



ANDREI CODRESCU

Interview with Andrei Codrescu

THE BACON REVIEW

TBR: Your new book, *So Recently Rent a World: New and Selected Poems* has just been published by Coffee House Press. The book collects the best work of your poetic oeuvre, including several new poems. How did this book come to be, and who did the selection?

AC: It was Ted Berrigan, I think, who told me that I should publish a Selected Poems every ten years if I'm still writing. Every decade a new Selected rededicates you, Joe Cardarelli used to say. They both meant that you should do that when you're alive. Post-mortem collections are editorial fancies. This particular tome selects from half a century of poetic crimes, and I couldn't have done (given sheer volume) without Allan Kornblum, dear friend and founder/publisher of Coffee House Press. When I handed Allan the first selection, he was baffled: it seems that my complicated vision of the book's story and my idea of my poems was neither comprehensible nor sensical. I had decided to eliminate

chronology (a criterion for my last Selected, "Alien Candor," *Black Sparrow Press*) and obvious thematic affinities. The result was a splendid mess I wanted to title, "Please Don't Wash." Happily, Allan took matters in hand, reread all my books (many of which he had published), and gave the book solid order and shape. You can now see how alive the poems are in the company for which they were intended. I'm a lucky dog: an appreciator, a hard worker, a publisher and a poet himself took pity on me. Allan is pure treasure. I realized when the book was done, and the double meaning of "rent" in the title threw a good retrospective light on the poems, that I hate to reread myself. I write to get rid of the stuff that obsesses me, so why deal with it again, for chrissakes? It's for readers to delight in my discarded junk.

TBR: You've published hundreds of poems in the last several decades, but you are also known for your witty, subversive, and sometimes satirical essays. You've published collections of writing on New Orleans, NPR, travel, literary criticism, and a wide range of other subjects. Are you still actively writing both essays and poetry? What do you feel inspired to write about?

I had to make a living, so I wrote complete sentences, aka, essays. Those are to poetry what beer is to whiskey: 8% proof to 80%. Maybe if I (and all poets) had a bigger stage, and an audience not made dumb and stupid by the media, we could have made America a place of intelligent citizens who would never use horrid clichés like “the melting pot” or “the middle class” to describe themselves. Because the audience has been stupefied, I was lucky to smuggle a bit of poetry into my essays. The reason I could do that is because I have an accent, and nobody has any idea what I’m REALLY saying. At NPR they quit listening years ago, lulled to sexy somnolence by my accent. I would say, “White man, tomorrow you die!” and my producers would hear, “Waking up with a cry.” In my essay books and novels people who read (all five of them) noticed, of course, that I am a monster. They rejoiced, but it’s a secret. As to what inspires me, it’s women and alcohol, combined occasionally with civic indignation and allergy to political rhetoric.

TBR: You’ve spoken before about your rich collaboration with the poets, artists, and thinkers of the 1960s, and the significance it had on your ideas. Are you collaborating with other poets now? How has the internet

changed your ideas of collaboration?

AC: I love collaborating. The New York School of Poetry poets in the late 60s, Allan Kornblum’s Actualist poets in the 70s, and all my friends since, were people I wanted to hang out with. Since we were all poets we wrote things together. Works of genius, all of them. I have boxes of unpublished poems, novels, drawings -- “exquisite corpses,” as the Surrealists, our literary predecessors in orgiastic practices, called such artistic collaborations. I haven’t had time to reread any of it, but I do remember the quickening pulses and stimulated ero-zones that accompanied each of these acts of typing. Now that the internet is here and communism is dead, I renewed my relations with Romania, my native place, and the Romanian language: I wrote a book-length poem together with the great Ruxandra Cesereanu, called “Submarinul Iertat,” published in Romania by Editura Brumar. I translated it into English as “The Forgiven Submarine,” it was published in a bilingual edition by *Black Widow Press*. If one wants to know how languages work in the brain, and what wonders they do in the brain, should read this book slowly and wallow in its multilingual shamelessness. I see now that brain scholars claim that bilinguals don’t get Alzhei-

mer's, and that plurilinguists don't even more. Well, of course. Plurilinguality IS a kind of Alzheimer's: you speak all the languages, or rather an ur-language, because a crystal-sharp forgetting blows away your memories of experience like a strong wind, leaving behind only the bone-clean bedrock of language(s). I say a "kind of Alzheimer's," because, unfortunately, the medical horror that goes by that name is a swamp, fog, miasma, not a cleansing crystalline event. The internet is not such a great aid to collaboration, which seems counter-intuitive, but it's true: you have to smell the person you collaborate with. Happily, I was able to smell Ruxandra once before we started emailing back and forth, and I kept a little flask of her smell by my laptop. Each time it was my turn, I took a whiff and said a prayer.

TBR: You are the founder and editor of *Exquisite Corpse*, a former print journal that was a real innovator in switching to online only. It was a model publication for *The Bacon Review* before we launched the magazine. How are things going at *Exquisite Corpse*, and what are you publishing these days? What do you look for in the work you publish, and are there any up-and-coming authors you are especially excited about

Thank you, glad to hear it. I love the name of your magazine: was it Gloria Swanson who said, "The smell of frying bacon is the most optimistic smell in America"? *Exquisite Corpse* is now the *Secret Corpse*. When you go to *corpse.org*, our website you'll see a big NO on the Homepage on a background of rejection letters. If you click on the NO, a very lively Corpse opens up for you. I did this to stave the flood of unsolicited submissions, but also because I like the idea of hiding in plain sight. Everyone lives now in the prison of the internet, so it's the only place to hide. You can't get outside because there isn't any outside left. Since the *Secret Corpse* started uploading, we have more readers than we had when anyone could find us. Weird. People like to be invisible any way they can, even on full display. I like my friends' writings, for the most part, and work that is so real it makes your teeth hurt, or so fantastic it causes arousal.

TBR: Where do you call home now? Are you traveling often, and do you ever go back to Romania?

I travel way too much, I've been to Romania every year since they shot Ceausescu, the dictator, but I'm not going now because it's full of fascists, and Germa-

ny owns everything. I live in the wilderness near the Buffalo River National Park. I have two caves by Little Panther creek, and I make art out of junk and I spray-paint roots of downed trees. Oh yeah, and I type.

TBR: In *New Orleans, Mon Amour* you wrote about the sexy, sultry, and altogether inspiring quality of New Orleans. New Orleans is often considered to be a different world than the rest of the United States -- more Caribbean or African than 'American.' Do you still feel this way about the city? What cities are best for young writers and poets now?

New Orleans is the only CITY for poets now. I hate cities, they are money-extorting machines, but if you have to be a poet anywhere, go to New Orleans because there are still poor people there, and you can be drunk and stay up all night. People actually like artists in the French Quarter there, so you can be a glorified drunk on top of it.

TBR: We are often told that poetry has become more academic in the last few decades, and that poets need to speak more to the important cultural issues and political realities of our age. What do you think about

this contention? What can poets do to make an impact?

Poets can make a huge impact by eliminating the word "poetry" from their vocabularies. Leave that word to the businesses they call "colleges," and act and do poetic things that keep their mystery without a label. You can be a poet who doesn't write, but if you do, make sure it gets tattooed and skywritten, or melted and vaporized. Read "The Poetry Lesson," the book I wrote my last year of teaching at LSU, it has the fail-proof recipee for genius, delight, and freaky alt-life.

TBR: Thanks for taking the time and for giving us the pleasure of publishing your work!

My pleasure.