

Exit Stage Left

by Gregory McNamee

The Disappearance of the Outside

by Andrei Codrescu

Reading, MA: Addison Wesley;
216 pp., \$17.95

The Outside: beyond wall and watchtower, on the far lee of the border, the place of the Other, the place of exile. Now that the walls are crumbling around the world, helped along by the crowbars of angry patriots; now that the faces of the other look pretty much like our own, the Outside seems to be shrinking. In its place we have some dawning version of the Global Village, whereby a denizen of Zamboanga wears the same sneakers and listens to the same pop music as a Manhattan sophisticate, and one nation blends imperceptibly into another.

All this worries Andrei Codrescu, the Romanian exile, poet, and radio commentator who since 1966 has lived in the United States, exercising his surrealist magic. Like his fellow exiles Joseph Conrad and Vladimir Nabokov, Codrescu has made the English language his home, and he has written 26 noteworthy books of poetry, fiction, and fact that outstrip most native production. His latest, *The Disappearance of the Outside*, announces his emergent technophobia and his fond hope that the world will retain at least some places to escape the machine; in the age of the computer and the networked planet in which the Global Village has devolved into World Empire, Codrescu frets with just cause that "we may become mere images, trapped like shadows in some collective hell. . . . In another generation, people raised by images will not be able to imagine escape. The walls of Plato's prison-cave will be animated."

Much of Codrescu's book-length essay concerns his return to Romania after the fall of Nicolae Ceausescu in December of 1989. Arriving in his hometown of Sibiu, Transylvania, Codrescu notes with some surprise that images have replaced words in bibliocentric Eastern Europe, that television programs and not books temper the intellectual climate of the land where, as a boy, he prowled through bookstores and private libraries, even

hanging out in the Russian-language Communist Party bookstore to take advantage of the air-conditioning. And what shows are beamed into Romanian homes, haunted by Ceausescu and Dracula? *Dallas*, *Dynasty*, and *Miami Vice*, the stuff of brain death in many an unsuspecting land.

Invisible in the way of a practiced exile, Codrescu affords a moving account of life in revolutionary Romania, democratic for the moment but still asworn with Stalinists, unrepentant agents of the Securitate, and other enemies of liberty. But this account is secondary to Codrescu's larger meditation, centering not only on the disappearance of the Outside but on the subtle erasure of cultural differences in the age of worldwide television and computer data networks. (While there is much merit to Codrescu's argument, at the same time, ethnic hatred seems to be on the rise everywhere as borders of all kinds dissolve—witness Azerbaijan and Bensonhurst.) Like many other theorists of the Information Age, Codrescu speculates upon the possibilities for global electronic control, of a

technototalitarianism serviced by a deliberately uneducated, politically apathetic, and terrorized population, uncomprehending helots whose days are spent in equal parts at the workplace and before the television set. (All those to whom this sounds familiar may now shudder.)

"We are a new kind of being now," writes Codrescu. "We don't need an unconscious, we *are* unconscious." Overwhelmed by information and injured to all the high-level lying language is used to accomplish, most citizens of the world now shun the written word whenever possible. To lure them back to literacy, "we should wage a campaign against too much information," the poet writes, "like the campaign against cholesterol. Down with info-fat!"

There may be hidden virtues for bibliophiles like Codrescu in the electronic world. In it, the book may regain some of its status as a sacred object, precisely because it lies on the periphery of the general culture. History has accustomed us to changing fortunes, and the book age is, after all, very

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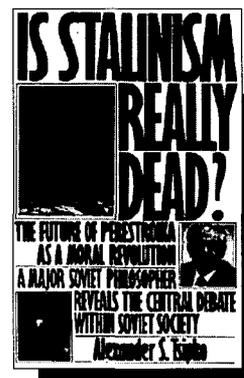
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young; Johann Gutenberg's first printed book dates to 1436, and it has been a mere five hundred years since Erasmus of Rotterdam leaped from his carriage, squatted in a muddy lane, and inspected a scrap of newsprint, so thrilled was he to encounter the printed word. There may yet be a future for the written word; on the other hand, the age of the book may be over before it reaches its 600th birthday.

What is to be done? Codrescu issues what he calls "a manifesto for escape," directed in large measure at his fellow writers. He calls for a renewed reverence for language and for telling the truth with it; he calls for public discourse and an end to the present condition wherein, as he puts it, "most writing today appears headed for the résumé, its final resting place." He urges us to take the example of other exiles, who went Outside rather than submit to the tyranny of their homelands: Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, Czeslaw Milosz, Guillermo Cabrera Infante, Milan Kundera. He demands a

repudiation of worldwide culture, a return to a planet on which Times Square is markedly different from Piccadilly Circus and the Ginza in every particular. And he sets a high subversive goal for his peers: "The poet's job," he announces, "is to short-circuit the imaginary globe."

Codrescu's manifesto is stimulating and, like all his books, impeccably well-written. It brims with the writer's hallmark aphorisms, his witty one-liners to trap the unwary: "Modern Russia is an homage to Henry Ford, not to Karl Marx." *The Disappearance of the Outside* is a reader's delight as well, a long evening's entertainment, a book that provokes nods of assent, provides plenty of room for argument, and raises as many questions as it attempts to answer. Switch off the set and have a look.

Gregory McNamee's most recent book is *The Return of Richard Nixon and Other Essays*.

Only the Boring

by Janet Scott Barlow

Dark Star: The Roy Orbison Story

by Ellis Amburn

New York: Lyle Stuart/Carol

Publishing Group; 283 pp., \$18.95

Generally speaking, fans of early rock and roll fall into two categories: those who want to hear Roy Orbison's "Only the Lonely" more than once a year, and those who don't—and I belong to the latter group. One of the strengths of vintage rock was that it meant nothing more and nothing less than what its teenage audience said it meant (unless, of course, you listen to rock critics, but nobody does, which is why, impotent and resentful, they write mainly for each other). I always thought the music existed to make you want to laugh out loud, or dance, or take a wallow in adolescent melancholy, the experience songwriter Mickey Newbury called "feeling good feeling bad."

But rock and roll wasn't meant to create pain, and that was my problem with Roy Orbison—his voice and his songs were nothing if not emotionally wounded. In addition, no one in rock and roll possessed a physicality less suited to rock style. Orbison had no "moves" (there was a certain integrity in that, but it wasn't the kind of integrity I was interested in), and when he covered his small, pale frame in shades, dyed and molded blue-black hair, and a black jumpsuit, he looked like somebody's country uncle dressed up for Rock Around the Clock Night down at the VFW.

But people who love Roy Orbison's music really love it, and he occupies an important, if slightly off-center, niche in rock and roll history. His untrained voice was beautiful and unique. His songwriting and musicianship were admired by his contemporaries. And his life, which included early poverty, personal tragedies, drug abuse, and a trip from fame to obscurity and back again, is the stuff of rock legends. What's more, he is surely alone among first-generation rockers in having enjoyed comic books and the writings of Winston Churchill.

Why then, is Ellis Amburn's *Dark Star* so tedious? Is it because rock legends who live fast and die before

BRIEF MENTIONS

BODY by Harry Crews

New York: Poseidon Press; 240 pp., \$18.95

Dorothy Turnipseed, rechristened Shereel Dupont by her trainer and free-weighted into world class shape, has arrived at a Florida hotel for the Ms. Cosmos world championship women's bodybuilding contest. Come to cheer her on, all the way down from Waycross, Georgia, in a pair of pickup trucks, are her huge relations and her psychotic feeads, Nail Head. There to provide her stiffest competition is Marvella, a heavyweight from Detroit with four equally large, equally deltoid sisters loudly in tow. For Shereel's trainer Russell Morgan it is the championship he was never so much as in the running for. For Shereel it is the fight of her life.

Fans of *Pumping Iron II: The Women* should line up for this novel, to which the movie bears some relation. The contest there as here is between the advocates of "femininity" vs. "muscularity," what is evidently the great controversy among women bodybuilders. But the true theme of the novel is Crews' usual one, that the competition is everything. Eating, sleeping, intimacy, talk—everything is a battle and the winner will take all. And for Nail Head, forged into violence by the Vietnam War, and his childhood sweetheart Shereel, forged by Russell, the Ms. Cosmos competition quickly becomes the decisive event of their lives, beyond which is either everything or nothing.

Like all Crews' writing *Body* is not something to give your great-aunt; he takes a pleasure in the perverse that is unnerving. More unnerving still is the fatalistic logic of his Grits characters, a self-destructiveness that comes from legitimate anger at the world and, most importantly, strength. His Turnipseeds are demoralizing, funny (not laughable) and admirable, and they are, for all their bizarreness, very real. Pure tragedy is pure theater. *Body*, billed as a tragicomedy and very funny in parts, is much more like life.

Harry Crews, with his love of martial arts and boxing and other kinds of physical abuse, has like his characters made something of a cult of strength. *Body* may not be, as touted, the best book of his career—I remain most partial to *The Gospel Singer* myself—but all those weeks of power typing have not been wasted.

—Jack Ramsay