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**VOICES OF THE VOID:
ANDREI CODRESCU'S TROPICAL REDISCOVERY
OF ROMANIAN CULTURE IN THE HOLE IN THE FLAG**

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Abstract: *An exile since 1966, Andrei Codrescu has constructed his pen-self mostly in the United States. One of the main ingredients he used in concocting his literary persona was his foreignness. Having started as a Western Transylvanian young artist in communist Romania, where the political and literary standards were dictated by the country's South Eastern capital of Bucharest--and also as a Jew in a covertly anti-Semitic nation-state--Codrescu eventually had to settle for the status of an immigrant Central East European writer in America. His alien identity, like his NPR accent, has been one indelible stamp of his style. And a test. One he may have hoped to resolve as he completed his long imagined return to his country of origin after the fall of communism.*

*The paper discusses the return of the native to post-1989 Romania and the negotiation of his reinsertion in Romanian culture in terms of an unsettled genealogy. Starting from the structural image of a signifying absence, I argue that the symbolism of the void is pivotal not just for Codrescu's self-representations in *The Hole in the Flag* and elsewhere in his texts on Romania, but also for at least two of the more spectacular lines of canonical discourse on the communal self in Romanian culture: the Anarchist-Metaphorical and the Radical-Antithetical. These terms come from a modified version of Hayden White's tropology and I use them to distinguish between competing ideological discourses on Romania's past, which aim to (re)construct Romanian identity starting from the image of the generative void.*

History (A)Voided

In the fateful December of 1989, Romania became identified with a new image, as its revolutionary emblem became the old tricolor flag with a hole at its center. The gap was the result of the exuberant removal of what used to be the communist coat of arms. A photograph in *Le Nouvel Observateur* at the time showed in the vacated midst of the rebellious flag the faces of two young boys, their hands fingering a V sign: a symbol of Romania's rejuvenation.

By the end of that *annus mirabilis*, the Romanian exile Andrei Codrescu, an American academic, a popular NPR personality, and a surrealist poet, returned to Sibiu, his hometown in Romania, after a twenty-five-year exile. The book in which he narrates this quasi-surrealist experience is called *The Hole in the Flag: A Romanian Exile's Story of Return and Revolution*. Riding a train from Hungary to Romania, as "[m]oonlit telegraph poles marched over the dark earth into nothingness", Codrescu has a startling realization:

suddenly there, under the cold moon, there it was, the Romanian flag with the socialist emblem cut right out of the middle. It fluttered over a square brick building marking the frontier. *It's through that hole, I thought, that I am returning to my birthplace* (67).

The rest of the book makes it quite plain that the hole in the flag means much more than a fleeting eye-catcher for the media. It is an "objective correlative" for something that lies deep in his frustrated

soul. Just a few pages earlier, as he recounts his visit to an old synagogue in Budapest, Hungary, with its "deserted yard", Codrescu, a Jewish ethnic himself, ponders how "a once-full world . . . was now empty, a deserted center that was also somehow at the center of my being. Something lost, gone, irretrievable" (59). His insistence on the imagistic paradigm of the void seems to indicate a steady pattern of self-retrieval.

The deserted center that Codrescu recurrently invokes on his voyage of rediscovery is paradoxically full of cultural meaning for Romania. This paper aims to show that, while the iconic image of the punctured flag may have been new in the early nineties, the tropological significance behind the placing of a significant void at the (symbolic) center of the nation's identity is really part of a tradition that goes back at least to interwar Romania. The trope of the (re)creative void was employed by many canonical figures in twentieth-century Romanian culture to generate national self-representations. Most of these voices belonged to young intellectuals who emerged around 1930, who knew each other closely, and who were connected with a part of Transylvania that has been considered the geo-symbolic center of Romania ever since. A part that includes Codrescu's native Sibiu and environs. Though all of the members of this cultural network employ the symbolism of the generative void, they are prompted by divergent ideologies to make equally divergent use of this imagery. In the following pages, I will indicate how Codrescu's text can be read against this cultural backdrop and I will suggest that the book ironically incorporates the problematic intellectual genealogy behind the founding trope of the void.

Andrei Codrescu does not bother to hide his irritation as he explains one of the reasons for which he accepted a TV contract on Romania: during the early stages of the overthrow of Ceaușescu's dictatorship, the American "media had employed Polish, Hungarian, and Czech "experts" to explain the Romanian situation". The writer handles his discontent ambiguously. At first, he volunteers alleviating circumstances for the initial haste and confusion, and notes that Romanian exiles like Dorin Tudoran, Vladimir Tismăneanu, and Radu Bogdan were eventually discovered, whose English was excellent and whose expertise was genuine. But over the next page Codrescu jeers at the Americans' clichéd ignorance of Romania in undertones of cultural criticism, offering more examples of how the West discriminates against remote primitive cultures it can hardly trust to speak for themselves (*The Hole* 113-4).

Though Codrescu's text invites both tolerant and hostile attitudes towards the exclusion of Romanian accounts of a Romanian history(-in-the-making), I suggest that the reasons behind this "muteness" exceed those provided by circumstantial or culturalist explanations. Though the American media may have treated Romania discourteously in December 1989 (again), *The Hole in the Flag* indicates that there is also a peculiarity in the way Romanians themselves construct and exhibit their historical self-image.

As it is often the case, it may prove easier to see the light if you do not look directly into it. Codrescu is not the only exile who became upset by the absence of native historical accounts of Romania on the international scene. Just a few years before the fall of Ceaușescu's dictatorship made it possible for the dislodged artist to see his birthplace again, Sanda Stolojan, another émigré writer who, like Codrescu, translated Lucian Blaga's poetry (a coincidence whose cultural significance I will address presently), was making the following entry in her Paris journal on July 5, 1986:

Only one Romanian from Romania attended the Congress of the International Association for Romanian Studies - and he was coming from Germany where he had been awarded a grant. It was inconceivable, this absence of the Romanians at a reunion that concerned them directly, that dealt with their history. Romania is an inexistent presence, a *void* that is filled today by the foreigners and a few exiled Romanians. Romanian history is studied in America, Romanian culture is discussed in Italian universities or in small seminars in the West. An absurd situation, the reflex of the incarcerated policy of Romania. (*italics and translation mine*)

Like Codrescu, Stolojan deplors the absence of Romanian accounts of their own history, and like him, she also draws on the image of the void. Though the two expatriates coincide in their choice of theme and trope, Stolojan's explanation for this absence is different from Codrescu's. She thinks it is the outcome of Ceaușescu's policy of seclusion, of his denying Romanian citizens the right to travel, and of his banning free communication with the rest of the world.

So far, between the two writers, we have the Americans, Ceaușescu, and circumstance to blame for the adulteration of Romanian history. But there's a third coincidence—and three is always a charm. Both Codrescu and Stolojan chose to translate Blaga's poetry into the respective languages of their adopted cultures, and this particular poet is probably best known for his special metaphoric construction of national identity. Blaga's imagery for the Romanians' profound self may be the key to why his two melancholy translators converge on the theme of historical muteness and the symbolism of the void. In his quasi-lyrical philosophy of cultural styles, Blaga provides the paradigmatic trope of Romanians' silent subsistence in (spite of) history together with the metaphysical support for it. This tropological construction of Romanianness provided one of the most popular narratives of the nations' past. Codrescu shares with Stolojan an affinity to this line of canonical self-representations whose nebular origin goes well beyond Ceaușescu, the Americans, and the immediate circumstances of the revolutionary 1989, back to pre-communist Romania.

Figural Versions of the Void as a Subterfuge for Threatened Identities

Lucian Blaga (1895-1961) was a poet-philosopher who, in his 1936 *Spațiul mioritic*, described Romanianness as a cultural style grounded in his trademark concept of a "boycott of/against history". His contention was that the (pre-) Romanians spontaneously stepped back from the turmoil of history and resisted the lure of an epic destiny. Instead, they found comfort in cultivating a peaceful and organic spiritual bond with their hilly habitat, in turning nature into a shrine, and in funneling their creative drive into the anonymous and atemporal satisfactions of folk art. The result was a quintessential life-style, which Blaga thinks is best represented by the *plai*, the rolling horizon of the Romanians' deepest psyche. He takes the rising and falling of a certain type of rural landscape to be deeply connected with the timid stepping back and forth in history of Romania's peasant culture (177 and passim).

Blaga is but one of many writers in interwar Romania that used the image of the void as a similar structural trope in order to generate representations of national identity. Romania's *absence from history* had become a popular theme between the two world wars. Although canonical histories boasted plenty of memorable feats in Romania's past, a number of prominent personalities were arduously debating the notion of medieval/profound Romania's ahistoricity in the 1930s. There are many canonical examples of the void being used to symbolize Romania's identity in history. However, this imagistic paradigm is charged with different ideological meanings as it becomes lodged in unrelated discourses and is made to operate in distinct tropological frameworks.

The topos of Romanians' mysterious lack of historicity was part of a historical argument meant to settle a political bet. The rather scholarly debate between medievalists had become politically topical in the aftermath of recent international agreements (notably the peace treaty of Trianon in 1920) which had once again shifted state borderlines after the Great War. In the context of territorial controversies, the lack of historical attestation for medieval Romanian communities could very well stand as evidence of non-existence, and this would support theories that claimed Romanians were latecomers to, rather than ancestral inhabitants of the territories under contention. Bulgarian historian Petar Mutafchiev denounced Romanians for being "the only European people which has no history of its own until the end of the Middle Ages" (qtd. in Brătianu 25). This was a reference to the ten centuries of silence on Romania in the historiography of/about Eastern Europe following the retreat of Aurelian's legions in 271 A.D.¹

¹ The battle that interwar personalities like Gheorghe I. Brătianu, Lucian Blaga, Mircea Vulcănescu, Mircea Eliade, Constantin Noica and many others engaged was carried over from the previous century. The concern had been there at least since the mid-nineteenth century, when the 1848-generation tried to emancipate Romanians by inculcating a modern national consciousness (Kogălniceanu qtd. in Brătianu 46). In any case, the thesis of the Romanians' silent persistence had already been laid out in 1885 by A. D. Xenopol's *Une énigme historique: les Roumains au Moyen Age*.

But after the First World War, non-Romanian historians (mostly from neighboring countries like Hungary, Bulgaria, and the USSR) redoubled their challenges against the Romanians' claim to precedence in the territory granted to the

In this heated context, it is quite likely that Lucian Blaga was not entirely disinterested when he produced his metaphysical narrative of the Romanian atemporal quest for self-discovery. Such a twist in the argument about Romanians' absence from history turned a shortcoming into a sign of spiritual superiority; it added the pride of difference to that of precedence in the construction of a national identity, and it indirectly legitimated Romanians' claim to the newly (re)gained lands. The lack of historical certificates became a token of spiritual genetics, and the marginal, insecure territory of Transylvania became the cultural center of Romania. Blaga must have been aware of the power of this keen discursive maneuver, because he used it again in a polemical article on historian Vasile Pârvan's *Getica*. Blaga admits that one often deals with "historiographic voids" regarding the ancient cultures of the Getae and Dacians, but these Thracian tribes are "geographically and ideally" placed *at the center* of the Arian culture (Chimet 4, 32-3; *Italics mine*). Blaga has taken his metaphoric trick to the next level, as he turns Romanian culture, usually discarded as minor and marginal by the West and the East alike, into a spiritual center of the world.

Blaga's metaphoric account of the genesis of Romanian culture must have been manna from heaven to apologetic historiographers. But the situation became more complicated when disgruntled Romanian intellectuals turned on their own rural nation and charged it with abandoning any hope of a remarkable destiny. From a reverse ideological position, such Romanian critics launched attacks against their people's absenteeism, anonymity, and its unacceptable self-confinement to a meager subsistence in history; that is, against everything that was hailed by apologetic discourses as the arch-qualities of a deeply genuine peasant culture. Emil Cioran (1911-1995) is probably the exemplary young malcontent in this group. Born less than 10 miles from Codrescu's hometown of Sibiu, Cioran denounced the retreat from history as a resilient national flaw that survived even in interwar modern Romania. In *Romania's Transfiguration (Schimbarea la față a României, 1939)*, a devastating criticism of Romania's past and tradition, Cioran calls out in anguish, his sight temporarily overcast with mystical fascist fervor:

There is a substantial flaw in the psychic structure of the Romanian, an original *void* generating a series of failures in our past . . . the Romanian form of living suffers from the lack of a primordial dynamism . . . Whenever I look at a Romanian peasant, I choose to see in the lines on his face the painful *voids* in our past...² (Chapter III, "Romania's historical and psychological voids", 39-41; *Italics and translation mine*).

Both Blaga and Cioran address the topos of Romanians' absence from history by resorting to the symbolism of the void, but it is easy to notice that two opposing self-images result. The difference lies in the fact that the mechanisms of the imagination for the two writers stand in direct opposition to one another and they turn the same symbolic image into contrary tropes serving contrary ideologies. This is where I need to resort to the methodological insight of Hayden White, whose tropological framework I have slightly modified in order to deal with nationalist discourse types in a more consistent manner.

I will identify Blaga's national self-representations as Anarchist in the sense given to the term by Hayden White in *Metahistory*. White contends that Anarchist ideology emplots history in what Northrop Frye calls the mode of Romance that has the hero transcend the world of experience. Anarchist discourse expresses intuitively the uniqueness of things by means of metaphors (*passim* in the "Introduction"). This is precisely the tropical move behind Blaga's symbolic reduction of the mental horizon of Romanians to the metaphor of the *plai*, the essential and singular core of Romanianness. Underneath the surface image of the historic/historiographic void, which is the figural medium of Blaga's discourse, lies the deep

recently unified Romanian nation-state. While not really disputing the absence of the Romanian people from written records, Romanian historians like G.I. Brătianu were trying at the time to turn this inevitable topos around by insisting that the enigmatic silence covered a profound and miraculous genesis of Romanian culture (Brătianu, *passim*).

² „Există un viciu substanțial în structura sufletească a românului, un gol inițial din care deriva seria de ratări ale trecutului nostru . . . forma românească de viață suferă de lipsa unui dinamism primordial. . . . De câte ori privesc țărânul român îmi place să văd înscrise în cutele feței sale golurile dureroase ale trecutului nostru.”

structuring trope of the *lack of existential assertiveness*. This trope is an essential structuring Metaphor that organizes discourse around an intuitive, transcendental horizon. The result is a portrait of the nation as a serene and self-complete self, which translates into a lack of hubris, a wise resistance to vanity, voluntarism, and excessive historical gesturing.

To be sure, Cioran maneuvers the same symbolic medium of the historical void, but for him it is only a surface or ornamental metaphor in a Radical discourse. The more profound constructive principle of his text is *antagonical*, whereby he phrases his need of a drastically renovated national self in terms of a (re)action against the shameful past, the historical foes, and the superior nations in the world as implacable “agencies” of adversity. So far, there are recognizable traits of Radical ideology as described by White, such as Tragedy as a mode of agonistic emplotment (9), the focus on acts/agents as the basis of a world hypothesis (16-7), and the commitment to a structural or cataclysmic transformation of society (24). But, unlike White, I would suggest that the founding trope for Radical discourse is *Antithesis*, rather than Metonymy. Antithesis seems to more adequately embody the agonistic vision of Tragedy and the agentive make-up of Mechanistic worldviews, while preserving the realistic drive behind Metonymy.³

Blaa and Cioran produce their opposing representations of (national/cultural) identity under duress. Romania’s self-version was under attack, past, present and all, and in those troubled times to be a Romanian was to be painfully insecure. Both writers reconstruct Romanianness as a literary strategy to face this political challenge. Blaa uses the metaphor of a spiritually generative void to calmly turn the tables on Romania’s detractors. Impervious to common accusations that Romanians are late and laggard migrators, he reverses the situation when he depicts the Romanian as a superior culture in deep and intimate contact with the transcendental universe, a miraculous feat that could only be accomplished by remaining aloof from historical agitation. The wise passiveness and the communal vision of this putative Romanian spirit are best captured in the discursive turn of the Metaphor, which is meant to conflate separate realities, happily oblivious of any divisions.

Conversely, Cioran opts to augment this historical and historiographic antagonism in his hyperbolic account of the inferiority of his people. By victimizing both his peasant nation and himself as a disgruntled member of it, he plays this Antithetical description against the image of victorious nations and nationalistic ideals, while covertly hoping to achieve a magnificently tragic stature as a Romanian, one that will minimize the claims of more successful competitors. But his (a)version is equally directed against the competing paradigm of Anarchist nationalism that Blaa and the like so successfully upheld. In renouncing the dubious wisdom of his ahistorical peasant nation, Cioran also abjures the very image of the void, which is central to Anarchist apologetics, thus making it clear that the heart of his Radical discourse lies elsewhere:

How could there be patriots who turned our secular resignation into a virtue? Can there be such irresponsibility in enthusiasm? [...] Any resignation is but a mild yoke, an insult to the Promethean drive

³ On the one hand, White’s choice of Metonymy is conventional, trying to preserve the Ramus-Vico-Burke lineage in rhetorical theory, while on the other hand it means to suggest a realistic vision by playing Metonymy against the more lyrical and romantic Metaphor, in the manner suggested by R. Jakobson in “Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Disturbances”. But White is visibly incommodated in applying the cross-polar distinction to the four master tropes of Metaphor, Metonymy, Synecdoche, and Irony and in matching these tropes with the respective ideologies, modes of emplotment, and world hypotheses.

All nationalist/historiographic discourses dealing with identity (re)formation have to approach the self-other binome. François Hartog’s rhetorical analysis of Herodotus’ discourse on otherness offers a good example of how this works tropically. Hartog finds *inversion* to be one of the ways in which otherness is conveyed in the *Histories* by Herodotus as a contrastive term of reference in asserting one’s own identity. For him, inversion is at once a means of communication and a heuristic principle (212-5), just as its opposite, comparison/analogy. Obviously, in terms of rhetorical stylistics, the name for such inversion would be *antithesis*.

of the spirit. Renunciation comes from the chaos and demirugy of the heart; resignation from its void.⁴ (44-5)

The competing tropes shape two paradigms of ideological discourse on Romanianness in the 1930s, the Anarchist-Metaphoric and the Radical-Antithetical. Since then, various personalities enlisted their nationalist representations in one of these paradigms.

The Anarchist-Metaphorical and Radical-Antithetical Versions of the Void: Competing Self-Stylings of the Nation's Past

Blaga's philosophical approach to Romania's cultural identity was a catalyst for other metaphysically minded writers. Mircea Vulcănescu, Cioran's friend and the most respected member of the 1927 generation felt compelled to react to Cioran's canon-rocking text by reverting to Blaga's apologetic Anarchist-Metaphoric discourse. Vulcănescu invested particular words and phrases in the Romanian language with symbolic meaning and declared them to be representative of an essential life-style.⁵ Significantly, he analyzes the way in which existence is negated in Romanian to dismantle the common antitheses between being and non-being, and between the negative and the affirmative. These one-time opposites coincide peacefully in metaphoric spots of language in the genial shade of a spontaneous Romanian metaphysics (124 and passim).

Two other members of the young generation of spiritualist writers, Mircea Eliade and Constantin Noica, joined this Anarchist-Metaphoric choir after spectacularly swinging from intransigence to apologetics, and from activism to quietism in their journalistic prose. Though in the mid-thirties he had been raving about the need for Romania to fight for a huge historical destiny, Eliade had mellowed down by 1943 when, as a press attaché in Portugal, he published in Madrid *Los Rumanos. Breviario historico*. His propagandistic short history of the Romanians is replete with the recognizable commonplaces of canonical histories. Eliade echoes Blaga's belief in an intimate connection between the spiritual horizon of the deep national self and "the landscape that was to mould, starting with the third millennium before Christ, the souls of the autochthonous population" (*The Romanians* 17). In latter years, he would paraphrase Blaga and talk of the "terror of history" (*Încercarea* 110). According to Eliade, the Dacian-Roman peasants and shepherds withstood all historical vicissitudes by withdrawing to the "impenetrable forests covering the mountains" (*The Romanians* 15). Eliade quotes G. I. Brătianu and borrows his fairytale vocabulary as he records the "miracle" of the birth of a nation:

and when the first Romanian principalities emerged during the eleventh century, the *miracle* had already taken place; the Slavs had been assimilated, and the people living in the territory of Dacia was the Romanian people, who had preserved all the characteristic features of their forefathers, the Dacians, and were speaking a Latin language: the Romanian⁶ (*The Romanians* 19).

Interestingly, the Metaphoric-Anarchist approach was carried over into communist Romania by Constantin Noica (1909-1987), who was Cioran's close friend and a devotee of the same mentor, Nae Ionescu. Noica emerged on the public scene in 1934, when he and Cioran both won a prize from the

⁴ "Cum de-au putut exista patrioți care să facă din resemnarea noastră seculară o virtute? Să fie chiar atîta inconștiență în entuziasm? . . . Orice resemnare este un jug domol, o ofensă adusă elanului prometeic al spiritului. Renunțarea pleacă din haosul și demiurgia inimii; resemnarea, din golul ei."

⁵ Vulcănescu's phenomenological portrayal of a *Romanian Dimension of Existence* starts from a few scattered but essential words like *a fi* (to be) and its derivatives, *fiinta* (being) and *fire* (individual nature or way of being), or *întotdeauna* ("always", but, literally, "in-all-as-one") which Vulcănescu finds related to the Greek *en kai pan*).

⁶ As an example of the magical resilience of the Romanian spirit, Eliade invokes Transylvanians, who preserved their Romanianness in spite of centuries of foreign domination. This might sound strange, since, unlike Blaga or even Cioran, Eliade was not a native of that part of Romania. He was born in Bucharest and much of his fiction is set there and in Southern Romania. But Transylvania had once again become a sensitive political issue, since part of it had been awarded to Hungary after the Vienna Arbitration of 1940.

Royal Foundations, and, like Cioran, fell into a brief and fervent infatuation with the Iron Guard. In his militant pro-Guardist journalism, Noica borrowed the Radical tone of Cioran and Eliade at the time. However, immediately after the war, while Cioran and Eliade chose to live in exile abroad, Noica opted for a different kind of exile, inside his own country, which was now tipped to the communist extreme. After serving a six-year sentence for having read and written about one of Cioran's banned texts, Noica withdrew in a remote mountain resort at the center of the country and into the world of culture. The resort was Păltiniș, in the vicinity of Sibiu and less than five miles from Cioran's birthplace.

Like Blaga, Noica concentrated on the trope of the vacant center to develop a metaphysical portrait of Romanianness. Similarly, he postulated a generative absence from history dictated by the typically Romanian "spiritual malady", *ahoretia*, which he describes as:

. . . conducive to a sudden illumination or lucidity of conscience which forces the subject to reject participation, to dominate his determinations, to perceive the positive in non-action and negativity, accepting defeat, assimilating it, and entering indifference . . . placing life and history under the order of reason, which annihilates novelty and proclaims the fruitfulness of non-travel⁷ (103).

Like Vulcănescu, Noica focused on words and phrases that he invested with miraculous symbolic powers. Most revealingly, *întru*, an otherwise scarce and obsolete preposition, encapsulates nothing short of a complete and unique ontology that supposedly lies dormant in the Romanian language. What is even more striking than his speculations is that Noica made his own life in communist Romania consistent with his Anarchist-Metaphorical discourse which is grounded on the topos of the withdrawal from history to a symbolic center (Sibiu). His life-style under the new terror of history was meant to re-enact the canonical tale of the Romanian genesis, a dramatization whereby Noica was hoping to win a new victory for his nation far from the conventional battlefields.⁸ The emaciated gesturing of the philosopher is an uncanny echo of anticommunist resistance fighters after WWII taking shelter in the central wooded areas of Romania (as well as in Dobrogea, to the eastern extremity of the country) where they were reported to keep on sabotaging early communist projects until as late as 1958. The backbone of this strategy, whether philosophical or paramilitary, is the same mental reflex of *vacating* the external or peripheral areas and withdrawing to an elusive, ungraspable center.

In his chastising of the humble peasant history of Romanians, Cioran's dissident voice may have sounded singular among the members of the 1927 generation, but one may find a radical-absurdist lineage embodied by the same discourse-type. This small yet remarkable tribe of extreme contesters, which includes Urmuz, Tristan Tzara, Cioran, and Eugen Ionesco, is a literary genealogy to which Codrescu would be affiliated (Olson 40). Urmuz and Tzara ruthlessly abandoned Romania's cultural past in their avant-garde writings, as did Cioran's uneasy contemporary and companion, Eugen Ionesco. Like Cioran, Ionesco talks of a lack or negation as the devitalizing principle of Romanian culture in *No*, the prize-winning collection of articles he published also in 1934. In this book, Ionesco sees Romania as a devitalized colony of France and the West, emptied of its originality and creative drive, and he rejects the alienating traditional values, in a manner that is not far from Cioran's.⁹

⁷ „. . . ducînd la o bruscă *iluminare* sau luciditate de conștiință, ce face pe subiect să își interzică participația, să-și domine *determinațiile*, să vadă pozitivul *non-actului* și al negativului, acceptînd *înfrîngerea*, asimilînd-o și intrînd în *indiferență* . . . punînd viața și istoria sub ordinea *rațiunii*, care desființează noul și proclamă rodnicia *non-călătoriei*.

⁸ Gabriel Liiceanu, one of his most devoted disciples, explains Noica's attitude as a "will to culture" that prompts a "lateral, discreet and unspectacular liberation, maybe even guilty in its intellectual egotism, but which always has been the form in which the best of the Romanian spirit survived to the present day If by history we understand the series of events happening to us, but also without and beyond us, then culture for Noica meant, no doubt, a withdrawal from history . . ." (271)

⁹ On the other hand, Cioran, whose metaphysical and ideological sympathies ran contrary to Ionesco's, protested in earnest, while the will-be master of absurdist theatre confessed to playing a mere rhetorical game and claimed that he could just as easily and eloquently reverse his anti-canonical arguments. In fact, Ionesco's *Nu* could be placed alongside the writings of Urmuz and Tzara in a family of histrionic and gratuitous discourse, unlike the driven and

But Cioran's Radical-Antithetic castigation of his nation in terms of the trope of the shameful historic voids could not serve as a viable model for nationalist discourse in communist Romania, and, unlike Blaga, Vulcănescu, Eliade, and Noica, the ban on Cioran's work was never lifted by the communist authorities. This anti-canonical form of radical discourse coagulated around the image of a symbolic (de)generative vacancy could only re-emerge after the 1989 Revolution. Unsurprisingly, one of the first to use it was another old friend of Cioran's.

Petre Țuțea, a spectacular oral wit and Cioran's one-time revered companion, served as a mid-rank official in the interwar Romanian administration, was imprisoned by the communists and then lived anonymously until 1989. He resurfaced as a public figure, immediately after the Revolution due to a series of filmed interviews and the publication of his private manuscripts. In one of the interviews, Țuțea called his compatriots revolting in their lack of historical sense and cast a bewildered anathema on Romanians for having elected by a vast majority an ex-communist high official as president of Romania in the first free election after the fall of communism in 1990. He could only offer a disheartened protest and a familiar metaphor:

To have been locked for thirteen years in the communist dungeons for a nation of idiots! . . . Romania is a waste land.¹⁰ (qtd. in Patapievicu 204).

In the same tone of voice, the much younger Horia Roman Patapievicu, a passionate and vocal critical intellectual, notes a "dissociation of our most basic identity" (86) and denounces his conationals as the frustrated owners of "an identity of nothingness" (89) which is the cause of their moral and intellectual decay. It is quite surprising for a discourse analyst to watch Patapievicu recycle the familiar thesis of the miraculous genesis of the Romanians. Paradoxically, the post-communist critic uses all of the apologetic clichés to accuse Romanians of their inertia and their unwise boycotting of what might have been a historic change: voting for a non-communist administration in 1990. On a page of philosophical musings on the void, Patapievicu quotes Brătianu's (and Blaga's) topos of the miraculous survival and regeneration of the Romanian culture, and then he invokes Noica's interpretation of significant voids, but he is obviously aiming for the opposite effect (118). Earlier in the book, Patapievicu had made clear his reservation to the Anarchist-Metaphorical canon on Romanian identity in one of the many passages that echo Cioran's temper and diction:

To be a Romanian did not pose for me any problem of choice: it was an ineluctable destiny. A dilect one, no doubt, for the optimistic, flattering ontology edified by Mircea Vulcănescu and Constantin Noica . . . seemed to create a right. Romanianness, consequently, was instituted as a kind of privilege, a kind of baptism through birth, even preceding birth. To be a Romanian meant to be chosen. You have, no doubt, been able to recognize in this the ethnic theory of the stamped spermatozoon.¹¹ (84).

Back to *The Hole*: Unsettling Genealogy and the Plurivocality of an Exile's Self

Codrescu is no translator, his overbearing poetic personality would not have allowed it. Yet, late in his American career, he chose to translate Lucian Blaga's poetry. Blaga was probably singled out not just as a gifted and sensitive modernist poet, but also as the metaphysical shaper of a Transylvanian-Romanian identity. The translation may have been a nostalgic compensation for Codrescu's improbable

exasperated text by Cioran. Cioran's first reaction to Ionesco's *Nu* was violently visceral (Matei Călinescu. *Eugen Ionesco: teme identitare și existențiale*. Iași: Junimea, 2006, 442.).

¹⁰ „Să faci 13 ani de temniță pentru un popor de idioți! ... România e un loc viran.”

¹¹ „A fi roman nu punea, din partea mea, nici o problemă de alegere: era un destin incontestabil. Dilect, firește, căci ontologia optimist-măgulitoare edificată de Mircea Vulcănescu și Constantin Noica . . . părea a crea un drept. Românitatea, prin urmare, se instituia ca un soi de privilegiu, un soi de botez prin naștere, anterior nașterii. Să fii român era echivalent cu a fi ales. Ați recunoscut aici, desigur, teoria etnicității ca spermatozoid ștampilat.”

return in the flesh. Or not. In any case, the connection is there in the translated poems as it is in some of the topoi in *The Hole in the Flag*, or in the scattered tributes to Blaga in a couple of other books.

Codrescu's affinity to Blaga and the blander Anarchist-Metaphoric tradition, may strike his aficionados as somewhat unexpected. Admittedly, Codrescu voices his admiration for Blaga in at least a couple of his other books. In an essay on Brâncuși, he claims Blaga is a kindred spirit of the greatest modernist sculptor, and Eliade completes the triad of mystical Romanian artists (*The Dog* 152-5). And the Foreword to *The Disappearance of the Outside*--the other book hinged at least in part on his return to Romania--lists Blaga's "spring-clear Romanian" as one of the few formative idioms for the young Codrescu (alongside his grandmother's Hungarian and his nurse's German). Blaga is not just acknowledged as "Transylvania's greatest poet", he is somehow accepted in Codrescu's circle of family insiders (an honor that is not bestowed on Codrescu's deeply resented step-father, for instance).

And yet, apart from these occasional and emotional mentions of Blaga's metaphorical mysticism, the road scholar of New Orleans has generally accustomed his readers with an artistic timbre that smacks more of the radical distemper of early twentieth-century Romanian avant-garde. His admiration for Tristan Tzara--a master of uncompromising revolt against tradition and Blaga's antipode in Romanian modernism--is spelled out over several pages of *The Disappearance of the Outside* and in more than one interview with his monographer, Kirby Olson, Codrescu acquiesces to a more radical literary genealogy. When Olson suggests Codrescu's work may stem from "a tradition of crazy, comic Romanian intellectuals" (and he mentions Urmuz, Tzara, Ionesco, and Cioran), the interviewee promptly approves and suggests it is a Balkan "tradition of absurdist writing", which is really "a tactic for survival" there (40). And when he challenges Olson over the question of beauty in his poems, Codrescu suggests that Celan, Benjamin Fondane, and Ilarie Voronca--alongside the omnipresent Tzara, of course¹²--are the key to understanding his own sense of beauty:

The fact is that beauty abounds (but not in description). It's in there in love checked by irony, a constant battle between sentiment and intelligence. That's how language sparks. You may want to look up here Paul Celan, Benjamin Fondane, Tristan Tzara, and Ilarie Voronca, for a matrix for this work (178).

The radical undertones of Codrescu's iconoclasm are generally more in tune with the anti-traditionalists Tzara, Ionesco, and Cioran, than with countryside mystagogues such as Blaga. And it is hard not to recognize some of Cioran's impatience with apologetic grand narratives of a wisely humble peasant-identity in Codrescu's critical meditation on how Romanians early in 1990 were "rallying about the obsolete facts of their imaginary national identity, which is mostly a fairytale" (*The Hole* 236). Like Cioran, Codrescu is an abrupt and witty critic, whose phrasing is imaginative and unexpected, and whose sentences often come as aphorisms. Interestingly, though, Cioran, whom Codrescu met in Paris, and whom he once placed in the company of exemplary exiles such as Eliade and Nabokov, is only acknowledged in *The Disappearance* as the originator of the concept of "sabotaging history" (38, 51). This practically amounts to a reversal of Cioran's reaction against canonical Romanianness and to his being included in the band of metaphysical apologists such as Blaga and Eliade. In fact, Codrescu places Eliade and Cioran side by side in the pantheon of an exile's imagination (39-40).

Though reticent to the fairytale national identity, Codrescu seems hypnotized precisely by such lyrical versions of Romanianness. *The Disappearance* starts with a meditation on the mythical abolition of time and history occasioned by *Miorița*--a founding Romanian folk-myth that provided the imaginary matrix for Blaga's *plai* (which he also calls "the *mioritic* space"). Codrescu explicitly grounds his atemporal musings in Blaga's nationalist metaphysics and in Eliade's mythological concept of an escape into *illo tempore*. The first six pages of *The Disappearance* may be a key to understanding Codrescu's reaction to history being made by the Romanian Revolution in *The Hole*. His surrender to the Anarchist-Metaphoric mode of discoursing on historical identity is once again illustrated in *The Hole* by resorting to

¹² Codrescu's homepage advertises a book on Tzara and the Dada movement forthcoming at Princeton University Press.

Mircea Eliade. It is the fiction writer that Codrescu invokes there, but the allusion is to a short story where Eliade ruminates about aging, extinction, and the passing of time. The reference is meant to suggest that a deeply spiritual identity may remain untouched by earthly years through a symbolic conservation of an exile's underground self. This reverie generates the half-hope that there might be "a moment in the midst of a revolution when it is possible to transcend time" (80). What Codrescu seems to hand us here is a revised script of the tale of the atemporal and secret Romanian self. It is with Blaga in his heart and Eliade on his mind that Codrescu imaginatively records the new Romanian history unfolding under his half-dreaming eyes.

Though he instinctively abhors all nationalist fantasies, Codrescu cannot fully shake off his early surrender to Blaga's mythical version of an ahistorical national self. And this imaginative therapy works for Codrescu as it did for Blaga, turning a one-time outsider into an insider. A Transylvanian born at the edge of the Austrian-Hungarian Empire, Blaga lived to see his culture lodged in the unified national state of his dreams in 1918. As a consequence, Blaga's birthplace in Lančrăm, less than 50 miles from Sibiu, and part of a remote imperial province peopled by a disowned minority, came to lie almost at the center of Greater Romania after the First World War. His metaphoric grand narrative works both as a nationalist metaphysics and a biographical success story. Similarly, Codrescu nestles in this irresistibly comfortable national myth to convert his marginality into centrality. The outsider is relocated safely inside the canon, while still being able to flaunt his estrangement. The exiled, distant relative, twice removed, rediscovers his own and his nation's birthplace.

Smitten with canonical Romanian self-images predicated on the strategic retreat from history, Codrescu produces an unsurprising reflex childhood memory triggered by the historic Revolution of 1989. He reminisces the days when, as a schoolboy, he "could sink under the city [*i.e., in the ancient secret tunnels beneath it*] at the blink of an eye, and often did, when we skipped history which was taught by a horrible man with an eye patch named Comrade Rană [*meaning wound in Romanian*]" (21). Like a good Romanian, the young Codrescu was already boycotting history in his own way.

On the previous page, as Romania insecurely celebrates a new year and a new era, Codrescu recounts his drinking champagne with two militiamen in Bucharest "at the frozen center of the wounded city" and he volunteers an analogy between Ceaușescu's mythical maze of tunnels and "the Romanian mind after forty-five years of dictatorship" (20). One cannot help but ponder on Codrescu's own convoluted and half-frozen cultural self, hidden from the terror of his personal history in a literary maze of styles and allusions. A history that must have tormented the young man's mind with chauvinistic monsters such as anti-Semitism or communism.¹³

While it is easy to observe the coexistence of two genealogical models in Codrescu's texts on Romania, explaining it is an infinitely more complicated and speculative task. How is it that Codrescu's cultural identity discourse accommodates both the Anarchist-Metaphoric and the Radical-Antithetical paradigms? How is it that he can be at once an uncompromising anti-traditionalist and a nostalgic autochthonist? It may be that Codrescu's metaphoric imagination is the latter-day equivalent of the underground retreat from history back in his schoolboy years.

This secret shelter of one's hurt self can liberate the mind from all conflicts and adversities by virtue of its power to join empathically and fuse poetically. The severed parts of Codrescu's mosaic identity come together as he allows his severed past to re-emerge from the recesses of his mind. On the New Year's Eve, Codrescu is drinking to freedom and reunion--or to the freedom of being reunited with his past. The two victories dance in his mind as one, as he is now given the chance to rejoin his

¹³ The architectural maze of underground tunnels is obviously the symbolic counterpart of (Codrescu's) Romanian unconscious. The entrance to the concealed convolutions of city and soul--the metro entrance--looks like a huge open mouth (20). Psychoanalysts might have a field day with this image of the gaping extremity, haunting what was probably still the yet unhealed unconscious of one who, as a boy, secretly hated and sabotaged his step-father and who, a quarter of a century later still fantasizes about decking him (17). The image of the gaping void is a symbolic paradigm in the book that includes Codrescu's flashing realization that he is returning to his early life through a hole. Naturally, it can also be read as an archetypal descent into the inferno of his past self, dramatizing the confrontation with his origin(s).

abandoned birthplace, and his buried youth. In the accounts of both his imagined and his real return to Romania, Codrescu often subdues his carnivalesque literary persona and in a gentler narrative voice gives in to an empathetic and lyrical disposition where the union of opposites occurs naturally, with no tension, under the spell of metaphor. As such, he candidly quotes from the Metaphoric Anarchists in the nationalist canon, but is able to suddenly switch back to his harsher and antagonistic Radical tone.

As I end this article, I feel contaminated by the metaphorical imagination. It seems to me that as Codrescu descends into the double inferno of his own past and that of his disowned nation, he reaches the long-silenced heart of his identity where several canonical voices become one, as in Poe's *Shadow. A Parable*. Hopefully, it has become clear that one can identify in *The Hole* some of the different topoi and styles that have helped Codrescu construct his marginal and undecided self. But these divergent streaks in the discourse on Romanianness, which he has adopted and adapted, manage to come together in the text as one guttural voice under the almost surreal spell of reunification. Like Poe, he is fantasizing about the suspension of change, about abolishing the relentless passing of time and of life. Like Poe, Codrescu is narrating the privilege of standing on the edge of transformation, where opposites such as past and present, in and out, here or there, self and other are both unsettled and unsettling.

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