

E.M. Cioran, or God Doesn't Wear a Cane

In my bed of pain, with a crown of ice cubes around my foot, I was proof that Paris is the best skateboarding town in the world. The square at St. Sulpice had run from under me like Los Angeles had from under Fred Astaire, to show me, possibly, that I wasn't as young as my son. But the pain in my foot wasn't as bad as the ache in my heart because now I couldn't see the hero of my adolescence with whom, by clever and devious means, I had obtained an interview. I looked over the radiator at the roofs of Montparnasse eight floors down, and called Emil Cioran to tell him that I couldn't make it that evening, that I was a cripple.

It is not pity, it is envy the tragic hero inspires in us, that lucky devil whose sufferings we devour as if we were entitled to them and he had cheated us of them. Why not try to take them back from him? In any case, they were meant for us . . . To be all the more certain of that, we declare them our own, aggrandize them and give them excessive proportions; grapple or groan before us as he will, he cannot move us, for we are not his spectators but his rivals, his competitors in the theatre, capable of supporting his miseries better than he is . . .

(*The Temptation to Exist* 194)

Ever since I remember (and my memory only goes as far as my literate beginnings) I experienced that *frisson* of awe and envy at mention of Cioran's name. Born in my hometown of Sibiu in Transylvania, he was a legend before I read him. Forbidden by the Communists, his books burned with a flame that went way beyond their content. In the lycée (the same one he had attended) I would positively dissolve at the thought that one day I might be good enough to meet him. The dazzling fantasy of being in Paris talking to Emil Cioran exhausted me. Here I was, at the core of my fantasy, unable to shake his hand. I was a tragic hero, not

because of my wounded foot which they might or might not saw off, but because I couldn't see him.

So he came to see me.

He made it up eight floors just like a human being, in a rumpled suit, with a lush mess of gray hair like Albert Einstein, his fingers weaving in and out of it in a vain attempt to discipline it, looking bemused, simple and *all there*. This was the man whose very name was anathema in Communist Rumania, whose books carried automatic jail sentences if found in the wrong hands (all hands being wrong, except the censor's), the man who left Rumania in 1937, disgusted with the advent of Fascism, who had abandoned his native language to write in a French so sublime he is called "the best stylist in France" today. His books, *Précis de décomposition*, *Syllogismes de l'amertume*, *La tentation d'exister*, and a few others, come under the heading of "philosophy" in your local library, but for anyone who has read them they are poetry. Says Susan Sontag in the introduction to *The Temptation to Exist* (Quadrangle Books, 1970) —the only Cioran book in this country, translated into a fair-to middling English by Richard Howard:

Another response to the debacle [i.e., of *the philosophical system-building in the 19th century*] was a new kind of philosophizing: personal (even autobiographical), aphoristic, lyrical, and anti-systematic. Its foremost exemplars: Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Wittgenstein. Cioran is the most distinguished figure in this tradition writing today.

For the sake of my wife and child, whom I turned into nervous wrecks during the wait, Cioran spoke English. It was an astonishing English, almost American. The British accent attested to its continental origin but the directness was American. Which could mean only one thing: driven by the same impulse that made his writings such crystal clear monuments of concision, he had *invented* American from the English he had learned. He said that given a choice today, he would have emigrated to America instead of France. One of the many paradoxes from the great French writer. There was in English, he said, a precision that

French did not yield. Yet the *Précis de décomposition* is exactly that: the precise misery of the human condition, in exact French.

He sat in a hard chair, leaning slightly forward. He did not drink. Smoking, he said, he had given up in Spain when someone had told him the story of a doctor in the middle of a complex heart operation, whose mind went suddenly blank. The doctor left the patient on the table and went outside to light a cigarette. His mind came back. At that, said Cioran, I quit. Four packs a day for 20 years. I couldn't write a letter without a cigarette.

A delicate moral man begins to emerge. When the big earthquake of 1974 happened in Rumania, perversely wrecking what was left of old Bucharest (what even the development-crazy Communists wouldn't wreck), Cioran found himself standing in the rain in front of a movie theater in an Arab district of Paris. And then he was inside, watching the first pornographic film in his life. And he wished, with all his heart, that he had been in the earthquake in Rumania instead.

But to my son Lucian, he said: "When I was about two years older than you, I got rheumatism from standing in the frozen creek in my village all day long." When he was going to the *lycée*, he lived with two old spinsters who used to send him out for groceries. The grocer was an absent-minded man and the young Cioran stole everything and pocketed the money. Until one day, when he was discovered and chased for a mile through the medieval streets of Sibiu. His house was across the street from the *lycée* but from that day on he took a mile-long detour to school so he wouldn't be seen by the grocer. For one year he took this circuitous route. I couldn't help thinking that even today, he must give his country and his language a wide berth, except that the situation has been reversed: they have been stolen from *him*.

There is no doubt that for Cioran, the West is a phantom. "There is only one city in the world: Sibiu," he said. At 18 he had insomnia and walked those magical, medieval streets at night, communing with the wealth of ghosts until dawn. He is a religious man without a religion, whose sense of the world comes from the *certainty* of a lost paradise. In

Sibiu, he saw the mystics he so envies and walked with them. I know because I've walked with them too.

Contrary to that abstract, false void of the philosophers, the mystics' nothingness glistens with plenitude: delight out of this world, discharge of duration, a luminous annihilation beyond the limits of thought . . .

(*The Temptation to Exist* 155)

His language is rooted in the concrete experience of medieval ecstasy. His despair is not personal; he despairs for what he sees as the end of the West, the increased mechanization that will *never again* make it possible for anyone to experience what he has, in the exalted beatitude of another culture, of another time. He is, personally, an optimist. His despair is compassion. At 60 he is unbelievably young. A few weeks before, he said, he had been pruning a tree for a friend and he fell from the tree and almost died. My unworthy foot squirms with insignificance.

This optimistic tree-climbing bachelor who has diagnosed better than anyone the moribund West, tells delicately with a shy grin, the story of this day. For some time, he had been receiving letters from a passionate female fan. These letters, apart from their youthful vigor, were not stupid. The writer was a mixture of girlish infatuation and uncommon intelligence. Having occasionally answered them, the letters grew to a flood, begging in more and more dramatic ways for a rendezvous. Cioran, who is a very private man (hence the miracle of him in that hard kitchen chair without even a glass of water in his hand!) finally consented to a meeting. By this time, his curiosity was also aroused and his imagination conjured various beauty, in honor of which he combed his hair (in what manner, I couldn't imagine), donned a new suit of clothes, and straightened out what books he could, making a walkway through them. The doorbell rang, he hastened to open it and facing him was an *ancienne dame* wearing a hat from the last century and a Belle Époque dress, which only barely hid her hump and her many folds. With unflinching graciousness, the philosopher bade her sit and made her endless cups of tea while she poured forth her story. A story, said Cioran, I became very

interested in. My politeness turned to curiosity and I forgot the excuses I'd been busy concocting. She had had a tragic life and I listened to it way past midnight. Her husband had died, and the children she'd had by artificial insemination had deserted her. Just before I called a cab for her she said that she had fulfilled a lifelong dream of meeting me and that now she was going back to her country home near Paris to commit suicide. She was serious. And I didn't try to reassure her.

"Do you think she did?" I asked.

"I don't know."

Misfortunes render us futile the more they surround us: even our gait is changed. They invite us to parade, they strangle our person in order to awaken in us the personage. (*Syllogismes de l'amertume*)

I asked him if he had ever taken LSD.

No. But Henri Michaux had been his friend and they had talked a lot about mescaline. The reason he was unable to take drugs is that he had taken so many sleeping pills for insomnia in his youth. They hadn't helped but they had given him huge migraine headaches. He remembers being immersed in the middle of the night, when he wasn't walking the streets, in Austro-Hungarian history, and how the shape of his pain would find sympathetic correspondence in Elisabeth, the mad queen, Franz Joseph's wife who was assassinated in Geneva in the year 1900.

Listening to Emil Cioran talk, I am time tripping beyond my childhood into the lore of my beginnings. Furthermore, he has also fascinated Lucian who, at age seven, skateboards like a pro. But now he is listening, and when Cioran tells about his frozen feet and cannot remember the English word for "skates," Lucian brings a tray of ice cubes from the refrigerator and two razorblades from the medicine cabinet and acts out the scene.

Cioran has written little. He has no patience for masses of words, for thick volumes. His books are very short. At one time or another he was asked to write an introduction for this or that writer, Valéry, in one case. Pantheon Books was publishing Paul Valéry's collected works and

they asked Cioran for an introduction to one of the volumes. The letter asking for his collaboration mentioned the astronomical sum of \$17,000 in payment. For that reason alone, he locked himself in with Valéry's works and read them all. At the end of his readings he found himself disliking Valéry so violently that he had no choice but to write a vitriolic indictment of the great dead writer. He sent this in to Pantheon Books. Needless to say, the introduction was rejected. Which is a tragedy. I am sure Cioran said more about Valéry in his brief attack than a conciliatory critic could in a hundred years. What consoled Cioran however was that the aforementioned sum had been a mistake. What had been meant was \$700.

This was as good a place as any to ask my hero how he fared in the world. What he told chilled me. Seventy-eight percent of the French don't read. The rest are professors, who hate him. Professors, said Cioran, spread like a plague everywhere, via Germany. In the old days, before the war, professors weren't allowed in good society. Young poets, yes, professors, no. These days they are cultivating their own brand of writer-professors so they will never have to deal with real writers again. Between the illiterates and the professors, this living classic of French culture makes about six thousand francs a year from his books. He climbs six flights of stairs to his apartment. I am, he said, a flop in 10 different languages.

It is inevitable, he added, if you write. You can't write for fame or money. you just write. This I knew, but coming from Cioran brought it home with more poignancy than ever.

It was past midnight. Lucian was asleep and Montparnasse eight floors down, blinked on. I would have liked to accompany him home but I was a cripple, and the elevator swallowed him.

All my heroes get knocked out one by one the older I get and realize from what depths of horror heroes come. This miner with terrible fists who knocks out my heroes is named Muhammad Dali. Well, MD stood no chance against Emil Cioran because he was too charmed and fascinated to get up. Emil Cioran is both younger and older than the world

he lives in. He spoke directly to the child in me and to my child, with the true simplicity of a philosopher/poet.

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(Andrei Codrescu is the author of *The Life and Times of an Involuntary Genius* [Brazillier], *For the Love of a Coat*, and *The Lady Painter* (Four Zoas Press)).

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