

THEMATIC BLOCK: UTOPIA AND DEMOCRACY

When Simulacrum Reigns Supreme: Andrei Codrescu's *Wakefield* and the Utopia of Living Authentically

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ABSTRACT

In *Wakefield* (2004), a postmodern take on what a Kerouac-inspired journey across America would reveal about the reality of contemporary times, Andrei Codrescu blends the Faustian pact with an ironic portrayal of this country's contradictory nature, at the end of the twentieth century. While democracy serves as the cornerstone of the American Constitution, Codrescu's novel criticizes the extreme manifestations of capitalism and globalization that have emerged within this democratic framework. The purpose of this paper is to question the possibility of authentic living within this absurd chronotope, ultimately reaching the conclusion that such an attempt equals utopia in a world which seems to follow Jean Baudrillard's "simulacrum." At the same time, Corin Braga's "anarchetype" will be used as a starting point for a double argument: not only is the search for the essence of life a non-linear and never-ending journey, but metaphysical themes like deals with the devil are nowadays subject to bureaucratic deferments as well, therefore proving that everything can be deconstructed into products within a consumer-driven economy. (MB)

KEYWORDS: Andrei Codrescu, *Wakefield*, archetype, utopian thinking, American literature



The Renaissance era can be considered a melting pot of ideas, values, and worldviews, all of which created a conflicting climate for people living during those times. On the one hand, the revival of classical Antiquity and Greco-Latin culture made itself felt in philosophy and art with its interest in humanity's potential and development. On the other hand, some more "dangerous" aspects such as occult practices and beliefs in magic and alchemy also resurfaced, bringing along the Protestants' (and later the Counter-Reformation's) attempts to eradicate anything that had to do with

the remains of the pagan world. These tensions generated the apparition of figures like Faust—described by Ian Watt (1996) as a pinnacle of modern individualism, together with Don Quixote and Don Juan—caught between the pursuit of knowledge and the constraints imposed by societal and religious norms.

Today's reality is equally complex to navigate. The technological revolution brought along global connectivity, but it failed to eliminate wars, systemic inequalities or religious, racial, and gender discrimination. Some people use technology's speed and power to predict and even manipulate the future moves made on the world chessboard by the economic, historical, and political forces, yet among other parts of the population poverty, famine, illnesses or lack of basic human rights are problems that are still killing hundreds of people daily. It can thus be seen that today's increasingly polarized society provides no relief from the contradictory impulses noted to have historically created Faustian characters. Due to the large gaps between what one might seek to accomplish in life and the sense of powerlessness coming from being unable to achieve that in the current socio-economic context, people might easily feel just as driven to accept a deal from the devil as the original Faust from the sixteenth-century German legends did.

Andrei Codrescu explores in detail many of the possible reasons why this is the case through placing the action of *Wakefield* sometime "late in the Twentieth Century" (1), while also adapting the traditional myth of Faust to the postmodern, digitalized American space. At the same time, he makes some sharp observations about how the ideal space in terms of freedom and opportunities actually ended up being a dystopian society, a place where democratic values did not exactly lead to the outcome one had hoped for. After outlining a brief overview of democracy's trajectory in the United States, my paper will follow America's gradual transition towards Jean Baudrillard's "world center of the inauthentic" (*America* 104) and Codrescu's "ultimate hollo-deck" (*Road Scholar* 177), arguing that such a setting transforms authentic existence into a utopian idea that cannot be found even when it becomes the object of a deal with the devil. In the analysis I will also use Corin Braga's concept of the anarchetype to underline the effects of capitalism and consumerism upon the world's relation with itself and with the great metaphysical forces that once used to rule above it.

American democracy—between utopia and dystopia

The year is 1776, the place is Independence Hall, Philadelphia, and the Declaration of Independence reads as follows: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” Everything looked ideal and perfectly democratic on paper, making it seem like the entire country was specifically built in response to people’s dreams and expectations of a perfect society—liberty, legal order, justice, abundance, and prosperity. It is also what Baudrillard implies when he labels America as “a Utopia which has behaved from the very beginning as though it were already achieved” (*America* 28). The course of history, however, did not run smoothly, neither before this particular moment, nor after it, and US history stands as proof of all the elements that turned this presumed utopia into a rather dystopic scene. Before the Thirteen Colonies gained their independence, for instance, thousands and thousands of Native Americans died because of European diseases, suffered the consequences of violent colonization, or were caught in conflicts such as the French and Indian War (1754–1763). Various forms of servitude were also deeply embedded in society, both in terms of African slaves laboring on plantations and impoverished Europeans arriving in America as indentured servants.

After independence was obtained, discrimination against marginalized groups such as Native Americans, people of color, women, and immigrants persisted. Native Americans faced continuous displacement, a practice formalized through policies like the Indian Removal Act (1830). On the other hand, while the North gradually moved toward abolition, the South’s reliance on slavery intensified, accentuating tensions that culminated in the Civil War (1861–1865). Afterwards, although slavery was formally abolished, the Jim Crow segregation laws and the rise of various white supremacist organizations demonstrated the persistence of racial discrimination.

The trajectory of women’s emancipation had a comparable development: suffrage was achieved in 1920 and other rights followed, but gender equality has remained elusive, as the feminist movement continues to demonstrate. Similarly, persistent gun violence or the complex situation regarding immigrants’ rights also underscore the gap between American democratic ideals and societal realities, highlighting other areas where change is needed for the former to be achieved. All these elements create an unstable, dystopic political climate, which this paper’s theoretical framework

aims to reference in the next sections, ultimately connecting it with the reality that prevents Wakefield from finding the authentic life he is seeking in Codrescu's novel.

Jean Baudrillard's *simulacra*

"The bigger the lie, the greater the value" (Codrescu, *Wakefield* 3), says the devil about how things work in his part of the world, although postmodern times do not differentiate anymore between the ontological status of "metaphysical" realms, such as Heaven or Hell, and that of the mundane, terrestrial world. This power of the artificial can be easily linked to Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981), where he traces the evolution of representation from the premodern era through the modernity of the Industrial Revolution and up until the postmodernism of late capitalism. What he underlines is similar to what Wakefield discovers at the end of his journeys, namely that the American civilization has become a dystopian one of imitations and fake appearances, where authenticity is nothing more than an elusive Grail sought-after by a few idealists. If, at first, the false nature of representation was clearly distinguishable from the real object it substituted, slowly the spread of mass-produced replicas that turned objects into marketable goods started to blur differences between these two categories. The unique value of the original version started to fade as the replica's capacity to mirror reality made it appear just as "authentic" as the original, so eventually the imitation began to overshadow the original and even replace it entirely, transforming it into an empty, insignificant notion.

Consequently, the phases of the image mirror this transformation as they take it from being "the reflection of a profound reality" to something that "masks and denatures" it, then "masks the absence" of it and in the end loses any relation to it, becoming "its own pure *simulacrum*" (Baudrillard, *Simulacra* 6). In this new era, mankind's relationship with divinity—or with a source of absolute truth in which to believe, in general—has become more and more troubled as the world advanced towards the last centuries of the millennium. As a result, individuals living in the postmodern era have found it more and more difficult to rely on external certainties, let alone "separate the false from the true [or] the real from its artificial resurrection, as everything is already dead and resurrected in advance" (6).

This period's distrust with modernity's grand-narratives is something emphasized by Jean-François Lyotard in *The Postmodern Condition* (1984) as well, where he explains that a totalizing, homogenous world view cannot accurately represent any longer the decentralized existence of

contemporary man. This can be seen in how people act, think and organize their lives, and it is just as visible in how they write their stories.

The concept of the anarchetype at the intersection with A. Codrescu's works

Following this line of thought, Braga explored this dispersed postmodern viewpoint in detail and introduced into the field of literary theory the concept of the “anarchetype,” defined as being

made up of three Greek etymons: the prefix a, an (“a-,” “anti-,” or “contra-”); árkhaios (“old,” “original,” or “primitive”) or arkhê (“beginning” or “principle”); and týpos (“type” or “model”). Grouped in pairs, these roots can be found in “anarchy” (comprised of an and of the verb árkhēin—“to lead” or “guide”) and “archetype” (“first type,” “original model”). Depending on how we combine all three of them, the anarchetype would denote, then, either an “anarchic model” of text, which rejects and destroys structure, or an “anti-archetype,” to wit, an “exploded” or fragmented archetype. (Braga 122)

As a result, texts that follow an anarchetypal structure no longer have a central meaning to unify them and develop instead “in surprising and contradictory directions that cannot be subsumed under a single scenario,” behaving “anarchically and chaotically,” in contrast with their more ordered counterparts, which respect Aristotle’s rules about the unity of place, time, and action (123). This difference can be easily observed in travel narratives too: archetypal voyages have a clearly defined purpose, a starting and an ending point, with a linear route connecting the two, while the anarchetypal journeys usually look like wanderings that could go on forever precisely because they do not have to reach a destination or follow a preset route in order to be meaningful.

But how does Codrescu’s work fit in with this category of narratives that destabilize any kind of structural pattern? As a Jew in communist Romania, he was able to escape unequal treatment only by emigrating to the US in 1966, at the age of twenty. Consequently, he himself is an individual whose life has not taken a regular, predictable course:

Swinging between two cultures, two societies, and two identities, Andrei Codrescu manages to reach the point where he can declare and consider himself a transnational citizen and writer. He seems to be somewhere in-between, neither inside, nor outside, or maybe simultaneously inside and

outside the American and Romanian literary context, being a well-integrated immigrant who does not accept assimilation. (Fălăuș 9)

Characterized by Ruxandra Cesereanu as “a creative mosaic, an artistic palimpsest and a multiple subject” (176), Codrescu had Lucian Blaga and Tristan Tzara as cultural models in his youth. Afterwards, his Dada affinities were amplified by the influence of the American Beat poets (Ted Berrigan and Allen Ginsberg in particular), which thus led to this complex, multifaceted sphere of ideas that his works reflect so well:

Andrei Codrescu’s writings are particularly open to the idea of shock and anarchy, taken from the avant-garde. As an author, he is situated between postmodernism and post-postmodernism, because his stylistic and authorial avant-gardism is not homogeneous and monochrome, but patchy and fragmented. The critifictions from his latest four books of essays resort to the technique of the galactic cloud or dust even though Andrei Codrescu was not aware, at the time of writing these books, (except very vaguely) with the term of anarchetype. (178)

Each of Codrescu’s latest four books of essays mentioned by Cesereanu, *The Posthuman Dada Guide. Tzara & Lenin Play Chess* (2009), *The Poetry Lesson* (2010), *Whatever Gets You Through the Night. A Story of Sheherazade and the Arabian Entertainments* (2011) and *Bibliodeath. My Archives (With Life in Footnotes)* (2012), are examples of anarchetypal works which propose different aspects of this mode of writing. Codrescu combines literary analysis with fictional techniques, such as narrative voice, character development, and imaginative speculation, thus exploring various postmodern literary techniques, the avant-garde evolution, as well as the interplay between memory, identity and textuality. His fragmented, polyphonic style critiques the dominance of simulacra and employs anarchetypal rhetoric akin to Dadaism. *The Poetry Lesson* reimagines poetry instruction as a picaresque journey through literary influences, while his reinterpretation of *One Thousand and One Nights* examines intertextuality and cultural hybridity. Last but not least, *Bibliodeath* investigates the preservation and erosion of memory in the digital age, blending personal narrative with reflections on the fate of books in contemporary society.

This paper argues that *Wakefield* belongs to this list of Codrescu’s anarchetypal works as well. In the next section I will therefore dig deeper into how Codrescu depicts the USA, while also commenting upon

Wakefield's ill-fated search for an authentic life in a country of excessive capitalism, democratic problems, and overwhelming simulacra.

The relationship between Wakefield and the Devil

While the main theme of this novel is a pact made by the protagonist with the devil, the interesting thing is that Codrescu, in a true anarchetypal fashion that mirrors the postmodern times in which the book's plot unfolds, subverts and ludically transforms every element upon which the Faustian myth was constructed. The book opens abruptly with the devil coming to take Wakefield, who is not ready to die as he feels he has not really lived his true life yet. This unusual encounter has an unusual ending too: in exchange for giving his "victim" a year to fulfill his wish, the devil is no longer asking for Wakefield's soul, as he is already drowning in "the twisted object[s] the world has made of [people]" (Codrescu, *Wakefield* 25). Instead, he wants to be given a thing, a simple material proof that Wakefield has managed to find what he was looking for. And so, as the majority of the novel's critics (including Nicoleta Marinescu, Cristina-Matilda Vănoagă, and Cătălin Tecucianu) point out, although Wakefield expects the devil to behave according to what he knows about him from literature and popular entertainment, the metaphysical entity is portrayed as being as far from this classical image as possible.

The formerly terrifying Lord of Darkness is described here as being surprisingly short and sick, resembling Goethe's Mephistopheles in his exhaustion and disappointment caused by having to deal only with sinners unworthy of his time. Moreover, as Tecucianu claims, the devil actually "shares many similarities with the people he deals with: he is lost in a high-tech world over which he has no power, tired of the bureaucracy in hell's governing structures, and even experiences a slight identity crisis, which stems from the feeling of loss in a whole new world" (251). This is certainly not the first literary work to discuss how the world has changed after God died or was metaphorically killed by modern man, but Codrescu's ironic perspective on how this event has affected even the otherworldly sphere brings a novel touch to the matter. As a result of the extensive process of globalization, it seems that even hell was dragged into the vast network of multinational companies, and Codrescu's old-school devil is overwhelmed by his younger corporate colleagues, who are eager to dedicate their whole life to the benefits and development of the new world-system.

In his *The Devil Never Sleeps and Other Essays* volume, Codrescu argues that the devil's existence is no longer taken seriously anywhere, a fact that

transforms him into an entity “no different from your average American with too much to do and too much to think about” (7). Less a transcendental villain than an ordinary individual struggling to cope with the chaos of late twentieth-century America, the devil becomes just another victim of the ongoing reconfigurations of global paradigms. Codrescu’s Satanik is therefore no longer confined to the religious dimension; he nostalgically reminisces of the times when his metaphysical status brought him some kind of respect. The implications of his postmodern life lead Vănoagă to identify some essential questions implied by the writer throughout his book: “Where is the sacred heading to, as religion reveals it to contemporary man? Can the church still relate to postmodern society? What are the sacred values of postmodern society?” (“Diavolul” 244).¹

The answers are not too hard to guess, as one is already familiarized with postmodernity’s disregard towards the grand narratives that once shaped the world as we know it today: people have become so disconnected from the idea that the world might be guided by supernatural forces that they ended up metaphorically killing not only their God, but also the entire species of demonic beings. In choosing to do everything according to their own profane terms, humans have put the devils in the strange position of no longer having a reason to exist in the world. As they say about people, “without guilt or the need for redemption, they aren’t human anymore, they are *us*” (Codrescu, *Wakefield* 220), which means that all the fun of corrupting their souls is gone. Consequently, as Vănoagă contends, Satanik’s deal with Wakefield is an opportunity for both of them to regain the connection with the self: the devil would start believing in himself again, due to finding in Wakefield a person who still has some faith in God and his evil counterpart, while Wakefield would also learn to look at things from a different perspective, one in which he would both find the divine in himself and overcome the devil inside (“Diavolul” 247). Faust’s historical desire of gaining knowledge and experiences that would help him explore and understand his soul in its whole complexity is no longer possible in a world where man is constantly distracted and running after useless things that make him miss any possible encounter with the sacred.

At the other end of the deal, Wakefield is a motivational speaker who becomes a faithful reflection of the out-of-joint postmodern times he inhabits. His talks lead him through a wide spectrum of experiences, ranging from yoga practices and corporate ideology to *haute cuisine*, flamboyant architecture, and the teachings of New Age specialists. Marinescu portrays him as caught in social mechanisms that limit almost

any personal initiative on his behalf, an anti-hero in a universe where heroism is condemned to oblivion because no one cares about individual freedom anymore (55). In this sense, it becomes obvious that individual acts of defiance often pass unnoticed in a society governed by rigid prescriptions and normative behaviors, especially as the erosion of belief in a genuine transcendental authority leads to a diminished exercise of free will. With societies no longer reasoning critically about the mechanisms that shape their existence, individuals become morally complacent beings, easily manipulated by the state system which turns them into instruments of its machinery.

Codrescu's portrayal of America

Vănoagă's PhD thesis, published in 2019 under the title of *Proza lui Andrei Codrescu. Spații între realitate și imaginar* [Andrei Codrescu's Prose: Spaces Between Reality and Imaginary], examines how American space is constructed through defining conceptual metaphors derived from the country's founding myths—metaphors that Americans ultimately fail to live up to. America has often been described as a salad bowl, a melting pot, a nation of immigrants, the land of freedom, dreams, and all possibilities, but what Codrescu does in his novels is to take all these positive connotations and subvert them in an ironic key, one that shows the rotten reality beneath the shining, perfect surface which has always attracted many immigrants to these lands.

In this sense, *Wakefield's* portrayal of American society on the brink of the twenty-first century reveals a community that proves to be vicious, selfish, unsentimental, machine-driven, and consumerist to the point of swallowing any metaphysical dimensions. The protagonist's conference tour is expected to show him examples of lives lived authentically while he tries to live his in the same way, but in a country with such characteristics, his journey "becomes increasingly surreal, an amazing and detailed display of globalism gone bad" (Tecucianu 248). Authenticity, if still existent, has lost all of its classical meanings here.

The American dream vs. the immigrants' reality

And so, even before seeing the American society unfold before his eyes, as Wakefield encounters various supermodels, art collectors, geeks, New-Age Gurus, dealers or drug addicts during his travels, Codrescu presents two core elements of American history and utopian claim to democracy as well: the American Dream and the immigrants' issue. The

character who represents here the immigrants of the late twentieth century is Wakefield's Russian friend, Ivan Zamyatin, a character potentially linked to Yevgeny Zamyatin, the Russian dissident writer. In Codrescu's book, Ivan is a very intelligent former arctic researcher, who left his communist country behind in order to search for a better life in the land of all opportunities. The symbolic power of the American dream was and still is so great in his case that he does not mind earning his existence as a taxi driver, but Codrescu cleverly hides some social critique in this character. In Tecucianu's words, "not only is the idea of brain drain hinted at through Zamyatin's character, but also the brain waste effect. There is so much potential to be exploited in him, but nobody takes the opportunity; society sees him as being suitable only for menial jobs, hinting at what America has in store for migrants" (249).

Nevertheless, in comparison to his former life, Zamyatin experiences America as Heaven on Earth, where he has all the freedom he lacked at home and thus does not need any other promise of an afterlife. Since he sees Wakefield as an embodiment of the American dream, he urges him to quit worrying about any non-material things: "You [are] a rich American, not too ugly, you have money to eat out, go to a show, anything you want. What you need the devil for, or God, or any of that stuff?" (Codrescu, *Wakefield* 11). But Wakefield, from his perspective of a more or less distant observer, uses this idea to further comment upon the American *Weltanschauung*.

What one discovers together with him, as one advances in the novel, is an America where the transcendental sphere is no longer needed as long as material conditions are good enough. Capitalism gives individuals infinite options to choose from in any domain, but it also reduces the quality of each experience in favor of their quantity. Since "the simultaneous machinery of gluttony and greed works to sacrifice the individual to corporate ego, . . . efficiency became the ideal of design, and increased profit its overarching peacetime goal" (Codrescu, *Wakefield* 32). As a result, even God becomes a mere product in this capitalist society, while "the real divinity is the Economy, with a capital E" (66–67). Maybe that is also why the image of the typical postmodern family consists of a naked mother nursing a baby with a naked pubescent girl child standing at her side (38), without any protective masculine figure in sight: the loss of the Father is felt both at the micro-level of the American family and at the macro-level of postmodern spirituality.

Travelling à la Kerouac—the right way to find authenticity?

Under these circumstances, with his childhood obsession for hidden spaces and passion for traveling, Wakefield thinks he might win his deal by becoming “the cartographer of hidden American spaces, the surveyor of our own *genii loci*” (Codrescu, *Wakefield* 50). He wants to find again the nostalgic and fragmented roads from his Kerouac-style youth, for whom the road was not just a way of going from one place to another but a way of seeing life itself. It was Charles Olson who claimed space to be “the central fact to man born in America” (11), so it comes as no surprise that this country kept urging people to discover it “over and over and never definitively” (Codrescu, *Road Scholar* 24). Wakefield’s travels echo those of Baudrillard and Codrescu (recorded in *America* and in *Road Scholar*, respectively), as both writers (like many others before them) crossed the country westwards in search for the “America of the empty, absolute freedom of the freeways” (Baudrillard, *America* 5).

As the story advances, however, Wakefield realizes that he will not be able to find the salvation he seeks because Kerouac’s “lyric of the open road” (Codrescu, *Road Scholar* 49) no longer exists. This is something Codrescu also noticed in his own travels; he saw how the remote control allows people to travel anywhere in the world in a few seconds now, while planes take people from one postcard to another in a way which eliminates the beauty, slowness, and unpredictability of a road trip. At the same time, since speed is the true American religion, going fast enough makes people blind to the accurate, the real, and the original, and satisfies them instead with the approximate, the illusion, and the copy. In the same way, the entertainment industry gives everyone the opportunity to recreate history in as many ways as they like (164–65), which brings us back to Baudrillard’s second (and eternal) “birth of the simulacrum” (*America* 41). This “artificial baptism” is received by all things in America, and it transforms the entire experience of living in this country into an endless drive-in through an infinite series of entertainments.

All these elements give America a strange status. Baudrillard referred to it as a utopia believed to be achieved from the very beginning, something that is “neither dream nor reality. It is a hyperreality” (*America* 28). But the idea of an achieved utopia is actually a paradox too, thus this nuance should be kept in mind when any kinds of considerations about America’s nature are being made. How can this state be maintained in a place whose “greatness” has been built upon the death of large indigenous populations? Baudrillard observes this irreconcilable duality throughout his journey

across the country: he identifies the American way of life both in terms of technological advancements and the excesses of technology itself, while modernity manifests itself not only in progress but also in the extravagance of modern forms. He perceives banality alongside its apocalyptic dimensions, and the reality of everyday life seems to coexist with a hyperreality—one that mirrors fiction in all its characteristics (Baudrillard, *America* 95).

For Wakefield, this status of “achieved utopia” is defined in contrast with his beliefs. According to the itinerant ideology of his youth, he thought that “humanity lived in an uprooted, deracinated, global, nomadic, and permanently exiled state now that we’ve traded the territorial idea of ‘homeland’ for the freedom of living peacefully nowhere. In cyberspace, or hyperspace” (Codrescu, *Wakefield* 243). He also believed that there was something spontaneous and authentic behind this reality constructed by modern, mechanical man, but as he keeps encountering various eccentric figures along his travels, he slowly starts to realize what an outcast his ideas make him in this society.

The final place that proves him America’s hypocrisy and artificiality is a millionaire’s party, where Wakefield is for the first time paid to just listen to others instead of having to deliver a speech. What he witnesses there is the fact that, hiding under all the luxury and apparent interest for high culture displayed by the country’s rich elite (the party host is a collector of Greek antiquities) lies the kitsch and the robotization of the entire society. The place is filled with young women bearing mythologically resonant names, such as Aphrodite or Persephone, but they all display signs of extensive cosmetic surgery and are married to significantly older men. Within this decadent pantheon of the rich, where everything seems altered by a hyper-consumerist vanity, Wakefield observes how identity itself is stripped of any authentic meaning and becomes just another marketable image, symbol of an entire world where overlapped surfaces hide the inexistence of an actual core.

Road Scholar reveals that this powerful contrast between essence and appearance can be translated into the way in which America is seen by Codrescu as the “ultimate hollo-deck” (*Road Scholar* 177). There is no system according to which people can tell apart the original and the copy anymore, no way for the majority to differentiate between the rich who consume expensive stuff and the poor who consume the imitations of those things. The copy may thus end up being valued more than the original, just as, for example, the industry based on the image of Elvis Presley or Marilyn

Monroe is still ongoing and very profitable even though both of them have been dead for a long time (177–78).

Lastly, the America Codrescu ironically makes Wakefield comment upon is chronically ill with an overwhelming boredom that can be found even in the most idyllic and exquisite places, haunting the billionaires who have seen it all. This results in Americans' addiction to entertainment and to screens in general, an aspect that also gave Baudrillard the impression that everything is a refraction of a giant screen in America, and that the cinematic (energy) is as central to the country's identity as speed, mobility, and technology (*America* 55). Once again, technology's power to keep the viewer engaged in its continuous flux of images—as Americans never turn off their lights or TVs (50)—wins over the imagination, the forgotten faculty of the mind which Wakefield tries in vain to revive in his school, in order to “attenuate the sterility and affective waste that can lead, in extreme cases of billion-dollar fortunes, to a total loss of humanity” (Codrescu, *Wakefield* 80).

Conclusion

What does Wakefield learn at the end of this long series of journeys, where he had the chance to gradually experience all the changes brought by the postmodern era in America—from cultural clashes to the evolution of art, racial tensions, globalization, migration, or the advancement of technology? Is authenticity still something to be searched for and found, “can the sacred still function in a society where it has to limit itself at not bothering the profane”? (Vănoagă, *Proșta* 102).

American culture has been shaped, to a great extent, by its traveling heroes, with their journeys into the western frontier spaces contributing even to the definition of the country's national history. Consequently, there have been lessons to be learned at the end of each journey, both about the spaces encountered during the voyages and the identity of the travelers who took them. In Wakefield's case, they are a bit far from what he expected: he is forced to hear the noise of progress everywhere but, at the same time, he witnesses how people are completely unable to reconnect with their origins or visit their past somewhere else than inside their memories, being thus forced to always drift through time but not capable of holding on to any space.

In such conditions, as Tecucianu points out, “the protagonist gets lost in the inner workings of the 21st century, he does not manage to adapt and remains an outsider. At the end of the novel, Wakefield returns home

and ends where he began: alive but alone” (250). It therefore depends on how we look at the problem, as authenticity as we know it is definitely a utopian concept in present day American society, but it may still exist in other forms, which are up to each individual to determine for themselves. Baudrillard, for example, found America’s originality and power precisely in how everything about it was fast, cinematic, related to space, and improved by technology (*America* 100).

Lastly, what could be more postmodern and anarchetypal in a story about a deal with the devil than the deal being left not only without an ending, but without a beginning too? Wakefield keeps wandering if different cues that he keeps on hearing around him during his journeys represent the devil’s signal, but none of them do. He does find several bits of authentic experiences, things or persons throughout the time we follow his life, but he finds it impossible to regard any of them as the foundation of a new life for himself when the clock has not started ticking yet. Alone and tired, he does not even care in the end if the knocks he hears on the door represent this long-awaited signal: he just wants to stay at home, as his desire of finding something authentic has been killed within him by the simulacra he saw all around the country. The devil, however, confirms that “the quest” has not started yet, leaving the deal suspended and postponed for times when he is no longer so busy with his own problems.

Baudrillard’s reflection on the tragedy of a utopian dream made reality lead him to pose the question: “What do you do when everything is available?” (*America* 30). In a world where meaning is lost amid endless copies and instant accessibility, this dilemma becomes even more pressing. Codrescu, however, offers an unexpected response—one that, despite its unconventional nature, may prove to be the most viable solution for postmodern man. The book ends with Wakefield going home to read, as reading and culture in general remain the best ways through which one can attain a sort of inner equilibrium within this chaotic environment. Besides, “what else could a silence-loving man do in a hammer-wielding world?” (Codrescu, *Wakefield* 288).

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history with philosophy, history of religions, the study of the imaginary, and sociology.

Note

1. All translations from Romanian into English are mine.

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