

On the Diseases of Cioran

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*“Disease takes us outside
the Species. Any sick man is
about to cross into zoology.”*



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Diavolul și ucenicul său: Nae

Ionescu—Mihail Sebastian (The devil
and his apprentice: Nae Ionescu—Mihail
Sebastian) (2009, 2010).

Cioran and the Doctors

“WESTERN MAN, the civilized man... rushes to the doctor, to the pharmacist...,”¹ stated the philosopher—somewhat critically—in a 1982 interview. Cioran himself was a civilized man and, just like he would take the train, he would also go to see the doctor²: not only in Sibiu, where he went to the medical laboratory of doctor Albert Zink to see whether he had been contaminated or not with *Treponema pallidum*, which could allegedly turn one into a genius, but also in Paris or in Dieppe. With painful symptoms haunting him like ghosts in an old mansion, the philosopher repeatedly tried to demonstrate to the supreme judges—the doctors—that they were the quantifiable signs of real diseases, diseases that had a name and—he hoped—a cure. His great problem was, “always,” “How to be in pain *no more*?”³

Cioran’s *Notebooks* and letters (especially those to his brother) mention, usually in passing, various treatments and cures he followed, most likely at the recommendation of one doctor or

another. If the cashier working at the clinic on Assas street asked him whether “*this time*” he was working or was unemployed,⁴ it follows that the philosopher was a known patient of the clinic where he went at one point to have a blocked ear unplugged. Also, he repeatedly went to Enghien, trying to treat his mysterious rheumatism with the sulfurous waters there, just like he had done earlier at Ocna Sibiului and Techirghiol. Living in exile and far from being a rich man (“The disease came to give flavor to my abject poverty, to *spice* up my destitution,” wrote Cioran in the winter of 1957⁵), lacking any “connection” that might have given his access to medical circles, Cioran had to wait in line, just like everybody else: “Cochin. I went there for a medical visit. For half an hour, they sent me from one clerk to another.”⁶ Also, “tormented by anxiety,” he waited long hours in front of medical offices: “I spent three hours in the waiting room of a clinic.”⁷

With his frequent respiratory infections, with his rheumatism or arthritis, high blood pressure, gastritis, insomnia, hyperanxiety, cyclical depressions, chronic fatigue (and, finally, Alzheimer’s disease), Cioran was eternally ill and eternally exasperated by the incessant awareness of his own body. A visit to the doctor was extremely taxing for him, and therefore physicians—all “incompetent,” of course—diagnosed him with “emotiveness.” Secretly—namely, in his *Notebooks*—this emotive patient admitted to the accuracy of the diagnosis: “Emotiveness?—this horrible word used by incompetent physicians—is nevertheless best suited for the state I am usually in.”⁸

Naturally, his opinion of doctors was either cautious or downright negative: a gastroenterologist looked “smug, or rather *idiotic*”; a “great cardiologist” whom he met at a cocktail party was completely ignorant of the facts of life: “He was no better than a country notary or a Parisian grocer,”¹⁰ came Cioran’s secret and vindicating insult. The philosopher sought to take revenge on the whole medical caste: he spend the entire evening talking to the great “ignorant” cardiologist (one can only imagine about what!), leaving him utterly stupefied: “He was amazed by everything I told him.”¹¹

Cioran seems completely unaware of the effect—an ambiguous one, most likely—he must have had upon “the great physician, formerly a professor at the medical school,” because creators are unable to understand and measure the tremendous strangeness that separates them from the warm and sound normality of the people around them.

Sometimes, tired of doctors and of the meager results of their recommended treatments, the patient went on strike: he decided to no longer go to the doctor. “I don’t want to know what I am suffering from, I’m through with doctors,” wrote he in the “dreadful” night—a night of “incessant pain in the legs”—of May 30, 1963.¹² However, a few days later we find him at Cochin clinic,

waiting for hours for the doctor to see him, tormented by anxiety and rendered misanthropic by the pain. Two summers later, the same scenario: “I have decided to no longer seek treatment: what happens, happens . . . The pain I feel comes from afar: let us bother the doctors no longer,”¹³ wrote the patient in the summer of 1965. Shortly afterwards, another entry tells us that “This morning, at Cochin, I was consulted by a great specialist in rheumatology.” Being an ordinary patient, the philosopher patiently waited for “two hours” and then—quite significantly—he was examined in the presence of medical students, turned into teaching material, which in the French system can only happen to those benefiting from social medical insurance: “The specialist quickly examined me and turned towards his students: ‘It’s a *subjective* thing.’”¹⁴

Cioran, who had hoped to be cured “of the constant tingling in the legs that I have been experiencing for thirty years,” came to accept both the situation and the explanation, and was even pleased. Furthermore, even if this time he fully realized that “the great specialist” had thought him “a nutcase,”¹⁵ he was not angry, only happy—“to my great relief”—that he did not suffer from a serious disease.

In clinics and hospitals, he continued with the “*sordid* experience”¹⁶ of his own body, allowing himself to be examined and treated for one disease or another: for high blood pressure (and the treatment “proved catastrophic for the stomach,” weakened by gastritis¹⁷), for his prostate (“I was seen by three doctors today. A swollen prostate. An old man’s disease. Hypertension, a swollen liver, etc., etc.”¹⁸), for his eyesight (“The doctor told me to come back for a checkup in six months or a year”¹⁹), for many other diseases. His attitude towards the medical corps ranged between “those imbecile doctors” (who misdiagnosed Simone Boué’s disease²⁰) and “They have great specialists here,”²¹ “a famous ophthalmologist. . .”

In the second half of the 1970s, with money less of a problem (“My financial situation has improved with age”²²) and enjoying a certain reputation, he gained access to better medical offices and clinics. He could presently afford to see “two or three” specialists and to be examined for a period of six weeks, spending significant amounts of money—“it cost me three thousand francs”—on investigations concerning his health. In the early 1980s, from “those imbecile doctors” we come to the point where Cioran becomes friends with certain physicians²³ (“I have some doctor friends here. . .”²⁴) and to a more cordial relation, not with his body, but with the medical system that could take care of it.

Despite his anger against doctors, Cioran always listened to their advice and obeyed it to the letter. In the summer of 1958 he began struggling with the “stimulants” that conditioned his writing and which had been suddenly “denied” to him: tobacco, coffee, alcohol. He quit smoking, no longer drank coffee—still,

in moments of absolute despair, believing that he could not write “unless intoxicated with tobacco,”²⁵ he started smoking again—and, seeking to motivate himself, kept repeating: “my stomach, my throat, all weakened by tobacco.”²⁶ Also, he followed a strict diet, gradually eliminating fats, salt, and anything likely to damage his “arteries,” and led “an orderly life.”²⁷ Still, he noticed that since he had turned so “rational,” everything he did “went badly,” in the sense that he could no longer write: “My mind only works amid disorder and with the help of stimulants,”²⁸ came his bitter admission. Every now and then, he felt tempted or gave in to the lure of a “party,” like it happened in the night of July 1, 1966, when he had dinner with E [Eugène Ionesco?]. The results were far from unexpected: he returned home at three in the morning, “dead drunk,” and paid the price in the morning: “hangover, nausea, morbid irritability.”²⁹

Terrified by the “arteriosclerosis running in our family”³⁰ and by the fog clouding his brain, he stayed away from salt and fats. He was pleased that, “after observing this diet for forty days—no salt, of course—my health has improved”³¹ and his blood pressure was “within normal limits.”³² As cooking oil “is bad for your arteries, for your heart, for everything, just like butter, for that matter,”³³ and because he had problems both with the arteries and with the stomach (“My faithful gastritis”), Cioran followed “un régime terrible,” eating “des légumes cuits à la vapeur, des céréales complètes.”³⁴ The occasional visitors he received in his famous attic could feel the scent of the herbal teas that Cioran used to drink: “there was always a pleasant smell in the room, coming from the herbal teas and from the fresh vegetables that he steam-boiled himself.”³⁵

He followed the diets prescribed by his doctors and, with his appetite for exaggeration, made them even harsher. After his death, with tender irony, Simone Boué remembered that her partner “était un grand, grand adepte de *La Vie Claire*,”³⁶ buying organic food and eating only fresh produce. Whenever he left for his bird’s nest in Dieppe, he would throw away everything he had in his Paris refrigerator. Arrived at the destination, Simone would go out to buy fresh food, and she did the same once back in Paris.³⁷ With great satisfaction, he told Sanda Stolojan that he had healthy food to thank for his long life,³⁸ food prepared either by himself or by Simone, who spoiled him with strawberry and sweet basil tarts. Besides, forced by his countless afflictions, he admitted that “drug therapy has become a reality.” Still, discouraged by the side effects of some drugs that hurt his stomach, he experimented with naturist and homeopathic cures. After three months of self-prescribed treatment with “gooseberry, rosemary, and savory leaves,” plus “the entire arsenal of homeopathy,” he ended up “literally *drunk* from all the infusions, intoxicated by sedatives.”³⁹ In a similar fashion, he sought to prevent the eternal flues that kept him in bed for several months every year: he annually took “a homeopathic vaccine.”⁴⁰ When he still got the flu, to his utter despair, he found out that “it offers protection

only for two months a year” and realized that he had failed to take the only “truly effective” medicine, the vaccine offered by Pasteur Institute.⁴¹ When he suddenly came down with the flu and treated himself with “old wives” herbal remedies, he was forced to admit that they had absolutely no effect and, in utter disgust, switched to antibiotics. Also as part of this orderly life, in order to treat his asthenia and anemia, Cioran went cycling or walking for as much as 30 kilometers a day, like an 18th century traveler. Or, even better, the philosopher who had dreamed of becoming a *forest warden* or a *gardener* enjoyed working in the gardens of his friends: Tacou’s garden in Varengeville, or the Nantes garden belonging to a certain Nemo. Gardening turns out to be a miracle cure, it helps him “recover in an absolute fashion,” so that by the end of a morning he spent gardening he forgot everything about his diseases and, wonder of wonders, experienced a “feeling of elation, of happiness, even.”⁴²

True to his theory whereby “Sick people know more about their condition than any doctor,”⁴³ Cioran subjected himself to other therapies, from vitamin C pills (taken in the morning, to prevent flu) to one hour of sleep in the afternoon. According to Simone Boué, he was both a theorist and a practitioner of siesta,⁴⁴ which “makes my mind work.”⁴⁵ The “ultimate treatment” involved staying in bed, in the dark, dozing off or even sleeping, because “Anything that decreases the activity of my consciousness is beneficial.”⁴⁶ “The only thing that helps me is sleep,”⁴⁷ declared Cioran, always tormented by the “eclipses” and the clouds fogging his brain. In fact, sometimes even the “maternal abyss”⁴⁸ of his afternoon naps failed to help him, and every now and then he would wake up with a “feeling of pressure and aching all over.”⁴⁹

Tormented by his weak body to the point of exclaiming “Oh, why couldn’t my parents refrain themselves!”⁵⁰ the eternal problem of Cioran was how to make the pain go away,⁵¹ and then how to manage to work, that is, to write. Because disease (which, in his youth, had triggered his creative powers, but was presently destroying them), diets and medication had “extinguished” his mind and condemned him to a maddening sterility, whenever he managed to write something he was pleased to notice that writing itself was a cure, albeit only for his mental disorder. For instance, when writing about suicide, he openly admitted that “my former obsession has completely fizzled out. Which goes to show that being a writer is not so bad.”⁵²

With his determinist mind, he constantly sought to identify the causes of his physical afflictions, reaching the certainty that his mother “passed on to me all of her infirmities.”⁵³ Apart from the hereditary cause, mentioned time and again, Cioran also blamed everything on the “excesses” of his youth, especially on his recourse to sleeping pills and his smoking.⁵⁴ Then came the changing of the seasons and of the weather, as well as the sun. Spring, in particular, tended to “dissolve” him, brain and all, causing depression and anxiety. In

its turn, summer aggressed him with its sunshine and its light, because “Sun is the enemy of man,”⁵⁵ of the brain, of life... Just like the playwright I. L. Caragiale, who could breathe properly only when the sky was overcast, Cioran wanted to be under an eternally clouded sky that would block the rays of the sun: “I have a physical need of clouds.”⁵⁶

Any change, in the weather or in the seasons, drove him insane: “Every season crushes me like a vise.”⁵⁷ In Paris he felt persecuted by the damp weather, but on Ibiza (at Talamanca), he was annoyed by the unforgiving light: “Swimming in the sea, the wind, the heat—everything triggers my diseases, stirs them up, makes me aware of them.”⁵⁸ As a rule, the changing of the seasons utterly disturbed him: “Every season turns me into a different person; springs makes me suicidal, and so does summer. The variations in temperature being far too sudden in the north, living there is a torture that increased as I became older.”⁵⁹ This is also the reason why taking the train in the company of Cioran was quite an adventure, as the eternal patient would change seats several times, seeking a spot sheltered from the draught and from variations in temperature.⁶⁰

Sometimes, his restless mind pictured an ideal climate: a place with no currents of air, a country “with a *minimum* of weather.”⁶¹ In fact, in this world of seasons—a world that he never desired, into which he had come just because his parents could not “refrain themselves,” a world he nevertheless loved with a passion—he was a *stranger*: an apparition that preserves its condition, essentially different from that of the other mortals, the condition of an individual expelled from the paradise of pre-birth.

Disease As a Profession

WITH ALL these symptoms and diseases, with all the doctors and all the treatments, with his nostalgia for the great Beyond and with his countless anxieties, Cioran was a busy man indeed, like any other sick person. In fact, with sarcasm and self-irony, he admitted that being sick took up most of his time and energy, and therefore he could neither write, nor feel pity for anyone else: “My diseases are so time-consuming that I simply cannot deal with the diseases of other people. I simply can’t make any *room* for the pain of others; my own afflictions have overwhelmed me, and I surrendered to them.”⁶²

On other occasions, he noticed how sick people became meaner and more egotistical. At one point, his own experiences led him to the realization that “Sick people are extremely busy: their suffering is so demanding that it leaves them no *time* to commit suicide.”⁶³

Various commentators of his work, including his mistress, Friedgard Thoma, wondered why Cioran did not commit suicide. First of all, Cioran did not see suicide as a goal, but rather as a mental safety valve, an emergency exit, like a fire escape in a building or a bank account that one uses only as a last resort. This allowed him to live and deal with life as it was, thinking that, should he be no longer able to cope, he would use the emergency exit. Secondly, he did not commit suicide precisely because he was constantly sick. In other words, he was so troubled by the enemy within, whom he had to fight without respite, that he never got to experience that moment of clarity that would have allowed him to decide, in a fully rational manner, whether suicide may or may not be preferable, and whether the time for such an act had come or not. We can assume that this is what Cioran had in mind when he wrote that sick people are too busy with their affliction to have the time to commit suicide.

Always looking for something to alleviate his physical pain (“For me, the word *bodily* operates only in its fullest sense,”⁶⁴ wrote the philosopher with bitter irony; indeed, his body lived his ideas and spewed them out like a fountain), Cioran could only appreciate the philosophical and literary work of those who shared his condition: Pascal, Dostoevsky, Nietzsche, Baudelaire, creators who also had to suffer far too much. Even if later in life disease ceased to be an inspirational factor, he remained nevertheless grateful for its gifts and for what disease had turned him into. “The petty and pathetic fatality” of the body was always a mystery to him, while disease was “the greatest *invention* of life,”⁶⁵ something that one “cannot reason with”⁶⁶ and has to fight in silence, like Jacob with the angel. Still, without disease man is nothing, for only disease has the power of bestowing “a certain ‘depth.’” A healthy individual, even a genius, is unavoidably shallow.⁶⁷

Doctor Cioran

LIVING WITH and within disease, submitting to treatment and administering his own treatment, Cioran came to be “pretty skilled in matters of health.”⁶⁸ And, like any patient worthy of the name, he began to fancy himself a doctor. And this not only when it came to his own condition, but also with regard to other people.

His main patient was his brother Aurel (Relu), whom in a first stage Cioran simply supplied with medical drugs. But, as he was sending him boxes of pills, Cioran also began to offer advice, drawing his brother’s attention to side-effects: “Terramycin (an antibiotic) is very strong and therefore dangerous, as it destroys your intestinal flora. It is to be taken only in case of infection... Eat a lot of yogurt after every pill. To be used only at the recommendation of a specialist.”⁶⁹

Gradually, as he became increasingly versed in matters pertaining to disease and drug treatment, he gained more courage. In 1969, on his own initiative, he prescribed and sent to his younger brother “*Influenzinum* 7. They are homeopathic pills used in the prevention of cold and even of the flu.” He also told his brother that they were to be taken “half an hour before breakfast, and then in the evening, two hours after dinner.”⁷⁰ As one of Cioran’s major problems was influenza, every year the philosopher in the attic treated his brother for the flu. In 1970, also as a measure against the flu, he sent to his brother Survitine, while in 1971 he sent an anti-flu Biothérapique vaccine, another “homeopathic product,”⁷¹ without forgetting to provide detailed indications concerning its administration.

Doctor Cioran had a golden rule: his disease, the disease treated by the Parisian doctors and by himself, was also the disease of his brother, whom he had to treat. As he could not bear the sea and the sun, he told Relu: “Do not go to the seaside this year. Nothing is worse than the sea for people like us, who suffer from depression.”⁷² Because he suffered from rheumatism, he advised his brother to “seek treatment for his rheumatism,” and when Cioran undertook a cure of sulfur water at Enghien, the recommendation for Relu, who lived in Sibiu, was not long in coming: “You should do the same at Ocna Sibiului, for your rheumatism.”⁷³

In order to be a convincing doctor, he also turned pharmacist, mailing to his brother four boxes of sulfur, with the indication: “Take a pill (swallow it) before each of the three main meals. This is a cure of sulfur, not a treatment,”⁷⁴ and, for the first time, he recommended a visit to the spa, this time at Govora.

Because the philosopher used rosemary in the treatment of his digestive problems, Relu received his own share of it: Cioran sent him medicines for the liver—Chofitol—and advice: “You should follow a strict diet, with as little fat as possible. Should you find any *rosemary* there, drink it as an infusion.”⁷⁵ As Cioran the hiker had walked across France and Spain in order to fight asthenia and anxiety, Relu was told that “Only walking can cure the asthenia that you complain about.”⁷⁶ Then, betraying Cioran’s own nostalgia for the lost paradise, came the suggested route: “You should walk at least ten kilometers every day—the distance between Sibiu and Rășinari...”⁷⁷

When the patient Cioran was diagnosed with hypertension and had to give up salt, doctor Cioran told patient Aurel Cioran: “I suggest you eat very little *salt* and drink a lot of tea (linden leaves, etc.).”⁷⁸ Doctor Cioran must have had at least some success with patient Cioran, for the latter trusted him enough to request not only medical drugs, but also medical advice: “I shall gather information about thrombosis,” promised Emil from Paris and, a few days later, he wrote to Relu: “I had a long conversation with a pharmacist about thrombosis,” etc., etc., promising him the drugs but requesting that a prescription be sent from Romania, for the drugs in question were not sold “over the counter.”⁷⁹

This routine of consultations and treatment by mail worked perfectly. “I caught a nasty cold,” Emil wrote to Relu on December 14, 1973, and he continued: “Be mindful of the flu.”⁸⁰ His recommendations were not limited to homeopathic drugs or to vitamin C (the latter was the object of a whole series of epistles⁸¹), or to visits to the spa (but only after Relu saw a cardiologist for his blood pressure⁸²). Sometimes he even passed on to Relu his own drugs, which were making him sick and so he could not take: “I’m sending you some prescription drugs I cannot take an account of my gastritis.”⁸³

In 1979–1980, when Relu developed a severe depression, Cioran turned into an amazingly delicate psychotherapist. By transference, he considered that everything harmful to him—insomnias and the sun, for instance—also had a negative effect upon Relu, while all that was good for him—linden tea or riding a bicycle—must also be good for his brother. Consequently, his letters are filled with maniacal recommendations: “I forgot to tell you that you must always cover your head when out in the sun... The sun is the enemy of the brain”; “I can’t understand why you neglected your insomnias”; “You must drink a lot of infusions, three or four a day, preferably soothing ones (*linden tea*, etc.)”; “the excessive use of medical drugs is dangerous. You must take care of your stomach, liver, kidneys, and heart—they are the victims of drug treatment”; “magnesium . . . can cause (mild) diarrhea”; “don’t forget sleep... You should develop the habit of sleeping a little during the day... You must take care of your brain; once again I tell you, shelter it from the sun.”⁸⁴

For Relu’s depression he sent antidepressants obtained with the help of a “doctor friend.”⁸⁵ He encouraged his brother to let him know about anything he might need, for presently he had both money and “doctor friends.” Still, he warned Relu about the diversity of antidepressants and about their side-effects. And, after years of nagging his brother about physical exercise, he explained to him as if to a child how exactly to ride a bike: “When the road goes up, you get off the bike”; “Riding a bike is not for those with a heart condition, unless you ride it on a flat road. Riding up a hill is not recommended.”⁸⁶ While forced to admit that “drug therapy has become a reality,” doctor Cioran nevertheless prescribed to his brother long walks before going to bed, a no fat and no salt diet, infusions of linden leaves and cures of garlic.

Occasionally, Cioran also treated other relatives—his parents, to whom he sent drugs for “arthritis” and “rheumatism,” his brother-in-law Nuțu, or his sister-in-law Ica. Also, he offered advice to his friends (more precisely, Arșavir Acterian, who was not eating properly, or Ionesco, hospitalized in Lucerne: “I begged him to stop drinking”)⁸⁷ about the manner in which to deal with various diseases. When she first met him, Friedgard Thoma, Cioran’s last great love, was amazed by his concern and advice regarding her health: “He always told me to lead a healthier

live and take better care of myself.” This was an almost “professional” concern which, as Friedgard Thoma gradually came to realize, Cioran felt “for *all* people.”⁸⁸

The Nameless Disease

IN HIS youth, disease had been the mystical vehicle that elevated Cioran to the radiant realm of consciousness and took him to the abysmal heights of ecstasy. Later in life, exhausted by the incessant pain and by the aggressiveness displayed by his many afflictions, Cioran concluded that “Disease takes us outside the Species. Any sick man is about to cross into zoology.”⁸⁹

Of all his diseases, the one Cioran feared the most and refused to name was the one that eventually killed him. This at the otherwise venerable age of 84, but after a long and humiliating process of decay. We know little about the onset of the disease with Cioran. However, he began complaining about the improper functioning of his brain as early as in January of 1958. In other words, when he was 47 years of age. “On the heights of aboulia,” wrote he in January 1958, and in February he once again complained: “Sick brain, sick stomach.”⁹⁰ From this moment on and until the very end, documents—Cioran’s own notes and the statements of those who visited him—indicate that Cioran was afraid of developing a neurological disease and worried about the fate of his brain.⁹¹

Anything could threaten this essential organ: spring, which “dissolves my brain,”⁹² influenza, sinusitis, his blocked ears, all felt like “a weight upon my brain” and reduced him to a state of “daily semi-idiotcy.”⁹³ Becoming acutely aware of his problem, Cioran painted it in apocalyptic colors: “disintegration of memory,” “a fog clouding my brain,” “a dry wind has ravaged my mind,” “my mind no longer works,” “my mind is *damaged*,” “The abdications of the brain,” “my brain gets foggy and darkened,”⁹⁴ etc., etc. He constantly monitored his own condition and, at the age of 51, he diagnosed “the evil that afflicts me”: “senility.”⁹⁵ His fatigue and lack of attention were blamed on the same process of mental degradation that “terrifies me.”⁹⁶ Elsewhere, he confessed to being the victim of “sudden fears” and waited “for the fate of my brain to be decided one way or another.”⁹⁷ Or, feeling that all of his fatigue was “concentrated” in the organ of thought, he wrote: “Sometimes I worry so much about the future of my brain!”⁹⁸

In the end, he could not escape the fate he most feared.

Over the years, he paid close attention to the relationship between his organs and humors, on the one hand, and the “state of my brain,” on the other, resenting the inactivity caused by every “abdication of the brain,” by the daily eclipses of memory.⁹⁹ He admitted that “it takes some courage to fight all of these symptoms.”¹⁰⁰ His question—similar to the one asked by Kierkegaard, who wan-

ted to overcome the (sexual) deficiencies of his body by sheer force of will—was: “How far can the mind go in its struggle against the decay of the body?”¹⁰¹

Prone to exaggeration, Cioran chose to live an ascetic life in order to combat the “decay of the body” and especially the “decay” and the “fatigue” of the brain. As we have already seen, he devised a diet meant to protect his arteries and his brain, drank soothing teas, took long walks and tried to sleep well, etc., arguing that “We must take care of our brain (or rather of what is left of it).”¹⁰²

Every now and then he noticed an encouraging detail, such as, for instance, the fact that his siesta “sets my mind in motion.”¹⁰³ Equally encouraging was the fact that his mother—who, according to him, was responsible for all of his illnesses—was showing signs of “decrepitude” but, until the end, gave no indication of “a decrease in brain function.”¹⁰⁴ Believing that “All that is good or bad in me, everything I am, comes from my mother,”¹⁰⁵ Cioran most certainly hoped that, just like his mother, he would not experience a serious mental decline. Nevertheless, he always lived in a state of panic, incessantly monitoring his own condition: “Over the past few years I have noticed several eclipses of the memory, a pathetic failure to concentrate, the obvious signs of neurological senility.”¹⁰⁶

When he could nor remember the number of his bank account—humiliated, he wrote about the “consternation” showed by the teller¹⁰⁷—when he made “more and more mistakes caused by his lack of attention, which he ascribed to a major malfunction in the transmission system that was his brain,”¹⁰⁸ when, after several sleepless nights, he felt that “I am on the brink of senility,” Cioran was terrified. “We must take care of our brains,” wrote he time and time again, in utter helplessness.

Quite certainly, Simone Boué was the first to realize that something was amiss, and she delicately helped him conceal his moments of amnesia: “Cioran tires quickly, and then Simone continues his thought,” wrote Sanda Stolojan on December 18, 1991.¹⁰⁹ Cioran “has grown old, he tires quickly,”¹¹⁰ he talks about the same thing several times and “somewhat begins to talk nonsense,” noticed the same Sanda Stolojan beginning with June of 1991, wondering, in utter amazement, whether this was a “sign of senility?”¹¹¹ Another friend of his, Constantin Tacou, told me that, after waiting for a long time for Cioran to show up at his publishing house on rue Verneuil, he received a phone call from the embarrassed philosopher, who was in a bistro, completely unable to find the way to his friend. Paris, presently too big and dangerous a place, soon began to frighten him, as noticed by Friedgard Thoma, who wrote about the “barbarian fear”¹¹² of cars that he developed towards the end of his life.

In the winter of 1991–1992, before the new year’s eve party, Cioran “mixed things up and, in the freezing cold, waited for hours at the railway station”

for the arrival of Friedgard Thoma, while his former mistress went straight to his attic where, “terrified,” she waited for him in the company of Simone.¹¹³

In the years that followed, disease wreaked havoc in Cioran’s head. In his tiny attic or in public, he seemed “stunned” and looked “old . . . somewhat decrepit.”¹¹⁴ On October 19, 1992, when Friedgard Thoma took him out for a walk, Cioran (who was beginning to forget his favorite aphorisms related to his love for Friedgard), pulled her towards Montparnasse cemetery, where his grave had been prepared. The scene of the search for the grave—which is indeed somewhat hard to find, being located far from the path and surrounded by other graves—is quite disturbing: Cioran “knows the direction” but fails to find his final resting place, so he “staggers to and fro,” walks fast and “keeps stumbling,” until he suddenly stops in front of a gray granite slab, with no name inscribed on it: “He is almost certain that this stone bearing no inscription is *his* . . .” Then comes a heartbreaking gesture: “he barks at it twice, angrily and threateningly, two dreadful sounds, dark and completely unexpected, come out of his mouth, incredibly similar to the barking of a real dog.” While Friedgard Thoma recited a line from Hölderlin, Cioran, puzzled by the absence of an inscription, “kneels down on that stone, with a loud and desperate laughter, and slaps his forehead.”¹¹⁵

On March 5, 1993, Cioran fell down while at home and broke his leg. The fracture affected not only his femur, but also what was left of his lucidity. Admitted into his hospital, Cochin Hospital—where he had waited in line for so many hours in order to set an appointment—Cioran is but a frail envelope of what he had once been. Friedgard Thoma and Sanda Stolojan recounted the various stages of his collapse: he forgot the German language, starting the occasional sentence but unable to complete it, mixed up his languages, putting Romanian words in French and in German and, upon the departure of his visitors, Cioran, now in an infantile stage, could not understand why Simone and Friedgard did not take him home with them.¹¹⁶ Visiting him on March 14, 1993, and happy that the patient was able to speak to her in German and then in Romanian—“a confirmation of the fact that he had recognized me”—Sanda Stolojan nevertheless departed in much sadness, because “I had seen something incredible: Cioran with a damaged mind.”

Although the doctors were able to heal his broken leg, and the philosopher was no longer bedridden or confined to a wheelchair and could move around freely,¹¹⁷ they failed to also cure his spirit. With an “empty *but gentle*” expression on his face, Cioran looked at his guests “from far, far away,” increasingly lost “in his disease,”¹¹⁸ in its obscure labyrinths. Sometimes he would have an angry outburst and aggress other patients,¹¹⁹ he lost his sense of direction and was unable to read even the title of his own book, *Bréviaire des vaincus*, which

had just come out. His last means of communication were his eyes and his smile, as we learn from another one of his visitors.¹²⁰ In fact, however, “Cioran n’*é*-tait plus Cioran,”¹²¹ wrote his lifelong partner.

In his *Treatise on Ontology*, Noica argued that the ultimate nature of things is revealed when the things in question agonize and die. Judging by the notes of Sanda Stolojan, during his humiliating regression Cioran revealed his *angelic nature*. Just like Victorița Timaru, the girl courted by Cioran in the early 1930s, in Ocna Sibiului, who politely covered her mouth whenever she yawned, despite the fact that she was on her deathbed, Cioran would try to get up whenever a woman came into his room or sought to politely greet her. “With all the fog clouding his mind, he is still a genial host,” noticed Sanda Stolojan, and she added that he looked like “a sick child. Nothing in him is likely to drive you away . . . there is something angelic about him.”¹²²

As a young man and even later in life, Cioran had praised the regression towards the time that preceded the rise of conscience and birth; now he found himself the passive object of precisely such a regression. His individuality was gradually absorbed into the living ocean of the original indivision, to the point where he no longer knew who he was or who was visiting him—even if he was still happy to receive a visitor. From that point on, he no longer responded to cognitive stimuli (books or the conversations in which Simone, Aurel Cioran, or Sanda Stolojan naturally tried to engage him), but only to signs of affection. Consequently, he wanted to touch the people who showed him affection, and he showed his presence by way of sighs: “a heartbreaking sigh . . . so profoundly human.” Relu and Simone were the last people with whom he communicated, but only through his eyes.

When Eugène Ionesco passed away on March 28, 1994, Sanda Stolojan wondered why Cioran’s “torment” was still going on. On June 20, 1995, she could write in her diary: “Cioran is dead. Should I have said: finally?”

The Incurable Disease

Yet howsoe’er this prove, life’s full of charm!
—Goethe, *The Bridegroom*
(trans. Alfred Bowering)

FIRMLY BELIEVING that some day all diseases would be cured, Cioran pointed out that this would not mean the elimination of our essential disease, of our “fundamental evil”: death. The personal myth of the Romanian philosopher was the archaic myth of eternal youth and of a life without end.

Throughout his work, from *On the Heights of Despair* to *Conversations* and to his *Notebooks*—just like Prince Charming crying in his mother’s belly—Cioran cried for eternal youth and for immortality. If the emperor’s son from the Romanian fairy tale *Eternal Youth and Life without End* cried and refused to be born, Cioran, aged 22, considered himself an “exile from the world” and refused to return there, unless spared from old age and death: “And then you ran away from the world, aware of the transient nature of all beauty and splendor. And you said: I shall not return until I am free from birth, old age, and death.”¹²³

As he lamented during an interview, man is unable to cure the fundamental disease: “whatever he does, man cannot escape death.”¹²⁴ This is “our fundamental evil,” and no “human intervention”¹²⁵ can save us from it.

The nostalgia for an unborn state and the “inconvenience” of being born, as well as the accusation whereby the world is the work of an “evil demiurge,” derive, in his case, from this incurable disease: the mortality of the human being, the unbearable “presentiment of death.”¹²⁶ This is an “outrage” that made Cioran weep time and time again.



Notes

1. Cioran, conversation with Luis Jorge Jalfen, 1982, in *Convorbiri cu Cioran*, trans. (Bucharest: Humanitas, 1993), 46.
2. Cioran, conversation with Fritz J. Raddatz, in *ibid.*, p. 154.
3. Cioran, *Caiete*, 3, 1967–1972, trans. (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2000), 35, 1969.
4. *Ibid.*, 28.
5. Cioran, *Caiete*, 1, 1957–1965, trans. (Bucharest: Humanitas, 1997), 15.
6. Cioran, *Caiete*, 3: 337, 13 May 1971.
7. *Ibid.*, 1: 189, summer 1963.
8. *Ibid.*, 320, 1965.
9. *Ibid.*, 313, 13 April 1965.
10. *Ibid.*, 188–189.
11. *Ibid.*
12. *Ibid.*, 180, 30 May 1963.
13. *Ibid.*, 321.
14. *Ibid.*
15. *Ibid.*, 321, 1965.
16. Cioran, *Caiete*, 3: 378, March 1972.
17. *Ibid.*, 172, 16 April 1970; *Scrisori către cei de-acasă*, trans., ed. Dan C. Mihăilescu (Bucharest: Humanitas, 1995), 83, 1 July 1970.
18. Cioran, *Caiete*, 3: 377, 29 March 1972.
19. Cioran, *Scrisori către cei de-acasă*, 150, 21 January 1977.

20. Ibid., 93, 9 July 1971.
21. Ibid., 150, 21 January 1977.
22. Ibid., 182, 23 June 1980.
23. Cioran, letter of 9 May 1980, 17 May 1980, in *Scrisori către cei de-acasă*, 179–180.
24. Cioran, *Scrisori către cei de-acasă*, 179, 9 May 1980.
25. Cioran, *Caiete*, 1: 195.
26. Ibid., 193.
27. Ibid., 108, summer 1962.
28. Ibid., 108, July 1962.
29. Cioran, *Caiete*, 2, 1966–1968, trans. (Bucharest: Humanitas, 1999), 67, entry of 1966.
30. Ibid., 121–122, 17 October 1966.
31. Cioran to Relu, 1 July 1970, in *Scrisori către cei de-acasă*, 83.
32. Cioran to Relu, 11 November 1970, in *ibid.*, 86.
33. Cioran to Arșavir Acterian, 12 April 1974, in *ibid.*, 212.
34. Simone Boué, Interview, in *Lectures de Cioran*, eds. Norbert Dodille and Gabriel Liiceanu (Paris–Montreal: L’Harmattan, 1997), 28.
35. Sanda Stolojan, *Nori peste balcoane: Jurnal din exilul parizian*, trans. (Bucharest: Humanitas, 1996), 308, 18.
36. Boué, 28.
37. Ibid., 27.
38. Sanda Stolojan, *Ceruri nomade: Jurnal din exilul parizian*, trans. (Bucharest: Humanitas, 1999), 60.
39. Cioran, *Caiete*, 1: 354, fall 1965.
40. Cioran to Relu, 17 January 1970, in *Scrisori către cei de-acasă*, 79.
41. Cioran to Relu, 17 February 1973, in *ibid.*, 104.
42. Cioran, *Caiete*, 1: 337, 1965.
43. Cioran to Relu, 7 March 1981, in *Scrisori către cei de-acasă*, 188.
44. Boué, 28.
45. Cioran, *Caiete*, 2: 201, March 1967.
46. Cioran, *Caiete*, 3: 182, summer 1970.
47. Cioran, *Caiete*, 2: 201, March 1967.
48. Ibid., 174, entry of 1967.
49. Cioran, *Caiete*, 1: 96, June 1962.
50. Cioran, *Caiete*, 2: 58, 10 June 1966.
51. Cioran, *Caiete*, 3: 35, 1969.
52. Ibid., 125, 1969.
53. Cioran, *Caiete*, 2: 125, 19 October 1966.
54. Cioran, *Scrisori către cei de-acasă*, 168, 13 December 1978.
55. Cioran, *Caiete*, 1: 265.
56. Cioran, *Caiete*, 2: 62, June 1966.
57. Cioran, *Caiete*, 1: 341, 1965.
58. Cioran, *Caietul de la Talamanca, Ibiza, 31 iulie–25 august 1966*, trans. (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2000), 40.

59. Ibid., 18–19.
60. Boué, 30.
61. Cioran, *Caietul de la Talamanca*, 19.
62. Cioran, *Caiete*, 2: 34, 1966.
63. Ibid., 284, entry of 1968.
64. Ibid., 202, March 1967.
65. Ibid., 25, entry of 1966.
66. Ibid., 126, entry of 1966.
67. Cioran, *Caiete*, 1: 142, December 1962.
68. Cioran, *Caiete*, 2: 360, November 1968.
69. Cioran, *Scrisori către cei de-acasă*, 47, 11 February 1966.
70. Cioran to Relu, 4 February 1969, in *ibid.*, 69.
71. Ibid., 69, 79, 95.
72. Ibid., 74.
73. Ibid., 109.
74. Ibid., 111.
75. Ibid., 75.
76. Ibid.
77. Ibid.
78. Ibid., 86.
79. Ibid., 113.
80. Ibid., 116.
81. Ibid., 117–120.
82. Ibid., 134–135.
83. Ibid., 117.
84. Ibid., letters to Relu, 177–183.
85. Ibid., 180, 17 May 1980.
86. Ibid., 185, 187.
87. See Cioran to Arșavir Acterian, 12 April 1974, in *ibid.*, 212; Cioran, *Caiete*, 2: 210–213, entry of 19–20 April 1967.
88. Friedgard Thoma, *Pentru nimic în lume*, trans. (Bucharest: EST, 2005), p. 123.
89. Cioran, *Caiete*, 2: 379, entry of 1968.
90. Cioran, *Caiete*, 1: 12, 16.
91. I expect the information on the implacable progress of Cioran's Alzheimer's to increase after the publication of his other *Notebooks*, discovered in the autumn of 2005.
92. Cioran, *Caiete*, 1: 55.
93. Ibid., 226, December 1963.
94. Ibid., 69, 102, 147, 170, 238, 298.
95. Ibid., 92, entry of 1962.
96. Ibid., 145, December 1962.
97. Ibid., 167, entry of 1963.
98. Ibid., 170, April 1963; 176.
99. Ibid., 254, 27 May 1964.

100. Ibid., 27 May 1964.
101. Ibid., 27 May 1964.
102. Cioran, *Caiete*, 2: 150, 15 December 1966.
103. Ibid., 201, March 1967.
104. Ibid., 124, 18 October 1966.
105. Ibid.
106. Ibid., 224, May 1967.
107. Ibid., 241–242, 16 October 1967.
108. Cioran, *Caiete*, 3: 219, 24 September 1970.
109. Stolojan, *Ceruri nomade*, 95.
110. Ibid., 74, 86.
111. Ibid.
112. Thoma, 145.
113. Ibid., 142.
114. Stolojan, *Ceruri nomade*, 108, 12 April 1992.
115. Thoma, 143–144.
116. Stolojan, *Ceruri nomade*, 139–140.
117. Ibid., 159, 28 November 1993.
118. Ibid., 141–143.
119. Ibid., 148.
120. Flore Pop, in Ovidiu Pecican, *Trasee culturale Nord-Sud* (Cluj: Biblioteca Apostrof, 2006), 100.
121. Boué, 40.
122. Ibid., 157, 149.
123. Emil Cioran, *Pe culmile disperării* (Bucharest: Fundația pentru Literatură și Artă Regele Carol II, 1934), 98.
124. Cioran, conversation with François Fejtö, in *Convorbiri cu Cioran*, 227.
125. Cioran, *Caiete*, 2: 217.
126. Cioran, *Pe culmile disperării*, 8.

Abstract

On the Diseases of Cioran

Throughout his entire life, E. M. Cioran experienced physical discomfort and failed to develop a satisfactory relationship with his own body and with his own existence. Present since the early years of his life, disease first stimulated Cioran to start writing and then became a true profession. Actually, his main occupation. The present study presents a few episodes in the career Cioran made of disease and also a few aspects concerning the complementary vocation, that of physician, a physician who treated himself and who provided medical assistance to others, to the best of his abilities.

Keywords

disease, medicine, herbal teas, suicide, death