

On 21st-Century Poetry and Poetics

Andrei Codrescu* in Conversation with Radu Vancu**
(Annotated by Laurent Milesi)

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Abstract

This interview with contemporary poet Andrei Codrescu, conducted over email, examines several contemporary meanings of 21st-century poetry and poetics, the relevance of American poetry schools that dominated the latter half of the 20th century, and effects of the post-humanistic turn on poetic discourse(s). It also asks whether the public condemnation of Russian culture in general is justified or not in the aftermath of the Russian aggression against Ukraine.

Keywords: *21st-century poetics, contemporary American poetry, the New York School, avant-garde, war*

Radu Vancu: *Dear Andrei Codrescu, the current issue of Word and Text is interested in contemporary, meaning 21st-century, poetry and poetics. More precisely, as it is stated in its 'Call for Papers', 'it is interested in observing how humanities and, suum cuique, poetical practice respond to the blending of cognitive poetics and physical cosmology', as well as in studying the modalities in which 'poetry reacts and responds to these new pulsions of the sacred made visible in the social body'. What do you think about that, both as a poet and as a theoretician of poetry? Do you think language (and the reinvention of it for poetical purposes, as modernists strove to do) may still be a central issue in an age of the image and of the 'global screen', as Gilles Lipovetsky and Jean Serroy name it? Can poetry (whose nature is intrinsically linguistic) remain relevant in a world more and more dominated by the image - and on whose social networks even Facebook is perceived as too text-loaded and abandoned by the younger generations in favour of other text-free social networks such as TikTok?*

Andrei Codrescu: Dear Radu, I read with interest your ambitious call for a discussion on poetics now. It is timely and complicated. I admire your reach into areas that, at least in the U.S., have been either shoved aside or cancelled. We live here in a highly politicized environment that is straining the language in an attempt at a new vocabulary. Much of it sounds ridiculous to our sensitive ear for the rhetorics of post-neo-Frankfurt theorizing – its Marxist roots are showing like grey hair in bad need of dyeing – and it's OK, too, if you spell it 'dying.' What is interesting to me is the new European passion for festivals and poetry performance, a phenom that in the post-Covid era means the making of new communities. In the U.S. the great festivals are now strictly commercial. Even rap, which began in words, doesn't contain poetry any longer, if it ever did. Poetry seems to have taken a well-behaved white-collar job in an academic marketplace. Degrees, retreats and prizes are the currency of both 'conventional' (a pretty

meaningless term) and the new political ‘action’ (another meaningless term) ‘art’ (ditto) of poetry. I look with nostalgia at the ideas of ‘gangs or ‘schools’ engaged in meaningful polemics. I’m not even sure if ‘language’ is an issue anymore, as Mark Zuckerberg is readying to sell our imaginations in the ‘metaverse.’ We could get (briefly) rich, by issuing a coin called ‘metaphor’ on the blockchain.TM

RV: *What do you think of the American poetry schools that dominated the latter half of the 20th century? Are they still relevant today? Has any of them proven more catalytic than the others, influencing or modifying poetry written presently in English? Or are they already all museumized, relics of a past which is to be politely regarded, but is completely detached from the energies of the present world?*

AC: The New York School first and second generations matter to me: Frank O’Hara, Kenneth Koch, John Ashbery, Clark Coolidge, Ted Berrigan, Bernadette Mayer, Alice Notley, Anne Waldman, John Godfrey. As is always the case there are concentric circles of poets buzzing around these poets, influenced by them. My anthology *Up Late: American Poetry Since 1970* (1970) follows *The New American Poetry* (1960) edited by Donald Allen.¹ Allen’s anthology includes the poets of the first-generation New York School, the Black Mountain School and the East Coast mystics, Robert Duncan, Philip Lamantia and Jack Spicer among them. The *chef d’école* of Allen’s anthology is Charles Olson, an Ezra Pound acolyte and frequent visitor to St. Elizabeth’s Hospital where Pound was interned after WW2. These lineages can be traced back to Walt Whitman, who also gave breath to William Carlos Williams and Allen Ginsberg. All the names I mentioned should be followed by ‘among others’, some of them important philosophers and visionaries who were not necessarily or primarily poets, Buckminster Fuller, John Cage, and Joseph Albers above all. Buckminster Fuller and John Cage are in a class of their own, genius tentacular visionaries that everyone references and venerates. The second-generation New York school poets’ *chef d’école* is Ted Berrigan and his contemporaries. All the poets I mentioned were also living and practising in a ubiquitous *Zeitgeist* they didn’t notice, much like fish don’t notice the water they live in. Abstract Expressionism, Pop Art, Fluxus, hippy communes, psychedelia and rock ‘n roll were components of this *Zeitgeist* that, in a general way, was addressed by two PR agencies: Allen Ginsberg and Bob Dylan. These poetries (and by that, I mean philosophies, life styles, visual arts, etc.) are far from exhausted. They are live and productive though some of them have become the new mainstream, hence irrelevant. The trick is to keep moving into the unknown whatever it takes, or as I put it in *The Poetry Lesson*: Pound’s commandment was ‘make it new’, the postmodern is ‘get it used’.² I was using ‘postmodern’ because no other umbrella seemed apt at the time. That umbrella has now shredded and one must (note to academics) take each artist on his or her own worth and take it from there. It doesn’t matter if the physical person is dead or alive. Dead is better actually because then you can eat it at leisure without

¹ *American Poetry Since 1970: Up Late*, ed. Andrei Codrescu, 2nd ed. (New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 1987 [1970]); *The New American Poetry, 1945-1960*, ed. Donald M. Allen (New York: Grove Press, 1960).

² The exact quotation is ‘The modernist command was Pound’s “Make it New.” The postmodern imperative is “Get it Used.” The more used the better.’ It appears in *The Disappearance of the Outside: A Manifesto for Escape* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1990), 150 (‘The Triumphant Shipwreck of Dada and Surrealism’).

having to deal with the impatience of the living. In this sense, poetry is the future not the past. It doesn't rust and it doesn't pay. For a good review of avant-gardes, with a slight bias for the Language School, see Marjorie Perloff's essay 'Avant-Garde Tradition and Individual Talent: The Case of Language Poetry'.³

RV: *After the atmospheric chemist Paul. J. Crutzen has made popular the Anthropocene as a geological concept in 2000,⁴ showing the responsibility of the human for the (mostly negative) influence on the environment, the scientific and artistic discourse have swiftly undergone a post-humanistic turn. Are there any recognizable effects of this post-humanistic turn on the poetic discourse(s)? If so, which ones do you think are more substantial? If not, why do you think poetry has been less influenced by post-humanism than other artistic trades?*

AC: Poets try but any 'messaging' sounds artificial (at least to my commie-sharpened ears), so being good to nature doesn't mean 'writing nature poems'; it means writing a poetry that is nature, like a bug or a raccoon. That goes for visual artists, too. I think scientists should figure out how to message the environmental urgency. That includes to my mind protecting poetry and art just like the air and the endangered species. We know from our own past that propaganda doesn't work, that clichés kill what they purport to promote. Artists shouldn't jump on that bandwagon because it all happens naturally whether they like it or not: the new Zeitgeist is the dystopia that was in the air of Eurocentric colonial (and now post-colonial) air. In other words, if industry, economy, politics and sociology don't produce good policies, we will perish along with everything else. The Dadaists didn't change history with policy; they overturned the rot of art that was the mainstream at the time.

RV: *Contemporary poets of English language live, like any other world citizen, in the time of a Russian-Ukrainian war which threatens to become global any other day. In her groundbreaking 1993 anthology, Against Forgetting: Twentieth Century Poetry of Witness, Carolyn Forché has collected over 140 poets who lived during even worse times than those of the present, using poetry as a medium of witness for the atrocities they experienced during the last century, starting with the Armenian genocide and ending with the Balkan wars – and which sometimes eventually killed them. Is poetry still functional as a medium of witness? What is the relevance of poetry, and of culture by and large, if the humanistic values they promote do not make their respective civilizations more humanistic?*

AC: Maybe, think Wilfred Owen and Pound about World War I, 'that bitch rotten in the teeth',⁵ but like I said, poetry if it's innovative has no choice – art lives in the Zeitgeist

³ Marjorie Perloff, 'Avant-Garde Tradition and Individual Talent: The Case of Language Poetry', *Revue française d'études américaines*, Special Issue: 'Poètes américains: architectes du langage' 103 (February 2005): 117-41. The main part of the title is an obvious reference to T. S. Eliot's epoch-making 1919 essay 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', in *The Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot. The Critical Edition, Volume 2: The Perfect Critic, 1919-1926*, ed. Anthony Cuda and Ronald Schuchard (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press / London: Faber and Faber, 2014), 105-14.

⁴ Paul J. Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer, 'The "Anthropocene"', *International Geosphere-Biosphere Programme Newsletter* 41 (2000): 17-18.

⁵ The exact line and quotation, from Ezra Pound's 'Hugh Selwyn Mauberley', is 'From an old bitch gone in the teeth'. See Ezra Pound, *Selected Poems of Ezra Pound* (New York: New Directions, 1957), 64.

like fish in water, or people in (bad) air. Yes, call it out, but as particularly and in detail as possible, yet being an artist doesn't mean that you can't be a good citizen who condemns the war-makers in complete sentences. Taking on a political job is even more useful if you can. Your poetry will do its damage as art, and there is no hostility between the poet and the citizen. I've never liked Forché & Co's 'witness poetry'; it's mostly confessional tabloid reportage. 'I was there!' has its 'I' at the centre followed by various horrors – Forché's poem about the dry peach-like severed ears of prisoners that the sadistic colonel shows her in South America is a fine image, but it titillates, it is erotic under the cover of outrage. There is a conventional (and highly rewarded) confessional mode in the workshops that aims for a Plath-Forché sensationalism that is essentially erotic. Brutality in these poems is decorative, the body moves in only one direction – it's not a constructive dance à la Martha Graham or a prompt to action. It doesn't, like you say '*make their respective civilizations more humanistic*' (Or readers more militant, since they preach to the choir).

RV: *The Russian aggression against Ukraine has generated a public condemnation of Russian culture in general – quite similar to the general condemnation of German culture after WW2 – see, for example, George Steiner's famous 1959 article 'The Hollow Miracle: Notes on the German Language', where Steiner states that the German language was Hitler's accomplice; or Adorno's refusal from 1951 of the moral right of poetry to exist after Auschwitz.⁶ How do you think poets and poetry are to react to this condemnation? Is it a necessary and useful result of their moral stance against the war?*

AC: I like Steiner's writing, but I almost always resisted it, precisely for generalizations of that sort about the German language being 'Hitler's accomplice', a truly absurd proposition. Was Romanian 'the accomplice of Antonescu'? Maybe he means 'the performance' that German is rhetorically capable of? You can bark in any language, you don't even need language to be a murderer. Temporarily, I think that performances by Russian artists who are for this war should not be welcome. But it's idiotic to ignore Russian culture because of Stalin and Putin. Russian culture has put its 'shoulder to the wheel', to quote Allen Ginsberg,⁷ in overthrowing tyrants – see Solzhenitsyn, Bulgakov, Pasternak – and smashed to bits the conventions of courtly art in the Constructivist period. The culture that can get us out of the current insanity and make us more humane may well be Russian. What infuriates me about American media now is the constant use of the word 'Russians' – 'they' do this and that, etc., when they mean Putinism. After years of Stalinist terror Russian people are reflexively cowed, and one of the ways in which they were (briefly) freed was through innovative culture. So, sure, no triumphalism like sports and ballet! but yes to Pussy Riot.

⁶ George Steiner, 'The Hollow Miracle: Notes on the German Language', *The Reporter*, 18 February 1960: 36-41; reprinted as 'The Hollow Miracle', in *Language and Silence: Essays on Language, Literature, and the Inhuman* (New York: Atheneum, 1967), 95-109. Codrescu is referring here to the famous dictum by Theodor Adorno, 'to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric', originally written in 'Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft' (1949). See Theodor W. Adorno, 'Cultural Criticism and Society', in *Prisms*, trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1983 [1955]), 34; also 70, 73.

⁷ Allen Ginsberg's final line in his 1956 poem 'America' reads as follows: 'America I'm putting my queer shoulder to the wheel.' See Allen Ginsberg, *Collected Poems 1947-1997* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2006), 156.

RV: *In 1966, in Negative Dialectics, Adorno admitted he was wrong in his moral refutation of poetry – and stated that, far from being barbaric, poetry (y compris that written after Auschwitz) is the unalienable right of the human to scream under torture.*⁸ *How do you react to Adorno’s two statements?*

AC: Adorno was being histrionic here. He was stating grimly what Milan Kundera did so much better and funnier in *Life is Elsewhere*, where he condemns poets for being so eager to sing at court.⁹ Tyrants used poetry (sometimes wrote it) to tug at heart strings so they could later rip out hearts. Obviously, there is little use for poetry after Auschwitz or post-mortem after Hiroshima, for example, because the dead can’t speak. The rest of us would like those horrors to never happen again and if art can throw its sabots into the machine so much the better. As for Adorno (he was the master thesis subject of Richard Spencer, one of Donald Trump’s strategists), humans have the right to make any sound they please, including screaming.

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⁸ Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (London and New York: Routledge, 1973), 362, in the famous section ‘After Auschwitz’.

⁹ Milan Kundera, *Life Is Elsewhere*, trans. Aaron Asher (New York: Harper Perennial, 2000).

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Despre poezia și poetica secolului XXI

Acest interviu cu poetul Andrei Codrescu, realizat prin email, examinează câteva sensuri contemporane ale poeziei și ale poeziciei secolului XXI, relevanța actuală a școlilor americane care au dominat cea de-a doua jumătate a secolului XX, precum și efectele virajului postumanist în discursul/rile poetic/e. Totodată, se pune întrebarea dacă se justifică sau nu condamnarea publică a culturii ruse în general din perspectiva agresiunii ruse împotriva Ucrainei.