

MAKING SENSE OF THE PRESENT: WAKEFIELD AND THE 21ST CENTURY WELTANSCHAUNG

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Abstract: *Andrei Codrescu is, undoubtedly, one of the most critically acclaimed Romanian-American writers. Born in Sibiu in 1946, Codrescu immigrated to the United States as a teenager, eventually settling in New Orleans where he developed a successful literary and teaching career at the University of Louisiana. The aim of this paper is to analyze, from a cultural perspective, his 2004 novel, Wakefield. Setting off on a journey to understand the 21st century American zeitgeist, Wakefield, the novel's eponymous character, exposes the strangest phenomena in our contemporary society; examples include the appearance of Internet money, ethnic wars, the clash of cultures, globalism gone awry and the perpetual search of one's origins in a country that is constantly on the move. The novel becomes representative, not just for the American society, but for the world community as a whole, since it addresses problems that are pervasive in almost every culture and country.*

Keywords: *the devil; globalization; zeitgeist*

1. INTRODUCTION

During the decades of Romanian communist dictatorship, many writers fled the country in search of new territories, usually settling in Western and democratic countries, which allowed them to express their ideas freely. Although the largest exodus occurred in the last decade of Ceausescu's dictatorship, the numbers had been increasing steadily since the 1970s, so that by the time of the 1989 Revolution, there was a rather numerous Romanian literary diaspora set in place.

One of the most appealing countries for the Romanians suffocated by the dictatorial austerity imposed on literature, culture and life was the United States of America. Mircea Eliade, Virgil Nemoianu, Petru Popescu, Ștefan Stoescu, or Andrei Codrescu, are just a few examples of such writers. In the new geopolitical and especially cultural context, such writers primarily pursued survival paths, just like any other emigrant. Nevertheless, they also resumed their activity, continued writing, edited magazines, set up associations and organizations so as to promote the cultural values of the country that was left behind. Their ultimate goal was to show that "Romania existed as a spiritual presence" (Eliade, 1990: 52). Moreover, some of them started writing in the language of the country of adoption, incorporating topics that are typically Romanian and, by doing so, they became true messengers of

Romanian culture and spirituality in Europe. Such is the case of Andrei Codrescu, a "professional immigrant" as he likes to refer to himself. Born in 1946 in Sibiu, in a family of Jews, Codrescu and his mother were sold by Ceausescu to the State of Israel for \$4,000 in 1966. With the help of HIAS (Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society), his family managed to immigrate to the United States when Andrei was twenty years of age; the writer says the following about the decision to move to the new country:

I was fascinated by the West. I was listening to music and I was in love with the Beatles and Rolling Stones. I felt there was a world there, outside, that had a different rhythm and I felt freedom. And I left especially because I was after the adventure (Codrescu, 2006: np).

His first American hometown was Detroit, then New York, then he moved to San Francisco with his wife, after that he relocated to Baltimore, eventually settling in New Orleans where he developed a successful literary and teaching career at the University of Louisiana. In 1990 he came back to Romania, but only to do a cover of the Revolution for ABC's famous show, *Nightline*.

Codrescu's writing career spans over more than 40 years and includes essays ("In America's Shoes", "The Posthuman Dada Guide"), novels (*The Blood Countess* (1996) or *Messiah* (1999)), collections of short stories (*A Bar in Brooklyn: Novellas and Stories*

(1999)), and volumes of poetry (*Belligerence* (1993), *Alien Candor* (1996)). After his 2004 novel, *Wakefield*, was published, he joined the classic writers such as Marlowe, Goethe, Hawthorne, Wilde or Borges by becoming a contemporary master of the pacts with the devil. With regards to the Romanian translations of his writings, these started appearing after 2000, and the focus was especially on his novels and less on his poetry and essays.

It is very interesting to see how Romanian cultural aspects are integrated in a type of writing that is targeted at the American public. We are dealing with a Romanian writer who produces his fiction in English and reaches the Romanian audience through translations. Nevertheless, this is not a first for the Romanian literary scene; Eugen Ionescu wrote in French and his *oeuvre* made its way to Romania through the medium of translation and this did not affect his reputation; quite on the contrary. The same applies to Codrescu, who was first famous beyond the Romanian borders and then became more and more appreciated in our country as well. Of course, this "lag" of the Romanian reception can also be attributed to the Romanian communist regime.

The word *weltanschauung* represents a vision of the world and is at the basis of the understanding of the human existence, of spatial and temporal relations and of the primary condition of being. (Heidegger in Calcatinge, 2012:126). It alludes to the idea of a cultural landscape which can be interpreted from as many lens as there are visions of people and, in this way, *weltanschauung* "always bears the connotation of an opinionated stance vis-à-vis the world" (Boehnke, 2009:111). The aim of this paper is to analyze Codrescu's latest novel, *Wakefield*, from a cultural perspective. Setting off on a journey to understand the 21st century American zeitgeist, Wakefield, the novel's eponymous character, exposes the strangest phenomena in our contemporary society; examples include the appearance of Internet money, ethnic wars, the clash of cultures, globalism gone awry and the perpetual search of one's origins in a country that is constantly on the move. The novel becomes representative, not just for the American society, but for the world community as a whole, since it addresses problems that are pervasive in almost every culture and country.

2. WAKEFIELD

A novel that takes the pulse of the American society on the threshold of the new millennium, Codrescu's *Wakefield* brings to the fore the classic theme of the pact between the man of genius and the Devil, the latter constantly in search of new

souls to feed on. The action is placed over the backdrop of a vicious, selfish, consumerist, machine-driven and unsentimental America.

Like many of today's anti-/heroes, the protagonist of the novel, a divorced writer and motivational speaker, feels alienated; he knows neither what he wants nor where he is headed, although he is able to preach in front of others what life is all about. One day the devil shows up in his apartment to claim his soul and Wakefield does what any good literary character would do: he invites the devil for a drink, strikes a deal to extend his life, and then tries to find his true self. If he finds it within one year, then he goes on living. If he doesn't, then his soul will be claimed by Satan, who is going through an existential crisis of his own due to the ever-growing bureaucracy of the afterworld and the younger upstart demons.

Wakefield embarks on a lecture circuit across the United States, searching for his authentic life by observing how others are living theirs. Throughout the places he visits, Wakefield observes ethnic wars, new Internet money and shiny coffeehouse chains, while conversing with day-trading slackers, eccentric art collectors, New-Age Gurus, billionaire techno-geeks, heroin addicts, global pioneers and lesbian supermodels. But the "authentic life" Wakefield is seeking eludes him. The road trip becomes increasingly surreal, an amazing and detailed display of globalism gone bad. The devil may have spared his life, but Wakefield already seems like a ghost at times, meditating about the differences between the various means of transportation that are available today and those of the past:

Once, there were luxurious staterooms on ships, lovely sleeping cars on trains, and airships with elegant lounges where thin women conversed with handsome men, sipping cocktails from crystal glasses. Travel itself was an enviable adventure, though of course only the wealthy could travel. The ungainly masses stayed home. What happened? When did change come? (...) Two world wars redesigned trains, airplanes, and ships to efficiently transport soldiers, weapons and prisoners. Efficiency became the ideal of design, and increased profit its overarching peacetime goal. (Codrescu, 2004:32)

He has a number of intimate affairs with women who demand nothing from him and continues to wander with no responsibility or impact.

Codrescu's novel borrows its title, motifs and the protagonist's name and motives from Nathaniel

Hawthorne's 1835 short story, *Wakefield*. Even the motto that precedes the first chapter is taken from Hawthorne's story: "Imagination, in the proper meaning of the term, made no part of Wakefield's gifts" (Codrescu, 2004:8). In Part One, entitled Old Quarter, there is another reference when Wakefield asks his friend Ivan Zamyatin, "a Russian émigré cabdriver and unknown American philosopher" (Codrescu, 2004:10), if the latter has read any of Hawthorne's works:

"Have you ever read any Hawthorne?" Wakefield asks his friend by way of greeting.

"I know the *House of the Seven Gables*, and the story 'Young Goodman Brown', about this poor young man who meets the devil in the forest (...)

"No, not that one. There's this other story, about a guy who leaves his wife and home and everyone thinks he's dead but the shows up again after twenty years, no explanations, no questions asked. (Codrescu, 2004:10)

Also worth mentioning is the fact that Zamyatin is a representative of the late 20th century migration waves and, in this respect, he speaks for a great number of people. Like many other economic migrants who have chosen to leave their countries of birth behind in search of a better life elsewhere, Zamyatin is well educated; at the time he met Wakefield Zamyatin was working as an Arctic researcher for the Russian government. The idea of the American Dream attracted him so much that he accepted a job which was beneath his level of education. Not only is the idea of brain drain hinted at through Zamyatin's character, but also the brain waste effect. There is so much potential to be exploited in him, but nobody takes the opportunity; the society sees him as being suitable only for menial jobs, hinting at what America has in store for migrants.

Coming back to the idea of disappearance, of being hidden and observing from the world from a distance, we can notice that this is something that characterizes both Codrescu's and Hawthorne's protagonists; they both have what we might call hiding fetishes:

He began to spend nights hidden in a large department store or a museum, enjoying the profound thrill of the moment when the doors shut and all the employees went home. He learned the movements of night watchmen and crept silently from hiding place to hiding place (...) Perhaps he should, like his literary namesake, disappear and return after twenty years as if nothing had happened. (Codrescu, 2004:86)

Just like Hawthorne analyzed the American society of his age through the eyes and experiences of his protagonist, so is Codrescu doing almost 200 years later with his. Being a motivational speaker, Wakefield has plenty of chances to offer an insight into the fabrics of contemporary America. In his opinion, one of the greatest problems of the 21st century America is that people

are quickly bored and they demand greater and greater imagination in their content. Matter of fact, the only certainty driving the economy is the certainty that boredom at faster and faster rates is inevitable" (Codrescu, 2004:75).

For the purpose of countering this new disease, which he calls "TBS (Terminal Boredom Syndrome)", and which affects America and its citizens, Wakefield announces that he has "created the School for the Imagination" (ibid: 79). Wakefield understands that Americans have always wanted to experience diversions from their ordinary existences. One thing that characterizes all Americans is their addiction to entertainment, no matter how ridiculous and deceitful it might be, because entertainment provides an outlet for escapism from daily life. Contemporary American life

was a time of tent revivals, just like in the mid-nineteenth century (...) America was rolling in money and a not inconsiderable portion of that gravy slopped generously into bowls of smooth talkers and charlatans. Wakefield read some history and found that his own age was very like the Jacksonian era before the Civil War. At that time everyone from mesmerists and channelers of the dead to writers like Mark Twain were raking in the chips. It was about that time, too, that Hawthorne's Wakefield decided to drop out. Nineteen-nineties America was just as enamored of bathos and fantasy as Jacksonian America had been. (Codrescu, 2004:105).

Further on, while attending another corporate conference, Wakefield has the chance of meeting the Swedish Minister of Culture who is delivering a speech on the need for portable houses because

these structures are an answer to the most vexing problem of contemporary life: boredom. Here you can move your house, exchange view with your neighbors, or take the whole thing with you for a weekend of fishing in the country. (Codrescu, 2004:165).

On one of his last trips, where he was awaited to deliver a motivational speech at the dinner party

of a Californian billionaire, Wakefield arrives in a town perched along the Pacific Ocean where

he wonders if *l'ennui* can exist in this jewellike beach town sparkling gloriously on a sunny morning. Bored, bored, bored, ma petite (Codrescu, 2004:207).

He realizes that the town's citizens are bored even here in this apparently idyllic place because

before the new economic boom this had been a place with rough characters about, dim bars, working girls, anarchist bookstores. None of that remains: no flophouses, no indigents, no winos, no whores, no sailors - pretty boring (Codrescu, 2004:217).

Whenever he has the chance, Codrescu explores Romanian cultural elements in his fiction, mingling them with American ones. Thus, another inter/cultural aspect exploited in *Wakefield* is to be found in the chapter entitled Wintry City where an old woman from Yugoslavia, Mrs. Petrovich, tells Wakefield a story representative of the Balkan region: the myth of sacrifice, better known in Romania as "Mesterul Manole". Mrs. Petrovich's grandfather, Yssan, was in charge of building a Mosque but its walls kept coming down during the night. Convinced by the Mossul that the only way to have the Mosque built was through a human sacrifice, Yssan caught his first-born daughter, Aleisha, who happened to come to the building site to meet a boy, and built her into the walls. The scene is heartbreaking:

When first girl come by, Grandfather catch her and he ask angry is she love God, and she cries and says yes, yes. So he grab her arms and put her feet in the brick mud and he build his daughter, Aleisha, in church wall. His best daughter, he love her the most, she cries, he cries, too, but what is done now is done. When wall is up to her chin, she says 'I love you', but it's for Grandfather not God, so he cries more but is more angry and covers her all up with bricks. (Codrescu, 2004:127)

The prospect for America is dismal: the country "has no history" (ibid: 150) and, therefore, it has no present and no future: "in our country here the future is in ruins before it is built" (ibid). There are no more people willing to make sacrifices; there are just stories that the migrants bring along with them, but they do not melt, they do not provide any sense of identity to America. The country does have the reflexes of a civilization in search of an identity and authenticity, but they

never materialize. As Codrescu himself put it in an interview,

Part of the point of Wakefield journeying in the 90s America is that the entire culture is against the possibility of change. (...) The "true life" he's looking for is impossible in such a time (maybe in any time) and he finds that no matter how much conscious attention he pays to what befalls him, he will not be allowed to make his experience coherent or "authentic" (in Olson, 2005: 183)

Art itself has changed and has become something that Wakefield does not recognize. For instance, when he visits the town of Typical, he is told the story of a sculpture, commissioned by the local authorities, to counteract the rocketing rate of divorces. This particular statue would stand as a testimony of Typical's family values which they were so proud of. However, when the sculpture is unveiled, the community is shocked to see that

the Typical Family consisted of a naked mother nursing a baby with a naked pubescent girl child standing at her side. There was no father figure, no protector no Man (Codrescu, 2004:38)

Following the unveiling, a huge scandal broke which led to mass protests, riots, vandalizations of the statue by the citizens, until it was finally removed. Extrapolating the story to accommodate the larger context, it is obvious that Codrescu addresses the issue of gay marriages and gay couples and the town of Typical becomes representative of the battle between the two factions (traditionalists vs. gay advocates) in America. The lesbian couple, made up of Tiffany and Milena, that he befriends is just another example of how un-/typical the town really is.

Although the journey allows for Wakefield's analysis of the changes brought about by the new era – globalization, the transformation of art, the gay movement, the rise of technology, migration and ethnic conflicts, America's cultural imperialism – the protagonist gets lost in the inner workings of the 21st century; he does not manage to adapt and remains an outsider. At the end of the novel, Wakefield returns home and ends where he began: alive but alone. "He heads home, to read. What else could a silence-loving man do in a hammer-wielding world?" (Codrescu, 2004:288). Nevertheless, his endeavor has not been in vain as it has given the readers an opportunity to consider such fundamental issues for themselves, in their own lives.

3. THE DEVIL

One of the reasons for the success that *Wakefield* has had in both the United States and Romania is that Andrei Codrescu manages to bring back to spotlight and revive a topic that has long been used and explored in literature - the pact with the Devil. Indeed, the Devil is the character that really makes the book. This particular theme has been revived and repositioned across the centuries in various literary creations, with each author putting his mark on how it is interpreted and symbolized. Thus, the century of technology and speed offers a good chance to pick it up again and it very interesting to analyze the changes that have been made so as to accustom it to the new milieu.

The 21st century pact with the devil is an intriguing one and it is seen as ludicrous, ironic, and even incisive. Codrescu's Devil is different from Goethe's, as the former shares many similarities with the people he deals with: he is lost in a high-tech world over which he has no power, tired of the bureaucracy in the hell's governing structures, and even experiences a slight identity crisis, which stems from the feeling of loss in a whole new world.

“Things used to be more simple, more fun. I enjoyed a frivolous and pleasant existence as a beloved, comic, quasifictional character. It was great – classic literature, opera, ballet ...” He sighs deeply, then leans closer to Wakefield. “Then one year I went from being revived at the Bolshoi to being deified by Khomeini and Falwell. Since then it's been a mess.” (Codrescu, 2004:4)

Characterized by wit, humor and sarcasm, Codrescu's devil has lost his touch in the art of negotiation. Thus, the writer constructs a character that the readers can sympathize with; the devil is not a villain anymore, but a mere victim of the paradigm shift the whole world is undergoing. Even the large list of names that is used to refer to him aims at creating a more humane image of him: the Devil, The Great Malign One, El Diablo, His Interruptiosness, Satan, Lucifer, Beelzebub, His Satanic Majesty, Orpheus, the Evil One, His Malignancy, His Demonic Highness, El Sataniko, Old Goat, the Dark One, His Holy Hoof.

Codrescu's approach pays off: a character that has made history in the literature of the ages is brought into the spotlight of modernity and of the reader, be it American, Romanian, or any other nationality, who manages to identify with him, to understand his fears and crisis in a world that is constantly on the move. To make things even

worse and make the Devil's feeling of alienation more acute, Hell itself has followed the American example and has become a multinational company; globalization leaves nothing and no one behind. Having just arrived at a meeting, the Devil notices that

(...) several hundred devils have already taken their places and more keep coming (...) He catches snatches of their pretentious conversation, buzzwords like *telekinesis*, and *synergy*. These new corporate types make him gag, chasing every new fad, flicking their firm young tails and flashing their perfectly polished horns. And they are willing to work 24/7 for the greater glory of the company (...) devils should not have to work any more than eight hours a day for the collective. (Codrescu, 2004:184)

In the face of these new younger devils holding corporate-style seminars so as to maximize the production of souls, Codrescu's devil feels a little out of date and this is reflected in his dealings with Wakefield in which he sometimes displays a lack of confidence. As both the protagonist and Wakefield struggle to make sense of the present and find the right path, it becomes obvious just how human both of them really are. And during all this time, “God is sleeping, let Him rest in peace” (Codrescu, 2004:67).

4. CONCLUSIONS

Although an ocean and another few thousand kilometers of land separate Romania from the United States, our country is not far from the spirit of Wakefield's America. Codrescu manages to capture many aspects that have to do with the disorientation and uncertainty felt in the post-apocalyptic Romanian society, which followed the events of December 1989, even though the novel is about America and the reshaping of contemporary society. It can be argued that, by blending cultural elements representative of many countries, Andrei Codrescu creates a recipe of literary success even though he is, more or less, the product of a culture torn apart by feelings of inferiority.

The Romanian-American writer speaks a universal truth regarding the 21st century society and draws our attention to the fact that

We lose our stories. We're letting the TV tell stories for us. Our personal stories, the stories about where we come from, who we are, what we all talk about whenever we have a family reunion, all the stories that people say over a cup of coffee, all these stories disappear because we do not have time for them anymore. And it's a tragedy, because people without

stories are no different than machines (Codrescu: np)

As Carmen Firan observed in a 2006 review of the Romanian translation of *Wakefield*, the novel is truly a delight. It represents a demonstration of intelligence, narrative verve, an admirable observation of human psychology, a humorous, ironic and paternal analysis of America at the beginning of a new millennium. Andrei Codrescu uses his acuity as a reporter, his introspective powers as a reputed essayist and his grace as a story-teller to create this brilliant, post-modern, absurd and, ultimately, life-like novel (Firan, 2006: np). By mixing cultural elements that are representative of both the United States and Romania, Codrescu is truly redefining community in intercultural context.

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