

Ruxandra Cesereanu

## Andrei Codrescu – A Portrait of a Writer in Puzzle

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**Abstract:** The present portrait dedicated to the writer Andrei Codrescu (the most impactful American author of Romanian origin in postmodern world literature) is one of synthesis, depicting the multi-facetedness of this complex and provocative author, who is continuously innovative, experimental and charming as a poet, prose writer, essayist and thinker.

**Keywords:** Andrei Codrescu; Multicultural Nomadism; Lucian Blaga; Tristan Tzara; Ted Berrigan; Allen Ginsberg; Lawrence Ferlinghetti; Dada Movement; New York School of Poetry; Exquisite Corpse.

**RUXANDRA CESEREANU**

Babes-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania  
ruxces@yahoo.com

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Andrei Codrescu (born in Sibiu, in 1946), is a poet, prose writer, essayist, journalist, screenwriter, and translator.<sup>1</sup> He started writing poems in Romanian under the penname Andrei Steiu. In 1966 he emigrated to the United States and began publishing in English. Considering the languages in which he has written and the various geographical areas in which he has lived, Codrescu is a multicultural nomad. The picturesque culture of the Balkans reverberates in his works, which are marked by the memory of his Central-European hometown, Sibiu, a multicultural Transylvanian city. To these ingredients is added the American cultural purview of the emigrant who has assimilated the culture of the host country through carnival cities and poetic movements in New York, San Francisco, Baltimore and New Orleans.<sup>2</sup>

In his adolescence in Sibiu, Andrei Codrescu had two Romanian cultural models that were radically opposed on a poetic and mental level: Lucian Blaga (1895-1961, a Dionysian poet with Apollonian touches who became a Gnostic later in life) and Tristan Tzara (1896-1963, co-founder of the Dada movement). After emigrating to America, the “metaphysical verticality” of European poetry met the

“horizontality” of pop art (1960-1970), thanks to the influence of his friend Ted Berrigan (1934-1983) and the political enthusiasm of Allen Ginsberg (1926-1997). Codrescu’s ultimate master was not necessarily a writer, but an inner movement, a way of understanding poetry that was recalibrated by the author in keeping with a personal vision inspired by the activity of the Dada Movement during the *Voltaire Cabaret* in Zurich (1915-1916). For Andrei Codrescu, the “anti-art” attitude and the radical involvement of the Dadaists in society resonated with the last decades of the 20th century, when the young Romanian emigrant to America discovered the “New York School”, the “Beat” romance and the new visual media. At the beginning of his career, Codrescu’s group of literary friends were represented by poets from the New York School of Poetry. Later, in San Francisco, Andrei Codrescu initiated a series of performances with Lawrence Ferlinghetti (the poet and publisher of the Beat generation) and other poets of the New American Poetry. He founded *kingdom kum press*, one of the Mimeo revolution’s (almost) instant publications, and a precursor to the internet.

A university career at John Hopkins University in Baltimore and Louisiana State University (LSU) also contributed to Codrescu’s literary adventure across various backgrounds. He retired in 2009 as McCurdy Distinguished Professor of Comparative Literature. At the beginning of his literary career, he won the Big Table National Poetry Prize in 1970 for his first book of poetry, *License to Carry a Gun*. Other awards include two National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) awards, the Ovidius Poetry Award, a National

Book Award nomination for poetry, and Honorary Doctorates from many American universities. At LSU Andrei Codrescu founded and edited the magazine *Exquisite Corpse*, which played an important role in the American literary environment.

All these activities of the multiple literary subject Andrei Codrescu coexisted with intercultural voluptuousness, alchemically influencing each other. Here are some defining features of Codrescu the writer: 1. the predilection for anything that is life in poetry, understood as a social agent of renewal; 2. the baroque-postmodern carnival; 3. participation in and creation of a contemporary American ethos to which the poet added the original Balkan dimension; 4. freedom of thought and writing that is allergic to cultural coercion, censorship, limit; 5. humor, playfulness and absurdity as spiritual attitudes. Codrescu’s predilection for the absurd is inherited from other Romanian and European writers, including Urmuz (1883-1923, a cult author of the Romanian avant-garde), Eugène Ionesco (1909-1994), Gherasim Luca (1913-1994, Romanian-French surrealist), Emil Cioran (1911-1995), Blaise Cendrars (1887-1961) and Fernando Pessoa (1888-1935).

Andrei Codrescu’s early Romanian poetic creations emanate the transitional atmosphere of the 1960s, caught between the demands of collapsing Stalinism and the (temporary) freedom for poetry that followed. After covering the Romanian revolution in 1989 for NPR and ABC News two decades after emigrating, he returned to his native language and wrote a number of books in Romanian, notably *Miracol și catastrofă* (*Miracle and Catastrophe*) (2005), *Submarinul iertat* (*Forgiven Submarine*), in

collaboration with Ruxandra Cesereanu) (2006, translated into English by Andrei Codrescu in 2009) and the anthology *Visul diacritic (The Diacritical Dream)* (2021), in which the author stages his lyrics and comments on his poems in a historiographical manner. He continued to write primarily in English but contributed poems, essays and stories to Romanian journals as well. His American poetry continued to challenge the taboos, pragmatism, frustrations and social ills of a radically changing society. His American poems are composed like fast-cut videos, sometimes verging on dry moralism with political overtones, or existential carousels related to the poet's life. Poetry volumes such as *License to Carry a Gun* (1970), *For the Love of a Coat* (1978), and *The Art of Forgetting* (2016), and the anthologies *Alien Candor* (1996) and *So Recently Rent a World* (nominated for the 2015 National Book Award), are syntheses of temporal visions.

As a prose writer, Andrei Codrescu is a complex novelist, whose narrative architecture is rendered in a baroque-postmodern style. He has published multi-translated novels, on extravagant themes such as medieval Eastern European sadism, end-of-millennium eschatology, eroticism, or the pact with the devil in *The Blood Countess* (1995), *Messiah* (1999), *Casanova in Bohemia* (2002), and *Wakefield* (2004).

As an essayist and thinker, Codrescu has had a major impact through the following books of criticism, but also his studies on the history of ideas: *The Disappearance of the Outside. A Manifesto of Escape* (1990), *The Posthuman Dada Guide. Tzara & Lenin Play Chess* (2009), *The Poetry Lesson* (2010), *Whatever Gets You Through the Night. A Story of Scheherazade and the Arabian Entertainments* (2011) and *Bibliodeath. My Archives (With Life in Footnotes)* (2012).

Andrei Codrescu's essayistic discourse, in the above-mentioned books, is intentionally decentered through a discontinuous, inhomogeneous, dispersed rhetoric, as well as through a paradoxically coherent dialogue with philosophers such as Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Derrida and Jacques Lacan. Codrescu's essays are animated by a poetic agenda that defends the human body against the sophisticated structures of surveillance in the ever-evolving technological panopticon. Aware of the ubiquity of the simulacra that capture ideas, intellect, sensations, perceptions, and language, he proposes a mode of subverting their inevitability through their own tools. With dark humor, Codrescu employs the post-structuralist post-dada rhetoric intended to jam the machinery of posthuman humanity's "dehumanization". He has coined the word "zombification" for that condition.

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*The Marriage of Insult & Injury*, Cymric Press, Woodstock, New York, 1974.  
*The Life & Times of an Involuntary Genius*, George Braziller, New York, 1975.  
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- Belligerence*, poems, Coffee House Press, Minneapolis, 1993.
- The Repentance of Lorraine*, a novel, Rhinoceros Books, 1994.
- Zombification: Essays from NPR*, St. Martin's Press/ Picador, New York, 1995.
- The Blood Countess*, a novel, Simon & Schuster/ Dell, New York, 1995.
- The Muse Is Always Half-Dressed in New Orleans*, St. Martin's Press/Picador, New York, 1995.
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- The Dog With the Chip in His Neck: Essays from NPR & Elsewhere*, St. Martin's Press/Picador, New York, 1997.
- Ay, Cuba! A Socio-Erotic Journey*. With photographs by David Graham, St. Martin's Press/Picador, New York, 1999.
- Hail Babylon! Looking for the American City at the End of the Millennium*, St. Martin's Press, New York, 1999.
- Messiah*, a novel, Simon & Schuster, New York, 1999.
- A Bar in Brooklyn: Novellas & Stories, 1970-1978*, Black Sparrow Press, 1999.
- The Devil Never Sleeps & Other Essays*, St. Martin's Press, New York, 2000.
- Casanova in Bohemia*, a novel, The Free Press, New York, 2002.
- It Was Today: New Poems*, Coffee House Press, Minneapolis, 2003.
- Wakefield*, a novel, Algonquin Books, New York, 2004.
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- Submarinul iertat*, by Ruxandra Cesereanu and Andrei Codrescu, Editura Brumar, Timișoara, 2007.
- Femeia neagră a unui culcuș de hoți*, Editura Vinea, București, 2007.
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- The Art of Forgetting*, Sheep Meadow Press, New York, 2016.
- No Time Like Now*, Pittsburgh University Press, 2019.
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*Visul diacritic*, Editura Nemira, București, 2021.

*Too Late for Nightmares*, Black Widow Press, 2022.

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## NOTES

1. The present text is a synthesis of several essays and studies I have written about Andrei Codrescu: Ruxandra Cesereanu, “L’alchimie scripturale chez Andrei Codrescu”, *Synergies Roumanie*, no. 5, 2010, pp. 51-62; Ruxandra Cesereanu, “Andrei Codrescu – An Anarchetypal Writer”, *Caietele Echinoc*, volume 30, 2016, pp. 175-187; Ruxandra Cesereanu, “Andrei Codrescu”, in Chantal del Sol and Ioanna Nowicki (eds.), *La vie de l’esprit en Europe Centrale et Orientale depuis 1945. Dictionnaire encyclopédique*, Les Éditions du Cerf, 2021, pp. 584-585.
2. Two books (which were originally doctoral theses) analyze the condition of the exile and his relationship with the Romanian language; Oana Strugaru, *Exilul ca mod de existență. Andrei Codrescu în spațiul textual al dezrădăcinării / Exile as a way of existence. Andrei Codrescu in the textual space of uprooting*, București, Editura Muzeului Literaturii Române, 2013; and Radu Pavel Gheo, *Străin în țară străină: literatura română și granița identitară în proza Hertei Müller și a lui Andrei Codrescu / Stranger in a foreign country: Romanian literature and the identity border in the prose of Herta Müller and Andrei Codrescu*, Timișoara, Editura Universității de Vest, 2017. A travelogue in the world of Codrescu’s prose was published by Cristina-Matilda Vănoagă – *Proza lui Andrei Codrescu. Spații între realitate și imaginar / The Fiction of Andrei Codrescu. Spaces between reality and imagination*, București, Tracus Arte, 2019. Like the books signed by Oana Strugaru and Radu Pavel Gheo, this book is based on a doctoral thesis.