

The Exiled and the Immigrant: Two Faces of the Same Self

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Abstract: The present paper aims at analysing two concepts used in the works of the american writer of romanian origin, Andrei Codrescu. Codrescu refers to himself as being both an immigrant and an exiled. Far from equivalence these two concepts lead to various controversial discussions related to Codrescu's status. We intend to break the ambiguity of these two concepts and to demonstrate that in Codrescu's work both can be used in different contexts. By the means of personal experience, Codrescu assigns new meaning to immigration and exile making the aforementioned terms in two faces of the same self.

Key words: exile, immigration, identity, Codrescu.

In the last few years of post communist Romania, there has been a attempt to restore the abroad literature of those writers who left the country during the years of communism. Though their departure was triggered by various aspects of their life within the Communist borders and despite the fact that they managed to reconstruct from scratch their life on foreign grounds, they are still a part of the contemporary Romanian culture and literature. Their perspective on Romania and the world in general is unique and truly valuable for the modern history of our country. According to the way they left the country they are usually divided in two categories, emigrants and exiled, those who voluntarily left the country and those who were forced to. But sometimes, this clear-cut definition comes upon some obstacles, as there are strange cases of writers that manage to obliterate the borders between exile and immigration. One of these writers is, no doubt, the controversial American writer of Romanian origin, Andrei Codrescu who refers to himself as being both an exiled and an immigrant.

Taking into consideration the biographical aspect of this writer, the use of the term exile seems inappropriate, as he was not forced to leave the country. As a matter of fact, he chose to, in the pursuit of an ideal of freedom. In 1965, when Codrescu was nineteen, he succeeded to escape the Communist regime by getting out of the country through a „through a small crack in the wall”, as the writer calls the mean opportunity given to him. He took advantage of an abuse of the autocratic regime, masked under the face of a humanitarian ideal to reunite so-called individuals of foreign origin with their native countries. But actually the Communist Party of The Socialist Republic of Romania was selling people of Jewish origin to Israel and people of German origin to Germany. The writer confessed in this autobiographical novel An Involuntary Genius in America's Shoes that at that time he was trying to become a poet, even to make a living from poetry within the suffocating environment of Romanian contemporary literature. In this book, he describes the literary environment of that time, a biased world caught between on the one hand the manufacture of propaganda literature under the close control of the censorship and on the other an underground existence of unapproved literature. Here is how the writer depicts the literary environment of Communist Romania of that time: "The thirst for information was fantastic. Foreign plays, poets and events were discussed for hours. The lucky few who could travel abroad brought back books and records. [...] Type written translations (mostly atrocious) made the rounds. All of this found unfortunately, no echoes in the pages of the reviews themselves. Faint references yes. But for the most part, tractors, peasants, Party Secretary Quotes and other socialist paraphernalia filled the pages". Through these illegal literary insertions of the outside, an ideal of freedom starts to take shape in the mind of the young

poet. He starts dreaming about leaving the Communist borders, imagining that beyond, there is this magical territory of freedom of speech and writing. Still, departure was forbidden, as the borders were closed and carefully watched. Only few lucky people managed to travel abroad.

Codrescu’s nonconformist attitude and his direct attacks and disclosure of the abuses of the Communist party trigger the attention of Securitate. He is expelled from the University and his writing is rejected from publishing. And finally he is forced to enrol in the Army. His fear of a conformist life makes him understand the urgency of departure. There was no other way to preserve an intact self, unformatted according to the communist way of life, as the entire communist ideology was aiming at modifying the very core of the individual and to transform him into a tool at the hand of the party. In this given conditions, Codrescu understood that he must leave. He applies for an exit visa for Israel, taking advantage, for the first time in his life of his half Jewish origin.

Departure is painful, as it means leaving everything behind, from family and friend to the language of his poetry and the myths he grew up with. Here is the point where emigration and exile intermingle in the environment of a country ruled by an autocratic regime: both the exiled and the immigrant leave everything behind because departure is definite. But if the exiled is forced to leave and is forbidden to return or to keep in touch with his/her family, the immigrant chooses to, and willingly gives up everything, as a price he has to pay for freedom. Here is how Codrescu describes this symbolic gesture of the price paid for freedom: “At the Ministry of Internal Affairs, later, they made him sign a paper which said, in melodramatic and unnecessary language, that he was leaving forever and renouncing his Romanian citizenship, and had no claim to anything or anyone he left behind”.

It is important to mention that Codrescu’s departure had as legal destination Israel, destination that he never reaches. He remained for a short while in Italy and afterwards left for America, where he finally found a place of belonging. Despite the fact that departure was chosen, immigration, in this case resembles a lot with exile, as return is in both cases forbidden.

Other differences between exile and immigration are worth mentioning here. Both exile and immigration, asserts Sanda Golopenția in the volume Între pătrii, imply the idea of a rupture from a familiar environment and the wandering in search of a new place to call home. The difference lies within the fact that, whereas the exiled leaves the country because he is not welcomed or, even more, he is considered enemy of the official political power, a menace for the security of the state, the immigrant leaves in search for a better alternative to the present life and the decision of departure is entirely individual. This brings forth the main difference between exile and immigration, noted also by Edward Said in Notes on Exile. Whereas the exile originated in the age-old practice of Banishment, says the literary theorist, and is imposed upon the human being as a punishment, the immigrant enjoys an ambiguous state marked by the possibility of choice.

Furthermore, the case of the Jewish and German people that left Romania for Israel or Germany is a particular case in the history of both exile and immigration, as it can be stopped at a close analysis that these people were not either exiled or immigrants, in the aforementioned sense of the words. Sanda Golopenția considers their departure a sort of rupture-return, as in this case the conditions of exile or immigration are inverted to the form of a closure for the initial departure. After many years of being away from their origin, these people face a strange situation; they have to leave home in order to return ‘home’, the country that their ancestors left exactly through exile or emigration. Thus, the writer Andrei Codrescu is caught in this ambiguity of definition. He chose to leave the country, but one can say that this choice, as in many other cases was forced upon him by the autocratic regime of Communism. The purpose of his departure was twofold. On the one hand, he left in search of an ideal of freedom, of a better way of life, and on the other hand, he left to save his poetic self that, in the case that he had stayed, it would had been slowly shutted by the censorship of the Communist regime. This places Codrescu half way between emigration and exile. Furthermore, he is not reunited with his native land, Israel, despite the fact that was his legal excuse for departure. So, his departure does not put an end to a previous exile.

Maybe this is why literary critics are so reluctant to place Codrescu in one category or the other, some of them even claiming that Codrescu is not a part of the picture of Romania

3 Ibid, p. 111.

7 Sanda Golopenția, op. cit. p. 10.
exile. In her book dedicated to the Romanian exiled writers, *Patria de Hartie*, Nicoleta Sâlcudeanu does not include Codrescu in the triad of exile, but still mentions him as a particular case of "mythologizing the exterior". What Nicoleta Sâlcudeanu notices is that Codrescu constructs in his entire work a myth of exile and places it at the foundation of his own existence. Still, he consciously sustains an unclear use of terms, as he refers to himself as being both an exiled and an immigrant. He refuses any attempt of definition, and, without any further clarifications, uses both terms and modifying their meaning, constructing thus a unique perspective on both exile and immigration.

Still, a pattern is to be identified as the terms "exiled" and "immigrant" are used in different contexts. And the writer himself offers an explanation to his choice of terms, a superficial and ludic one, but that still hides a deeper layer of meaning: "îmi părăsim țara și iubita și ma simțeam mizerabil din cauza asta. Punând faptele pe hârtie, le aranjam astfel încât să par un erou: nu eram un fugar, eram un surghiuinit, un erou. [...] Aci îmi venea în ajutor literatura, cu lunga și distinsa ei listă de eroi surghiuinţi".

Thus, one can notice a first definition, as looking in the depth of this pseudo-justification. One can see that when the writer talks about his physical condition, his placement in the real world, he auto-defines himself as an immigrant. When talking about his literary status, he refers at himself as being "a practitioner of Exile".

A second justification of terms could be found in the etymology of the two words. To emigrate and immigrate share the same root, the Latin *migrare* meaning to move from one place to another. Thus any given dependence of a fixed place is eliminated. This abolishes to some extent the traumas of exile, as emigration and immigration do not involve the forced departure from a place of belonging. Salman Akhtar considers emigration related to some social events less traumatic than exile, that is first of all due to its voluntary character generally associated with departure. This makes us return to our afore mentioned definition, that emigration and immigration are a matter of choice, whereas exile is forced upon the individual. On the other hand, exile finds its etymological definition in the Latin word *exilium* – translated as *to exit*, and seen as a punishment for the ones that did not subscribe to the official order of a society. Exile is the banishment of the individual, regarded as a menace for the wellbeing of the others. Thus its traumatic character of displacement from a social-physical matrix of a place called "home". It can be said, from this point of view, that the use of the term *exile* with regard to Codrescu, is a misusage. Furthermore, the young age at which Codrescu leaves the country does not allow the framing of an identity constructed in accordance with the national stereotypes of Communist Romania. This may be the explanation why the codrescian exile lacks the typical traumas of displacement. The relation Codrescu has with his exile is totally special and unique in the environment of Romanian dissidence. He does not see departure as the beginning of a wandering in a wide outside, lacking any kind of perspective or direction. On the contrary, for Codrescu, departure is equivalent with arrival, as leaving the Communist borders means entering in Exile, seen as a place of belonging. From this point of view, Codrescu renders meaning to a paradoxical play of words: he is exiled at home and home in Exile.

The writer imprints his personal perspective on exile. He rewrites the very structure of this phenomenon, as he disagrees with the official etymology of the word and imposes his own. He takes the liberty of modifying this aspect of the word as to better connect with his entire perspective on exile. Here is how Codrescu rewrites the etymology of the word: „Exil înseamnă în latină „dezrădăcinat”, dar mie-mi plăceau asociatilile în engleză: helix, axis, exit (spirală, axă, ieșire)".

Thus, from his point of view, exile does not mean the independent dissemination of the individual in the space of the Other, that is the Outside, but becomes an escape from a suffocating world, a very paradoxical axis of existence, of freedom.

But a better definition of terms is offered by the very work of the writer. The phenomenon of immigration finds place generally in the works of fiction, where the immigrant becomes a central character, and also in the works of social analysis, where the writer analyses the traumas of the individual trying to get accepted by the others, the natives. But when talking about his condition as writer, Codrescu places the discussion in the terms of exile, as for him being 8 Nicoleta Sâlcudeanu, *Patria de hârtie*, 2003, p. 135.
11 S. Akhtar The Immigrant, the Exile and the Experience of Nostalgia, 1999.
a writer becomes equivalent with being an exiled.

Arrested in his attempt to integrate in the new adoptive culture, the immigrant finds himself prisoner of the native spatial matrix of this homeland that he manages to unconsciously transport with him in the new country. Despite the fact that he wants nothing more than to integrate in the adoptive society, he unwillingly continues to relate his every action to the original set of values of the home he left behind. The main characteristic of emigrations seems to be the inability of the individual to adapt to a new world. Codrescu's immigrant will always engage in a comparative relation of the old culture with the new one. Even more, all the stereotypes of the old world are transported into the new one, and the immigrant continues to live his life according to an old set of values, one that is no longer available for the new society, thus the perpetual inadaptability of the immigrant. Deictic for this state of existence is Codrescu's novel Wakefield, where the author best describes the immigrant's re-enactment of their home realities on the ground of the new adoptive country. In this novel, the writer depicts a society of immigrants that, despite the fact that they left their native land in order to construct a new better life, they do not manage to cut themselves off from the realities of their country. Paradoxically, they want to become "Americans", and they name their children American names and encourage them to act as true "Americans". Still, they are still caught up in their past conflicted life that they unconsciously and artificially reconstruct. The immigrant society depicted by Codrescu is mainly a society of mixed families of Serbs, Croats and Bosnians. Despite leaving behind their native country, these people do not adapt to a new way of life. Even more, they bring forth the conflicts of their home country, social conflicts, recreated at an individual level. In one of the family, the husband is Serbian and the wife is Bosnian. The hatred between these two nations finds place in this mixed family where they too fight for a land that, paradoxically, is no longer their own. Thus, historical conflicts, eight hundred years old that were supposed to be left behind exactly though immigration, find place, at an individual level, in the society of immigrants. Here is how one of the characters depicts this conflict:

"It was supposed to be different in America, [...] It was, many years. This is a good place, we have festivals and everybody hate the Communists. Then the Communists go, everyone happy for maybe two months. Then this big war over there starts and everybody here starts."

As compared to immigration conflicts that are more visible at a social level of unconscious estrangement and refusal of integration, exile too presupposed isolation and unadaptability, but at from a very different point of view. If immigration finds place especially in novels and social articles of the writer, Codrescu talks about exile especially in his essays on the condition of the writer. One can still identify exiled in Codrescu's works of fiction, but they are strange cases of auto-exiled, characters who, aware of their status, self-engage in a relation of total rejection of all the others Auto-isolation in this case is a conscious act of estrangement and it does not have any social or political determinants. Codrescu's self exiled characters reject integration, not because they are unable to fit in the world, but simply because they are aware of their different way of being and preserve the status of the eternal stranger in whatever society they might be. The codrescian self-exiles potentate their differences, and place themselves in total opposition with any type of social order. It can be noticed that all these characters are of historical origin, the writer projecting on them a personal perspective of maximizing their dissident character, and placing the prototype of the self-exiled deep in the society. The main difference between immigrants and exiled is to be identified here. While the immigrants search for integration at all costs, but unconsciously refuse it, the exiles choose to increase their estrangement and uniqueness in an environment of uniformity and sameness. If eventually the exiled chooses to integrate, than integration will be made in a social structure constructed, paradoxically, through the myth of exile, a myth Codrescu himself places at the foundation of his own existence. The only place where the exiled integrates, is going to be in a place of the other exiled.

Maybe the most deictic example of the entire codrescian work regarding this difference of relating to the surrounding world can be found in Codrescu's first autobiography, An Involuntary Genius in America's Shoes. Two characters of this book become the impersonation of two faces of mainly the same self: the main character, the writer himself and his mother. If the writer's mother is the embodiment of the immigrant, the writer himself exploits and enjoys his status of exiled. Here is how the two characters differentiate in their way to relate to the new world: "the advantages of being a literal exile in

a culture obsessed by a myth of it are numerous. The most obvious was that I was able to gain admittance to a community of my peers [...]. My mother, who looked for security as well as acceptance had no active myth to see her own way\textsuperscript{14}. Whereas the exiled broke any connection to the home country, this being both forbidden and refused, the immigrant lingers in an indirect attempt of relating every action to the place of birth. While the writer's character enjoys his exile as a condition that paradoxically renders integration, the writer's mother, "struggled like all energetic immigrants to make a living, and possibly some money. The money was to show the people back home that she’d become a rich and powerful woman"\textsuperscript{15}. On the other hand, another major difference can be identified in delineating the two concepts. If emigration is defined on a spatial background (moving from one place to another), exile is not constructed on such grounds.

To conclude, we can openly assert that from a biographical point of view, Codrescu is an immigrant, like his mother, but one who becomes an exiled by believing in a myth constructed through the very need of belonging to a world of literature. To be an immigrant means for Codrescu to be displaced from the home country, whereas to be an exiled, means to find integration in a world of all the other exiled. Furthermore, to be a writer means to be an exiled, because, if uprootedness is the main characteristic of exile, than the writer cannot be something else. To be a writer means to be cut from the immediate reality and to be transported into a new realm, one of the words. This is why in Codrescu's works, the immigrant borrows all the traumas of exile, being in the end more painful than exile itself, whereas exile becomes a definite condition for the literary creation, equivalent to a state of being that, paradoxically, lead to integration.

References


\textsuperscript{14} Andrei Codrescu, An Involuntary Genius in America's Shoes, 2001, p. 9.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid, p. 10.

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