

## WHY POLITICIZE THE CULTURAL GAME? (EMIL) CIORAN'S ETHOS: MYSTICISM, RELIGION AND ETHNIC PHILOSOPHY

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### Abstract

*The present research aims at understanding some of Emil Cioran's spiritual positions in several of his writings. The tools of analysis are the philosophical and cultural approaches, but also elements of positivist determinism, such as climate, disease, etc. The oeuvres studied belong to different periods of creation. The working hypothesis is that the essayist remained a lifelong thinker oscillating between the extreme right and the extreme left, as well as a stubborn and metaphysically rejected progressive thinker, but always obsessed with metaphysics and the transcendent. Among the commonplaces of Cioran's artistic and geopolitical critique of reality and the real are narcissism, humor, victimhood and diatribe. His work is underpinned by intuition and Utopian projection and much less by logic. Cioran becomes dangerous if treated as a programmatic philosopher, but otherwise he is a spectacular source of artistic and literary-philosophical insights; an experimental essayist, dangerous as an influencer. The fate of his thinking has been heavily marked by the ideologies of his interpreters.*

*Keywords:* Emil Cioran; mysticism; hermeneutics; left-wing; right-wing.

“la crítica más reciente ha desestabilizado el Yo en el que el autobiógrafo ingenuamente confía, al exponer que no es sino una ficción del lenguaje. El lenguaje es, entonces, el significante que crea el Yo que significa, y éste está tan ausente que sólo puede adivinarse, como un fantasma, entre las líneas que componen el texto”<sup>1</sup> (Durán Giménez-Rico, 1993, p. 75).

### Introduction

Making use of methods specific to hermeneutics and cultural-historical analysis, this article takes aim at debunking a few preconceptions that beset the interpretation of Cioran's oeuvre. No doubt there are several stages in Cioran's thinking and writing, but the most important are two: the philosophy of history and culture permeated by the Nietzschean energy of his youth, then the stage of his nihilist-melancholy exile, as detached as possible from the applied analysis of his present-day problems. In the same manner his *écriture* writing evolved, as it is well known, but the argument that the French language imposed a different rhythm and stylistics on him is naive. This naivety is due to the crediting of various cultural considerations issued by the essayist even though he never claimed to be a scientific authority, nor have scholars of his work used it as a source of irrefutable arguments, i.e. examples of logic and verified information. However, even those who have taken some of Cioran's statements as sound arguments have not

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<sup>1</sup> 'The more recent criticism has destabilized the I in which the autobiographer naively trusts, by exposing that it is nothing but a fiction of language. Language, then, is the signifier that creates the I that signifies, and this self is so absent that it can only be guessed at, like a ghost, between the lines that make up the text' (my translation).

been shy about regarding many of his other statements as aberrant speculations and many of his other statements merely likeable. Therefore, this article analyzes the work of various creative phases of the essayist and focuses on the relation to concepts and theories such as freedom, individuation, democracy, religion, politics and ideology, etc. Ciprian Vălcan emphasizes the importance of identity for Cioran, who shows horror of non-differentiation and the tyranny of the One (Vălcan, 2008, p. 168). What matters is mainly the semantic analysis and much less the formal one. Of particular interest are Cioran's considerations of Christianity-Buddhism-paganism and of political and moral values. The fundamental intention of the demonstration is to configure a portrait of a thinker-aesthete who often plays dangerously, but no more, and who builds a persona based on fickleness, on scintillating, paradoxical and stupefying formulations, on abysmal moods and cultural demonism. Cioran is a great actor, able to detach himself from various scriptural roles in his private life. An enfant terrible who has the merit of not having put himself at the service of ideologies and political and cultural correctness except sequentially and secondarily.

The times in which Cioran evolved were some of the worst in human history. Not that this history has ever been too humane...From this point of view, the essayist's views should not be treated with virulence, especially since he was not involved in any atrocity, nor did his message clearly advocate the commission of any crime. It is true, however, that his stances were in favor of the extreme right, but subsequently he not only revoked them, but condemned them himself. What is odd is that he did not firmly condemn the crimes of the far left, which were appalling and incomparably more numerous. Cioran's fear of being ostracized in the West under the mirage of leftist ideology considerably tempered his vituperative tone in his youth on political issues. He continued to be caustic in non-dangerous areas: his non-contemporary culture, religion and mysticism. This concealment also affected his philosophy, which became often nihilistic and sarcastic, if not melancholic and emphatically stylistic. As Ștefan Bolea observes, much of it is a philosophical anti-humanism disseminated by a "not-man", which would be "an alternative to Nietzsche's controversial notion of the *Übermensch*" (Bolea, 2019, p. 80). One might as well consider Dostoevsky's *underground man*. This not-man would be linked to Romantic and post-romantic literature and would manifest himself as anti-humanist. In other words, and in his own words, in order not to be blamed for the beliefs of his youth, the Romanian exile became a "home atténué", as he sarcastically called his compatriots in the newspaper *Vremea* ("Țara oamenilor atenuați" ["Country of the softened men"], 24 September 1933, my translation). The inter-war aggressive thinker became a bookish and cautious protester later on.

From the philosophy of excess (see Nicolae Țurcanu, *Cioran sau Excesul ca Filosofie* [Cioran or excess as philosophy], Limes Publishing House, Cluj, 2008), the essayist moved on to the pendulum of paradox. By hiding in paradox he has not become less proud. However, his pride remained original, rebellious-demonic-romantic, but also recognizing the elementary forms of religious life, in the sociological tradition of Émile Durkheim.

After all, Cioran's anti-humanism is authentic only insofar as it struggles with the anthropology of man as *imago Dei*. Otherwise, he shares a pro-humanism that was initially technological and imperialist, and later a-historical and intellectualist. In both cases, Cioran's metaphysics remains non-foundational (in line with the critique of metaphysics and ontotheology undertaken by Heidegger (in Horan, 2014, p. 96). Naturally, under these conditions, he will move towards the Heideggerian nothingness, towards the impersonal Buddhist Nirvana (as it was redesigned after the first 1000 years of Buddhism) and towards melancholy and loneliness (rather declared than lived).

As has been said, Cioran is saved from the dangers of mischief and ridicule by humor and self-irony, and by an attachment to the fragment at the expense of system philosophy; the

fragment intensified by metaphors *in praesentia* and *in absentia* (Garoiu, 2021, p. 12) and aiming at the oxymoronic paradox. From here, the essayist plunges into buffoonery and aphorism, his cynicism and despair not withstanding discursiveness.

The consistency of Cioran's exile is shown by the fact that he not only challenged the God of religions, but any fetish, any deification. For one thing, he derided cultural arrogance, as well as any kind of arrogance (Nica, 2016, p. 122). That is why it is saddening that almost a century after the Nietzschean excesses of the young Cioran they continue to be the favorite subject of massive doctoral theses. Such is *De Emil Cioran a Cioran, Análisis de un Discurso Político* [From Emil Cioran to Cioran, analysis of a political speech] by Corina Nicoleta Tulbure (2015), which takes the young essayist's nationalist-legionary adherence very seriously, without sufficiently documenting all the sources of the evil of that period. But the contribution is significant for highlighting the extremist leftist's hardening against opponents, as well as justifying the fearful seclusion of the exiled Cioran, the former Emil Cioran, etc.

### **1. The anti-Spanish Spaniard, the anti-Romanian Romanian, the melancholic vampire**

The non-philosopher has constantly remained the genre that always contradicts himself or adopts perfectly opposite positions, sometimes even in the same work. That's why it is hard to make verdicts on his political or cultural positions. Cioran remains a trickster with many faces and capable of playing various roles. This does not mean that he was a mere prankster, but that his essence was hybrid and unstable to some extent. For example, in *Cuaderno de Talamanca* he relates how much he loves Spain and how little of a Spaniard he is himself.

Manuel Arranz, the translator of the *Cuaderno* considers in the *Foreword* that 'Cioran had a Spanish character, a Spanish temperament'<sup>2</sup> (Cioran, 2002, p. 3, my translation). From the context it could be inferred that he was an impulsive man, tormented by mystical outbursts, but also rigorous. A tragedian. But was 'Cioran a nihilistic mystic?'<sup>3</sup> (Cioran, 2002, p. 5, my translation) A user of mystical data for anti-mystical purposes? However, can a mystic be detached from love? 'No one has spoken more contemptuously of love than Cioran'<sup>4</sup> (Cioran, 2002, p. 6, my translation). Obviously, this is a gross overstatement. However, not even such a fact would make him a Christian or Hindu ascetic, but a hedonist of intellectual activity who also belongs to the realm of the erotic. For an erotic temperament he was, proof of the passion poured into defending or contesting various points of view.

On the other hand, Cioran describes himself as a nocturnal being with vampire-romantic touches, so a Nordic Gothic with a dark disposition: 'I cannot stand the sun'<sup>5</sup>, 'Everyone is brown, but I will remain white, pale'<sup>6</sup> (Cioran, 2002, p. 10, my translation). However, his hyperborean mindset is only a simulation, knowing that he was a rheumatic being. Other aspects bring him closer to the vampire demon: 'I have in common with the Devil the bad mood, eternal foundation of anxiety. Like him, I am bilious by divine decree'<sup>7</sup> (Cioran, 2002, p. 13, my translation). Moreover, a constant in his perceptive gaze is the lack of receptivity to moral and scenic beauty, be it urban, with minor exceptions. Happiness is plebeian and unhappiness has no determined origin. The insomniac and nocturnal essayist searches everywhere for nostalgia and melancholy. For example, 'In Europe, one can only find so much daily nostalgia in Hungary'<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Original text: "Cioran tenía un carácter español, un temperamento español".

<sup>3</sup> Original text: "¿Cioran un místico nihilista?"

<sup>4</sup> Original text: "nadie ha hablado con mas desprecio del amor que Cioran".

<sup>5</sup> Original text: "yo no puedo soportar el sol".

<sup>6</sup> Original text: "Todo el mundo está moreno, pero yo seguiré blanco, pálido".

<sup>7</sup> Original text: "Tengo en común con el Diabolo el mal humor, eterno fundamento de la ansiedad. Como él, soy bilioso por decreto divino".

<sup>8</sup> Original text: "En Europa, ya sólo se puede encontrar tanta nostalgia cotidiana en Hungría".

(Cioran, 2002, p. 20, my translation). Spain was once an aristocratic country, oblivious to material success and excessive regulation, but in the meantime, it had aligned itself with consumerist civilization. So, the excessive imperialist of his youth has turned into a nocturnal melancholic irritated by the bustle of the day and the vigor of tanned bodies. Finally, the essayist was a library creature, fragile but haunted by dreams of domination and demolition.

## 2. In search of the authentic Cioran

But not even a library creature was he to the end, for the creator of style was irritated by the philosophy of language and linguistics: “Meditate on anything except language”<sup>9</sup> (Cioran, 2002, p. 21). Systematization and abstractions do not agree with his choleric and skeptical-melancholic nature. He remains voluptuously improvisational and fragmentary, so rather a frequenter of a whimsical bibliography free of academic rigidity.

Dismayed by the doctrinal instability of Cioran’s work, many researchers have focused on its stylistics, in the hope of being able to base a perfectly methodological research. Costică Brădădăţan considers in *The Philosopher of Failure: Emil Cioran’s Heights of Despair* that the common thread of Cioran’s work, so full of contradictions, would be a stylistic, thematic and substantial one and which focuses on failure and non-integration (Brădădăţan, 2002, p. 1). So he is counting on identifying some constants in this massive and comprehensive work, which shows him to be an optimistic researcher.

Other researchers have tried a less refined infiltration, namely on the pathological pathway. Alexandru Sereş reviewed Marta Petreu’s book, *Despre Bolile Filosofilor. Cioran* [On the diseases of philosophers Cioran], 2008. Here he mocked the ease of such an all-explanatory approach and showed how skillfully Cioran played the role of the fancied sick man: “To the patient Cioran would be invented all the illnesses, whether real or simply imagined, of which he complained to friends and family in his letters, which he mentions in his writings, especially in his *Notebooks*: ‘sore throat, sinusitis, gastritis, hypertension, prostatic hypertrophy, neurasthenia, depression, rheumatism’<sup>10</sup> (Sereş, 2009, p. 1, my translation). Cioran would have begun to write, and therefore to express himself culturally, as a result of his chronic insomnia. In this way, ‘he knew how to make the most of his discomfort, proving himself to be a genius sufferer’<sup>11</sup> (Sereş, 2009, p. 2, my translation). Consequently, he seemed a hypochondriac with flashes of genius. But genius has no materialistic essence; one doesn’t become brilliant if one suffers from prostatic hyperplasia.

## 3. No mercy between admiration and objection

Returning to Cioran’s capricious nature, it is interesting to study how he exercises his admiration in *Exerciții de Admirație. Eseuri și Portrete* [Exercises in admiration. Essays and portraits], 1986, especially in the chapter *Joseph de Maistre. Eseu asupra Gândirii Reacționare* [Joseph de Maistre. Essay on reactionary thought]. Cioran is a relentless label maker, i.e. a producer of verdicts without clear evidence. Any characterization he undertakes begins with a canon of epithets and conclusions almost without premises. For example, in the case of Joseph de Maistre this one would be imbued with ‘the dogmatic vehemence of his contempt’ (Cioran, 2012, p. 26), a monster (Cioran, 2012, p. 26) because he was against the Jansenists, the French Revolution, Protestantism, the Encyclopedia, but praised the

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<sup>9</sup> Original text: “Meditar sobre cualquier cosa, excepto sobre el lenguaje”.

<sup>10</sup> Original text: “Pacientului Cioran îi sunt inventariate toate bolile, reale, sau doar închipuite, de care se plânge prietenilor și rudelor în scrisorile sale, pe care le amintește în scrierile sale, îndeosebi în *Caiete*: dureri de gât, sinuzită, gastrită, hipertensiune, hipertrofia prostatei, neurastenii, depresie, reumatism”.

<sup>11</sup> Original text: “a știut să profite la maxim de beteșugurile sale, dovedindu-se un bolnav de geniu”.

incorruptibility and erudition of the tribunals of the Inquisition (Cioran, 2012, p. 27, my translation).

Speaking of Cioran's attachments and disavowals, we are implicitly talking about the Generation of '27. 1927 was the year in which Mircea Eliade's *Itinerar Spiritual* [Spiritual Itinerary] appeared, wherein a versatile but homogeneous theme is already taking shape: "träirismul" (a sort of ethnic existentialism, from "traï">living), which means also authenticism, a cult of self-expression as the supreme ethno-creative exuberance, a hunger for experiences together with the paroxysmal affirmation of personality and the flagellant activism of an 'awakening' of barbaric-Levantine laziness, a kind of "ardelenism", i.e. a Transylvanian ethos *sui generis*. At the same time, the obsession with failure manifests itself. Without the slightest doubt, that generation was obsessed with spirituality. This *concordia discors*, constantly and baroquely doubled by *discordia concors*, reinforces the assertion that the whole generation was nobly doomed.

Cioran is irritated by Maistre's admiration for the Constitution, sovereignty, hereditary monarchy, papacy and "any authority consolidated by tradition" (Cioran, 2012, p. 33). This is a point of view worthy of a social anarchist. Similarly, he does not accept the argument that war could be part of a divine plan. After all, a constant in his mentality is the cultural flirtation with a metaphysics to which he does not seem to adhere. The impression is that he is much more tolerant of imperialist dictatorship than of the ontological hierarchy.

The essayist regards Maistre as a person haunted by a God of armies, hence his approach to Spanish religious art: the only Christ who might have suited him is the figure of Spanish sculpture, sanguinolent, disfigured, convulsive, and pleased to the point of delirium by His crucifixion." (Cioran, 2012, pp. 34-35). A Christ à la Mel Gibson, but performing a narcissistic performance. The delight in torture performed by Christians will remain a leitmotif in the essayist's thinking. Moreover, Cioran constantly refers to the spatial and ethnic matrix. Joseph de Maistre would have recovered divine privileges after the century of deist "philosophy" (Cioran, 2012, p. 35) that had abstracted and exiled the Creator, but the recovery would have been in the sense of a tyrannical Yahweh, a "terrible" God. There follows another Freudian generalization: "man loves fear to the point of frenzy" (Cioran, 2012, p. 35). Any generalization begets other possible generalizations, for example that people love the dictatorship of force, because it seems to provide security for the everyday.

#### 4. Dooming Gnosticism and Plotinus' theory of emanation

Concerned with the essence and nature of evil, Cioran rushes to Gnostic conclusions: "Good and Evil principles coexist and mingle in God" (Cioran, 2012, p. 35), or "The notion of God's culpability is not a gratuitous one, but necessary and perfectly compatible with the notion of His omnipotence" (Cioran, 2012, p. 36). The next move is towards Nemesis, that ancient Greek goddess who in fact controlled Olympus: "God could not avoid the influence of Evil" (Cioran, 2012, p. 36). Logic does not particularly concern him, but rather blunt, pseudo-aristocratic philosophies. Thus, evil is "the secret of our dynamism" without which "we should vegetate in that monotonous perfection of the Good which, according to Genesis, vexed Being itself." (Cioran, 2012, p. 36). A vision of a sedentary and debilitating paradise, not far from that of popular origin in the short story *Ivan Turbincă* written by Ion Creangă. On the one hand, God is responsible for the existence of evil in the world; on the other hand, evil is the fuel that makes us evolve in a Bergsonian way towards the fullness of our being. In other words, God did us good against his perverse will etc.

Maistre will coin the absolutely "eminently untenable theory of the moral origin of diseases. 'If there were no moral evil on earth, there would be no physical evil', '...all pain is a punishment for a present or original crime'" (Cioran, 2012, p. 37). Cioran neither admits

that spirit could influence matter, nor does he accept the existence of sin and the inheritance of its effects (Cioran, 2012, p. 37). Suffering, moreover, appears to him as senseless sadism, which was natural in a hypochondriac. The pedagogy of the soul seems to him a painful absurdity.

Cioran does not conceive that civilization could predate history, in a *sui generis* prehistory. Maistre's assertion that "the state of civilization and of knowledge in a certain sense is the natural and primitive state of man," annoys him (Cioran, 2012, p. 39). Maistre, then, takes up Jean Jacques Rousseau's romantic vision of *le bon sauvage* in a Christian sense: a lost state of paradise. Cioran agrees that the meaning of history is a descending one but does not admit an initial golden age later diluted in inferior metals. For the mature Cioran there were only mini-golden ages interspersed in the desolate historical continuum.

The issue of power in Cioran is inextricably linked to the religious one. For him, original sin, present in most of the major religions, is merely a justification for a dubious system of domination. The Doctrine of the Fall would seduce only reactionaries, insensitive to "revolutionary optimism" (Cioran, 2012, p. 40). In this era, the thinker is dressed up as a progressive activist, confident in the upward march of history. The reactionary is "conservative who has dropped the mask" (Cioran, 2012, p. 40). The conservative would be the bestial hypostasis of the reactionary. Cioran is seduced by the splendor of mankind's destiny and accuses the skeptics of "aggressive lucidity" (Cioran, 2012, p. 42). Better to adhere to the generous naivety of revolutionary thought, the tangent touching on Friedrich Schiller's distinction between naive and sentimental poetry. *Becoming* must be sustained by all means, in a vein of Bergsonian optimism and a Berdiaevian mysticism. Exactly the opposite pole of this vision will reach Cioran in his maturity.

But Cioran goes beyond the utopian limitations of the revolutionaries and shows an interest in eternity. His meta-scientific post-utopianism does not condemn Marxism, for the desire for renewal at all costs is common to both, but it surpasses it.

At the same time, Cioran is irritated by Maistre's opinion that the transfer of authority to the mob is disastrous and confirms that a leftist could never have uttered such a thing, only a rightist (Cioran, 2012, p. 42). Behold Cioran as a sympathizer of the people and an opponent of the elitists! His statements are even melodramatic: "The leftist's despair is to do battle in the name of principles that forbid him cynicism" (Cioran, 2012, p. 43). It is therefore admitted that the far left is animated by cynicism.

### **5. The far right touches the far left on large surfaces**

The essayist's first three books also meant inflamed political, historical and cultural statements. Later, this clarity coupled with radicalism was only found with regard to Christianity and certain people or ideas in the past. So Cioran distanced himself as much as possible from the area of politics and the cultural hierarchies of his time.

*Transfiguration de la Roumanie* [The transfiguration of Romania], begins with a warning from the editor, although the book was published so many years after its initial appearance (2009, 1936), to a public 'mature enough and used to debating ideas'<sup>12</sup> (Cioran 2009, p. 7, my translation). The need for justifications was still felt; one of them being that Cioran himself would have wanted this risky youthful work published towards the end of his life (Cioran, 2009, p. 7). The publisher of Éditions de L Herne, repeatedly and timorously states that he does not agree with the ideas expressed in this book. This disclaimer is followed

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<sup>12</sup> Original text: "sufisamment majeur et habitue au debat d'idees."

by a *Foreword* in which Constantin Tacou also justifies the publication of the “difficult” book belonging to a ‘young age folly’<sup>13</sup> (Cioran, 2009, p. 10, my translation).

Sixty years after the publication of Cioran’s third book of essays it is mentioned that this was only a stage in Cioran’s thought. Already in the 1991 edition of the book, published in Bucharest, Cioran had suppressed Chapter IV, *Collectivisme National* [National collectivism], which showed that immediately after the anti-communist Revolution in Romania for the new proto-capitalist regime the essayist remained *persona non-grata* (Cioran, 2009, p. 10).

In the *Preface*, Marta Petreu points out how the thinker had initially rejected any political adherence with contempt, preoccupied as he was with Oswald Spengler’s considerations on the “end of culture” and civilization in *Der Untergang des Abendlandes* [The Decline of the West] (Cioran, 2009, pp. 13-14). The researcher highlights the focus of this unique book of systematic critique of the Romanian ethos that would have neither style nor rhythm, or in other words, the well-known inferiority complex of minor cultures (Cioran, 2009, p. 15).

A scholarship in Berlin in 1933 was enough to turn him into a follower of the Hitler-type dictatorship: elitist, ethnicist, activist (Cioran, 2009, pp. 15-16). He even comes to question the formative role of the library for young people in this interwar period, although he will remain a lifelong book lover, even if mainly a cultural critic. Caught up in the general hysteria caused above all by the danger of Soviet communism - at its origins a Western torpedo - , the young scholar goes into an irrational frenzy (Cioran, 2009, p. 16).

Between 1930 and 1933, Cioran practiced a chaotic and contradictory philosophy of culture and history under the influence of several incongruous thinkers and theorists. A major influence is the already mentioned Spengler’s *Der Untergang des Abendlandes*, and due to this he makes some hazardous statements (Cioran, 2009, p. 14). Thus, Romanians would not have an “original style”, although there are countless styles in popular dress, in decorations, and a Romanian architectural style. The history of the Romanians would not have ‘a sufficiently fast pace’<sup>14</sup> (Cioran, 2009, p. 14, my translation), i.e. it had not been centered on wars of conquest and on industrial exploits.

Another source from this period is Dumitru Drăghicescu’s book, *Din Psihologia Poporului Român* [The psychology of the Romanian people] (1907), which states that Romanian identity is a borrowed identity (Cioran, 2009, p. 19). The young Cioran is a great believer in civilizational modernity, with no regard for cultural depths and differences. Some other thinkers of the time also shared these ideas, and they seem to constitute a cultural prototype which constantly emerges in the technologically and administratively unsynchronized civilizations with the great powers (cf. G. Ibrăileanu, *Spiritul Critic în Cultura Românească* [The critical spirit in Romanian culture], 1909, Ștefan Zeletin, *Burghezia Română: Originea și Rolul ei Istorice* [The Romanian bourgeoisie: Its origin and historical role], 1925, and E. Lovinescu, *Istoria Civilizației Române Moderne* [The history of modern Romanian civilization], I-III, 1924-1926). All these predecessors use leftist ideas in their demonstrations (Cioran, 2009, p. 20).

Starting with 1932, Cioran began praising the dictatorship in the Bucharest weekly *Vremea* (Cioran, 2009, p. 16). This is whence the accusations of extreme right stance will issue. But he, the ultimate philosopher of contradictions, can just as well be assimilated to the extreme left. Thus, he combats the inner life in favor of political action, and politics seems to

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<sup>13</sup> Original text: “folie de jeunesse”.

<sup>14</sup> Original text: “un ritm îndeajuns de trepidant”.

him superior to science (“La conscience politique des étudiants”, *Vremea*, no. 463, 15 Nov. 1936 (in *The transfiguration of Romania, Preface*, p. 17).

As with any extreme, Cioran’s extremist statements are not based on demonstration and logic, but on irrationality and often on offense: ‘To be Romanian means to have your blood mixed with a lot of water’ (my translation)<sup>15</sup>, *Vremea*, no. 306, 24 September, 1933, “Le pays des hommes atténués” (Cioran, 2009, p. 21).

In the case of *Pe Culmile Disperării* [On the heights of despair] (1934), his first book, this would be ‘a black jubilation, a negative ecstasy’<sup>16</sup> (Dan C. Mihăilescu in *Revelațiile Durerii* [The revelations of pain], 1990, p. 16, my translation), written in ‘the tradition of the Romantic ego, of the ill-loved who passed through Werther, Rousseau, Sénancour, steeped in Silezius and Böhme, of the Nervalian black sun, of the Baudelairean “heautontimoroumenos”, of the absinthe of a “saison en enfer”, relying heavily on the Unamunian tragical feeling and the black cloak of Eminescu’s *Ode*’<sup>17</sup> (Mihăilescu, 1990, p. 17, my translation). Aside from the erudite-snobbish enumeration, interesting aspects could be singled out.

The critic blames the excesses of leading intellectuals on the turbulent era. Of Cioran he says that he is ‘an Eminescian Dan-Dionis, fallen from God after the terrible question. His demonism, his blasphemies become twisted psalms’<sup>18</sup> (Mihăilescu, 1990, p. 20, my translation). So, the essayist would be haunted by pandemoniac *hubris*, but only in relation to a god who actually humiliates him. The Lautréamont-style ecstasy is imbued with sensory drunkenness of the Carmelite type and consequently a kind of German mysticism results (Mihăilescu, 1990, p. 20). Cioran is acutely sensorial, evidence of his many sufferings, and often his outbursts of rage against the superhuman self-containment of ascetics betray a possible envy.

Cioran did not enter generational journalism until 1932, after ‘the stage of pure spirituality had been consumed’<sup>19</sup> (Mihăilescu, 1990, p. 22, my translation). At the same time, Dan C. Mihăilescu mentions ‘the devastating meaning of Cioran’s messianism in the fourth decade’<sup>20</sup> (Mihăilescu, 1990, p. 22, my translation), without specifying the precise meaning of this “messianism”. That Cioran was exasperated by the invasion of rigid professorship and parvenus in society denotes, after all, only moral purity and social naivety. As we know, he was attacking the peaks, not the rank and file. His time-bound admiration for the regimes of Hitler and Mussolini had a mystical motivation, a temporal and space-bound mysticism in order to create the best possible Leibnizian world.

## 6. Mysticism and politics

Commenting on the book *Tears and Saints* [Lacrimi și sfinți], 1937, republished by The University of Chicago Press in 1995, Ilinca Zarifopol-Johnston, the translator and author of the *Foreword*, takes in this assumption about the seclusion and intellectual asceticism of the essayist: “Like his saints, Cioran is now wholly an outsider” (Cioran, 1995, p. VI). But looking at the books he published as an essayist, his assiduous correspondence with academics, journalists and writers, the prizes he refused, we realize that this is another of his

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<sup>15</sup> Original text : “Être roumain signifie avoir le sang coupé de beaucoup d’eau”.

<sup>16</sup> Original text: “o jubilație neagră, extaz negativ”.

<sup>17</sup> Original text: “tradiția eului romantic, a *mal-aimé*-ilor trecuți prin Werther, Rousseau, Sénancour, muiată în Silezius și Böhme, a soarelui negru nervalian, a ‘heautontimoroumenos’-ului baudelairean, a absintului dintr-o ‘saison en enfer’, mizând mult pe tragicul simțământului unamunian și pe mantia neagră a *Odei* eminesciene”.

<sup>18</sup> Original text: “un Dan-Dionis eminescian, căzut din Dumnezeu după teribila întrebare. Demonia lui, blasfemiile devin psalmi întorși”.

<sup>19</sup> Original text: “etapa purei spiritualități se consumase”.

<sup>20</sup> Original text: “sensul devastator al mesianismului cioranian din deceniul patru”.



many playful attitudes. Ilinca Zarifopol-Johnston sees him as a “modern-day hagiographer” (Cioran, 1995, p. VI), which is an optimistic statement. She even wonders in a completely materialist spirit (here we are in the heart of an oxymoron) why a young man who is a self-confessed hedonist and politically active would invest his time in studying the lives of these saints in order to become a “heavenly interloper” (Cioran, 1995, p. VI), the answer being already suggested in the question.

Resorting to Nietzsche, both Cioran and his translator agree that sanctity would spring from the will to power and has imperialist tendencies (Cioran, 1995, p. VII). Saints would therefore be hypocrites who rely on humility to gain fame. Through assimilation, saints become existentialists *à outrance*, but conserve their naivety. As usual, Cioran contradicts himself from one sentence to the next, and Ilinca Zarifopol-Johnston believes that he actually loves saints, a love with a “shade of decadent aestheticism in it” (Cioran, 1995, p. VIII). But she also admits that such “dandified love” (Cioran, 1995, p. IX) is accompanied by “a vigorous and virulent hatred” (Cioran, 1995, p. VIII) motivated by the courage in the face of suffering bequeathed to us by the saints.

An interesting observation by the translator is that Cioran pays special attention to mystics, those who have received the “gift of tears” (Cioran, 1995, p. IX). Moreover, she quotes with diligence from the *Dictionnaire de la Spiritualité* [Dictionary of spirituality] the three types of holy tears: *penitential tears* (with the role of purification), *tears of love or grace*, and *tears of compassion* (increasingly present with Francis of Assisi, early 13th century) “wept for the Passion of Christ” (Cioran, 1995, p. IX). She calls this feat “a metacritical discourse on mysticism” (Cioran, 1995, p. XIII) and notes that the thinker referred mostly to Western mysticism and possibly to Far Eastern mysticism, but not at all to Orthodox mysticism. Indeed, Cioran behaves religiously as if he had no spiritual connection with his original background, never mind that he was brought up in an Orthodox priest’s family. Moreover, too few studies have examined the intellectual and spiritual formation of the child and adolescent Cioran.

This “discontinuous and iconoclastic philosophical discourse on mysticism” (Cioran, 1995, p. XIV) is actually anti-Christian, as the translator admits. An explanation of this approach is offered through the prism of the generation and of the journal *Criterion*, their organ of public expression. In fact, this generation was a spiritualist one, but heterogeneous, heteroclitite. Hybridized and haunted by what Mircea Vulcănescu would identify as an “agonic spirituality”, i.e. “lucidity, negation, and a tragic doubt that wants itself invalidated by the revelation of a new type of man, yet to be born” (in *Tears and Saints*, p. XV). From this, Ilinca Zarifopol-Johnston, is unable to draw any conclusions other than “mystical mania” and political populism, also with a pinch of identity crisis (Cioran, 1995, p. XVI). The question is how someone who is preoccupied with spirituality can traverse an identity crisis, while an individual who relies only on perishable materialistic coordinates is fully balanced and non-populist.

One justification for the book, offered by Ilinca Zarifopol-Johnston, would be that it is a riposte to “a rebirth of mysticism in political garb” (Cioran, 1995, p. XVIII). In other words, mysticism would be guilty twice over: once for daring to confront modernity, then because it can afford to send representatives into politics where only the most materialistic citizens should have access.

*Tears and Saints* is also linked to *Romania’s Transfiguration* (1937), which “borrows the rhetoric of mystical discourse and applies it to the realm of politics” (Cioran, 1995, p. XVII). And here the rhetoric of a discourse is confused with the discourse itself. The Nietzschean-Cioranesque idea, therefore of anti-mystical origin, that mystics are obsessed with the will to possess God can easily be transferred to politics. But this does not mean that

Romania was in a spiritual crisis, rather that part of the intelligentsia was experiencing a false spiritual crisis, namely that there was a minor culture in Romania generated by a pathetic - for being non-imperialist - history, and that the same intelligentsia was proposing some funambulist-mystical strategies by grossly mixing the temporal with the timelessness.

When he trumpets the breaking of the minor historical destiny through blind rage towards a great culture, Cioran is indeed Machiavellian, as his translator labels him, constantly making use of Michel de Certeau's contrived assertion that nihilism and Machiavellianism often coincide (Cioran, 1995, p. XIX). But what ideas or ideologies can't be made to coincide at some points?

On the other hand, Ilinca Zarifopol-Johnston is right when she observes the application of mystical principles in the two early books, *Transfiguration of Romania* and *Tears and Saints*, in the same way as the extreme left-right movements of the time and not only did. The young Cioran is violently utopian, but holiness and mysticism are not utopian, they do not want to impose a way of life and thinking on humanity through violence and uniformity. Excesses made in the name of mysticism are distortions of the essence of mysticism, they are actually anti-mysticism.

In a much keener manner analyses the translator the style of the book than its content: the incendiary metaphors, the erudition of the text, the ambiguity, but also the colloquial-lyrical style (Cioran, 1995, p. XXI). Fortunate is also the integration of the thinker in the family of the existentialist outlaws who hang chaotically between history and eternity, as they were brought to the stage by Unamuno (the martyr Manuel Bueno), Dostoevsky and Genet's holy killer (Cioran, 1995, p. XXI).

The translator's conclusion is that Cioran presents himself as a failed mystic touched by "bravado, a romantic, Luciferian pose" (Cioran, 1995, p. XXII). To this picture is superimposed the spite that humans would be the buffoons of an absent God. So romanticism is on full display including the characteristic Wit - *Witz* (Cioran, 1995, p. XXII).

At the same time, Cioran imitates the mystical discourse, including its temperature, without being mystical himself. A stumbling block to mysticism is the disregard of suffering perceived as revenge and humiliation on the part of the divine.

In both the realm of holiness and mysticism Cioran must be taken *cum grano salis*, but he saves himself gloriously as a postmodern poet, that is, by offering pastiches and parodies, even if the underlying crisis is genuine. Still, Cioran remains a rational intellectual, with tragic outbursts, but never truly suicidal. A thinker-poet, he proposes fictions, not political and religious solutions.

On the other hand, Cioran being an *ec-static*, even if a nihilist (so not a programmatic nihilist, i.e. almost a Caragialin "nifilist"), has the openness to admire the joy of the saints, for example the frenzied drum dance of Saint Teresa when Jesus revealed himself to her as her fiancé (Cioran, 1995, p. 4). His admiration for Spanish mysticism stems from this passion, as he himself is a passionate writer. In this sense he also admires the passionate Islamic mysticism, accompanied by music and dance, of Djelal-eddin-Rumi and Chems-eddin (Cioran, 1995, p. 5). Not very surprising, his favorite music is not sacred music: "Music make me too bold in front of God. This is what distances me from the Oriental mystics" (Cioran, 1995, p. 6). Exacerbated passion distances Cioran from the divine; hence his admiration for Western mysticism, the one based on the cult of the heart (Cioran, 1995, p. 6). In fact, most often he speaks as a man educated in the Catholic spirit.

### **7. Cioran's pact with some branches of Buddhism**

Salvation is the main theme of the Bible, which coincides with "redemption from slavery of sin" (Maier, 2014, p. 1). In fact, Judaism, Christianity and Islam are concerned

with this salvation of humanity in a fallen world that has already lost its meaning. Only that Judaism suggests a collective salvation for the Israelites, Christianity sees salvation as possible through faith in Jesus Christ and communion with the Eucharistic body obtained through transubstantiation, and Islam sees salvation as a gift offered in exchange for total submission to Allah (Maier, 2014, p. 1). Some forms of Buddhism add to the “techniques of salvation the steps of reincarnation.

My aim is not to discuss the similarities and differences between the various soteriological procedures, but to record what salvation would consist of in terms of identity in Buddhism.

According to the *Pāli Buddhist* scriptures, the Four Noble Truths are the first teachings preached by Gautama Buddha after he attained enlightenment. Their aim is liberation from suffering, which is what Cioran wanted. Thus, 1. life is mainly suffering or dissatisfaction (*Dukkha*), 2. the root of this suffering (*Samudaya*) is desire or craving, 3. the cessation (*Nirodha*) of suffering is possible by renouncing desire, 4. the path (*Magga*) to freedom from suffering and the cycle of reincarnation is the practice of the Buddhist religion, which is called the Noble Eightfold Path, and the less noble one, 5. suffering is evil in itself and pointless.

Followers of Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism have a different vision of salvation from that of Christianity. Hell and heaven are the end results of a soteriological choice (Maier, 2014, p. 4). Salvation, i.e. liberation from the karmic cycle, is achieved through knowledge. Freedom from *Samsāra*, the cycle of death and rebirth, occurs through the attainment of maximum spirituality. So reincarnations are a kind of hell with the function of Purgatory. Towards what does one escape as prize for complete spiritualization? Towards *moksha* or *mukti* in Hinduism and towards Nirvana (*Nibbana*) in Buddhism. Liberation through spiritualization does not lead to individual happiness, but to the merging into a collective existence (Maier, 2014, p. 4). Nirvana is the opposite of ignorance (*Avidyā*, *Pali Avijjā*), the meeting of the liberated minds (*Citta*). Of course, the Christian heaven also contains the ultimate knowledge, revelation, only it is rather described as a space of love, perfection and worshipful spirituality for saved individuals. In Buddhism it is mostly about liberation from suffering and ignorance as negative factors and the attainment of happiness, moral perfection and freedom (Maier, 2014, p. 4). The discourse on love between redeemed individualities and on worshipping the supreme being is missing.

Emerging mainly as a protest against the priestly ritualism and sacrificial religion of the Hindu Brahmins, Buddhism emphasizes moral training and mental discipline. Siddhartha Gautama is not accessible even by revelation (Maier, 2014, p. 4). He produced the message of salvation (*Dhamma*) towards an impersonal spiritual happiness. Buddha, though represented by huge statues, is neither a god nor a savior, for he does not offer Nirvana, but only points the way. In fact, the truth is that he has ended up being worshipped like Jehovah, Jesus or Allah.

But the doctrine states otherwise: “*Theravāda* Buddhism is basically a religion without god. It does not believe in a supreme being, although it does not recognize many gods as higher beings” (Maier, 2014, p. 5). However, even these intermediary gods need salvation, for they too are prisoners of the karmic chain. The reality is that they are more spiritually advanced beings, but not gods. Their function could be similar to that of the saints who are considered so precisely because of their spirituality - that of intermediaries with the divinity for humanity. Except that in Buddhism there is no such ordering and personal divinity. The common factors between the great religions or traditions are ethics, asceticism, compassion, etc., but their soteriology is totally distinct.

Returning to Cioran and his fascination with polytheism and freedom, as well as his horror of suffering, we note that he takes from Buddhism only certain aspects, but not the whole Buddhist message nor its liberating practices. Cioran remains an atheist who uses religious content strictly to construct his anarchic, pseudo-analytical lyrical “poems”.

However, Cioran can be a religious spirit without being a religious man. His desire for absolute freedom drives him to defy all hierarchical configurations. This is why he rebukes Dostoevsky for being a coward when he charged Raskolnikov with remorse after the murder (Cioran, 1995, p. 97). But the Russian writer always redeemed his murderers through remorse and penitence. Absolute freedom, however, not only condones murder and oppression, but above all feeds on pride.

Paulo Borges, an avid Buddhist scholar, admires Cioran as a “mystical iconoclast” (Vălcan, 2015, p. 23) and as a practitioner of a ‘titanic hybris of overcoming everything, the subject and oneself’<sup>21</sup> (Vălcan, 2015, p. 24, my translation). Yet Christianity presupposes a personalized transcendence, whereas Nirvana offers depersonalization and absorption into the universal *ātman*.

### 8. Imagining some pagan joy

Cioran differentiates religions more on stylistic reasoning. He later defends polytheism on the grounds that it “corresponds more realistically to the diversity of our bents and impulses” (Cioran & Brown, 1968, p. 43), i.e. his view is anthropocentric. Polytheism would support freedom of choice. This amounts to a hijacking of polytheistic religions. Pagans did not choose their gods on the basis of sympathies or whims, any more than Christians have any particular zeal for a particular saint in order to place him/her at the head of the Christian pantheon.

Faith, in Cioran’s view, is a Christian invention and a not at all commendable one (Cioran & Brown, 1968, p.44). What bothers the proud essayist is that there might be beings superior to him and even worse: worthy of adoration. The old gods were more human, i.e. founded on a low mimesis: “one greeted them without having to genuflect” (Cioran & Brown, 1968, p.43). Paganism, in Cioran’s view, did not condemn sin and allowed “the freedom to browse” among Gods (Cioran & Brown, 1968, p. 44) who cohabited in “admirable promiscuity” (Cioran & Brown, 1968, p. 44). Thus, Cioran’s understanding of theology is one of a library delight or of a videogame setting.

The essayist has two obsessions: complete freedom of thought, although his early books show him as willing to burn at the stake those who did not think like him, and the horror of suffering. For him, suffering is excluded from having a therapeutic role in the spiritual order; paradise would be worthy of interest if it had the appearance of the Rabelaisian monastery Thélème: luxury, entertainment, refinement. The modest Cioran who was able to refuse monetary prizes (to avoid being singled out and accused of right-wing extremism?) was in fact a hedonist in disguise.

Captivating in Cioran is the symbiosis between anarchism and dictatorship. He who praises the freedom of choice between gods in polytheism recalls with functional scrupulosity the Roman law which stipulated that no new god could be worshipped in private without the cult of the new god first to have received the approval of the Senate (Cioran & Brown, 1968, p. 46). Thus, a hyper-liberty, but with approval from the lordship in much the same way as Conu Leonida’s “revoluție” (“revolution”) functioned in Caragiale’s *Conu Leonida față cu reacțiunea* [Mr. Leonida faced the reaction] Finally, the apologist for freedom without frontiers says it directly: “Better to be a slave and have the right to worship the gods of one’s choice than to be

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<sup>21</sup> Original text: “titanic hybris de superación de todo, del sujeto y de si mismo”.

'free' yet have no alternative to a single variety of the divine" (Cioran & Brown, 1968, p. 46). Consequently, better false multiple choices than a mono-choice liberty. Or, put it bluntly, better slavery than quintessential, hence implicitly limited, freedom.

Cioran is also a fierce defender of pagans and apostates, showing no sympathy for the atrocities suffered by Christians. Thirty years after the publication of *Tears and Saints*, his attitude became radicalized and de-lyricized in an anti-Christian direction. What he retained was the vituperative epithet: "the venomous but insipid Saint Gregory of Nazianzus" (Cioran & Brown, 1968, p. 39). The essayist sees no qualitative difference between Christianity and paganism; on the contrary, Christianity would be clearly inferior because it does not proclaim force, will to power and unlimited freedom (Cioran & Brown, 1968, p.42).

Returning to Catholicism, the organ seems to him the transcendent instrument by definition, while the cello and flute "exhibit all the human flaws, transfigured by a supernatural regret" (Cioran, 1995, p. 85).

In the field of painting, however, Cioran is fascinated by El Greco, who disrupted the anatomical perspective and three-dimensionality of Western (Spanish) religious painting by cultivating a filiform spiritualism of Byzantine origin. Curiously, we expect Cioran to be closer to the manner of Van Gogh, who is an "El Greco without God, without heaven" (Cioran, 1995, p. 85).

## 9. Conclusion

Speaking about the isolation of the tender cynic, I would like to recall that Cioran always said that he did not want to be famous. However, it seems that a few young people have committed suicide by reading his books, while he claimed it was not his fault that he was taken seriously. Moreover, immediately after the anti-communist revolution in Romania, the works of the Generation of '27 were massively published. The publishing house Humanitas, owned by the philosopher Gabriel Liiceanu, became rich. In order not to lose money through inflation, books that did not sell fast enough were melted down and reprinted later. Thus, toilet paper impregnated with the texts of Emil Cioran, Mircea Eliade, Constantin Noica, etc., ended up circulating on the market.

This late hour success is due also to his humor in combination with the ingenuity of a peasant. In a series of interviews with Liiceanu, Cioran tells how as a child he used to play soccer on Coasta Boacii with the human skulls dug up by the village gravedigger. Liiceanu sophisticatedly asked him if these were morbid inclinations with Freudian and Schopenhauerian overtones. Cioran answered very seriously that it was all about soccer.

Even the bad words said about him and his work contributed to his surprising fame. 'It should also be added that Cioran is currently the victim of gossip by the most ill-intentioned biographers: his life is the target of murderous literary gossip'<sup>22</sup> (Álvarez Lopeztello, 2022, p. 5, my translation). I would add that not only the literary gossip.

But more important to my article is the intention to produce evidence for Cioran's brilliancy in terms of paradox, oxymoron, self-contradiction, risked statements and considerations. His charm relies not only on his refined style, but also on his ability to make use of a huge amount of cultural content in a playful, pleasant or caustic way. This is the advantage of keen essay writing. Nobody should be angry with, disgusted of, enthralled by Cioran's messages. He only played a cultural game and culture should be free to generate even twisted messages as long as they are not included in the public affairs realm. Cioran is no more, no less than a gifted, far-fetched, morose, funny voice; but a voice ferociously representative for the 20th century.

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<sup>22</sup> "Hay que agregar además que actualmente Cioran es víctima del chismorreo de los biógrafos peor intencionados: su vida es blanco del asesino cotilleo literario."

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