

EMIL CIORAN – A DECONSTRUCTIVE PHILOSOPHY

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Abstract: For Cioran, expressing (something, someone) is the same with a postponed ripost or an aggression left for later on and his writing is a solution, not to act, to avoid a crisis. His indignation is not as much a moral outset, as it is a literary one, the resort of inspiration, while wisdom wearies us of any momentum. The writer is a lunatic who uses in curative purposes these fictions we call words. For the Romanian philosopher the most uncomfortable relation is precisely with philosophy explaining that meeting the idea face to face incites us to talk nonsense, and clouds our judgement and produces the illusion of almightiness... All our deregulations and aberrations are triggered by the fight we lead with the unrealities, with the abstractions, with our will to conquer what does not exist, and from hereon also the impure, tyrannical and delirious aspect of the philosophical works...

Keywords: Emil Cioran, deconstructivism, antifoundationalism, philosophy of life, despair, and end of philosophy.

Among the Romanian philosophers, the most explicit postmodern position of a deconstructive nihilistic type was Emil Cioran.

In his work *Exercices d'admiration: essais et portraits*,¹ published in the Romanian version by the Humanitas Publishing House in 1993, there is an article entitled *Relecturing*, resulted, according to the confession of the author, from the intention to present to the German readers his *Précis de décomposition* translated from French to German by Paul Celan, in 1953, and edited in 1978. The text gives a glimpse of the type of philosophy promoted by Emil Cioran, inscribed, obviously, among the postmodernist, antifoundationalist, nihilist, and deconstructivist tendencies. Emil Cioran reveals here how he freed himself from the burden of existence through the destructive lyricism. One may affirm that, from his thesis of license on the Bergsonian intuitionism, a current opposed to the Cartesian rationalism, Emil Cioran elaborated with consistence philosophical essays „opposed to the serene rational meditation and to the smiling fatalism”. His books that were written in the Romanian language, such as: *Pe culmile disperării* [*On the Heights of Despair*] (1934, 1990, 1993); *Cartea amăgirilor* [*The Book of Deceptions*] (1936, 1991); *Schimbarea la față a României* [*Romania's Transfiguration*] (1936, 1941, 1990, 1993); *Lacrimi și sfinți* [*Tears and Saints*] (1937, 1991); *Amurgul gândurilor* [*Twilight of Thought*] (1940, 1991) and

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¹ Emil Cioran, *Exerciții de admirație*, Bucharest, Ed. Humanitas, 1993, p. 201-206.

Îndreptar pătimăș [*Primer of Passion*] (1991); as well as those published in French and translated into Romanian, after 1990: *Précis de décomposition* [*Tratat de descompunere*] (1949); *Syllogismes de l'amertume* [*Silogismele amărăciunii*] (1952); *La tentation d'exister* [*Tentația de a exista*] (1956); *Histoire et utopie* [*Istorie și utopie*] (1960); *La chute de temp* [*Căderea în timp*] (1964); *Le mauvais Démiurge* [*Demiurgul cel rău*] (1969); *De l'inconvenient d'etre né* [*Despre neajunsul de a fi născut*] (1973); *Exercices d'admiration* [*Exerciții de admirație*] (1986); *Aveux et anathèmes* [*Mărturisiri și anateme*] (1978), even by their titles, but also by their contents, reflect the nihilist deconstructive orientation of the author. Let us remind only a few titles of chapters from the well-known book of Emil Cioran, *On the Heights of Despair: The Dezintegration in Life; Everything Is Meaningless; Irony and selfirony; Banality and Transfiguration*. All these and others, from other volumes are relevant for the postmodern and antirationalist position of Emil Cioran, explicitly exposed several times to the public by the author in his works, retaken into a synthetical exposition, according to our opinion, in the volume *Exercices d'admiration*. The medallions dedicated to Joseph de Maistre, about who he says that „he is our contemporary only to the extent that he was a monster and that he is alive precisely through the odious side of his doctrines, as to him the aggressiveness is inspiration, the hyperbola infused science, was the protector of certain truths that mean something only through the passionate deformation that subjected them to. In what it concerned *Paul Valery* he recognizes that he has unfairly condemned by his imposing urge to deny the harmony of his personality; his texts on Michaux, Perse, Fondane, Beckett, Eliade or Borges all bear the seal mark of a spirit already freed from universealism, and unique truth and turned toward diversity, arbitrary and negation.

In the article *Brief confession*, Emil Cioran presents the metaphysical sources of his creation. For him, „expressing (something, someone) is the same with a postponed ripost or an aggression left for lateron”. He explains also, somewhere else: „I write, says Cioran, not to act, to avoid a *crisis*”. Indignation is not as much a moral outset, as it is a literary one, the resort of inspiration, while wisdom wearies us of any momentum. „I cannot produce, writes Cioran, unless when, deserted all of a sudden by the myth of ridicule, I feel I am «alfa and omega»”. The writer is a lunatic who uses in curative purposes these fictions we call words. Here come to our mind also Cioran's words concerning the confrontation of man with the idea: „meeting the idea face to face incites us to talk nonsense, clouds our judgement and produces the illusion of almightiness... All our *deregulations and aberrations* are triggered by the fight we lead with the irrealities, with the abstractions, with our will to conquer what does not exist, and from hereon also the impure, tyrannical and delirious aspect of the philosophical works ... Everyone feels as a *referee* of the world.²

In *Relecturing*, written, as I said, as an introduction to *Précis de décomposition*, the German edition, in 1953, Cioran undertakes the theme of writing as liberation, as explosion, as explanation related to existence and to the

² *Ibidem*, p. 196.

theme of negation. He shows that in *Précis de decomposition*, even since the first chapter (*Antiprophet*) attributes a *destructive* mission – a somation addressed to the sky and earth, of all there is, satisfying the **voluptuousness to deny**. Negation offers that possibility to place oneself instead everything that is, to dispose of the world, to be a demiurge in reverse, to ruin any creation. *Destruction* is the consecration of the spirit of negation. It results from the envy of the beings against the beginnings, and negation belongs to the demon of which man feels related. There are no foundations for anything, affirms Cioran, proving his postmodern antifoundationalism. „If at any moment we are conscious of what we know, if the feeling of the lack of foundation were to be uninterrupted and intense, we would commit suicide or we would fall into idiocy. We exist because we can forget these truths”, and in the chapter *The Automaton*, Cioran reveals the quintessence of the unbearable. He did not exactly love writing, but it was necessary to him, provided that the expression diminishes someone, leads beings astray, relieves the weight of the self, but empties and saves someone. When you hate, if you write, you relieve yourself from retaliation. My *Précis*, he writes, insults the very life, but also myself by the same token, presenting even from the first version (1947) with the subtitle *Negative Exercises*, a nihilist conception. After Cioran, The will to affirm one's self has lousy reasons, of overpassing the peers. Cioran excels in negation, since he believes, as did De Maistre, that modern philosophy says everything is all right, while everything is tainted by the evil, in a very real manner, *everything is bad* because nothing is at its place. In general, there is nothing else but nothingness, and the essence of the social life is injustice”.³

If there were only the deconstructivism, the antifoundationalism and the nihilism of Emil Cioran and we could talk already of his postmodern philosophical orientation, but we may add also his tremendous critique against the *absolutist rationalism, the technicist automatism, and universealist humanism* about which he wrote that „all the doctrines of the unity belong to the same spirit even when they post antireligious ideas and they follow the formal blueprint of *theocracy*, or they are bluntly reduced to a secularized theocracy. Positivism has the greatest benefits from the consequences of the idea sustained by the «retrograde» systems rejecting their contents and beliefs; only to better and deeper appropriate *their logical armature*, their abstract contour. It is what Comte did with de Maistre ideas and Marx with Hegel's”.

In *Précis de decomposition [A Short History of Decay]* there is a chapter entitled *Twilight Thinkers*⁴ where he speaks of the ephemerality and nocivity of philosophy and knowledge. He writes: „Athens was fading, and along with it faded away also the cult for knowledge. The great systems had already lived their lives: limiting themselves to the conceptual domain, they refused the intervention of turmoil, the search for liberation and the disordered meditation on pain. The dying city allowed the conversion of the human accidents into theory and therefore anything – a sneeze or death – replaced the old problems. The obsession

³ *Ibidem*, p. 20.

⁴ Emil Cioran, *Manual de descompunere*, in *Eseuri*, anthology by Modest Morariu, Bucharest, Cartea Românească, 1988, p. 16-18.

for remedies marked the end of a civilisation; in turn, the quest for redemption marked that of a philosophy. Plato and Aristotle gave **succumbed to these concerns only out of a need for balance, after them, all these will prevail, everywhere.**

Rome, at dusk, harvested from Athens only its echoes of decadence and the reflexes of tiredness that Athens irradiated. While the Greeks walked their doubts throughout the Empire, its rattle and, consequently, that of philosophy was a virtual consumed fact. **All questions seemed legitimate; hence, no formal limits superstition curbed the debauchery of arbitrary curiosities.** The infiltration of epicureism and stoicism was easy: as morality replaced the abstract edifices, the degenerated reason became an instrument of the practice. On the streets of Rome, predicting all sorts of recipes for „happiness”, Epicurians and Stoics swarmed, accompanied by the experts in wisdom, noble charlatans emerged at the edge of poetry, to cure an incurable and generalized fatigue. From their therapeutics were absent though the mythology and the strange anecdotes that, within the context of the condition of universeal decrepitude, were to constitute the vigor of a religion that is indifferent to nuances, came from incomparable more distant places than them. Wisdom is the last word of a civilization that is on the brink of death; the halo of historical twilights, the transfigured fatigue of the visions of the world, the last tolerance before the apparition of other, fresher Gods – and of barbarity; it is, as well, a vain attempt to hum a tune among the stridencies that go to the heavens all around. For the wiseman – the theoretician of the clear death, the hero of the coolness and the symbol of the last stage of philosophy, of its degeneration and of its vacuum – has resolved the problem of his own death”.⁵

Here we find ourselves at the symmetrical point of the Antic agony, says Cioran, pray to the same evils and mastered by equally unforgiven spells, we see how the great systems are abolished by their own limited perfection. And for us, all becomes matter subjected to a philosophy deprived of dignity and rigor... The impersonal destiny of thought dissipated into a thousand souls, into a thousand instances of the humiliation of the idea... Neither Leibniz; nor Kant, nor Hegel are of any help at all in this matter.

We came, along with our own death, to the gates of philosophy; we brought about our putrid death and since nothing is left to be protected anymore, these gates open by themselves... Hauls substitute to the paragraphs; and from here, the outcome is a philosophy of the *deepness of the soul*, whose intimacy would recognize itself into the appearances of the history and into the settings of the time.

And we are looking for „happiness”, too, either out of frenzy, or out of spite: despising it, it means nevertheless that we have not forgotten it, or that we refuse it, only thinking of it; we are looking for „redemption”, too, be it by the simple fact that we do not desire it. And if we are the negative heroes of an era that proves itself too ripe, by this simple fact we are its *contemporaries*: To betray your epoch or to be its adeptul expresses – underneath the apparent contradiction – one and the same act of participation. There are these endings of the climax, these subtle

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 16.

decrepitudes, these aspirations to intemporal halos – all leading to wisdom – and who won't recognize them for himself? Who doesn't feel the right to affirm anything in the surrounding void, before the world perishes in the dawns of an absolute or of a new negation? A God is always menacing at the horizon. *We found ourselves at the edge of philosophy, since we accept its ending*⁶. And here we are in the most obvious deconstructivist- postmodern situation. Cioran expresses himself with words used then also by Derrida or Rorty: „The edges of philosophy' and 'the end of philosophy', but also in meanings they imply not only the mere wording. Let us make it so that the God is not enrooted into our „thoughts”, so that we may keep our doubts longer, so that we keep our appearances of balance and the lure of an immanent destiny, any arbitrary and fantastic aspiration being preferable to the unflexible truths, he says. We are changing the remedies and we do not find one at least remotely efficient or suitable, because we do not believe neither in the alleviation we are longing for, nor in the pleasures we pursue, versatile wisemen – we are the Epicurians and the Stoics of the modern Romes”.⁷

The theme of the „death of philosophy” one of the essential themes of postmodernity, appears also at Cioran in several places, also in the paragraph *Farewell to Philosophy* where he masterly explains the philosophical nihilism.

„I have torn myself apart from philosophy when I was incapable to discover at Kant any shred of humanly weakness, or an authentic accent of sadness; at Kant and at all philosophers. Against music, mysticism, or poetry, the philosophical activity betrays a thin sap and a suspect depth, and these do not lure anyone but the shy and look-warm natures. Otherwise, philosophy – an impersonal unquietude, a refuge around the anemic ideas – constitutes the recourse of all these who avoid the corrupting exuberance of life. Almost all philosophers ended *well*: here is the supreme argument against philosophy. Even Socrates' ending has nothing tragic: it is a misunderstanding taking place there, it is about the ending of a pedagogue – and whether Nietzsche, in turn, collapsed himself, he has served the sentence for his ecstasies as a poet and visionary, but anyway, not the lines of reasonment.

We cannot elude the existence through expiations, Cioran writes, we can only bear with it, love it or hate it, adore it or be afraid of it, in a sort of alternating happiness and awe expressing the very rhythm of the being, the oscillations, dissonances, and the either bitter or alert vehemence.

Who is not exposed, by surprise or by necessity, to irrefutable abashment, who is not rising then his hands in a prayer, only to let them fall down again, even emptier than the answers of philosophy. One might say that philosophy's mission is to protect us for as long as the inadvertence of fate allows us to travel outside confusion and deserting us immediately as we are forced to sink into it. And how otherwise things can be when we see how little has philosophy undertaken from the sufferences of mankind. The philosophical exercise is not fecund; it is solely honorable. One does not risk anything as philosopher: this is a profession without destiny that fills up with sizeable thoughts the neutral and free hours, the hours of

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 17.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 18.

reflection, the hours of consideration for the *Old Testament*, and Bach, and Shakespeare. Were ever such thoughts materialized into a single page that would be comparable to an exclamation of Job, with a fright of Macbeth or with the altitude of a cantata? The Universee is not to be *discussed*; it is to be *expressed*. And philosophy does not express it. The true problems start but after going through them, only after their exhaustion, only after the last chapter of an enormous tome that places the final full stop as a sign of abdication in front of the Unknown that is enrooted into all our moments and with which we must fight because it is far more natural and more immediate, if conceivable, than the daily bread. Here, the philosopher leaves us: as enemy of disaster, he is well behaved as the reason itself and also as prudent as the very reason. And we remain then in the company of a plague victim as once were, in the company of a poet who knows all the deliriums and of a musician, whose sublime transcends the sphere of the heart, and we start live only at the end of philosophy, on its mines, when we finally understood its terrible futility and the fact that it is useless to **resort to it, it is not of any help whatsoever.**

What do the great philosophies for Cioran transpires clearly from his affirmations: „The great systems are not after all anything else but sparkling tautologies. What is the advantage to know that the nature of the being stays in the ‘will to live’, in ‘idea’, or in the fantasy of God or of the Chemistry? All are simple proliferation of words, subtle displacements of meanings. What it is refuses with repulsion the clench of the verb, and the intimate experience does not unveil anything beyond the privileged and inexpressible moment. Otherwise, the being itself is but a vindication of the Nothingness.

We define only out of despair. A formula is necessary; we must have even more, at least to give a justification for the spirit and a facade to the void.

Neither concept nor ecstasy is operative. When music sinks ourselves into the ultimate depths of our ‘intimacy’ of being, we quickly surface again: the effects of the illusion vanish and knowledge proves to be nule.

The things we touch and the things we convey are as uncertain as our senses and reason; we are *certain* only within our verbal universee, formable at will – and inefficient. The being is mute, and the spirit is talkative. This is *to know*, after Cioran.

The originality of the philosopher is reduced to the inventory of terms. As there are only three or four attitudes in front of the world – and as many ways to die – the nuances they diversify and multiply depend only on the choice of vocabulary, lacking any metaphysical opening.

We are thrown into a pleonastic universee, where questions and answers are equivalent.

Since the most eloquent decadence are not able to explain our unhappiness better than the mumbling of a shepard and since, after all, the grin of a idiot hides more wisdom than the investigation of laboratories – isn’t, I wonder, sheer madness to follow the truth on the paths of time – or through books? Lao Zî (Lao Tse), reduced to a few lectures, is not more naive than us, who have read everything. Depthness is independent from learning. We are translating on other contexts the revelations of the revoluted epochs, or we are exploiting ordinary

intuitions through the last acquisitions of thought. Thus, Hegel is a Heraclitus who has read Kant, and our Boredom is an affective elitism, the fiction of unmasked diversity revealed to the heart...⁸

Emil Cioran requires the acceptance of the cynicism in front of the world, he refers to Diogenes as the „the celest Dog”.⁹ „Whether philosophy made no progress from the pre-Socratics onward, we would have had no reason to complain. Exasperated by the hulabaloo of the concepts, we end by realizing that our life is perpetually agitated within the elements with which the pre-Socratics formed the world, that earth, water, fire and air conditions us and this rudimentary physics unveils the framework of our attempts and the principle for our agonies.

Complicating these few elementary data, we have lost – fascinated by the setting and the edifice of the theories – the understanding of Destiny, which, though, unchanged is the same as in the first days of the world. Our existence, reduced to its essence, continues to be a fight against the elements since ever, a fight which our science does not tame at all. The heroes of all times are not less happy than the heroes of Homer, and, if they became *characters*, it is only because they have lost something of their scope and greatness. How could it be that the results of the sciences to change the metaphysical position of man? And what are the polls in the matter, the observation and the fruits of the analysis aside the Vedic hymns and the sadness of historical aurora insinuated within anonymous poetry?...

We cannot know what needs a man lose so that he has the courage to confront all the convention, and we cannot know what is it that Diogene lost so that he became the man who allowed himself everything and who translated his most intimate thoughts with a supernatural insolence as only a God of knowledge would, concupiscent and pure at once. No one was ever more open; a limit-case of sincerity and lucidity at the same time, an example of what we could be if education and hypocrisy did not brake our wishes and gestures”.

Emil Cioran was born at the 8th of April 1911 at Rășinari, as the second son of the priest Emilian. He attends, starting in 1921, ‘Gheorghe Lazăr’ Highschool in Sibiu, city whereto all his family moved in 1924. Between 1928 and 1932 he attends the lectures at the Faculty of Letters and Philosophy from Bucharest and starting from his last year of study he starts to publish articles in the magazines „Calendarul”, „Gândirea”, „Vremea”, and „Azi”. He prepares at the end of his university studies a thesis on the Bergsonian intuitionism, and during the same year (1932) he becomes a PhD candidate hoping to receive a scholarship for France or Germany. In 1934 his first book is issued, *Pe culmile disperării*, translated later as *On the Heights of Despair* for which he receives the Prize of the Commission for Awarding the Unpublished Young Writers. He published four more books in the country before he left for France. Between 1933 and 1935 we find him at Berlin, with a scholarship from the Humboldt Foundation. Returned in Romania, he is for an year professor of philosophy at “Andrei Șaguna”

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 20-21.

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 21-22.

Highschool in Braşov, and in the following year, 1937, he leaves for Paris with a scholarship of the French Institute in Bucharest, scholarship that lasted until 1944. In 1940 he started writing *Îndreptar pătimăş*, his last book in Romanian language whose definitive version was ended in 1945, the year when he established himself in France for good. After 1945 he starts writing in French, and in 1949 he has his first book published at Gallimard Publishing House, *Précis de décomposition*, followed, until 1987, by other nine, published at the same Parisian publishing house. With the exception of the Prize Rivarol, conferred in 1950 for the French debut, he refused all the other important literary prizes awarded afterwards (Saint-Beuve, Combat, and Nimier). He dies in Paris in 1995.

„I was seventeen and I believed in philosophy. As a consequence, anything unrelated to it seemed a sin or abjection”¹⁰ – this is the confession of Cioran at the beginning of a chapter from *Tratatul de descompunere*, written at 38 years old. Astonished by the world in sight, he abandons himself to philosophy, although he considered it impersonal, because it did not express either the authenticity of the philosopher, of the thinker, or the spiritual scope and rhythm of the human being. „Philosophy as an impersonal restlessness is the solution for all who run and hide away from the exuberance of life, life cannot be avoided by explanations, by philosophy; life should be lived, endured, loved or hated, adored or feared, in an alternant mixture of happiness and horror given by the very rhythm of the being, by all the oscillations or dissonances. The philosopher risks nothing, his point is to express thoughts, the fruit of reason, but they do, by no means, equal the greatness of life described by music, literature, poetry (here one may feel the influence of Nietzsche), the universe is described, it is not discussed. The true problems of life begin where philosophy, through reason, abdicates in front of the Unknown, of the unpredictable, and of the disaster. Philosophy is useless; its definitions are but a façade, a result of man’s despair in front of nothingness. Things are deceiving because they relate to senses that could be illusory, or to reason that by its inner logic can fail, as the concepts that it uses are unoperable”.¹¹

¹⁰ Emil Cioran, *Pe culmile disperării*, Bucharest, Ed. Humanitas, 1993, p. 248.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 170.