
PHILOSOPHY

GHEORGHE GLODEANU **Cioran and the Poetics of Despair**

*"I have no ideas,
only obsessions."*



Gheorghe Glodeanu

Professor at Northern University, Baia Mare.
Author, among others, of the vol. **Romanul: Aventura spirituală a unei forme literare proteice** (The novel: The spiritual adventure of a protean literary form) (2007).

AWARDED WITH the Debut Prize by the Publishing House of the Royal Foundation for Literature and Art (among those that received prizes in 1934 were Constantin Noica, Eugen Ionescu and Horia Stamatu) the book *Pe culmile disperării* (On the heights of despair) brought forward a modern spirit, fascinated by the negative values of existence. Emil Cioran (1911–1995) is not a philosopher in the traditional sense of the word, as he is not the author of a distinct system of thought. For the author of *A Short History of Decay*, the issue of torment becomes much more important than that of syllogism, than the concern for unity and systems. The theme of the first volume brings together the most important interests of the philosopher and anticipates the main directions his subsequent writings will follow. In this respect, the titles of several chapters prove to be truly symbolic, promoting an authentic poetics of despair: “On Being Lyrical,” “On Not Wanting to Live,” “The Passion for the Absurd,” “The World and I,” “Weariness and Agony,” “Despair and the Grotesque,”

“The Premonition of Madness,” “On Death, Melancholy,” “Nothing Is Important,” “The World in which Nothing Is Solved,” “On Sadness,” “Total Dissatisfaction” etc. Entitled “On Being Lyrical,” the essay that opens the volume *On the Heights of Despair* contains a lyricism of negativity and despair, as with a disciple of Nietzsche or Kierkegaard. For the philosopher who is overwhelmed “by an unbearable feeling of utter emptiness,” being lyrical equals “not being able to remain locked in yourself.”²¹ The lyricism represents the beginning of a dispersion of subjectivity, as it reflects an untamed fervor of life in the individual, a fervor that constantly demands expression. Cioran believes that there are experiences and obsessions one cannot live with. The more intense the need for externalization, the more internal, deeper and the unadulterated the lyricism. Just like Mircea Eliade, Cioran asserts the need to live inner experiences with utmost intensity. The terrible ordeal which Cioran tries to live with, while exploiting the soteriological function of confession, is the terrifying obsession with death. Writing represents a break from the infinite tension caused by the soul’s experiences, which one can no longer endure. From this point of view, in the philosopher’s perspective, “creativity is a temporary salvation from the claws of death.”²² Death becomes one of the main obsessions of Cioran’s reflections, a theme that is approached in a personal manner. The essayist notices that the individual who has reached the limit no longer has any reasons to live. Just like the French existentialist philosophers, Cioran becomes a theoretician of nothingness. This occurs in the moment when the current ideals (moral, esthetic, religious, social) cannot direct life any longer and cannot determine a result. The passion for the absurd comes from a human being who has lost everything and can no longer be surprised by anything in life. The philosopher who cannot find a purpose for his existence finds that suffering is the main principle that governs. Cioran asserts the bestiality and irrationality of the world, and his existence represents an additional argument that the world is meaningless. The essayist, who at the early age of 23 becomes a specialist in nonexistence, feels supreme contempt in regard to the philosophers who fear death more than any other individual: “The philosophers are too vain to admit their fear of death and too pretentious to recognize the spiritual fecundity of malady. There is a guileful serenity in their considerations over death; in reality, they tremble more than all the others.”²³ Starting from this idea, the essayist gives a definition of philosophy, which is seen as “an ability to hide one’s feelings and inner torment in order to deceive the world about the true roots of the act of philosophy.”²⁴ Obsessed with death, Cioran associates the thought of agony to those of ending and death. Agony is defined as torment somewhere between life and death, and as death is immanent to life, almost the entire life is agony. For Cioran the time for the superficial and intelligent concerns has passed, and people have to realize the fact

that “the problem of suffering is infinitely more important than syllogism, a cry of despair is infinitely more revelatory than the most subtle of distinctions, and a teardrop has deeper roots than a smile.”⁵⁵ Life represents a long agony and a path towards death, this concept reflecting the demonic dialectics of life which generates a series of forms, only to destroy them in an irrational productivity. Death’s intrinsic presence in life is reflected by illness and depression. If diseases have a philosophical function, then it has to do with showing how deceptive is the sense of life’s endlessness and how frail is the illusion of finalization and fulfillment. Through the medium of disease, death represents a perpetual presence in human existence. Illness connects us with metaphysical realities, realities that a normal, healthy human being never understands. The only authentic experiences are those that derive from disease. Overwhelmed by an exuberant vitality, the philosopher never gives up in front of death, but constantly challenges destiny, converting suffering into meditation.

Although holding an extremely small place in the economy of the whole, the essay entitled “I Do Not Know” actually comes to circumscribe the philosopher’s outlook on the world. Cioran confesses not to believe in anything in a manner that betrays the deliberately outrageous attitude of an avant-garde creator. He does not know what is right and what is wrong and believes that there are no demonstrably valid principles: “Right now I believe in absolutely nothing and I have no hope. All the expressions and realities that make life charming seem meaningless to me. I have no perception over past or future and the present is poison to me. I do not know if I’m desperate, because the lack of any hope can be something else than despair. There isn’t any label that could hurt me as I have nothing left to lose. How I lost everything! And when I think that there are flowers blossoming and birds singing. How remote everything is!”⁵⁶

The philosopher thinks that there are two ways of experiencing solitude. He distinguishes between feeling alone in the world and feeling the solitude of the world. In the first case, the human being lives a purely individual drama, while the feeling of cosmic solitude, although experienced by the individual, derives not from his purely subjective torment but from the sensation of leaving this world, of an exterior nothingness. Then come other emblematic statements that describe the attitude of the thinker towards the world: “I leave it in writing for all my successors that in this world I have nothing to believe in and that my only salvation is absolute oblivion. I would like to forget everything, to forget about myself completely, not to know anything about myself and about this world. True confessions can only be written in tears. But my tears would drown this world and my inner fire would scorch it. I do not need any help, any advice and any pity, because, although I am the most degraded of men, I feel so powerful, so strong and fierce! Because I am the only man who lives with no hope.”⁵⁷

“Nothing is important,”⁸ claims the thinker that lives with the feeling of his total uselessness and insignificance and who transforms tears into ideas. Life is anguish for Cioran, but he cannot give up on it, as he does not believe in the values that stand beyond being and cannot sacrifice himself for them. Life symbolizes an irrational phenomenon, and the moralist does not know the reason why he lives. His conclusion is that the world is not worthy of one’s sacrifice in the name of an idea or belief. For the philosopher that proclaims the pointlessness of the world, thoughts are a substitute for tears since they are just as bitter.

Beyond the power of seduction exerted by language, the rebellious outcry of the philosopher brings about a new morality—according to Eugen Simion—which is based on a “productive negativity.” Furthermore, the stylistic features of excellence are amplified in the subsequent volumes, nonexistence is theorized in brilliant sentences, numerous collocations acquiring an aphoristic conciseness. The stance taken by the thinker is that of a wise man who talks in maxims and parables about the serious meanings of existence. In the work dedicated to this apocalyptic prophet, Richard Reschika highlights the novel elements introduced by Cioran as regards the levels of both content and expression. Going against an entire academic tradition, the philosopher discards the serious, Olympian style, in favor of a lyrical meditation, full of paradoxes, that requires the reader to cooperate with the author in putting together the work:

In his first book—which Cioran himself considers to have been one of the most philosophical books he has ever written and which anticipates all of his later work, especially all the important subjects of the debates on the philosophy of life—the debutant, 23 years of age back then, deliberately renounces the scientific discourse of the traditional academic type. Instead of bare systematics and a weak argumentative logic, he makes use of a lyrical one, filled with paradoxes, as a way of expressing himself in his philosophical meditations. This is a baroque and forceful book. Reflexive “immediacy,” extreme subjectivity, rough confession, epigrammatic abbreviations, paratactic articulations and ellipses are for Cioran stylistic forms which the “real,” “stormy” life can take, if ever the case. The interrogations and specific stylistic forms define the procedural character of subjective thinking, the provisional nature of the results. The reader is invited to active “cooperation.”

Much like the symbolists, Emil Cioran painfully feels the imminence of nothingness, of the coming extinction. Unaffected by the formers’ lack of vitality, the philosopher proclaims the unavoidable end with an overwhelming force that apparently comes to contradict the nihilist “on the heights of despair.”

Death is the only certainty in a world in which nothing is ever solved. Doubting everything and still being alive is a paradox, but it is not a tragic one because

doubt is far less intense than despair. Unlike the superficial character of doubt, despair seems to be an extremely complex phenomenon in the eyes of Cioran, the profundity of which can only be certified by direct experience. The thinker afflicted since birth by the woes of this world defines despair as the state in which “anxiety and restlessness are immanent to existence.”

Cioran is not preoccupied with unity and systems, as he belongs to the category of authors who write only when they are inspired. He considers the concern for systems and consistency indicative of a schematic lifestyle, and only huge contradictions and impossible antinomies tell of a lively spiritual life, because only they foster inner abundance:

Only what arises from inspiration has value, that which comes from the irrational sphere of our being, from the intimate and central area of subjectivity. All that is exclusively the product of labor, struggle and effort has no value, while the products of intelligence alone are void and lack interest. I am terribly charmed by the barbarian and spontaneous force of inspiration, by the rich flow of feelings, the intimate shine and shiver, the existential lyricism and the paroxysm of spiritual life that turn inspiration into the only valid reality in the hierarchy of conditions required for creation.¹⁰

Starting from the meditations on melancholy, Cioran then focuses on “On Sadness.” While melancholy is defined as a pale and ambiguous daydream that does not acquire depth and profound concentration, sadness is considered “closed seriousness and painful interiority.”¹¹ Unlike the equivocal peculiarity of melancholy, the intensity of sadness is due to the fact that it always starts from a well-founded reason. Cioran associates sadness with the irrecoverable feeling of loss. Therefore, the phenomenon of death provokes the deepest sadness. Another interesting concept refers to the narrowing of the aesthetic domain as one gets closer to the truly serious experiences. Thus, the aesthetic is present within melancholy, but absent in sadness, in turning points or in those that have a final nature. From this perspective, anguish, sadness or death (namely, the supreme denial) also represent denials of the aesthetic. After admiringly describing the greatness and the infinity of death, the philosopher returns to the idea that life is nothing but a lasting agony as every human being holds within both its life and its death. Returning to the issue of sadness, it is viewed as an objectification of death within life, a way in which the mystery proves its existence. Overwhelmed by incurable skepticism, the moralist realizes that only the people who either do not think at all or think “about life’s bare necessities” can truly be happy. To the lucid Cioran, thinking itself becomes the source of constant unhappiness and

regret: “True thinking resembles a demon who muddies the spring of life or a sickness which corrupts its roots. To think all the time, to raise questions, to doubt your own destiny, to feel the weariness of living, to be worn out to the point of exhaustion by thoughts and life, to leave behind you, as symbols of your life’s drama, a trail of smoke and blood—all this means you are so unhappy that reflection and thinking appear as a curse causing a violent revulsion in you.”¹²

Cioran is the evil demiurge (creator) that de-sanctifies the world and demystifies it through the violence of his negation. Overwhelmed by a “total dissatisfaction,” the philosopher speaks of the curse cast on some people, who cannot feel at ease anywhere. In his opinion, the exacerbated consciousness becomes a source of distress. By defining man as “an animal fated to death,” the moralist reaches a series of relevant conclusions which correspond to the skepticism that defines his self: “Knowledge is a plague upon life, and consciousness represents an open wound in the core of life.”¹³ Human condition is tragic in itself, as the human being is “an eternally dissatisfied animal suspended between life and death.” The ideologist of nothingness is bored by the status of being a human, but he can no longer change his condition. The thinker, who was close to the right-wing groups, considers the theory of the superman as “an impossibility and an absurdity, a ridiculous fantasy.”¹⁴ He aims at an existence situated beyond all complex forms of consciousness, beyond anxieties and torment, mental disorders and spiritual experiences. Not experiencing the supporting horizon of hope, the philosopher reaches some terrible conclusions: “As far as I am concerned, I resign from humanity. I do not want and I cannot be a human being anymore. What else could I do having this status? Should I work in a social and political system or bring wretchedness to a girl? Should I monitor the inconstancies of the philosophical systems or act towards the accomplishment of the moral or aesthetic ideal? All of these seem insufficient for me.”¹⁵

“Disintegration” is due to knowledge (the overt enemy of life) and it is a specific state of being for those who wander on the heights of despair. In spite of his overt skepticism, Cioran admits that not all people are unhappy, because not all of them have lost their naïveté. Naïveté is a way towards love, while disintegration is a gateway to the tragic. The philosopher claims that there are only two fundamental attitudes towards life: the naive and the brave one. The brave attitude is as much the benediction as the execration of those decayed from life, of those incapable of any kind of contentment or happiness. Defining bravery, the moralist points out the fact that being a hero means desiring a perfect triumph that can be gained only through death. Therefore, any form of bravery denotes a transcendence of life, the enigmatic charm of nothingness.

THE UNIVERSE seems to Emil Cioran as a huge performance, a tragic and absurd performance in which he refuses to participate. A mindless person works with no aim or continuously harbors the illusion of bringing a personal contribution to the wellbeing of the world, toiling for the next generations under the symbol of a macabre deceit. In the absence of great transfigurations, existence seems worthless and pointless to Cioran. The prophet of the limitless apocalypse asks himself what would happen in case all people left their daily duties, if nobody found any meaning in the mediocrity of duty, if existence broke down because of its own inner conflicts? As argued in the essay entitled “Apocalypse,” this would bring about the triumph of nothingness and the final apotheosis of non-being.

In “The Monopoly on Suffering,” for example, it is indicated that the definition of suffering starting from a hierarchy of values is not possible, because suffering is found in individuals regardless of their values. The philosopher has mixed feelings towards suffering and does not understand why it exists in the world. Bestiality, irrationality and the demon-like features of life explain the presence of evil in the world, but they do not justify it. Even more plausible for Cioran is the fact that, just like the existence in general, suffering has no legitimacy. For the prophet of the imminent end, existence is heading towards nothingness, and the being towards non-being, which makes him wonder if somehow the only absolute reality could be anything else but the non-being.

The problem of suffering leads to that of suicide. The moralist considers that there is no will or rational decision for one to commit suicide, but only organic determinants that may doom us to suicide. The important matter as regards suicide seems to be the denial of existence, a denial which does not have its origin in a whim, but in the worst inner tragedy. The philosopher admits that he is impressed only by two categories of people: those who can become insane at any time and those who can commit suicide in every moment. That is because “great passions seethe and great transfigurations arise only in them.”¹⁶ Passing then to his own belief on the discussed issue, Cioran states that he will not commit suicide because he is sick of both death and life.

Overwhelmed by agony and by the complex phenomenon of dying, the philosopher affirms that “all important things bear the sign of death” (“Absolute Lyricism”).¹⁷ He does not search for a fundamental explanation for his dark disposition because he can find one neither for his exhilaration nor for light. Cioran believes that the feeling of absolute confusion makes any philosopher become a poet.

In other contexts, commenting on “The Meaning of Grace,” Cioran reaches several extremely harsh conclusions regarding the status of women. Living on the heights of despair means attaining the most dreadful abyss. Or, grace is a

feeling of content and sometimes even of happiness, where neither abysses nor agony are known. The author considers women to be happier than men because grace and innocence are more frequent with women than with men. The naive grace of women succeeds to project them into a superficial state of equilibrium that protects them from “dangerous tensions” and “consuming tragedies.” Viewed as “pretty nullities,” women do not take any spiritual risks because for them the dualism of spirit and life has less antonymic intensity than for men. But let us quote the words of this incurable misogynist:

*The gracious pathos of existence doesn't lead to metaphysical revelations, to the vision of essential realities, to the perspective of the last moments, which make you seize every moment of your life as if it were the last one. Women are but pretty nullities. The more you think about them, the less you understand them. It is a similar process to that which occurs as you think of the world's ultimate core. But while one finds himself bemused by an unexplained infinity, in the case of women emptiness equals mystery, although they are essentially emptiness. Apart from sexual gratification, it seems to me that the woman's only purpose is to give support to man in temporarily escaping the hard pressure of the spirit. As the woman may be an ephemeral salvation for those who live on the edge, . . . the contact with her means a return to the naive and instinctive carnalities of life, towards the light immateriality of grace, which did not save the world, but nevertheless saved the women.*¹⁸

The philosopher revisits the matter in the essay entitled “The Beauty of Flames.” Cioran depicts the therapeutic role of women “whose presence makes one forget about problems, ideas, universal turmoil and metaphysical torment.”¹⁹ For those affected by deep metaphysical turmoil, the intimacy of a woman can be remedial and stimulating. Born for love, they exhaust the very matter of their being in the erotic outburst. Unlike man, who out of love or great suffering generates thought or a generic meaning, women remain strictly individual, without an insight on essence and eternity. Feelings are not fertile for women because they preserve themselves in a purely individual and fortuitous sphere and are devoid of meaning and creative value. Furthermore, there are several quite harsh remarks which reveal Cioran's fundamental misogyny: “The woman is an animal incapable of culture and insight.”²⁰ Yet, this matter does not prevent the philosopher from admitting that he likes women, because next to them he ceases to think and can experience the irrational for a short time. Although it does not convey redemption, the presence of a woman can lead to an ephemeral feeling of content and a stimulating forgetfulness. Cioran's significant conclusion is that “A woman's grace soothes a man's tragedy.”²¹

How can one still have ideals, when there are blind, deaf or crazy people on this earth, the philosopher wonders. Or, how can one still enjoy the light that the other cannot see anymore, or the sound that another cannot hear. Endowed with an exacerbated lucidity, the moralist feels responsible for the others' misfortunes, in front of which he finds reason useless and not worthy of any kind of compassion. Mercy and consolation seem to be signs of superficial living, because in front of irremediable misfortunes, one could either snap or remain forever dumb. Compassion is a feeling that does not engage us and, anyway, how can one commiserate with the others when one is himself the subject of endless suffering?

Cioran proclaims the relativity of concepts like good and evil ("Eternity and Morality") and is impressed by the impossibility of eluding these categories, in spite of the fact that appreciation is based on moral criteria. He believes that morality has become very complex and contradictory because its values do not reside in the "order of life," but have switched to a transcendental sphere. What is the point in searching for norms, in setting the line between good and evil, once reality is irrational in itself? The essayist remains skeptical as regards the triumph of the good from the perspective of eternity, as the latter does not lead to the triumph of either good or evil, but rather annuls everything. Thus, he concludes that: "Regardless of whether you suffer or not, you will be eternally and inevitably devoured by nothingness."²² Why feed ourselves with moral illusions when we could find more beautiful ones and nothing that man creates can reach a final jubilation, a conclusive victory? Any unsatisfied pleasure is considered by Cioran a lost occasion for life. The philosopher's conclusion is that "the whole of ethics only turns this life into a pile of lost opportunities."²³ Therefore, Cioran's suggestion is that one should live his existence in the most delirious way possible, because our existence is haunted by nothingness at every turn, meaning that "nothing shall come out of it all."²⁴

Cioran vehemently denies historicity, he rejects the ideals of the era, culture, and the social issues. He feels the dullness of culture and history and it is impossible for him to take part in the torments of the historical world, in the temporal ideals and goals. The philosopher considers that history is an obsolete concept that must be overcome. One may prevail over history when the past, the present and the future are meaningless to an individual, when the place and the time of living become indifferent. Cioran is indifferent to the historical period he lives in, as he firmly believes that no era is better than the other. The whole of history seems so empty to him, so worthless that he wonders how it is possible that some people hold on to the past for their entire lives. He considers that the contemplation of eternity is much more important than the study of other eras. History is not negated because of an ephemeral vein, but because of the impetus

of several great tragedies, world history being seen as a continuous sequence of dramas. Cioran's negation does not stem from reasoning or reflection, but from the deepest gloom. This profound metaphysical sadness is caused by the taste of death and the nothingness the philosopher experienced, which makes all aspects of life worthless to him. The overcoming of historicity, antinomies and uncertainties of the world makes the experience of eternity possible, a thing that can make you forget you are dying.

In the essay entitled "Not to Be a Man Anymore," the philosopher defines the individual as an "unhappy animal,"²⁵ abandoned in the world and forced to find its own way of living. The will to live in a natural order, rooted like a plant, without the continuous matters arising from consciousness, comes from the despair at the aims and the meaning of humankind. The descent from man to nature conveys the gradual decrease of the dramatic phenomenon, until its dissolution. Man tends to monopolize the drama and the torment of the world, therefore salvation becomes for him a burning matter.

After having frantically contested everything and denied all forms of being, the philosopher begins to reflect on his own condition in "Irony and Self Irony." Cioran states that the infinite nature of irony nullifies all the essential matters of life. He does not approach the elegant, intelligent and fine irony that was born of a feeling of conceit or superiority and through which some people express their remoteness from the world. The philosopher focuses on tragic irony, on the irony born of despair. In his view, the only true irony is the one that "replaces tears, convulsions, or even a grotesque and criminal grin."²⁶ The philosopher observes the fundamental difference which exists between the irony of those who suffered and the irony of the shallow and indolent ones. Only the tragic form of irony can be found in self irony. One gets to it with sighs and not smiles because self irony is considered a form of despair.

Another essay that is typical for Cioran's attitude towards existence is "On Poverty." The thought that poverty is closely related to human existence makes the philosopher reject any theory or any doctrine of social reform. Everything seems meaningless and useless. Unlike the animals that do not know poverty because they do not know what hierarchy is and are not dependent on one another, poverty is representative of the human beings because, being capable of supreme self-contempt, they have turned their fellows into subordinates. Instead of attenuating it, charity does nothing but amplify even more the world's poverty, revealing it as even more terrifying and incomprehensible. Cioran suffers because of the manifest lack of humanity and regrets the fact that human beings do not essentially change what they can change. Moreover, poverty in social life is considered to be the reflection of an infinite inner shortcoming. Furthermore, the thought of misery kills even the lust for life. In these circumstances, even

writing becomes a useless activity as it does not bring any aid to poverty, but, on the contrary, it “does nothing but poison this lonely and wretched world even more.”²⁷ The author is overwhelmed by a deadly despair when he considers the terrible misery of humankind. The passive attitude towards the universal disaster appears to him unbearable, just as unbearable as half-mercy. The presence of poverty in the world blemishes the human being more than anything else and explains the reasons why the megalomania of this rational animal will have to have a calamitous ending. When referring to poverty, Cioran himself is ashamed even about the fact that music exists, which in this context becomes impersonal and unexpressive. As the basis of social life is injustice, the philosopher finds it impossible to adhere to a social and political dogma. Poverty destroys everything in life. It does not purify, but it generates hatred, bitterness, malevolence and revenge. The ones that were not born in poverty but have fallen into it can never adjust to this state of being, as they acknowledge better than the others that in life things could be different. The philosopher does not admit to a relative rebellion when facing injustice, but only to an eternal rebellion, as poverty is also eternal within humankind.

In regard to prophets and great fanatics, Cioran states that he never doubted their faith and their mission (“The Flight from the Cross”). The value of the prophets is appreciated according to their capacity of doubt, according to the frequency of the truly tormenting moments they live. Cioran then approaches human malice, the admiration fraught with sadism of the plebeians. In order to be credible, the individual must let go of everything that is his, must sacrifice himself. Hence the observation: “People are evil and murderous; they want you to die in order to guarantee the truth of your faith.”²⁸ In “The Cult of Infinity” the world’s lack of meaning is asserted. The reasoning of the moralist is that, if this meaning had existed, it would have been revealed to us until the present. In Cioran’s opinion, the world has no meaning not only because it is irrational, but also because it is infinite, and meaning can only be perceived in a finite world, in which there are limits and progress. Infinity denies any possibility of resolving the matter of the world’s meaning in a favorable way. The philosopher feels overwhelmed by a demonical voluptuousness in the moment when he proclaims this negativity and states that we can live equally well overwhelmed by “the drunkenness of irrationality,” by a total “Dionysianism.” The art that best expresses infinity, that melts the shapes in a fluidity with a particular charm, is music. Like music, metaphysics is also born from an experience of infinity.

Revolted by the way people neglect their destiny and exhaust themselves in platitudes, the philosopher claims the necessity of overcoming banality at any cost, a step followed by the attainment of transfiguration, that is, nothing but the accomplishment of an absolute expressivity (“Transfiguration of Banality”).

All the demonism of this world is about to bundle in the philosopher's anxiety, a blending of regret, twilight dreams, sadness and unrealities. The theoretician of nothingness imagines existence as a never-ending decay that can never be definitive. In other instances he makes the distinction between sadness and pain, what distinguishes between the two concepts being the predominantly reflexive features of sadness. The two feelings can only lead to death, and not to love or erotic exaltation.

Work is regarded by Cioran as a curse transformed by the human being into carnality. The thinker believes sustained and incessant work turns humans into fools, it vulgarizes and impersonalizes. This is because it moves the center of concerns from the subjective area into the objective one of things. As work indicates an exclusively exterior activity in the modern world, by it the human being does not accomplish itself, but *produces things*. The need of each individual to build a career, to accept some life patterns he does not agree with, becomes for the author a clear expression of dullness through work. With the negative voluptuousness that defines him, the moralist then remarks the fact that ceaseless work and frenetic activity have destroyed the feel for eternity in the human being, as work is the negation of eternity. The philosopher would oppose laziness to frenetic activity; not a laziness that turns the human being into an imbecile, but one that unleashes the metaphysical sense.

“I HAVE NO ideas, only obsessions. Anybody can have ideas. Ideas have never caused anyone's downfall.”²⁹ This is how Cioran stated one of his beliefs in the essay “The Satanic Principle of Suffering.” It is a statement that confirms the thinker's permanent return to the same tormenting wonders. Having a premonitory title that is in constant accordance with the author's state of mind, that of a philosopher who vehemently proclaims the imminent end and who finds happiness only in unhappiness, the volume *On the Heights of Despair* is extremely relevant for the particular universe of Cioran's works. The author's next books evoke the same obsessions, writing having an important therapeutic role as everything that is expressed becomes more tolerable after being put down on paper. Lucidly aware of human unhappiness, Cioran keeps (re)writing the same book on futility and death. In spite of the published works and the releasing function of writing, the skeptical thinker did not feel any redemption in his later years. He only felt tired. In the 1980s the philosopher gave up writing, as he felt he was writing too much and that multiplying the books seemed useless. Bored with insulting the universe, the thinker retired for good in the shadow of his works.

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Translated by MINODORA BARBUL

Notes

1. *Eugen Simion comentează pe: Paul Zarifopol, G. Călinescu, Pompiliu Constantinescu, Mihai Ralea, Șerban Cioculescu, Emil Cioran, Constantin Noica* (Bucharest: Recif, 1994), 106–125.
2. Emil Cioran, *Pe culmile disperării* (Bucharest: Humanitas, 1990), 12.
3. *Ibid.*, 43–44.
4. *Ibid.*, 44.
5. *Ibid.*, 32–33.
6. *Ibid.*, 76–77.
7. *Ibid.*, 78.
8. *Ibid.*, 54.
9. Richard Reschika, *Introducere în opera lui Emil Cioran*, trans. Viorica Nișcov (Bucharest: Saeculum I.O., 1998), 28–29.
10. Cioran, 63–64.
11. *Ibid.*, 64.
12. *Ibid.*, 67.
13. *Ibid.*, 69.
14. *Ibid.*
15. *Ibid.*
16. *Ibid.*, 86.
17. *Ibid.*, 89.
18. *Ibid.*, 95.
19. *Ibid.*, 137.
20. *Ibid.*, 138.
21. *Ibid.*, 139.
22. *Ibid.*, 98–99.
23. *Ibid.*, 99.
24. *Ibid.*
25. *Ibid.*, 105.
26. *Ibid.*, 142.
27. *Ibid.*, 144.
28. *Ibid.*, 147.
29. *Ibid.*, 176.

Abstract

Cioran and the Poetics of Despair

Together with Mircea Eliade, Constantin Noica, Mircea Vulcănescu, Mihail Sebastian or Petru Comarnescu, Emil Cioran (1911–1995) belongs to an outstanding generation, one that had the philosopher Nae Ionescu as its spiritual mentor. As with Mircea Eliade, the works of Cioran that were printed in his native country contain *in nuce* the major themes approached by this remarkable

thinker. The book *On the Heights of Despair* (1934) brought forward a modern spirit, fascinated by the negative values of existence. Cioran is not a philosopher in the traditional sense of the word, as he is not the author of a distinct system of thought. The issue of torment becomes much more important than that of syllogism, than the concern for unity and systems. The theme of the first volume brings together the most important interests of the philosopher and anticipates the main directions his subsequent writings would follow. In this light, many chapter titles prove to be symbolic, outlining a true poetics of despair.

Keywords

negation, death, existence, nonexistence, suffering, unhappiness, despair, absurd, agony, sickness