



**Andrei Codrescu**

***Poetry Is the Currency of the Future***

**November 2, 2006**

*Irena Grudzińska Gross:* Andrei Codrescu is not only a wonderful voice on the radio, he is also an author memorable for his prose and poetry. He was born in Sibiu in Transylvania, a very magical place. He was there throughout his high school, went to Bucharest to study; by then he was already a poet. Soon he left Romania via Italy and came to the United States. According to an anthology of American poetry published in Romania, he is now known there as an American poet. So allow me to ask him: What does it mean to you to be an American poet?

*AC:* Let me start by saying that I live in New Orleans, and I will use this occasion to talk about *Exquisite Corpse*, an online literary journal. The cover of the issue that you see is about Katrina and its aftermath. It was such an important event, a life-changing event in the lives of the people I know and my own as well. But I have three million words on my hard drive, about 60,000 pictures and I don't know how many people talking in audio stuff, and I suddenly find myself incapable of dealing with all the material. So our Katrina issue, in fact, the storm, effectively killed the *Corpse*. Honestly, I've wanted to kill it so many times. Every time something happened to sort of rededicate me. Or somebody gave us some money, which is probably the quickest rededication I know – very effective.

I've just been rededicated to poetry and I feel like a convert to an old faith I used to have. I was in Romania in September at the Black Sea Poetry Conference. I wrote in Romanian, which I haven't used in a long time, and

they of course wrote in Romanian because that's their language. When I came back to the United States the Romanian poet Ruxandra Cesereanu wrote to me. I met her very briefly in Romania. She said, "How about we write a poem together [in Romanian]?" So I had to reach deep into my vocabulary which was much smaller than my feelings and the things I know, because my language has been English since I was nineteen. My whole adult world is in English, but then there's this other world of childhood and adolescence, which is in Romanian. In this literary collaboration I was the innocent party.

In New Orleans, poetry is doing well now. Nobody else is. Everybody is mentally disturbed because, well, there's no health care infrastructure, there's no drug store, there's nowhere to go to get some pills to calm you down. Everybody's lost something. People are distressed. None of the stories you see on television or read in the media can begin to tell you the extent of the psychological and physical devastation of that city. When the storm came I was in Baton Rouge and many of my writer friends were refugees in my house there. And we had a little press bureau going. New Orleans before the storm was a different city, a good place for poets. There were cheap rents and young artists and writers came because it was America's most spiritually interesting city. It was diverse in a real profound way. It was alive. The music was live, the poetry was live, and it still is. Now, after the storm, it may become even better because there are not so many apartments and the people who have decided to stay realize that they are living through a catastrophic history that nourishes them, feeds them, if they are willing to pay attention. There's absolutely nothing there that is not interesting.

My cab driver this morning took me to see his destroyed house. He said, "Do you have time?" "Yes," I said, "I have a plane to catch in about an hour." He took me by his house and he told me that he was seventy years old and he's probably the oldest cab driver in New Orleans at the moment and he'd seen something he'd never seen in seventy years, which was the reburial of his niece who died in her sleep in Houston in exile. A twenty-four year old woman, she was brought back to New Orleans to be buried

in the family tomb and it turned out there was somebody else in her place. They broke into somebody else's tomb and put her in there while they were moving the intruder out. When they took her out and put her in the family tomb he said her body showed no sign of decomposition at all. He said, "Seventy years and I've never seen anything like it." Have you ever seen anything like it? I've never seen anything even remotely like it. So, this is New Orleans.

This below is a piece I wrote in 97 or 98:

### *Poetic Terrorism*

A group calling itself the Assault Poetry Unit dropped off an assortment of suspicious packages at various offices around New Orleans, including that of the Times-Picayune newspaper, which evacuated its employees. The package turned out to be a watermelon with a four-page manifesto in it. The editor of the Times-Picayune was at the time deeply immersed in discussing the upcoming social season with the paper's gossip columnist. They were forced instead to huddle under a freeway overpass with the manifesto, while the NOPD bomb squad dismantled the watermelon. The manifesto called for painting over the huge Marlboro Man ad at Decatur Street and replacing it with a poem by Ishmael Reed; it called for all Louisiana government speeches to be written and read in iambic pentameter; and it demanded that New Orleans police officers memorize and recite poems at regular intervals. It was perhaps this, more than anything else, which caused the police to treat the incident as a crime. The manifesto declared that "the era of poetic passivity is over," an egregious statement in a city where passivity, poetic or no, is a sacred institution, especially in the summer. We are so passive here that we never even shoo the flies away from our po' boys; even the donkeys pulling the tourists quit flicking their tails this time of the year; even more amazingly, no mayoral candidacies are declared at all, leaving the incumbent to take an unencumbered siesta. The energetic manifesto demanded, among yet more things, that the mayor read "The Brown Menace or Poem on the Survival of

Roaches” by Audre Lord in its entirety on the seven o’clock news. Now, if someone would dare to wake Hizzoner up, that might solve the problem of what to put on the news, which has been all about how hot it is outside. Still, crime or no crime, you have to hand it to the Assault Poetry Unit. They ambulate, they agitate, they say something. In New Orleans, like in the rest of America now, that’s the height of social action.

This was before 9/11, before the Iraq war – not that things are terribly improved in the way of social action – the anti-war movement in this country consists of forwarding emails.

Irena asked me to read a poem from a new anthology of contemporary Romanian poetry [*Born in Utopia*, edited by Carmen Firan]. Now this business about being a Romanian and American, we can talk about that, but you know, it really doesn’t matter to me at this point. I think identities are there to add and the more identities you have the more elusive and rich you can be and the more you can actually avoid the authorities. This poem was written in Romanian and I translated it into English when I was nineteen years old:

### ***Foreign Languages***

To learn another language god left you your ancestral line  
whose root you can touch in the dark  
finding there the short padded jacket of the Austrian soldier  
in whose pocket there is an unfinished letter in German.  
It is easy enough to find yourself with the owls still living  
in these house roofs,  
inside them the Inquisition keeps working, swearing its oaths  
in Spanish while sharpening the Jew’s tongue with red irons.  
There are many silent mouths along this ancestral line  
and many more are their unspoken lies  
and you can startle them with a scream

to make them suddenly translate themselves into all the earth's  
languages.  
If you search long  
the search itself will begin to smell of exotic fruit cemeteries  
which you will name,  
opening in this way the rich vein leading to the heart  
of the black jazz singer.  
Beware only of the shine along the length of the ancestral line  
if you slip you'll fall farther than the root  
down where the word is mixed with blood, the beast's paw on  
the mother's breast,  
the vowels enter one another there,  
live coral islands, devouring.

I wrote all these poems in Romanian when I was 19 and 20. I read everything there was to read and I was running very quickly through our poetry and then when I left Romania, I had two intense years when I wrote in Romanian, and then, I just started writing in English. That was the end. So, this return is interesting and again I'm trying to find those places and Romania is doing that for me. However, I am also this American poet, and I am going to read from my new collection *it was today*. This one is called "a geography of poets" and it's the title of an anthology Edward Field edited some years back:

*a geography of poets*

is all wrong, ed

what poets now live  
where they say they do  
where they started out  
where they want to

half the midwesterners  
did time in new york  
the other half in california

only new yorkers write  
as if they are from new york  
and mostly they are not

the ones in california  
were wounded elsewhere  
when they feel better  
or can't afford the rent  
they'll go back where  
they came from

this is america  
you get hurt where you are born  
you make poetry out of it  
as far from home as you can get  
you die somewhere in between

the only geography of poets  
is greyhound  
general motors rules them all  
ubi patria ibi bene  
or ibi bene ubi patria  
bread out of nostalgia  
not a lot of it either  
some of us came from very far  
maps don't help much

Here is one from a long teaching experience:

*to a young poet*

so poetry  
aha they go  
I write it  
I want to publish it  
I am the new flock  
I have been taught  
in school by many  
renowned poets  
all of them great  
mediocrities & now  
I want to put my self-  
consciousness to use  
by you so you can  
recommend me for prizes  
grants fame & then maybe  
you can call my mom  
& say yes he made some-  
thing of himself he's a poet  
& then if you publish a big  
book of poems I'll read  
one or two & give you my  
begrudging approval in the name  
of the new flock even though  
we are lost & nobody cares  
if we live or we die & our  
web sites go unlogged on  
maybe they need more sex  
the sex we are not having  
much of because your  
fucking generation had it all plus  
egos to match & we hate you  
even those two poems I didn't  
quite finish from your big new  
book books are dead don't  
you know it

*IGG:* I find it very interesting that poetry has as much importance in Romania as in my native country, Poland, and I was wondering if you have any thoughts why is it so. And what of this growing interest in poetry in America?

*AC:* Poetry is so important to Romanians, and I'm sure it is the same thing with the Poles, because it was a form of historic resistance against the power occupying the country at the time. There is kind of a poetic flight into myth and fairy tale and legend that forms an imaginary cultural body. During the communist period, poetry was filled with occult messages of resistance. There was a special metaphorical language diametrically opposed to socialist realism or whatever the doctrines of the 1950s were. People loved their poets for their emotional honesty. Poetry was a more profound way in which people were able to talk about their true feelings. In 1989, a lot of the poetry from before 1989 became historical over night. Poets tried to find very quickly a new way to write, and they found it in some of the American poetry and they found it in a kind of journalism. They were reporting the news but very telegraphically and very quickly. I think what is happening now is that there is a new generation of young poets who are finding that incredible repository of metaphor that their predecessors had and finding it quite useful again.

*IGG:* For me there are two things about your poetry that are both very well known and very surprising. One is that as a writer you are continuing a persona of the European, or Hungarian *littérateur*, that is, of someone who is working in literature in general. It is also a continuation of a European *littérateur's* love for the city because your writings are basically an urban phenomenon, not so much love of nature. You are at the same time using old literary models in a literal way, in the French-Romanian poetic tradition.

*AC:* Well, yes, I mean the idea of the man of letters, it always seems to me they are writing everything – they are writing reviews, they are writing essays, they are writing political pamphlets. I wrote for the *Baltimore Sun*. I was writing op-ed pieces and then one thing led to another and some-

body said, "Why don't you do this?" Other things came about. I was always interested in writing novels but I never thought that I could, but New Orleans is a very magical city, and it has meant a lot for writers.

*IGG:* When I first arrived in New York I went to a place called the Cornelia Street Café where there were poetry readings and to my big surprise the majority of the poets who were reading their poetry were Romanian. Is there a big Romanian poetry life in exile?

*AC:* There is, even now. In New York there are several Romanian poets. They are writing in English and they are writing in Romanian and now the poets, the immigrant poets, in New York and other places, are using the microphone and finding new ways to do this. They are not whispering their poems. I think that is terrific. Everything was a terrible whisper in the countries we came from. If you wrote a poem, that's how far it went, and then you whispered the rest of it or mumbled it.

*IGG:* Contrary to the Russian tradition because in Russia there existed a kind of troubadour way of declaiming poetry.

*AC:* Poetry is the currency of the future. A new kind of content is surging and it's looking for its own form. I think poetry is ideally suited for communication. It's what we'll be spending instead of dollars or euros. There's no question about it. We have this extraordinary way of transmitting information. Poetry is simply the most valuable commodity, and the most valuable place in this whole country is New Orleans because we have that sense of leisure and we have time for dreaming. We have dream-time. I mean we are the Fort Knox of dream-time. The idea of having a place to dream or a place that is not being chopped to bits by the efficiency of America is really very valuable because poetry is mostly inexplicable. When it's good it's inexplicable. Poems don't explain anything to you. They just baffle you, make you feel weird and give you chills.

*Question (from audience):* I have the sense that in your radio essays you are being the outsider commenting on America. Do you think of yourself

that way or do you think of yourself as an American?

*AC:* I'm a professional outsider just like Henry Kissinger. I'm an outsider because I am a poet really and not so much because I came from over there.

*IGG:* But you are the only commentator on the radio that I have ever heard with a foreign accent.

*AC:* My accent allows me to sell all kinds of things to people that they wouldn't normally allow.

*IGG:* What you are bringing in is a satirical seriousness that is also recognizable as a Central European tradition.

*AC:* Well, the entire culture of East-Central Europe during the communist period was in spontaneously generated jokes – they were like spores – they were everywhere. They died out after 1989, and now there are professional comedians instead.