Macalester International

Volume 3 *Literature, the Creative Imagination, and Globalization*

Article 18

Spring 5-31-1996

Response to Codrescu

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I. Introduction

When I was reading Professor Andrei Codrescu's essay, I was thinking mainly about his view of walls dividing societies, peoples, and literatures. He says that after the fall of a wall between the most hostile social systems in the world, we can call it, if you like, the Berlin Wall, there are other segregating "walls." I am not going to quarrel with this. What I would like to do, however, is focus your attention on a very simple, pragmatic question: Are these "walls" good or bad?

In my opinion, the current "walls" are not as frightening and dangerous as was the Berlin Wall. And that is why I do not mind the new walls. Of course, I know this statement is very general. I can imagine, for example, the terror that a writer such as Salman Rushdie feels when he/she is sentenced to death for writing a controversial novel. Here, one is confronted by a wall of religious intolerance and violence that could be more hazardous than the Berlin Wall. Despite such a situation, however, I still think of the disappearance of the Berlin Wall as a symbol of human victory and a reconfirmation that the most intimidating of barriers could be dismantled.

II. New Walls?

While I agree with Professor Codrescu that new walls are appearing as the old ones give way, I suggest that we discriminate between the new and the old according to their durability. It is well known that the face of Romania's communism was, in many details, different from that of communism in Czechoslovakia, where the regime was less gruesome, and there was no dictator like Ceauşescu. Consequently, the Czechoslovak face of communism was labeled "goulash socialism." What does it mean?

The "goulash" — originally meaning "cheap but nutritious meal"—represents here not only literally food but also the avail-

ability of other goods, often not of excellent quality but in adequate quantity. And there was enough of such a "goulash" for everybody if he/she did not criticize the order too loudly. However, the most important thing that impacted life was the same as in the rest of Eastern Europe, that is, the persuasiveness of the ideology and political system that created the Berlin Wall. When that enclosure was opened, its hold on the minds of these societies loosened. In many areas, including culture, trade, and science, moribundity was replaced by vitality and hope. But of course, as Professor Codrescu reminds us, new and, in his mind, foul fences have appeared.

Professor Codrescu uses the example of travel. He suggests that Western countries are so afraid of a flood of immigrants from the East that Eastern Europeans are scrutinized carefully when they ask for a visa. Behind this restriction, Professor Codrescu argues, are other suspicions that together encumber the free movement of citizens of post-Communist societies to the West. I am cognizant, for instance, of the way British and American immigration officers carefully probe whether those who are bound for Western destinations have enough money and a return ticket purchased in advance. Needless to say, such a treatment can be humiliating. Who would want to be the subject of intrusive questions by some bureaucrats in uniforms?

But I can see some positive and important changes, too. Before the fall of the Berlin Wall, Czechoslovak authorities simply did not allow one to visit Western countries. Since the collapse of Communism, however, one can travel anywhere. The presentation of a valid passport is sufficient. This new space of privacy and freedom is a far cry from the days of total control. While not every post-Communist country has extended these rights to its citizens, I am confident that it will soon become the general practice. In the end, however, the main point to remember is that the people of Eastern Europe have reclaimed the mastery of their own fate. Such an empowerment is essential for dealing successfully with the new circumstances of the 1990s and beyond.

III. Good Literature

Professor Codrescu claims that during Communism, Romanian authors tried to avoid censorship by conjuring up more imaginative and global ways of writing. He adds that current Romanian literature is much less universal, paralyzed by local conditions and in danger of becoming self-absorbed or myopic. Let me express an evaluation of this situation not from the point of view of writers or literary scholars but from the point of view of a reader.

To effectively respond to Professor Codrescu's perspective, one must address the role of literature and writers—or intellectuals—in the era of Communism. It is common knowledge that many intellectuals in Communist countries, including the former Czechoslovakia, surrendered to the regimes of the day and, therefore, were given special privileges as reward for compliance. Did they have any options? Should they have emigrated, as some did? Usually, exit meant that one abandoned one's home, friends, and, often, family. Or, should they have stayed and opposed the regime, as a few did?

Exploration of these difficult questions still awaits a serious discussion in many parts of the post-Communist world. In the Czech Republic, while a discussion has begun on the guilt or innocence of writers and their works, memories are too fresh to avoid *ad hominem* attacks. However, it is important to note that a few literary figures (mostly dissidents) have assumed high-profile positions. In the Czech Republic, a creative but oppositionist imagination has thrust some into the center of political life. For instance, Václav Havel, a former defiant playwright, assumed the presidency; Milan Uhde, a former poet and playwright, became the chairman of the Czech Parliament; and Pavel Tigrid, a former journalist and writer who lived in exile in Paris, was appointed minister of culture.

But, I think Professor Codrescu is right to bring to our attention the peculiar conditions of post-Communism and its effect on writers. In the Czech Republic, a few have left behind their vocation and are now much involved in worldly pursuits. A good example is Michal Horacek, a 1984 World Press Institute fellow and the author of delicious song texts. He is now the owner and operator of a gambling outfit. Art has taken a back

seat to making money. In the thinning world of contemporary Czech authors who have caught my attention, I can think of only one new writer — Michal Viewegh, a thirty-three-year-old author who writes in a tender and young poetic fashion that often challenges the new pragmatic society. Perhaps Professor Codrescu's observations of the Romanian scene are fitting here, too.

But a shortage of good literature need not become an insurmountable problem in the epoch of openness and markets. Many outstanding literary and artistic works have already been translated into the Czech and Slovak languages and are available for circulation. During my travels in the United States, the work of Portuguese writer José Saramago was recommended to me. I am reading his gorgeous novel *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ*, in which Saramago uses his creative imagination to think about the personality of Jesus Christ, about fate, and about what really can be the will of God. I can compare this novel, for instance, with *The Last Temptation of Christ* by the Greek author Nikos Kazantzakis, with Russian writer Mikhail Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita*, with *Book of Apocrypha* by Czech writer Karel Čapek, and with the Canadian film *Jesus of Montreal* by Denys Arcand. Globalization of artistic production and circulation can be rewarding. The best of world literature is available for those who so desire.

IV. Optimistic Note

Professor Codrescu is right in forcing us to see the new unpleasant walls hemming in the societies of Eastern Europe. His insights on the gulf between liberated spaces and prevailing artistic output are instructive. However, I am not willing to interpret the whole situation pessimistically. What I really would like to underscore as the most important fact is that the Berlin Wall, which blocked creative thinking as well as free literary expression, no longer exists. This is a major victory; and smaller and weaker ones need not frighten or discourage us.