

## The History According to Cioran

Plutarque, aujourd'hui, écrirait les  
*Vies parallèles des Ratés.*

(*Oeuvres, Syllogismes de l'amertume* 746)

Certainly, Cioran's work must be read as what it is, and not as it should be according to such or such interpretation. Admittedly this is an aporia that yields little interpretative exit to any commentator on the philosopher whose entire work is the glorification of the denial. In other words, Cioran has nothing to hide and everything to deny except his own opinions. An uninterrupted repetition of his ultimate and only truth, Cioran's work is a faithful sanctification of the splendor of nothingness, and presents us with a thinking itinerary remarkable for the dedication with which it pursues the project of the scholastics of the decay.

As he says, with a perfect definition of his philosophic creed, "... sans un appétit funeste, point d'incarnation ni d'histoire" (*Oeuvres, Ecartèlement* 1452). The gradual shift from History to history, that is, from Creation to Apocalypse, is his response to the traditional questions posed by the systematic philosophy. Indeed, Cioran seems to entertain little patience for the solid constructions of the "other" thinkers. He resolved early in his writing career that the aphoristic style and the fragment convey perfectly his desire to commit himself to a textual violence equal to the results of an oppressive history. Whereas traditional philosophy speaks of "ontology" or "systems of values," Cioran, considering the lack of substance and, ultimately, the absence of a genuine being in our existence, sees such categorizing as superfluous. Each of us is "un accident, un mensonge," if one wishes to claim any "reality" at all to our existential approximations, then it surely is an apocalyptic one. Cioran never liked to be labeled as a "professional" philosopher, so he chose instead to describe himself as an independent thinker, a "penseur privé." Such a distinction allows him to refuse any academic affiliation

and to enjoy the privileges of a thinking free from the constraints of the system. As we have seen, philosophy is for him a matter of “appétit.”

This explains why Cioran views as important any major philosophical undertaking from the moment it discards the excess of a philosophical system while retaining the whole load of individual experience reduced to its essential problems.

Consequently, Cioran’s work undermines the attempts to represent philosophy as a linguistic construct that might alienate thinking from its ontological sources, which in turn makes him avoid the playfulness of Heidegger’s writings. Cioran assimilated the Presocratics’ lesson with a different emphasis than that taught by Heidegger, whose insistence on the “step backward” (*schritt zurück*) is read by the former more as the exercise of a “manipulateur sans pareil” (*Oeuvres, Glossaire* 1772). Once again, we see in Cioran’s definition not only a mistrust of a stylistic choice, but, more importantly, a mistrust of any “rational” representation of history, in this case, the history of philosophy.

Although the example of Heidegger may be irrelevant here, it is illustrative of a definition of Cioran’s philosophical method. And, in fact, does he really use such a method? The answer must be positive since he constantly denies affiliation except with himself. Whenever Cioran mentions other thinkers, he basically reinvents the history of philosophy by identifying himself with philosophers like Heraclitus, who speaks of the irrational course of our existence. This is another way for Cioran to see himself as the disciple of a grandiose history of nothingness; eventually he discovers what he calls the “tragi-comédie du disciple: j’ai réduit ma pensée en poussière, pour encherir sur les moralistes qui ne m’avaient appris qu’à l’émietter . . .” (*Oeuvres, Syllogismes de l’amertume* 753). This bitter lesson apprehended, it will give life in its turn to a philosophy praising the monstrosity of living. While not accepting philosophy as a cognitive system, Cioran’s work indicates his systematic effort to establish philosophy as negation. The negation of history and the battle against the fiercest enemy of man—life—are the only true roots of positive thinking for Cioran. Romantic at its core, his position virtually challenges the idea of human improvement that has

enticed this century, proving to Cioran that "la civilisation est mortelle, que nous galopons vers des horizons d'apoplexie, vers les miracles du pire, vers l'âge d'or de l'effroi" (*Oeuvres, Syllogismes de l'amertume* 770). Among the many attempts undertaken this century to foreshadow "l'apocalypse joyeuse" of history, Cioran's is arguably one of the most convincing for his unshaken belief in decay as the ontological truth of humanity (Le Rider 298).

History then is Cioran's biggest enemy and, with it, the whole idea of being and becoming are responsible for the erroneous orbit in which the history of philosophy has placed itself. A sick history carried out by its makers, and inevitably blind perpetrators, delineates the only topic worth discussing, and, thanks to Cioran, it has thus become a cliché in contemporary philosophy. Therefore history, its consequences and connotations, is at the core of this essay, since from it originate the other existential obsessions of Cioran: the death, the void, and the beginning as beingless ending.

Undoubtedly, history marks the origin of all evil; it is the "inconvenience" in absolute; its unfolding maps the territory confined by the futile dogma of existence as supreme goal, while revealing the process of historical decomposition. Far from being a mere metaphorical representation of human haplessness, our passage through life shows our inability to undertake exile from history. Cioran makes it clear, almost with a Nietzschean diction, that the only revelation to have sprung with the first day of creation is the reality of our chains: "La création reposait dans une stupeur sacrée, dans un admirable et inaudible gémissement; à la secouer par sa frénésie, par ses vociférations de monstre traqué, il l'a rendue méconnaissable et en a compromis la paix pour toujours. La disparition du silence doit être comptée parmi les indices annonciateurs de la fin" (*Oeuvres, Ecartèlement* 1436). Acknowledging the disappearance of silence, Cioran refuses even the aporia as conciliation: his apocalypse is not an irenic one, it is simply an apocalyptic apocalypse.

As one commentator has remarked, for Cioran "the only freedom is to create vanishing," while his "method" does not belong to philosophy but to the empirical condition of being alive (Altieri 180). Cioran's

implied “existentialism” states, in the tradition inaugurated by Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, the abandonment of the systematic philosophy belittled by the pain that life inflicts on us. To paraphrase Pavese, it is “il mestiere di vivere” the main task of a thinker: “Ne me demandez plus mon programme: *respirer*, n’en est-ce pas un?” (*Oeuvres, Syllogismes de l’amertume* 779).

However, Cioran’s position towards History assembles at best into the theory of the gradual decay of the world indicated by the ancient scholars of Genesis (see Boas). Having chosen the *Tree of Gnosis*, men have chronologically embarked on the ship of total failure with no irenic solution like, for instance, Levinas’s offering to the Other. Dante’s Ulysses, to give another classical interpretation of the human intellect as progressive cultural force, would fail to capture Cioran’s admiration because “plus l’homme acquiert de la puissance, plus il devient vulnérable” (*Oeuvres, Ecartèlement* 1437). Such vulnerability is human, “all too human,” echoing Nietzsche’s mistrust of the sensitive comprehension of life. On the other hand, Cioran craves throughout his work to save for himself the image of a dedicated demolisher of our feeble hopes that he replaces with the reality of our ludicrous lies. It only seems natural that through this web of lies the irony of our masochistic desire for negation is accomplished.

At this point, the whole philosophy of Cioran is a byproduct of the historical “decay of lying” thus, he merely states the willingness to represent ourselves through negation lest we accept life. The fear of life keeps us entangled in the dark forest of signs whose creators have continually increased to justify the making of the general history; however, the empire of signs has gradually fallen apart, an indicator of the veridicity of failure. The irony of this “non-sens général” is embodied by men, mainly intellectuals, who “représente[nt] la disgrâce majeure, l’échec culminant de l’homo sapiens” (*Oeuvres, Syllogismes de l’amertume* 782); as if a perfect illustration of Bergson’s definition of laughter, they have faithfully failed to understand that our world is the mystification of the lack of essence, of any ontological justification: “Une poussière éprise de fantômes, tel est l’homme: son image absolue,

idéalement ressemblante, s'incarnerait dans un Don Quichotte vu par Eschyle" (*Oeuvres, Précis de décomposition* 657).

Attacking mankind's vain attempts at an illusory happiness, Cioran re-writes the history of literature as a metonymy of the universal course of events, including the Christian solution. In Cioran's view the soteriology born out of Christ's sacrifice is one of the fundamental errors of interpretation which, instead of liberating us, has committed us to History. Watching the traditional reenacting of the Passion at Oberammergau, the philosopher cannot resist the temptation to side with the accusers of Christ. He must have viewed the scene, intended to revive hopefulness and belief, with a sort of Kierkegaardian grin that could not be noticed at the moment because of the noisy crowd that was trying to mend a historical mistake by means of an unjustified mimesis. Why is it so crucial to imitate an absurd History? Cioran's subtle deconstruction of the trial of Jesus seems to have escaped to the majority of his commentators. What is apparently a *mise-en scène* displays, to the only viewer left alone amidst the whole celebrating humanity, the ontological metonymy of a *mise-en-abîme*. Alone, like a skeptical Jesus, to be sure, a heretical Jesus, Cioran represents himself as a useless eye-witness in a crowd unaware of the tragic consequences of misrepresentation. The whole narrative of Passion has thus been modified to stir in us the appetite for catharsis. In other words, according to Cioran, we have been forced into becoming failed tragedians, each of us a pathetic Aeschylus enacting a ludicrous life of Don Quixote.

The presence of Cioran at the procession, supposed to be the highest figure of Christian mystery but assuming the reality of a negative miracle for him, stands also for an unaddressed personal vindication. Many times, along with other Romanian intellectuals of the historical generation of the '30s, he had been accused of anti-Semitism. For others, the accusation might seem more adequate but not for Cioran. How could a non-believer in the renewed history, in humanity's persistence in enjoying willingly its glamorous decay be an anti-Semite? Cioran must have savored hearing it, and felt perhaps one more time justified in believing that his work should not win any public awards because of its gloomy

prophecies. Not acknowledging salvation, or any messianic solution, his philosophy embodies one of the most tragic ironies of the end of the postmodern age. In a paragraph that rehabilitates the Jewish decision to condemn Jesus, Cioran, a hypothetical accuser, defends Jewishness accusing Christianity: “Quelque lourd de conséquences qu’il ait été, le rejet du christianisme demeure le plus bel exploit des Juifs, un *non* qui les honore. Si auparavant ils marchaient seuls par nécessité, ils le feront désormais par résolution, en réprouvés munis d’un grand cynisme, de l’unique précaution qu’ils aient prise contre leur avenir” (*Oeuvres, La tentation d’exister* 862).

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It is legitimate to ask then what is Cioran’s “philosophy,” and how is his work related to the history of philosophy in general. Furthermore, knowing his rejection of systematic philosophy, the urgency to place him on the map of European thinking seems no less necessary.

Although Cioran denies to history any ontological cognitive value, while consciously disrupting the tradition of systematic philosophy coming down from Kant and the German Idealism, there is enough “historical” filiation in his work. Indeed, he has explicitly placed his “method” within the Nietzschean contribution known as the philosophy of the fragment. In a conversation with Fernando Savater, Cioran insists on the “historic” opening performed by Nietzsche into the history of the philosophical discourse:

Je crois que la philosophie n’est plus possible qu’en tant que “fragment”. Sous forme d’explosion. Il n’est plus possible, désormais, de se mettre à élaborer un chapitre après l’autre, sous forme de traité. En ce sens, Nietzsche a été éminemment libérateur. C’est lui qui a saboté le style de la philosophie académique, qui a attenté à l’idée de système. Il a été libérateur, parce qu’après lui, on peut tout dire. . .”

(*Oeuvres, Glossaire* 1766 )

This is one of the few statements released by Cioran arguing for a positive historical outlook, the history of philosophy being the case in point, and this happens to be quite suggestive as it prompts to us a ready-

made hermeneutic key for his own work. Negation and an obstinate search for a different "genealogy" are found throughout all his writings. Cioran does have foundational dreams, but they are all built on negation. Even a negative thinking like his, yet not nihilistic, tries to reshape its identity through what Paul de Man calls a *figura of recognition*. The spirit akin, the precursor and *frère semblable* is, for Cioran, Nietzsche.

In *The Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche decries the pessimism of his time, which he places opposite the glorious days of the old past when "people were unashamed of their cruelty," making life "a great deal more enjoyable." According to Nietzsche, the whole idea of suffering was in fact a lived event, and not at all the concept it has been reduced to in the wake of Christianity. Cruelty, and thus whatever might be perceived as "evil," was before Christianity, part of the true spirit of life, whose absence is the object of Nietzsche's attack in *The Genealogy*.

The task of the philosopher is therefore to straighten up humanity, and lead it to the origin of the true morals: life itself. Like Cioran, who, barely a teenager, enjoys indulging the dramatic posture of rehearsing his future philosophy among skulls and undertakers, Nietzsche also admits to have been "exercised by the problem of evil" early on in his life. As a rule, both of them confess to having discovered, (and fallen) into history the instant they realized the necessity of reinventing ethics as a treatise against the corrupting concept of good.

However, neither Cioran nor Nietzsche use language to express or represent the external world as it appears to them, as they do not transfer or replace realities; indeed, in their case, language simply hides the "otherness" while identifying it with their own consciousness. There is barely any doubling of their identity, life and their own life (as biographical discourse) are thus identical. Cioran's work especially, appears as a linguistic extension of the very consciousness that he craves to possess in the most material way. It is a process similar to that described by Sartre in his essay on Baudelaire: the poet sees himself as the "Narcissus who wanted to embrace and contemplate himself" (Paul de Man 101-105).

So obvious is the continuity between biography and philosophy to Cioran, so powerful is the imprint of a wholly unified existence, that it often takes the form of confession: "I read a lot but only what I really enjoyed, and if I have also attempted to write books, such an effort has at least been rewarded by the fact that not even for an instant have I gone astray from my own choices and beliefs" (*Scrisori catre cei de-acasa* 321; my translation).

The unity of such a solipsistic ethic is the paradigm of both Cioran's and Nietzsche's thinking; the aphoristic form both thinkers use prevalently enhances the theory of the fragment as failed history. If the Romantics were defining the *ennui* as an ontological presence, to Cioran or Nietzsche it appears a mode of exerting an individual negation of history.

Where Nietzsche speaks of the "annihilation of the decaying races," Cioran responds with a deconstruction of failure seen by him as a positive aspect from the metaphysical point of view. History as a whole is an *échec* (a failure) caused by a kind of negative God ("dieu ténébreux") whose work bears the stigmata of destruction.

Introducing a proper interpretation of Cioran's aphoristic thinking would mean to be able to handle that "science of hermeneutics" that Nietzsche required his readers to possess in order to understand the real origin of the evil. Existence needs to be condemned, says Nietzsche, as long as it includes "the existence of God;" likewise, the dark god relying on us to reproduce his errors within a historical syntax is considered (con)damned by Cioran. Thus, our lack of accomplishment is originally designed by an unfair and competitive god who reproduces his malefic will through mankind, turning us into subjects of his propaganda. Will instead is the useless instrument ("la volonté n'a jamais servi personne") that, at best, may only enhance a kind of Schopenhauerian suffering. Obviously Cioran here takes up Schopenhauer's description of a groundless world "founded" on the principle of the will-to-live as God's plan is to create his own history we unwarily accept to perform. What is normally decried whenever people discover a crisis in history should instead be cherished as a revelation of the only evidence given to us. The



paradox of Cioran is once again irresistible: since we live a negative existence, the only truthful moments of our collective history are the negative ones.

The intersection of biography and philosophy is once more a figure of authenticity in thinking; gazing at the ethnical diversity while riding the underground, Cioran unfolds, literally and metaphorically, the lowest heights of despair. A Dante speaking from the other end of history, the philosopher contemplates "la perduta gente" while ruminating over the becoming of history. The realistic descent to the underground is a means of transportation (metaphor therefore) towards a collective semantics of *déclin*: "Le rôle des périodes de déclin est de mettre une civilisation à nu, de la démasquer, de la dépouiller de ses prestiges et de l'arrogance liée à ses accomplissements" (*Oeuvres, Ecartèlement* 1413).

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Sometimes the life of a thinker or artist is similar to that thinker's or artist's work; yet, one needs to recall Nietzsche's words in *The Genealogy of Morals* warning of the dangers such an assumption might encounter. There Nietzsche draws a clear line between life and work, and he recommends that they be divorced. Homer would not have been able to invent Achilles, had the author himself been Achilles, argues Nietzsche. Although with different stylistic effects, the same deposition is sustained by Kierkegaard, whose authorship is intentionally doubled by tacit references to a biographical "discourse" he tries to hide away from his readers by adopting various fictional identities.

Notwithstanding this rhetorical manipulation, the temptation to spot similarities between Nietzsche's life and his thoughts, or, for that matter, Cioran's, is not easy to overlook. Cioran's self-celebrated, and, in great part, misleading nihilism is certainly to be found and explained through his work. Yet, one wonders, does his entire work actually manage to leave out the essential traces of its author?

In one of his last interviews, Cioran underlined the identity of life (history) and subject (work) as his only solution to the ontological problem. The engine that fuels history to generate its unfolding is our ego's projection of utopias. Our coming to this world is the primal cause

of both unhappiness and alleviation of it through creation. Nevertheless, the “inconvenience” stemming from existence bears the benefit of selectivity: it forbids philosophy the access to a totalitarian system of thought, therefore utopian through and through. In his definition of philosophy, Cioran describes how the dialectics incorporating history and the subjective has unchained its temporal constraints to become a *figure of identity*; it eventually leaves room, in the absence of any grounded axiology, to an uselessly necessary rewriting of an individual ethics: “Je ne connais finalement que deux grands problèmes: comment supporter la vie et comment se supporter soi-même. Il n’y a pas de tâches plus difficiles. Et il n’y a pas de réponses définitives pour en venir à bout. Simplement, chacun doit résoudre, au moins partiellement, ces problèmes pour lui-même” (*Oeuvres, Glossaire* 1790).

Relating the idea of history to an unavoidable prison of any subjective attempt at liberation, which tacitly reopens Plato’s description in *The Republic*, to the morality of the individual existence as such, Cioran proclaims the Fichtean *Anstoss* as the illusory solution to the problem of existence.

In this sense, *Histoire et utopie* takes us to the core of Cioran’s dialectics. It may appear curious how much emphasis Cioran’s “negative” ideology puts on action; on the other hand, this interaction of life with our ontological imperfections should make existence bearable. By means of a detour, we should see how the relation between history and subject, and how the latter is forced by the former to relate to it by the force of its restrictive reality, can be played out within the sphere of mimesis.

Discussing poetic imitation and its internal (the “history” of the imitator) and external (the “history” of poetic genres) consequences, Derrida uncovers the origin of such a dialectics of negativity (Derrida 159-160). Writing reveals how a reproduction of reality is likely to show or imitate a difference while not a resemblance to it. We are thus facing a dialectics of the inadequate founded upon the law of negative ontology. “Son essence est sa non-essence,” concludes Derrida in an interpretation of mimesis that does away with the traditional understanding of *différence* as *écartèlement*; hence, writing denies the *différence* in order to annihilate

the origin as a starting point. Eventually there is no origin but the very act of imitation which is "mauvaise par essence," and so "elle n'est bonne qu'en étant mauvaise" (Derrida 160). If the decision of writing is taken with the purpose of destroying whatever essence history presents itself with, then this transfer of realities originates meaning.

Cioran, in his turn, justifies the necessity of writing as a futile simulacrum, yet the only one bearing the sign of personal authenticity. Writing is assimilated with the crude immediacy of life, it is the art of decomposition (for Derrida it belongs to the voice, the originator of grammar) of History in the name of failure, the true ontological reality of our life.

*Le crépuscule des pensées*, written in Romanian and published in 1940, is a book conceived in a Pascalian mode. Cioran declared to have admired Pascal much later in his life: the philosopher without a system, alone in the midst of his religiousness, and especially, "l'homme du fragment . . . , l'homme du moment aussi" (*Oeuvres, Glossaire 1770*) It is also a book written under the impulse of a joyous negativity, celebrating the desire of extinction as life; probably the most harmoniously dialogic treatise Cioran has ever written, *Le Crépuscule* speaks about philosophy as the negation of the religious feeling.

Almost everywhere in his work, Cioran links the fascination with decay to the desire of being part of history. In *La tentation d'exister*, history is again denounced as the origin of evil; it is a malefic outburst of anger against the possibility of a too tempting and too human initial Golden Age. A book about time as negative reality, *La tentation* dwells especially on the dialectics of this *negative mimesis*. Morally speaking, a positive imitation (as of God) is alien and fruitless to human condition. We are instead "blessed" to exist on the ashes of destruction: "Et c'est pour la dénoncer et par hostilité contre elle que l'histoire, *agression de l'homme contre lui-même*, a pris essor et forme; de sorte que se vouer à l'histoire, c'est apprendre à s'insurger, à imiter le Diable" (*Oeuvres, La tentation d'exister 829*).

Like the chorus of characters shouting in Dante's *Inferno* "Death to our life! Life to our death!" Cioran's soliloquy demands a dialogic

reading on behalf of an imaginary humanity redeemed by its superb flaws. What we do not need to imagine though is God; he exists as inventor of a ‘thérapeutique contre l’homme.’ Because of him, unfortunately, we are only able to chant the overcoming of humanity as historical beings.

Cioran does not intend to offer atheism as an alternative to the acceptance of the divine, for him, atheism is rather tasteless, “(il) suppose un manque de manières.” There is instead, for Cioran, the option of crossing “le pli” dividing history and death once we restore to the latter its “vital” meaning. Annihilating us, death annihilates the History that has kept us within it; the process of our liberation from History has started throughout our conscious attendance: “Nous ne sommes supérieurs à la mort que dans le désir de mourir, car nous mourons notre mort en vivant” (*Oeuvres, Le crépuscule des pensées* 431).

More discursive in his later books, where history is discussed with a more sensible *sagesse*, Cioran offers in *Le Crépuscule* a defense of philosophy as poetry. This is probably the last Cioran to believe in language, to dismiss rational philosophy for the sake of the natural logic of the poetic. There is a striking similarity with Vico’s theory of the poetic dawn of mankind filtered through Cioran’s passionate rhetoric, reminding one of negative theology. Jesus is reproached exactly for the lack of passion “pour connaître la volupté de la mort;” unlike God, his Father, who knows, who is no “étranger à la mort.” The idea of the decline is mediated now by the scarcity of poetic language. Jesus’ sacrifice is revealed then as less helpful in the absence of a poetic frenzy, without which there is no tragic completion for Cioran. His thinking already foresees the dialectical movement of his mature books; in fact, to be “human” means to vacillate between the Shakespearean “to be or not to be.” God seems to have “tous ses papiers en règle,” while man is allowed the importance to declare his own void. To understand Cioran’s thinking about death one has to understand this paradoxical de-composition of life. Music is born out of the longing for death, the only true thing to happen in the world, or at least in our world. History delays it by keeping us here long enough (“Je voudrais mourir, mais je n’ai plus de place à cause de

tant de mort" (*Oeuvres, Le crépuscule des pensées* 451), to allow us to become used to our individual "history."

Once we understand why we think, we identify death with thinking. When noting that "les introspections sont des exercices provisoires pour un nécrologue" (*Oeuvres, Le crépuscule des pensées* 453), Cioran must have thought of the "history" of his insomniac exercises in front of a life too short for his abundance of ideas about death. On death, on the ideas of a history of philosophy celebrating the absence of history, Cioran will relentlessly return in his writings. When decrying how "depuis Constant, personne n'a retrouvé le ton de la déception" (*Oeuvres, Syllogismes de l'amertume* 749), Cioran certainly sees himself as the most entitled follower of Constant. Certainly less, if at all, a follower of the latter's style, Cioran merely wants to state his (a)historical affiliation. To say that Cioran, the man and his work, will most probably survive as a deadly aporia of a philosophy that has continually deceived History should be more than a manneristic conclusion to an essay. It is the beginning and end of all Cioran's writing, like the oxymoron that should have introduced all his books: *Histoire et utopie*, that is, history as endless apocalypse.

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