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Response to Codrescu

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Response

Rachel May

Professor Codrescu has given us a remarkable, poet's-eye view of the contemporary complexities of culture in the former East-bloc countries. And as only a poet can, he has succeeded in exploring the ironies inherent in the situation from both sides. Rather than try to sum up his extraordinary web of ideas and images, I will focus on one strand of his argument that seems particularly important and particularly apposite to the theme of this Roundtable.

Running through Professor Codrescu's essay is the proposition that the twin threats of indigenous nationalism and imported commercialism are reducing literature in the former East-bloc countries to an empty shell, either by localizing it into insignificance, or by burying it under the "cement bed of technocivilization." By contrast, the previous repressive system had offered writers a kind of spiritual freedom that allowed them to address "universal truths," thereby making literature more, not less, globalized in nature. Let me retrace his route, which takes him from truth to literature, literature to jokes, jokes to ideology. While I may disagree with some of his broadest assertions, it is as difficult to engage in polemics against his highly nuanced and nonlinear discourse as it would be to argue about the stars with the sheep Mioritza. Rather, what follows should be read as further meditations on the themes Professor Codrescu has raised.

I. Truth and Literature

Professor Codrescu addresses the question of creativity and globalization in an original fashion. It has become a truism to say that East European literature has lost its way since the end of Soviet domination. Censorship and repression had the effect of riveting popular attention on literature and giving great acclaim to writers who dared disobey the system. Now that the repressive system is gone, no one cares about literature anymore. Professor Codrescu has taken that argument further and claimed,

rightly, that the previous system led writers to investigate in their literature what he calls “universal truths.” Most commonly, their most profound insights related to the values of freedom and loyalty and, sometimes, faith. These were, incidentally, also the values at the heart of the Romanian myths he retold.

Such an argument, however, can go only so far, and I disagree with the lengths to which Professor Codrescu has taken it. He writes, “Literature, before the Wall, was a lot more globalized than it is after the Wall. The literary imagination is now almost entirely localized, nay, *paralyzed* by local conditions.”¹ While it is true that the forces of nationalism and commercialism have taken over what was once the domain of high culture, it is worth giving some attention to the limits to how high that culture was able to go before. The “universal truths” that formerly occupied the attention of writers and readers were, in fact, themselves severely localized. This may seem an obvious accusation against the censorship and other forms of control that guided writers’ lives and work from above, but it encompasses many factors that came from below, from the writers’ own impulses, as well.

In the first place, the choice of “universal truths” in Soviet-era literature tended toward the banal. The argument that freedom is good and repression bad, for example, which was daring enough to earn acclaim for more than a few writers, is simply not very interesting when it is taken out of the repressive context. Boris Pasternak was offered a Nobel Prize for his novel *Doctor Zhivago*, more because it was a courageous work than because it was a great novel. Alexandr Solzhenitsyn also won a Nobel Prize for literature, but his works, too, are more important as testaments against the Soviet system than as art. When students in my twentieth-century Russian literature courses come to his stories, their first reaction is generally to ask, “So what?” It is only when they are given extensive historical and political background, when they can travel in their imaginations back to the repressive days of Soviet censorship, that they begin to see the works’ importance.

Moreover, even when these authors explored “universal truths,” the choice of “universal truths” was highly selective and self-serving for the males of the intellectual class that dominated Soviet and East European culture. Freedom and loyalty come

out as macho issues, faith as a conveniently nonthreatening “feminine” issue. Rarely did writers take on more internal universal truths, such as those related to compassion, existential crisis, or spiritual growth. Even the most highly acclaimed literature of the period often exhibits “universal blindnesses,” such as sexism, elitism, xenophobia, homophobia, and other forms of intolerance.

A second, related problem with the “universal truth” claim about Soviet-era writing is that however universal the truths were, their presentation was often strongly context-dependent. Professor Codrescu says of Romanian literature that its “very need to hide and invent masks had given it universality.” Adam Sorkin, who is a leading translator of Romanian literature into English, made a similar statement in an essay on literature and dictatorship in 1991, when he wrote,

Devices of irony and sly suggestiveness, symbolism and surreal imagery, allegory and parable, apparently private obscurantism and hermetic expressionism were the dissimulating means of making literature bear witness to the privations of daily life and the terrors inside the human soul.²

But then Sorkin goes on explicitly to consider whether this makes the poetry he is discussing purely Romanian or actually universal. Although he is discussing poems on themes not specific to Romania, such as Lazarus and Icarus (and although as a translator he has a vested interest in the portability of Romanian literature), Sorkin finds them to be geographically circumscribed by the Romanian context. “They have,” he writes, “the extreme compression of the best political jokes.”³ In other words, the themes may turn on universal human foibles but the intended audience is very specific, susceptible to a wink and a nudge and nothing more. For example, Sorkin mentions an established poet who told him, during the Ceaușescu years, that he was amazed the censors had allowed him to use the title *Imperial Winter* for a collection of poems. At first Sorkin was bewildered as to why this would have been a dangerous phrase. On reflection, he understood the veiled reference to the chilling effect of the dictatorship. But such a title could never really be *dangerous*, since its political reference can be understood only by

people who are already looking for it. Thus, the universal truths appear to be restricted to a very small universe.

Although Professor Codrescu could never be accused of nostalgia for the pre-1989 era, the argument about “universal truths” and the decline of high culture feeds into the contemporary ideology of nostalgia that is so influential in the former East-bloc countries today. A fatal flaw in such an argument is one that Professor Codrescu mentions himself, and that is the matter of complicity. No matter how heroic a writer’s voice may have sounded under dictatorship, the fact that the voice was audible probably meant that the writer had made some compromises. Indeed, mounting evidence points to a high degree of cooperation, or at least complacency, on the part of entire populations. In that context, these “universal truths” sound more like salves to guilty consciences. They mask a much uglier “universal truth” about the degree to which people are willing to victimize and ostracize their brothers and sisters for the sake of their own security.

Like many Western scholars who study the region formerly dominated by Soviet power, I was partly attracted to it by the lively intellectual life that went on behind all the walls and closed doors. Urban intellectual culture in Soviet Russia, for example, was marked by close-knit circles of friends who would sit up till all hours discussing literature, the arts, good and evil, beauty and death. For them, reading was as important as breathing, and there was a heady sense of the vital role literature played in their lives, a sense rarely encountered in the United States. As the Soviet system collapsed, it was painful to watch those circles break apart, but break apart they did, as their members became busier, more harried with practical responsibilities, more involved in their work and their own interests. I was startled to feel my own nostalgia for those walls that had created such tight communities, such a sense of what was really important. That is, until one friend in Moscow confided in me that, though he missed the late-night conversations, in retrospect it all seemed artificial. As the people of his close circle went their own ways—one became a religious fanatic, one a ruthless entrepreneur, one a rabid nationalist—he realized that he had never really known them, and if he had, he would not have liked them. Perhaps they had not known themselves. In other words,

the walls created close communities and an intensity of intellectual activity, but it drastically circumscribed that activity, limiting the truths anyone could share, even with themselves. To sum up, then, the links between truth and culture may have been more evident in the earlier period, but they were rather tenuous nevertheless.

II. Literature and Jokes

It is not coincidental that Adam Sorkin compares Romanian allegorical poetry to the "best political jokes," and Professor Codrescu moves between literature and jokes in his own comments. Jokes were what kept the old intellectual circles alive, and they are a good symbol for what has been lost. Jokes depend on and celebrate communities of people who speak the same language, who share the same cultural referents. Professor Codrescu also argues convincingly that jokes were the only thing that could penetrate the ideology of the time and reach existential truths. But the Soviet-era joke culture also reflected and perpetuated the narrow set of values on which the intellectual circles were based. For example, it made drunkenness a virtue and celebrated lying and cheating. In the "us vs. them" world of dictatorship, this made sense: law breaking and destructive work habits seemed to be honorable acts of resistance to a hated system that imposed the laws and demanded everyone's labor. But a popular ethos based on such values is disastrous now, as citizens try to construct effective democracies and efficient economies in the mafia-dominated, environmentally ravaged, poverty-stricken countries the dictators left behind.

Moreover, jokes have not disappeared from those cultures, they have merely changed with the times. Formerly they drew upon the paradoxes of the Marxist-Leninist-Stalinist system, whose propaganda yielded infinite possibilities for absurd inversions. (To the common Marxist slogan "Capitalism is the exploitation of man by man," Russians would add, "And Communism is the other way around.") Now the most popular jokes are much less benign and abstract. They turn on deeper, more frightening absurdities. A Muscovite friend's nine-year-old son recited to me at length a series of popular ditties about Malen'kii

Mal'chik (The Little Boy). The perky rhymes and jaunty rhythms belie the horrific content. Here are two examples:

The Little Boy found a loaded machine gun.
Now the whole village is blasted to hell.
Too bad Aunt Martha missed the good clean fun;
He'd kill her too if he just had a shell.

The Little Boy played in the elevator shaft.
The game was fun till the cable came loose.
Old Grandma sifts through his bones and laughs:
"I'll get big bucks for those running shoes!"⁴

Here we have a new kind of truth-telling through jokes. Earlier jokes were produced in self-defense against the absurdities of a system. The truths they told were dangerous because the system itself made them so. Now that it is no longer criminal just to tell the truth, people have sought out the most dangerous truths of all, those of the cruelty and greed that lurk within ourselves. The previous jokes connected people to each other within their small social spheres; the new ones connect them to the universal human predicaments of alienation and primal fear.

Jokes are also still the best weapon against ideology, because they strike at the naïveté that allows ideology to thrive. Previously the jokes were effective against the Soviet-style ideology as imposed from above. But they ignored much of what came from below and allowed a kind of innocence to thrive until it disappeared, almost overnight, when the walls came down. "Innocence" in both senses: innocence as opposed to guilt, and innocence as opposed to experience. *Innocence as opposed to guilt*, because as long as people considered "them" to be guilty, they never had to confront their own guilt and were able to focus on banal "universal truths" and explain everything with political jokes. *Innocence as opposed to experience*, because the hated walls protected them from a great deal of what makes the West frightening today: pornography, drugs, random violence, homelessness. It is this sudden loss of innocence, of course, that leads people in the former Soviet-bloc countries to clamor for a return to law and order, and to throw their support behind nationalists who promise to rebuild the walls and restore the simpler world they once knew.

The loss of innocence is of especially profound importance to artists. Before, they were protected from the need for sensationalism, from having to be entrepreneurial, from having to justify their existence all the time. Professor Codrescu wrote an essay in the mid-1980s about a refugee Romanian artist named Antim, who wandered around after his arrival in the United States looking for the "Art Center," the central authority that would tell him what to paint, that would buy his works and guarantee him an income. The anarchy of the American art world seems heartless by comparison.⁵

But the loss of innocence is a necessary precondition to art. The old paternalism also protected artists from having to be original or creative. Antim, whose sole creative act was to devise a clever means of escape from Romania, will not be an artist in America, but this is hardly a loss to art. Neither is it a loss to art that a title like *Imperial Winter* is no longer charged with deep and dangerous connotations. The old system may have made words loom large, through seemingly innocent debates about orthography, clumsy propaganda sloganeering, and doublespeak. (One group of writers compiled a list of words that were used in Soviet times in ways that had little to do with the reality to which they supposedly referred. It included *meat, sausages, money, democracy, the fight for peace, people's friendship, and environmental protection*.)⁶ But such intense official focus on the manipulation of words was really a way of vitiating the power of words and images in the hands of creative artists, of keeping them out of the arena of global truths and in the middle of a big political joke. It is true that the old regimes cracked down on writers who opposed government policies, but they cracked down even harder on those who tried to rise above politics and enter the world of abstract art, of absurdist or fantastic literature, realms through which they could have entered into a more global culture. (The first literary show-trial of the post-Stalin era in the Soviet Union was the 1966 trial of two writers of fantastic and absurdist prose, Andrei Sinyavski [pseudonym Abram Tertz] and Iulii Daniel [Nikolai Arzhak]. Both were given long sentences of hard labor for "anti-Soviet propaganda.") In other words, those regimes recognized that the most dangerous truths were the ones that transcended locality and ideology. And it is these truths which must now do battle against the twin threats

of nationalism and commercialism that Professor Codrescu identifies. It is difficult for those of us who care about culture to see an agent of salvation in the sadistic Malen'kii Mal'chik, but for now he may be our only hope. He is no Ceaușescu or Brezhnev, he is not some distant leader on whom to unload righteous wrath; he is an ordinary, nameless little boy. As he runs around inside the old walls with his machine gun and his running shoes, he gives the lie to both the nationalists' promise of a return to innocence and the commercial message that materialism will save the world.

III. Infinite Choices

Under the previous regimes, Russian and East European writers had two choices. They could write what they were told, or they could not. If they wrote what they were told, fine. If not, they had two choices. They could write in opposition to the system or they could stay silent. If they stayed silent, fine. If they wrote in opposition to the system, they had two choices. They could emigrate or go to prison. If they emigrated, fine. If not...

The endless joke that Romanians used to tell while waiting in endless lines lends itself surprisingly well to the predicament of writers under the Soviet system. They faced in their professional lives a set of clear-cut, binary choices. Now writers have infinite choices, which is the same as no choice at all. They can't write for or against, they can't choose to suffer and thereby gain readership. Their only choice is to provide answers to the ubiquitous modern question "So what?" As writers get accustomed to posing that question to themselves, they are moving out of the sanitized, parochial world of localized universal truths, of literature as political joke, of ideological walls built out of words, and into the larger universe of human terrors and passions.

Notes

1. Andrei Codrescu, "The Fall of the (Romanian) Wall in Three Acts and a Prologue," *Macalester International* 3 (Spring 1996): 158.
2. Adam J. Sorkin, "Hard Lines: Romanian Poetry, Truth, and Heroic Irony under the Ceaușescu Dictatorship," *Literary Review* 35, no. 1 (Fall, 1991): 28–29.
3. *Ibid.*, 32.

4. Courtesy of K. A. Rakin. The originals are:

1. *Malen'kii mal'chik nashel pulemet:*

Bol'she v derevne nikto ne zhiivet.

Tol'ko ostalas' babulia Matrena;

Zhal', na nee ne ostalos' patrona.

2. *Malen'kii mal'chik na lifte katal'sia.*

Vse khorosho, tol'ko tros oborvalsia.

Babushka roetsia v kuche kostei:

Ishchet krossovki na sorok rublei.

I have not been able to date the appearance of these rhymes. One Russian told me they had appeared about ten years ago. However, the content suggests a more recent provenance, around 1990. In the first place, weapons were not available to ordinary Russians until Soviet power began to break up. Western-style running shoes of the sort Grandma hoped to find were also a more likely black-market item in the late Gorbachev period. The “forty rubles” she hoped to gain from them in the original would have been significant before but laughable after 1991.

5. Andrei Codrescu, “A Hero of Our Time” in his *A Craving for Swan* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1986): 307–11.

6. Igor I. Altschuler, Yuri N. Golubchikov, and Ruben A. Mnatsakanyan, “Glasnost, Perestroika, and Eco-sovietology” in *The Soviet Environment: Problems, Policies, and Politics*, ed. John Massey Stewart (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992): 202.