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## «Like a prisoner in a cage»: Aspects of poetic language and the condition of writing in Andrei Codrescu

### Abstract

*This brief essay does not have as its purpose the analytical delineation of the debates concerning the concept of multiculturalism, but rather the exploration, through the analysis of a very restricted number of texts, certain aspects of the trajectory of the writer Andrei Codrescu, in his attempts to navigate the cultural and linguistic frontiers starting from the time of his exile from Romania in 1965. Codrescu abandons Romanian in order to write in English, the language of his adopted country, the United States of America, and having found success in doing so, returns then in the later part of his career to his native Romanian. The career of Codrescu, emblematic in many aspects of the diasporas that characterize the Twentieth Century, is rendered all the more interesting and complex by questions of the relations not only between identity, language and membership in a Nation-state, but also by his very strong sense of belonging to a sort of transnational entity, that is to say, the community of exiled Romanian writers and intellectuals who fostered the project of modern Romanian literature.*

**Keywords:** *multiculturalism, Andrei Codrescu, Romanian exiled writer, English language, change of the linguistic expression, Diaspora.*

The notion of multiculturalism does not have a uniform meaning within North-American contexts. Nonetheless, this brief essay does not have as its purpose the analytical delineation of the debates concerning the concept of multiculturalism, but rather the exploration, through the analysis of a very restricted number of texts, certain aspects of the trajectory of the writer Andrei Codrescu, in his attempts to navigate the cultural and linguistic frontiers starting from the time of his exile from Romania in 1965. Codrescu abandons Romanian in order to write in English, the language of his adopted country, the United States of America, and having found success in doing so, returns then in the later part of his career to his native Romanian. The career of Codrescu, emblematic in many aspects of the diasporas that characterize the Twentieth Century, is rendered all the more interesting and complex by questions of the relations not only between identity, language and membership in a Nation-state, but also by his very strong sense of belonging to a sort of transnational entity, that is to say, the community of exiled Romanian writers and intellectuals who fostered the project of modern Romanian literature. Even though Codrescu feels himself to be more American than European, nostalgia for the language of his origins as a writer seems to become stronger and stronger as certain concrete dimensions of the United States as an historical, geopolitical entity take the upper hand over that utopian and mythic place called « America » to which he arrived in 1966.

The senses of the term « multiculturalism » indicate in fact two very different perspectives in the North-American context. The Canadian notion refers to an active policy of the promotion of cultural difference on the part of both local and central institutions. In the U.S., on the other hand, multiculturalism is generally seen as a local variant of the traditional notion of pluralism that is so deeply rooted in the cultural and linguistic ground of the U.S., and thus not

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subject to any active policy<sup>1</sup>. If the project of the modern nation State consists in great part in ensuring cohesiveness and loyalty on the part of its members through the creation of an illusory map upon which the political territory of the State coincides with an idealized linguistic and cultural map of the Nation, such that it then becomes possible to constitute imagined originary communities, it was a difficult strategy to follow in the New World where the State was created through successive waves of immigrants of wildly diverse provenance<sup>2</sup>.

Even though the notion of the 'melting-pot' is most often associated with the

U.S. policy of immigration from the end of nineteenth through the beginning of the twentieth century, the *locus classicus* of the notion of the crucible, of the State as foundry, together with all of its modern industrial associations, is to be found as early as 1782 in the third chapter of *Letters from an American Farmer* entitled "What is an American?" by St. John de Crevecoeur, just a few years after the Declaration of Independence of 1776:

*What attachment can a poor European emigrant have for a country where he had nothing? The knowledge of the language, the love of a few kindred as poor as himself, were the only cords that tied him: his country is now that which gives him land, bread, protection, and consequence: Ubi panis ibi patria, is the motto of all emigrants. What then is the American, this new man? He is either an European, or the descendant of an European, hence that strange mixture of blood, which you will find in no other country. I could point out to you a family whose grandfather was an Englishman, whose wife was Dutch, whose son married a French woman, and whose present four sons have now four wives of different nations. He is an American, who leaving behind him all his ancient prejudices and manners, receives new ones from the new mode of life he has embraced, the new government he obeys, and the new rank he holds.*

*He becomes an American by being received in the broad lap of our great Alma Mater. Here individuals of all nations are melted into a new race of men, whose labours and posterity will in time cause great changes in the world. Americans are the western pilgrims, who are carrying along with them that great mass of arts, sciences, vigour, and industry which began long since in the east; they will finish the great circle<sup>3</sup>.*

1 For a discussion of the relationship between multiculturalism and the notion in the U.S. context in connection with Andrei Codrescu, see: C. Vanoaga-Pop, « De la condiția scriitorului e(i)migrant la imaginea e(i)migrantului în creația lui Andrei Codrescu », *Annales Universitatis Apulensis. Series Philologica*, no. 1 (2009), p. 171–79.

2 The notion of multiculturalism that informs this discussion depends greatly on the concept of Culturalism developed by A. Appadurai in *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, Minneapolis, U of Minnesota Press, 1996.

3 J. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur, *Letters from an American Farmer*, reprinted from the original ed., preface by W. P. Trent, introd. by Ludwig Lewisohn, reprint, 1782, New York, Fox, Duffield, 1904, p. 54–55

Having ultimately his origins in Western Europe, the new American subject would have by the very identity of his origins ensured cultural, ethnic and sexual homogeneity, as well as the ambition of carrying out the historical mission of the "western pilgrims".

In the twentieth century, however, the movement of immigrants came to be strongly characterized by the disastrous upheavals that afflicted great parts of the world's population during the course of that century. Under the pressure of wars, pogroms, and famine, movement along and through the frontiers of the Nation-states took on the dimensions of so many diasporas. The United States of America became deeply involved in the diasporas of the twentieth century, especially around the time of the Second World War, to the point of becoming the goal and the refuge of persons coming from all parts of the globe. Thus the utopian sense of the term « America ». came increasingly to be confounded with the geopolitical reality indicated by the term « The United States ». This fusion of the historical with the ideal is invoked both at home and abroad by the automatic and wilful reduction of that historical entity simply into the glowing transcendence of the City upon the Hill.

Thus it is in the context of the political oppression following the Second World War and the continued anti-semitic politics of the Soviet-aligned regime, that the young poet Andrei Codrescu left Romania with his mother in 1965, beginning a bumpy journey that would take him first to Naples, then on to Rome and Paris, before finally arriving in Detroit in the United States of America in

late winter of 1966. The Codrescu left Romania, according to an interview given by Andrei Codrescu, following the terms of an agreement between Ceaușescu's Romanian regime and the government of Israel, whereby the Israeli government paid two thousand dollars for every Jew released from Romania.<sup>4</sup> Thus he left Romania after having begun his university studies at the University of Bucharest, from which he had been expelled for having written poems critical of the political situation in Romania, and because of which he was menaced with imprisonment. He published his first poems under the pseudonym of Andrei Steiu, which he then changed to Andrei Codrescu while still in Bucarest. And it is with the name of Andrei Codrescu that he becomes a naturalized citizen of the United States in 1981.

Born Andrei Ivanovitch Perlmutter at Sibiu in Transylvania in 1946, Codrescu immersed himself in the cultural life of the United States immediately upon arrival, participating in the Poets' Workshop in Detroit, before moving to New York where he came quickly into contact with poets of the Beat Generation and their successors, among whom was Allen Ginsberg as well as younger poets such as Anne Waldman and Ted Berrigan. In 1970 Codrescu moved to San Francisco and then to Baltimore on the east coast towards the end of the 1970's where he would remain until the beginning of the 1980's when he became professor of English Literature at Louisiana State University, from which he retired in 2009.

In the first volume of his memoirs, *The Life and Times of an Involuntary Genius*, first published in 1975, just nine years after his arrival in the United States, he writes:

4 S. Talbot, « Interview with Andrei Codrescu », *Romania—My old Haunts in Frontline World*, October 2002, (s.p.), [Http://www.pbs.org/frontlineworld/stories/romania/interview.html](http://www.pbs.org/frontlineworld/stories/romania/interview.html) (data di accesso 14 febbraio 2010). These circumstances are not suggested in the principal autobiographical texts such as *An Involuntary Genius in America's Shoes (And What Happened Afterwards)*, contiene *The Life and Times of an Involuntary Genius* (1975) and *In America's Shoes* (1983), Santa Rosa, Black Sparrow Press, 2001, even though these texts present themselves as novelized memoirs. The autobiographical texts, like the poems, seem to enjoy a certain degree of indirection, as the poem "Biographical Notes" suggests: "my biography / in the absence of facts, / rests on shaky ground // every day / i add thousands of new entries / to my biography // without me / my biography / is your story // when made into a play / my biography / speaks with an accent" from A. Codrescu, *Alien Candor: Selected Poems 1970–1995*, Santa Rosa, Black Sparrow Press, 1997, p. 59.

All kinds of people had gone, before him, to America for specific purposes. Tourists, as a rule, don't go to America. Businessmen do. Emigrants do. Poets don't. Poets leave America. So what kind of perverse destiny pushed him there? he thought, as he listened to the three Yugoslavs behind him eating onions, wiping their mouths and saying every two seconds "America! America!" (These Yugoslavs were on the wrong plane. They had missed their special charter flight and were going TWA instead.) Michaux had been to America. Cendrars starved in New York for a while, just long enough to write his great "Easter in New York." But they had all been victims of historical circumstances. He was the first, as far as he knew, to go to America because his girl friend wanted to get rid of him<sup>5</sup>.

Thus the figure of the young poet is novelized, becoming the unfortunate *mal-aimé*, in flight from Romania after a romantic setback: but this is only part and parcel of permissible poetic license in which details are skewed in order to make place for myth.

The narrator manages to distinguish himself from his fellow emigrants from the Balkans by means of a grotesque and sardonic representation of the humble immigrant from whom he takes his distance. The irony of the situation is emphasized by the breaking of the isotopy of the stereotyped representation in that the three fellow travellers are placed, not in the lower decks of an overcrowded ship, but on a TWA flight, since they had missed their more humble charter flight. Whereas on the flight they are eating onions, presumably raw, they will soon be feasting on the bread promised by St. John de Crevecoeur. The third person narrator, calls himself Andrei Goldmutter in this text, a variant on the given name of Perlmutter, or "mother of pearl" in which the precious material, pearl, is transformed into gold in keeping with the development

of imagery throughout the text. The narrator imagines himself during the flight as arriving in the wake of two great French language poets, Blaise Cendrars and Henri Michaux, representatives of the historical avant-garde and of surrealism. Codrescu maintains this line of descent, enriching it however throughout his writings with precise and persistent references to exiled Romanian writers such as Tristan Tzara and Eugen Ionescu, emphasizing the roles they played in Western writing throughout the twentieth century. Finally, in this passage, the narrating voice positions itself in respect to the mythic constellation known as America, an imagined place, seen through the refracting lenses of textuality. This involves both the literary storiography that has prepared the place of the encounter, as well as the specifics of the story told by the immigrant who moves towards a new life while yet weighed down by the vestiges of a tribal past.<sup>6</sup>

Later in his career as an English-language poet, Codrescu will write a tribute to Blaise Cendrars (1887–1961) in "Christmas in New York" that takes up title and mood of Cendrars' "Jacques a New York" from 1912. As far as Henri Michaux (1899–1984) and Surrealism go, tired of being constantly labelled a Surrealist, Codrescu writes in *The Disappearance of the Outside: A Manifesto for Escape*:

*I have often been labeled a surrealist by people who wouldn't know a surrealist if one came steaming out of their mouths at a French restaurant, and not only by them. What people usually mistake for surrealism is a different way of speaking. The metaphorical echoes of Romanian into English sound surreal. By that token, anyone sounding strange to a listener is a surrealist: we are all each other's surrealists. Given the increasing strangeness of human voices compared to media voices, we are all becoming sur-*

5 A. Codrescu, *An Involuntary Genius in America's Shoes (And What Happened Afterwards)*, contains *The Life and Times of an Involuntary Genius* (1975) and *In America's Shoes* (1983), Santa Rosa, Black Sparrow Press, 2001), p. 129.

6 On the relation between identity and textuality and the "imagined community" of the nation, see B. Anderson, « Exodus », *Critical Inquiry* 20, no. 2 (Winter 1994), p. 314-327, and B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London, Verso, 1983.



*realists. In a world inhabited by involuntary surrealists, silence becomes a real alternative. But I am not a surrealist: I am a Romanian, an exile. It is true that much of the European avant-garde between the wars was a creation of provincial Romanian Jews, chief among them Sammy Rosenstock, a.k.a. Tristan Tzara, but that is only a by-product of Balkanism. Balkanic exilism is distinguished by the fierce speed of its self-affirmation in the midst of fragmentation: each fragment is still within the explosion. the art of "meditation in an emergency" is our art. We speak a language propelled everywhere by paradoxes, little vehicles really, modes of historical transportation we have had to evolve to survive*

that starts with Walt Whitman (1819–1892), and passes through, among others, William Carlos Williams (1883–1963), Ezra Pound (1885–1972) and Charles Olson (1910–1970)<sup>10</sup>.

That Codrescu should identify with poetic forms so strongly tied to the rhythms of the spoken language is remarkable for a non-native speaker. His characterization of this strain of poetry as "multicultural" probably indicates his opening to and knowledge of the world beyond the borders of the United States, and he articulates his position notwithstanding the persistent

such as T.S. Eliot, Marianne Moore, Robert Frost, Hilda Doolittle, and Wallace Stevens, not out of a lack of knowledge of their work, but in order to give more weight to the Beat Generation that arrives on the scene after the Second World War and that opens the field to the poets of his, the successive generation.

The understanding of his belonging to that generation is strongly conditioned by his sense of having arrived in the United States in an historical moment that was not only favourable but entirely propitious:

*If I can ever be called lucky, it is because I was an exact contemporary of my times. I came to America in 1966 when there was sudden freedom in the air on both sides of the Iron Curtain; one of the few times in history when a poet and foreigner could walk straight into the arms of a whole poetic generation in love with its "strangeness" and find the fulfillment of his expectations there. I pity the poor poet of Romania arriving in the xenophobic, uptight, eco-cultural smog of the 1980s. [...] And I was lucky too to have experienced in my own self and with my own body the sexual revolution in America*<sup>12</sup>.

Codrescu characterizes his efforts to become a competent user of the English language, a language that he did not know before his arrival, in the prose poem "Bi-lingual", published at the beginning of the 1970's, just a few short years after his arrival in the United States:

*I speak two languages. I've learnt one of them in a trance, for no reason at all, in a very short time, on horseback, in glimpses, between silent revolts. One is the language of my birth, a speech which, more or less, contains my rational mind because it is in this tongue that I find myself counting change in the supermarket and filing away my published poems. In a sense, these two languages are my private day and night because what one knows without having learned is the day, full of light and indelicate assumptions. The language of the night is frag-*

*ile, it depends for most part on memory and memory is a vast white sheet on which the most preposterous things are written. The acquired language is permanently under the watch of my native tongue like a prisoner in a cage. Lately, this new language has planned an escape to which I fully subscribe. It plans to get away in the middle of the night with most of my mind and never return. This piece of writing in the acquired language is part of the plan: while the native tongue is (right now!) beginning to translate it, a big chunk of my mind has already detached itself and is floating in space entirely free...*<sup>13</sup>

The text suggests a reversal of the roles between mother tongue and the acquired language inasmuch as the mother tongue comes to play the role of interpreter of the poetry written in the acquired language. The mother tongue seems to be relegated to an almost perfunctory secretarial role, inhabiting the rational space in which coins are counted and published poems get archived. This implies that the language of poetry is irrational, spontaneous, and that in its madness is held prisoner by the mother tongue, from which the newly acquired language desires to escape. This figurative stance towards the virtues of the mother tongue and the acquired language seems to be in accord with the notions of the nature of language current among the Surrealists and Beats, but at the same time it establishes a strong connection to the past of the exiled poet, for whom writing in the mother tongue exposed him to the risk of imprisonment.

His feeling of having attained a high level of comfort with his adopted language is witnessed by his later achievement as a successful novelist, as cultural commentator for National Public Radio, and certainly for his continued production of poetic texts. His sense of intimacy with his adopted language becomes, however, in the long run, a trap:

*In America, I'd felt immediately at home in the life of the country, even though I didn't know*

12 A. Codrescu, *An Involuntary Genius in America's Shoes*, p. 248–49.

13 A. Codrescu, *Alien Candor: Selected Poems 1970–1995*, p. 105.

*a word of the language. Now, I was home in the language but I felt more alien. I began to "lose my familiarity with myself," as the narrator of my Life and Times noted toward the end of the book. I began to splinter, mirroring the disintegration of hope around me. I began to lose my perspective as an Outsider. Which meant that I put on America's shoes, which were like the little red shoes in Grimm's fairy tale: they looked like regular shoes but they were not. Sure, I said everyday, I can take these shoes off any time I want, I can quit anytime, I can find my old self in my new self, I can stop talking*

*I wondered what would have happened if, instead of coming to America, I had gone to those other countries which had been potentially welcoming: Australia, New Zealand, Canada. Those places, untouched as they were by the barefoot madness of America, would have never provided me the luxury of identifying with a whole generation, I would have stayed an immigrant pure and simple, wearing those shiny, black, pointed shoes immigrants wear the world over. I would have walked in those shoes through school, possibly a job that would have allowed me to buy more shoes, and I would have wrestled my muse in that dark, horrifying, lonely chamber that is the true residence of most exiled poets. I would have slowly lost the bounce in my walk, and the cockiness of my pronouncements, and I would have probably killed myself one fine day in Sydney, or become a petty crook<sup>14</sup>.*

This passage taken from the memoirs unites two types of material fundamental for understanding the manner in which Codrescu moved into the culture of the United States, as immigrant and as exile. After having attained a high level of competence in the second language, a competence that permitted him to participate fully as writer and as cultural commentator in his new country, there begins gradually and increasingly to develop a sense of apprehension and unease as he becomes more fluent and more at ease with the new language itself, to the point at which he experi-

ences a loss of the sense of self, a loss of his identity as « outsider ». This perception brings to him a sensation of fragmentation. This perception goes along with growing sensation of a loss of hope that surrounds him in the culture, a sensation that followed the initial euphoria of the liminal state characteristic not only of outsider and of poet, but also of his sense of belonging to a revolutionary cultural movement that exploded onto the scene in the Sixties and that coincided with his arrival in the United States.<sup>15</sup> The moment of euphoria that corresponds to his arrival in « America », that utopian and mythic site, will be put into a different perspective, and not only for Codrescu, during the 1970's and the beginning of the 1980's when he composes the second memoir from which the above passage is drawn. The political reality of the United States displaces that which had been the center of gravity of the United States, such that the geopolitical reality of the State imposes itself ever more forcefully upon the mythic Nation into which he had believed inserted immediately upon arrival.

In *Comrade Past and Mister Present*, a poetry collection published in 1986, the prose poem « Fourth of July » serves as a vehicle for Codrescu to imagine a possible world: a Romanian poet in exile in the Federal Republic of Germany is counterpoised to his own ambivalent position in respect to his experience in the United States of America:

*I know a sad and large man who lives in West Germany.*

*That's how I thought I would start a newspaper article about a man I don't know, a Romanian poet who sends me his sad self-published little books every three months or so. This man is a doctor, a G.P. probably in a small coal-mining German town. I see the post office where he buys his stamps and gets his mail and the little coffee shop where he has his schwarz Kaffee and writes his sad poems. His poems aren't just*

14 A. Codrescu, *An Involuntary Genius in America's Shoes*, p. 344–5.

15 For notions of liminality in its relation to *communitas*, V. Turner, *The Ritual Process. Structure and Anti-Structure*, reprint, 1969, New York: Aldine De Gruyter, 1995, p. 94 ff.

sad, they are desolate, they are haunted, they are hollow and ground-down, the despair is thick and incontrovertible. There are leaden seas and hopeless rivers in them and burnt trees with dots of pain on the charred branches. The humans are missing from his landscapes as resolutely as if they'd been rubbed out so long ago nobody even remembers them. But once in a while a remarkable little human thought will make its appearance, astonishing in its petty incomprehension. Things like: "They've thought of it, so now I have to eat it." Does he have a wife, children? Probably.

Today is the Fourth of July. The radio plays the "Ode to Anacreon," from which F. S. Key took "The Star-Spangled Banner." I'm an American, no doubt about it. My heart swells with pride at this brass riot, I am transported. I love Mr. Jefferson. A genius. A revolutionary. A great visionary. He would have puked on Ronald Reagan. [. . .]<sup>16</sup>

Whereas a manner for resisting the feeling of fragmentation consisted in the positive evaluation of and identification with a tradition of avant-garde poetry whose most profound and meaningful roots were to be found in Romania, the next move would be to connect oneself to that tradition in one's own poetic practice.

As Ioana Avadani, the translator of Codrescu's novel *Messi@h*, argued in 2000,<sup>17</sup> the poet had lost contact with his mother tongue, such that his Romanian was then more or less stuck back in 1965, the year in which he had left Romania. When translating *Messi@h*, Avadani tried to restrict herself to a lexicon that reflected the state of the

language when Codrescu left the country. After having finished the translation, the translator continued to collaborate with Codrescu, translating his weekly radio commentaries. She realized that Codrescu was known in Romania as a writer, but not as a Romanian writer. She was able, however, to foresee the time when Codrescu would no longer have need of a translator in order to publish in his mother tongue.<sup>18</sup>

Codrescu began returning to Romania after the fall of Nicolae Ceaușescu's government in 1989, going back as the correspondent for National Public Radio.<sup>19</sup> This activity is only a very small part of his involvement with the cultural life of Romania, even from well before the fall of that government. But it was not until 2007 that he published, together with Ruxandra Cesereanu a volume of poetry written in Romanian, *Submarinul iertat*<sup>20</sup>, translated into English by Codrescu with the title *Forgiven Submarine* in 2009<sup>21</sup>. As Codrescu writes in the notes to the translation: « When Ruxandra proposed our collaboration I was amazed how much poetry in Romanian was in me, waiting to burst its dungeon »<sup>22</sup>. The structure of imprisonment and the anticipation of a soon to follow liberation seems to be constitutive of the poetic spirit in Codrescu, a sensation that can be traced to his life experience as exile, Jew, and poet, but also through his belonging to a community of Romanian avant-garde writers, a sort of transnational community, a virtual territory of exile within which modern Romanian literature continues to flourish.

16 A. Codrescu, *Comrade Past and Mister Present* (Minneapolis: Coffee House Press, 1986) p. 10.

17 A. Codrescu, *Messiah*, New York, Simon and Schuster, 1999.

18 I. Avadani, « Translating Codrescu Into Romanian », *Xavier Review* 20, no. 2 (Fall 2000), p. 24–5.

19 A. Codrescu, *The Hole in the Flag: A Romanian Exile's Story of Return and Revolution*, New York, William Morrow, 1991.

20 Per l'immagine del sottomarino, il delirionismo ed i rapporti con l'avanguardia storica romena, Ruxandra Cesereanu, « Il delirionismo o un manuale concentrato su come rimanere bloccato nella realtà », trad. Giovanni Magliocco, in *Poetica dell'immaginario*, a cura di Gisèle Vanhese, Rende, Centro Editoriale e Librario-Università della Calabria, 2010), p. 33–37.

21 R. Cesereanu and A. Codrescu, *Forgiven Submarine*, translated from the Romanian by A. Codrescu, introduction by M. Cărtărescu, Boston, Black Widow Press, 2009.

22 Cesereanu and Codrescu, *Forgiven Submarine*, p. 137 [Quando Ruxandra propose la nostra collaborazione io fu meravigliato quanta poesia romena vi era in me, aspettando di essere liberato dalla sua prigione sotterranea. *Trans. R.K.*]