Response

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I. Introduction: The Danger of Betrayal

The vampire, a legendary monster who seductively drains victims of their life essence, is an old character in literature, the magnetically evil creature who takes his complacent prey with a smile. As an archetype, it is not far from Andrei Codrescu's description of the Haplea, a folk demon tyrant who is also a traitor — meaning it must convince its victims to believe in something good about it, until it destroys their faith by trampling their gardens. In what Robert Busch called the "monsterizing of character,"[1] myth has become in Eastern Europe a convenient expression of political reality, a way to encompass the complexity of government betrayal and individual self-deception contained in the old system. It is against the dangers of such betrayal that Eastern Europeans built what Professor Codrescu calls "abstract walls that held against the battering rams of the outside world."[2] Eastern European literature has defined itself as opposed to the outside world of enforced ideology, built itself around the need to preserve what was inside the walls: national identity, language, and culture. Now the question before Eastern European writers is what myths address the realities after the Fall, and what walls can support new work without crushing something else worth preserving.

In this discussion of the challenge facing Eastern European writers today and its larger implications for literature in a time of globalization, I will first look at Professor Codrescu's analysis of the crisis through two metaphors he uses, walls and jokes, and then move on to place this topic in the context of the larger theme of the Roundtable by looking at the problem of creating artistic cohesion in a fragmented time — the dilemma that Professor Codrescu calls "writing without an enemy."[3]

II. Walls and Dragons: Barriers to Creativity

Walls as metaphor are a convenient device by which to understand literature, infused as they are with morality by the people who build or use them. In extreme cases, these protective barriers of words, stories, and systems can develop into ideological barricades, "artificial and murderous boundaries"[4] such as nationalism and xenophobia. These evils, once encouraged by Ceaușescu in his bid to cement power, now continue to grow in ever greater conflicts with Hungarians, Gypsies, and Jews. "The Berlin Wall, like a mythical dragon, spawned a thousand little walls that are growing as we speak," writes Professor Codrescu.[5]

Here is a myth we can work with, then: the many-headed monster that is only enraged by efforts to kill it. Professor Codrescu does not pursue the thought, however, to ask if, as in the story, we may find a point of vulnerability in the beast. Rather, he leaves us with the somewhat darker suggestion that national hatreds, like the Communist ideology of the past, paralyze literature because dogmatism of all kinds produces "meaningless words" and poets can "not, in the end, bear the burden" of opposition to them.[6] It seems that the fight against the Hydra is too much.

This despairing response, understandable as it is in a time when ethnic division is killing thousands in Bosnia-Herzegovina and conflict simmers in the states of the former Soviet Union, seems to assume a model of the writer with which I cannot agree — that is, a person bound by the narrow political and physical limits within which he or she works. In fact, this assertion seems antithetical to Professor Codrescu's earlier argument that the constrictions of government censorship inspired writers to produce work notable for its artistic "metaphorical obliqueness" in the Communist past. External conditions must help shape the writer's imagination, and in Eastern Europe we have seen the terrible effect war and prolonged political crisis may have on the individual spirit and on literary creation. But those conditions do not mark the boundaries of literary imagination.

Alexander Wat, a Polish intellectual and writer during the decades of Soviet hegemony, offers one example of how a writer has tried to negotiate the tensions of politics and art in an ideo-

logically charged time, and how he has dealt with frustrating political conditions. In the dialogue work *My Century*, Wat says he embraced Communism because "I could not stand my nihilism....I could not live by negation alone." During this time, doubts about his political affiliations caused him great internal conflict, and Wat felt unable to produce creatively. "I wrote then a good deal, but I would destroy everything, for whatever I wrote was either bad or anti-Marxist"[7] — support, perhaps, for Professor Codrescu's argument that writers are silenced by social realities that force them to make impossible moral choices. In contemporary Eastern Europe, the equivalent dilemma may be choosing between nationalism and other allegiances, personal and public. These conflicts, however, are not ultimately crippling. For Wat and for many Eastern European writers today, the moral dilemmas posed by unpleasant political realities do not prohibit the important step of thinking through one's choices and eventually expressing the difficulty so faced creatively. Only the loss of meaning in language can effectively stop a writer from using words to illuminate questions of morality and ethics in human affairs, a point that brings me to the next issue I wish to address, the vital connection Professor Codrescu suggests between language and walls.

Professor Codrescu points out that a wall may be an unsteady barrier of words, an "*ur*-paste of language"[8] rendered meaningless by constant misuse. He makes no specific reference to the West, but given the often deeply ironic nature of his political commentary, I would like to apply this warning to us, the intended audience of this paper. We in the West do much to perpetuate the decline of meaningful language; using phrases like "post-Communist" and "democratic society" without often pausing to compare definitions, we make those terms as hackneyed and unhelpful as the term "socialist realism" became to some writers in Eastern Europe during the Communist era.

And here I would like to pause for a moment to make a connection to the sometimes overly simple use of the language with which we ourselves describe the historical events, past and present, in Eastern Europe. In the program that advertised the display two years ago here, at Macalester College, of a piece of the Berlin Wall, promoters of the display called on members of the community to "share in the celebration of a new era." It seems

exactly this sort of reduction of history that writers of Eastern Europe must confront today. The process of writing must be, as it always is, a process of opening out, of increasing again the number of images we may associate with an event by using imaginatively the words available to us, and so creating another way of understanding.

The literature of Eastern Europe in the past fifty years has become known for its ability to open the ways in which we think about a specific place and time, to make the particular moment apply in a very important way to some more general theme. We may, for instance, read *The Garden Party* by Václav Havel as a commentary on the circular thinking and ridiculous self-importance of Communist officials, but more broadly, it is a moving psychological portrait of the sense of isolation common to the modern era. Milan Kundera once demanded that sort of general reading when he denounced Western critics for interpreting his first novel, *The Joke*, as a critique of Stalinism. "Spare me your Stalinism, please," he said, "*The Joke* is a love story!"[9]

Professor Codrescu acknowledges this element of "universality" in Eastern European writing of the past, but implies that more recent work lacks that quality when he writes, "Literature, before the Wall, was a lot more globalized . . . than it is after the Wall."[10] This statement suggests, among other things, that the writer's audience is no longer able or willing to respond to "globalized" literature, that the interests of those who listen to the stories a writer tells have narrowed until everything is swallowed in localized concerns. The issue of the community for whom the author writes, then, becomes increasingly important to speculating on the future on Eastern European literature.

III. A Joke in Line: The Community of Readers

Jokes, Professor Codrescu says, achieve a "universal recognition of a common *something*,"[11] the essence of the exchange of ideas, the packaging of a thought so that it is relevant and witty and accessible all at once. Jokes unite people in a way that implies the potential for further group action, perhaps for mutual support of each other in a moment of boredom in line; but the possibility exists that a "wicked" sense of humor can be put to more subversive use. The tragedy is that jokes are no longer able to

encompass the particular frustrations and absurdities of 1995 Romania, according to our author. Life in Romania now has become too grim, too confusing, too violent, too bitter, too loud, and there is no community of jokers who understand one another. In Professor Codrescu's words, "Life in Eastern Europe is still a joke, but, paradoxically, it is a joke without humor."[12]

The implications of this thought are fascinating, especially if we draw the implied parallel between joke tellers and writers. Writers, like the joke tellers, have an audience in mind, a group that shares the same reference points and can evaluate the message contained in the work. Setting aside for a moment the complexity of this idea that there is a "known audience" — an especially difficult concept for the many exiled authors writing from the West — let us look at what has happened to the audience in Eastern Europe. In formerly Communist countries, the argument goes, the scarcity of frank commentary on the social and political situation encouraged people to read fiction with a special urgency, looking there for critical evaluation of the government. In addition, more people had the time and energy to read the literature available to them. Richard Lourie jokes that the Russian readers' first response to glasnost was to wax "nostalgic for Brezhnev's stagnation when they had been able to reread the classics in unhurried calm."[13] The destruction of that (in some ways illusory) community of attentive readers is of great importance to East European writers today. The fact that jokes are in short supply, then, serves as useful shorthand to describe the breakdown of community.

In looking for a myth to describe this fragmentation, the Biblical story of Babylon comes to mind — for the hubris inherent in thinking that political freedom was all that was needed to "fix" Communist societies (in literary terms, to create an ideal relationship of openness and understanding between writers and readers), people are further divided from each other by the welling up of radically different causes, interests, ideologies, and, in many cases, literally different languages. Not coincidentally, this myth has frequently been called on to represent the postmodern condition of division and isolation frequently described in literature written since World War I.

In fact, however, the tower in Eastern Europe is not so imposing or permanent as it may seem. Common ground and com-

mon language still exist, as they do in the most apparently fractured communities that share a space and time. Perhaps we can find it by looking again at the joke to see exactly what about its language and structure unites a group. A joke has a well-established design; it carries with it explication, expectation, and a satisfying punch line. It generally points out human absurdities or makes some criticism of things as they exist, at the same time that it is committed to the thing criticized — there would be no point in joking about something that did not matter to the speaker or the audience. But the joke is not the only narrative form that allows for criticism that simultaneously unites a group and censures something related to it.

The paradox that Professor Codrescu mentions, the very idea that a joke can be a joke and not be funny, holds the same potential for precise, elegant, *funny* commentary as the joke, and such paradoxes are central to Eastern European ways of thinking and writing now. The definition of this rhetorical trope suggests its suitability for an unstable political climate: the characteristic element of a paradox is that it exploits "the fact of relative, or competing value systems. The paradox is always somehow involved in dialectic: challenging some orthodoxy, the paradox is an oblique criticism of absolute judgment or convention."[14] Situations that challenge our conventional understanding of politics and society and pit value systems against each other are rife in Eastern Europe right now: Democrats, disillusioned with Communist officials in coalition governments, suggest a return to monarchy. The Information Department, whose self-described task is to "inform correctly at home and abroad about the activity of state institutions," is accused by the Professional Journalists' Union of "subordinat[ing] the independent press to the government's own interests."[15] In this atmosphere the joke has, according to Professor Codrescu, floundered; it may, as he contends, require stability. Certainly the measured kind of joke he offers as an example seems best suited to a different political context.

"It is said that if you are Romanian, you can be born either in a city or in the country. If you are born in the city, that's fine. If you are born in the country, there are two possibilities . . . " The words drag on, poking fun at a pace of life, a way of doing business peculiar to government bureaucracy and understocked

stores. It is a joke, as Professor Codrescu suggests, for waiting in line. The paradox, perhaps, starts from a more isolated point of view: the individual observes an apparent contradiction between two realities and from this position of unreality seeks to reconcile or at least point out the discrepancy. In acknowledging the contradiction, however, the writer or observer is inviting others to join in a discussion about it.

I see this trope as a useful way to interpret a popular story told in Romania three years ago. In the much-heralded elections of 1992, one elderly Romanian voter looked at the list of candidates, most of whom were associated with parties that had already been tainted by rifts, scandals, and connections to former Communists. Finally he scrawled across the top of his ballot "I vote for God."[16] The incident, repeated by unhappy voters, is not likely to elicit laughter; it is too near for that. But in setting out two realities — there are free elections, but there is no real choice — the affair articulates Professor Codrescu's concern that "people used to mind-numbing conformism" cannot participate actively in a political system.[17] It deals with that fear by taking it to its extremes and suggesting subversively that unawareness might in fact be the best way to deal with the difficulties posed by the country's convoluted political situation. It is a disturbing solution, but its expression is encouraging: frustration articulated is the beginning of a discussion about the problem.

IV. Conclusion: Beyond the Censor

All of these questions about meaningless language and fragmented community circle one point, a recurring theme in any discussion about the future of Eastern European literature, and an issue that seems especially relevant to this Roundtable. We know that great literature was produced in this region during the years of collectivist ideology and artistic control: from Kundera to Miłosz, writers found ways to express their vision and evade the restrictions of the Communist leaders — or they failed, and suffered for the attempt by being jailed, exiled, or forbidden to produce artistically. With amazing adaptability many wrote anyway, and created novels and plays that are now generally acknowledged to be among the best literature and drama of this century, admired often for lyricism and a fine sense of the

absurd. And what drove the artists who created these stories with "universal" meaning? In the preface to *Letters to Olga*, a collection of letters to his wife from prison, Václav Havel wrote one part of the answer. "I soon realized that the more abstract and incomprehensible these meditative letters were, the greater their chance of being sent, since the censors did not permit any comments to be mailed that they could understand."[18]

This deflating thought, that the beauty of Eastern European literature may have been inspired by the artificially restricted conditions of its invention, has been a common subject of discussion these last several years. Professor Codrescu's label for the literary quality that suggests such an interpretation is "metaphorical obliqueness," a characteristic of Ana Blandiana's "The Floating Church," and perhaps, by extension, of much of the literature from the Communist years. If writers of the region were driven to write great work by the need to handle important issues circuitously, then what can be produced in this time of utter, vulgar openness? Professor Codrescu first poses this question as "What if the new freedom paralyzes us?"[19] but later, significantly, he expresses the predicament differently. "The problem of writing without an enemy turns out not to be one of not knowing how or what to write, but one of maintaining enough silence for what is called 'authentic' to be heard."[20]

So we return to the clattering Babylonians, to the fear of being able to speak but not being heard or understood, of being, in fact, a foreigner in one's own land. To this difficult dilemma, articulated so movingly by Professor Codrescu, I have little to offer in terms of explication and less of solutions. I would point out clearly what our author only implies, that the proliferation of voices is not unique to Eastern Europe or societies obviously in political and social transition; it is, in fact, the hallmark of our literary era and may be described as a global phenomenon. But we have heard enough at this Roundtable to be wary of the assumption that any trend can be global, to ask ourselves if, when we say "global," we mean "Western." With this concern in mind, the other problem Professor Codrescu addresses, the localization of literature, actually becomes a symbol of hope: in approaching the great social malady of our time, the fragmentation of our communities, the only manageable way may be to look at the problem in its very specific manifestations, and from

those individual moments, generalize to some greater understanding. In an article in *Sierra* magazine, Professor Codrescu wrote, "If we have happy memories, they are usually private. What we share with the world is an unbroken lament."[21] It may be that the new bond of community we will learn to share with others is our lament for what has been lost, be it the vague comfort of order in a repressive government, or the illusion of homogeneity in the societies of the West.

In thinking about this rather somber link between nations, and between writer and audience, I would like to refer back one more time to the power of myths to help us maneuver around the obstacles of our difference and accept potentially frightening change. The archetype of the vampire can be useful here too; in that legend, there is a way to talk about the survivors of evil. They are described not usually as tainted by the experience, but rather purified through the effort of overcoming it. The community of others is important in that struggle, because victory over a vampire often requires joining the force of one's own will with others who place the same value on life over death. The survivors adapt to the world again with the knowledge of its extremes, and often with the mission to use their new wisdom to fight corruption elsewhere, and to make others aware of its existence. In simple images lie complicated strategies for dealing with our world, and writers, in Eastern Europe and elsewhere, will continue to illuminate those ways.

Notes

1. Andrew Swenson, "Vampirism in Gogol's Short Fiction," *Slavic and East European Journal* 37, no. 4: 492.

2. Andrei Codrescu, "The Fall of the (Romanian) Wall in Three Acts and a Prologue," *Macalester International* 3 (Spring 1996): 146.

3. Ibid., 157.

4. Ibid., 148.

5. Ibid., 170.

6. Ibid., 166.

7. Victor Erlich, "Central European Writers as a Social Force." Presented at "Intellectuals and Social Change in Central and Eastern Europe" held at Rutgers University, 9–11 April 1991; proceedings published in *Partisan Review* 59, no. 4 (1992): 648.

8. Andrei Codrescu, "The Fall of the (Romanian) Wall": 167.

9. Fred Misurella, *Understanding Milan Kundera: Public Events, Private Affairs* (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 1993): 47.

10. Andrei Codrescu, "The Fall of the (Romanian) Wall": 158.

11. Ibid., 158.

12. Ibid., 163.

13. Richard Lourie, "Poetry in Exile." Presented at "Intellectuals and Social Change in Central and Eastern Europe" held at Rutgers University, 9–11 April 1991; proceedings published in *Partisan Review* 59, no. 4 (1992): 593.

14. Rosalie Colie, *Paradoxia Epidemica: The Renaissance Tradition of Paradox* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1966): 10.

15. Crisula Stefanescu, "Information Department Set Up," *RFE/RL, Report on Eastern Europe*, 25 October 1991.

16. Chris Stephens, "On With the Old," *New Statesman and Society* 5, no. 222: 10.

17. Andrei Codrescu, "The Fall of the (Romanian) Wall": 167.

18. Václav Havel, author's preface to *Letters to Olga: June 1979–September 1982*, trans. Paul Wilson (New York: Henry Holt, 1980).

19. Andrei Codrescu, "The Fall of the (Romanian) Wall": 152.

20. Ibid., 157.

21. Andrei Codrescu, "Down in the Flood," *Sierra*, March/April 1994: 87.