

EMIL CIORAN – THE NIHILIST THINKING OF GOD

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Abstract: *Towards those who consider Emil Cioran a convinced nihilist, our approach brings a new perspective about the Romanian thinker philosophical beliefs.*

Permanently thinking about God, the nihilism of Cioran is absorbed in mysticism. But, his mysticism is not a full one because it is not based on faith; it emerges from an intense subjective experience that brings Emil Cioran closer to Divinity.

Keywords: *nihilism, mysticism, faith, Divinity, Nothing, God.*

Emil Cioran was considered as “*the biggest nihilist of the occident since Nietzsche*”¹.

Nihilist and existentialist, Cioran is concerned of concepts like death, anguish, absurd, infinite, nothingness, chaos, agony, suicide and madness. The literary formulation, and most of all, the supported ideas, makes Emil Cioran a typical representative of deconstruction orientations of the 20th century in the area of anti-history, anti- representations and non-rationalism that are typical to continental schools from Germany, Italy and France.

Among Romanians, the most explicit post-modern position of a nihilist deconstructivism type is the one of Emil Cioran².

1. In his work *Exerciții de admirație*³ (“Admiration exercises”) we can find the article *Recitind* (“Re-reading”), issued, according to Cioran, from the intention of showing to German readers the *Tratatul de descompunere* (“Treaty of decomposing”) translated from French to German by Paul Celan in 1935 and edited in 1978. The text offers the opportunity of seeing the type of philosophy that Emil Cioran promotes, type that belongs to non-foundational, nihilist and deconstructivism postmodernist trends. Emil Cioran discloses the way that he escaped from the heaviness of the existence through destructive lyricism. One can say that from his diploma thesis about bergsonian intuitionism (opposite trend with Cartesian rationalism) Emil Cioran consistently elaborated philosophical essays “*opposed to bright rational meditation and smiling fatalism*”. His books written in Romanian are: *Pe culmile disperării* (1934, 1990, 1993); *Cartea amăgirilor* (1936, 1991); *Schimbarea la față a României* (1936, 1941, 1990, 1993);

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¹ Gabriel Liiceanu, *Apocalipsa după Cioran*, București, Humanitas, 1992.

² Angela Botez, *Un secol de filosofie românească*, București, Ed. Academiei române, 2005, p.320-331.

³ Emil Cioran, *Exerciții de admirație*, București, Ed. Humanitas, 1993, p. 201-206.

Lacrimi și sfinți (1937,1991); *Amurgul gândurilor* (1940, 1991) and *Îndreptar pătimăș* (1991) as well as the ones published in French and translated in Romanian after 1990: *Précis de décomposition* (1949); *Syllogismes de l'amertume* (1952); *La tentation d'exister* (1956); *Histoire et utopia* (1960); *La chute de temp* (1964); *Le man vais Demiurge* (1969); *De l'inconvénient d'être né* (1973); *Exercices d'admiration* (1986) *Aveux et anathèmes* (1978); even their titles (and also summaries) reflects the deconstructive nihilist orientation of the author. We bring into question the Treaty⁴ where Cioran, since the first chapter (Anti-prophet), gives himself a *destructive* mission – a challenge towards the sky and the earth, towards everything that exists and satisfying the sensuousness of *denying*. My Treaty, writes the Romanian thinker, insults the life and also myself, showing since its first version (1947) a nihilist version, with the subtitle *Exerciții negative*.

Researching the texts of the Romanian thinker we can understand that he wasn't a nihilist till the end: he denied life, he proclaimed death and nothing, but never gave up God. Furthermore, all his interrogations are fundamental in the idea of God. Everything that Cioran wrote is nothing else but the obsessive replay of the “Book of Iov”. Even if he talks about history, death, time or music, the one to which he dedicates sometimes the anger, ecstasy and blasphemy and sometimes the breaking scepticism – is God. Can you honestly speak about something else but God and yourself? – This is the unavoidable question from the text and subtext of all his books. Few know that the reflections of Cioran that were built in dialogue with God were included in a book called “Despre Dumnezeu” (“About God”).

We question ourselves who could dare to elaborate ideas about God enough to be included in a book?

Beyond debate, only the one that thinks all the time about God. This anthology dedicated to divinity advances a path through the dialogue of Cioran with God. “The only thing that lasts is what has been designed of solitude, facing God, even if you are a believer or not”⁵.

That is why I consider irrelevant the research of belief or disbelief of Cioran in God. It is well known that this problem does not concern philosophy. Nevertheless, there were faithful philosophers that never wrote a book “Despre Dumezeu” (“About God”).

*What matters the most in philosophy, and it is something that we can see in Emil Cioran, is the interrogative intensity that makes impossible the answer, any answer: “I don't know how people can trust God, even if I think daily about him”*⁶.

Here is where the problem of the distinction between believer and philosopher appears, between God and the idea of God, made once by Pascal⁷, in order to difference Iov's and Abraham's God from the one of philosophers and scientists. In the same manner, Cioran tries to clarify: “The philosopher thinks

⁴ Idem, *Tratat de descompunere*, București, Humanitas, 1992.

⁵ Idem, E., *Despre Dumnezeu*, p.99.

⁶ Ibidem, p. 243.

⁷ Blaise Pascal, *Pensées, Les Provinciales*, Paris, Bookking International, 1995, p.9-10.

about the *Divinity*, the believer about *God*. One thinks about the essence, the other one about the person. The divinity is the abstract and impersonal stance of God. Faith being a close transcendent, finds vitality in the routine of essences. Philosophy is only an existential allusion, just the way that divinity is an indirect aspect of God”⁸.

Cioran was aware that human meant is to think about God. More than that, all thinkers surround him but the question is how many think inside him?

Human immanency in divine transcendence is the only way of saving the thinking process. The individual cannot become a metaphysic centre without the illusion of divine substantiality.

God was defined, throughout history, as the Absolute or metamorphosed as a human part. Under this contradiction we can find philosophical ideas of the essayist Emil Cioran.

There is an impossibility of finding the truth that torments and that – because of the impossibility before which the thinker finds himself, converts into negativism. This negativism is determined by the “demonic” side of human that fights with ration: “It is curious how exhausting is this idea of God. It’s presence inside the conscience is a continuous tiredness, a hidden and exhausting fever, a destructive principle”⁹.

After a self-testimony (in an interview of Gabriel Liiceanu), Emil Cioran “shifts all the time between the need of belief and the impossibility of believing”. He somehow has the pride of a loser: “It seems easier to believe yourself God than to believe in God”¹⁰. The fight of Cioran with life, with the idea of God was a real spiritual war. “No one is able to know if he is a believer or not”. “Religious is the one that can do without faith but not without God”¹¹. The domain of faith has several unsuspected shade because the sceptic Cioran, the one that doubts God and his own faith finally reaches (in the virtue of scepticism principle) to doubt his own unfaith as well. His rebellion is considered “a faith that I embrace without believing in it”¹². This is how Cioran is not sure of the “disinterest towards salvation”. “If I would be sure [...], I would be by far the happiest person alive”¹³.

2. *The last step of nihilism is the absorption of God (Lacrimi și sfinți - “Tears and saints”).*

One can say that the nihilism of the Romanian thinker becomes mysticism. Furthermore, the author himself states that: “I am not a nihilist, even if negation always tempted me”.¹⁴ The feeling of nothing has tried him since childhood, after a illumination that Cioran does not manage to define. Otherwise, his early in life proclaimed atheism was hiding a great anxiety. His youth was marked by a reaction against church and also against God. He had a lack of faith because he

⁸ Emil Cioran, *Despre Dumnezeu*, pag. 191.

⁹ Idem, *Lacrimi și sfinți*, București, Humanitas, p.110.

¹⁰ Idem, *Mărturisiri și anateme*, p. 53.

¹¹ Idem, *Despre Dumnezeu*, op. cit., p.30.

¹² Idem, *Ispita de a exista*, București, 2002, Humanitas, p.15.

¹³ Idem, *Demiurgul cel rău*, București, 1996, Humanitas, p.168.

¹⁴ Convorbiri cu Cioran, București, Humanitas, 1996, p.195.

considered himself organic inapt of believing. This is the source of the assertion: "I suffer of an incurable doubt".¹⁵

The metaphysic suffering confessed by the Romanian thinker arises from doubt: "I don't believe neither in God or anything else. Yet, I had a religious crisis; for example, at about 26 years old, during a whole year I did nothing else but reading mystics and saint lives. At the end, I understood that I wasn't conceived for faith, I realised that thanks to a great crisis of despair"¹⁶. Cioran was aware that "the drama of the one that doubts is bigger than of the one that denies, for the reason that living without an aim is more cruel than living for a bad cause...when you deny, you know what you want; when you doubt, you don't know anymore"¹⁷.

Inspired both by the temptation of the absolute and the persistent feeling of emptiness, Cioran could however hope that "there are moments in which no matter how far we are from faith, we conceive only one interlocutor: God". In this way, the dialogue with divinity is some sort of a "consolatory hope" for the Romanian thinker. "...even if I am not a believer, I probably believe in Nothing – the absolute solitude asks a dialogue partner, and if I speak about God, then only as far as he is a dialogue partner for mid-night"¹⁸.

The Romanian thinker gets to the conscience of God thanks to some moments of illumination that led him to knowing the supreme happiness that mystics talk about. This is why he says: "Besides this happiness to which we are called only in an exceptional situation and only for a short time, nothing else has a true existence: we live in the kingdom of shadows. Anyway, you never return the same, from paradise or hell"¹⁹.

The mystic is the main preoccupation that gets out from the work of the Romanian thinker : „*Lacrimi și sfinți*”, „*Despre neajunsul de a te fi născut*”, „*Despre Dumnezeu*”.

Mystic for Cioran is an exceptional experience.²⁰ Somehow, he identifies himself with ecstasy. It is an extreme experience that he would have been lived several times (four times, according to his confessions), maybe, in order to get religion. But Cioran disagreed. This is why he opined: "...you can live this type of experiences with or without faith"²¹.

One can say that Emil Cioran was mystical till a specific point. The mystical emptiness leads to **Nothing**, but to a Nothing that, in the same time, is everything or the **Creature**. "The nothing in mystics is what starts after God or, more precisely, after divinity"²². Hence, the relationship: nihilism-mysticism.

Like Bl. Pascal, that was neither a rationalist nor a fully mystic, I incline to say that *Emil Cioran was a nihilist, but also a mystic till a specific point*. I bring as a support for this observation the following argument: "**...the failure of my**

¹⁵ Ibidem, p. 196.

¹⁶ Emil Cioran, *Despre Dumnezeu*, p. 232.

¹⁷ Ibidem, p. 232.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 98.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 104.

²⁰ Pohoată, G., *Fr. Nietzsche and Emil Cioran – Notes on the Contemporary Nihilism*, Vol. International Conference on Philosophy, Minsk, 2011, p. 50.

²¹ *Convorbiri cu Cioran*, Ed. Humanitas, 1996; p. 193;

²² *Ibidem*, 194.

life was that I didn't go all the way down. I was fascinated by mystics; I also got to a point, but never reached that final point"²³.

His passion for mystics will prove, over the years, to be insatiable, like his passion for wisdom, these two being bounded in proximate, yet different worlds, becoming (according to Cioran) almost two extremes – the passion of mystics vs. the ataraxia of wisdom.

Between scepticism and mystics “these two forms of desperation facing knowledge”²⁴, Cioran chooses the knowledge without hope of the scepticism, not being able to opt for escaping the knowledge that is mystic – because of his lucidity swept by pride.

Passages like: “No matter where you go, you can only find God”²⁵; or „I searched God my entire life, but I did everything not to find him”²⁶; „Everything without God is nothingness, and God is the pure nothingness”²⁷; „God, without you I am crazy and with you I am going crazy”²⁸; „God, I don't say you don't exist, I say I don't exist anymore”²⁹; or „Leukaemia is the garden in which God blooms”³⁰; „God exists even if he doesn't exist”³¹ (and this type of reflections are all over the work of Cioran); all these show an abortive mystical vocation, an antithetic placement towards transcendence, an apophatic demarche with discontinuous meon motivated by both a tendency of an anthropomorphic face of divine, the urgent need of making the sacred a phenomenon and by being aware of the impossibility of such a sensitive metamorphosis of comprehensible instances³².

Paradoxically, the need of God that Cioran has is equivalent with the need of lack of God. The philosopher from Rășinari is under the sign of a flagrant violation of the principle of non-contradiction, of a reversed mystic fever that defies logic principles: “Everything that exists belies and confirms Divinity. In same manner, the curse and the pray are equally justified. If they can be made in the same time-threatening with one hand and making a cross with the other, you are almost identical to the supreme Equivoque and you seem to be God each time you know if you exist or not”.

Somehow, the conscience of divinity brings closer the human to God, but “All paths go from me to God, none from God to me...”³³. This is the suffering of Emil Cioran. In spite of theodicy probations that were never absent in the theological and philosophical area since Augustin till Leibniz, we miss the final way of suffering. Facing the painful scream of the human being, any logical, rational and theological argument keeps its approximate character. Only common sense

²³ Ibidem, p.270.

²⁴ Cioran, *Lacrimi și sfinți*, p.17.

²⁵ *Idem*, *Amurgul gândurilor*, Ed. Humanitas, București, 1996, p.164.

²⁶ *Idem*, „Despre Dumnezeu”, *antologie, selecția textelor de Aurel Cioran*, Humanitas, București, 1997, p.67.

²⁷ *Idem*, *Silogismele amărăciunii*, Humanitas, București, 1992, p.61.

²⁸ *Ibidem*, p.80.

²⁹ *Idem*, *Amurgul gândurilor*, p.168.

³⁰ *Idem*, *Silogismele amărăciunii*, p.37.

³¹ *Idem*, *Despre neajunsul de a te fi născut*, Humanitas, București, 1995, p.200.

³² Chira, V., *Dominantele gândirii cioraniene*, Ed. Univ. Lucian Blaga, Sibiu, 2006, p. 61.

³³ Cioran, E., *Amurgul gândurilor*, p.143.

solutions facing suffering are silence, assuming the divine mystery, patience, courage and hope in the eschatonic restoration of human being. In this way, Cioran considers that “the one that hasn’t depleted the world in his inner torment will never have the opportunity of reaching God”³⁴.

This conquest is for itself and Cioran opts for an individual God: “In a world in which I have no one, I only have God”³⁵.

3. All his reflection shows us a thinker with a tormenting and subjective experience that follows the philosophical path, the one of self-knowing towards Divinity. Hence, the insurmountable difficulties that appears. God is an “abyss viewed from below”. Cioran, as well as Pascal, bets on God “Who was able to understand that this world does not overtake the condition of delusion has only two ways: to become religious, saving himself from this world or to save the world by destroying himself”³⁶. The writer opts for the second variant in exchange for saving the world because “the human cannot create anything without a hidden start of self-destruction”³⁷.

Destruction is the consecration of the spirit of denying. She emerges from the envy of the being towards beginnings; the denial belongs to the demon to which the human feels connected. There is no basis for anything, says Cioran proving the post-modern anti-foundationalism. “If we could be aware in every moment of what we know, if the feeling of lack of a background could be continuous and intense, we would suicide or fall into stupidity. We exist because we can forget these realities”³⁸. The nihilist speech makes the human being to go to an abyssal peratological terminal, in an ontological border area whose proximity makes him to confront with his own lack of basis. The God of Cioran isn’t apophatic because of his deepness but of his existential absence.

Beyond rebellious acts, invectives and claims, we can find in Cioran an endless longing of Divinity, music of the distance between human and God that compete as a tone, poem, sensibility, ending and deepness with mystic Christian writings. Cioran becomes a witness, prophet and apologet of the constituting catastrophe of the world. The special reversed character of the apophatism of Cioran consists of a conversion of the apophatic reduction in a metaphysic war with Divinity, which his musical spirit, hyper-lucidity, edenic nostalgia and most of all, the disharmony of the existence fatally make him bear.

It is hard to detect a portrait of a overwhelming complexity like the one of Emil Cioran. The author himself being aware of this confesses: “Not even God could tell where am I with regard not to faith but to religion. I belong so little to this world that is impossible to me to find myself unfaithful. Through this lack of membership, I am a part of the “religious”³⁹.

³⁴ *Idem, Lacrimi și sfîinți*, p. 89.

³⁵ *Idem, Amurgul gândurilor*, p. 144.

³⁶ *Idem, Cartea amăgirilor*, p.97.

³⁷ *Idem, Amurgul gândurilor*, p. 114.

³⁸ *Idem, Exerciții de admirație, op. cit.*, p.20.

³⁹ *Idem, Caiete*, vol. I, București, Humanitas, 2005, p.274.

The contradiction in the Romanian thinker work “Caiete”⁴⁰, says a thing that awakens the amazement, arguing in favour of the assertive of Cioran: “what cannot be translated in terms of religion, it is not worthy to be lived.” This assertion is un-doubtful. It doesn’t blow off all negations of Cioran that are more spread but it is a hard assertion, pushed to the limit, that can stay under the signature of any true mystic. It is a proof that far of being a simple nihilist, Cioran is a complex personality and this complexity provides opportunities of developing inside him opposite sides.

Understanding the metaphysic fussiness of Emil Cioran about God, Dumitru Stăniloae said in an interview before passing away: “In order to get to salvation, Cioran had to make only a big template A, that close he was to God.”

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⁴⁰ *Idem, Caiete*, vol. III, București, Humanitas, 2005, p. 190.