in En-





Codrescu's songs of brotherly love delineate a fecund cultic tension between the Jew and Gentile, too. The bleeding edge where difference, history, and sensation are liquidated by the totalizing firepower of intuition is evident in Codrescu's gunplay:

Mystically I live on two planes at once.  
Magically I am the two holes of a double-barrel gun  
threatening to blow me into space.  
This is almost true  
The church, the state, the typewriter, the police  
Are about to kick me out of the world  
(from: "a programme for the double-barrel  
life when it hits", 153)

Similarly the magical quest to break from the law is expressed in "the differences": "I am St. John the Baptist, my work heralds the birth of / Jesus" (188).

With savage medieval fangs and mystical tendrils, Codrescu propels a convergence of "the gods" and poetry. Taking aim at the common structure embedded in the human psyche, Codrescu codes his oeuvre in religious terms. This approach to poetry is intended to pressure the residue of magic and prejudice deposited in folk traditions and encoded in "the differences." Again, im-

pact of Eliade's identification of spiritual existence with the imagination, along with the Orthodox tradition's insistence of human universalism and Christological manifestation in the human artistry of the icon is powerfully registered upon Codrescu's construction of personae.

America's days of rage are assimilated into a numinous, touch adverse orality spoken by the shell-shocked soldier: "don't touch me, / I am your holy mouth" (115). As Peter Boone, "an ex-beatnik who became a mystical fascist in Vietnam" (114), he writes in "gist":

america is healthy. i am healthy  
in the body of christ  
the fall of melted metal builds  
my spheric soul.  
i go first.  
my body's laid flat  
on the copper table  
and pounded up thin like a sheet  
to pick up prophecy. (120)

Codrescu continued the great work of eating his medieval Christian shadow "in a self-published mimeograph collection called (like a later collection), *The History of the Growth of Heaven* by Calvin Boone, OSD (Or-

der of Saint Dominic)” (145). In “Dear Editors,” Brother Antoninus is called through Calvin Boone to Codrescu’s agape feast:

The Monk is American, he is wheat-treated Bethlehem steel  
 out of Brother Anoninus’ unsaid brotherlies,  
 all the wasted brotherlies...  
 He is presently a New Hampshire Monk  
 of the Dominican Order of Monks,  
 he is fat. May the blessed Willows pray on his lousy  
 attempts to the writing of his soul.  
 Find him care of the Lord’s dear  
 Andrei Codrescu, 3779 25th Street,  
 San Francisco 94110.  
 What those numbers mean is no less  
 than the World,  
 may Peace answer your knowledge of me,  
 Calvin Boone  
 New Hampshire (147)

Codrescu’s poetry abounds with magic beans, meta-historical rhythms, and synchronic jolts, which fuse individual and collective experience to the sacred language of the gods. With timing buckled up to the the-

ophanic imperative, Codrescu marks in “new market” the shift in collective attention from metaphysical to virtual domains:

create  
 twelve facebook gods, name them  
 after the months  
 à la revolution francaise  
 assign each of them to OCD friends  
 born in them or temperamentally suited  
 to the choleric Anusis the melancholy Ursina etc.  
 provide each god with a daily sura  
 and a lesson for every hour  
 meant to replace horoscope and toothbrush  
 for friends who then go forth to friends  
 suited to their gods (21)

Poetry is Codrescu’s creation myth; it charters a universalistic spiritual community that honors singular brothers, unique individuals, and irreducibly socialized mothers for their generous deposit of transpersonal potentials in active language. Not surprisingly, Codrescu’s wide range of perceptive cultural productions—NPR radio commentary, ABC Nightline television reportage, editorship of the literary magazine *Exquisite Corpse*,

screenwriting and starring in documentary film *Road Scholar*—are registered across nearly all media. In all likelihood, Codrescu's availability and well-deserved success over profane airwaves and popular platforms have impeded the critical reception of his first-rate poetry. As *So Recently Rent a World: New and Selected Poems: 1968-2012* proves, there is far more to Codrescu than a sardonic tongue flapping for the NPR gatekeepers of "the smart thing to do." Among the thinning herd of poets still determined to live by the mouth, Codrescu is indisputably the King of the Talkies.