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Title

The philosophy of E.M. Cioran and its relation to Post-Christian philosophy

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A thesis submitted for the award of PhD

King's College London

Abstract

The work of E.M. Cioran, while well-known and respected in the French and broader European world, has thus far attracted comparatively little attention in the English-speaking philosophical community. Primary amongst the reasons for this are his aphoristic style and a putative “pessimism” that is largely uncongenial to the Anglo-American style of philosophising. This thesis aims to challenge and, in however minor a fashion, combat this view. Rather than an analytical probing of Cioran’s work that would vitiate much of the spirit in which it is written, I aim to explore Cioran’s thinking by means of engendering dialogue with a number of better-known mainstream philosophical figures including, amongst others, Martha Nussbaum and Hannah Arendt. In doing so, I hope to illustrate the value of Cioran’s philosophical odyssey by demonstrating how his thought can shed light on hitherto less illuminated aspects of contemporary thought. In doing so, Cioran can be seen to resurrect philosophy in one of its originary forms, namely that of provocative Socratic gadfly who disrupts any tendency or temptation toward closure or circumscription by what he frequently refers to as “the system”. By focusing in particular on theological topics such as guilt, original sin, natality and apocalypse that remain constant undercurrents of his work I hope to show how Cioran’s thought can act as a fruitful means of uncovering and “unmasking” similar if occluded themes that have been previously unnoticed in the work of more conventional thinkers. By concentrating on these recurrent issues, I hope to show the importance of religious categories of thought in the work of several ostensibly secular philosophers in a post-Christian world, an endeavour that may also help undermine the

alleged incommensurability between the analytical and continental modes of philosophising by means of deploying Cioran's aphorisms and insights at appropriate junctures. The nature of Cioran's unsystematic and wide-ranging philosophical explorations, and the insights his unconventional approach leads to, also offers important insights concerning the nature of the philosophical enterprise itself.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements 9

List of Abbreviations 10

Introduction 11

Philosophy and the pursuit of happiness 11

Cioran and the pursuit of happiness 15

Methodology 17

Religion 19

The flesh 20

Ennui 23

Emotions 25

History 28

English literature survey 31

Chapter 1: Cioran and the Aphorism 43

The aphorism – form and purpose from Lichtenberg to Nietzsche 44

Cioran and Nietzsche 47

Cioran's anti-Dionysiac project 50

Chapter 2: Ethical Deformity: Cioran, Nussbaum and Hadot 68

Introduction 68

Nussbaum's Philosophical Anthropology 70

A Cioranian critique 73

Values as Historical 82

Pierre Hadot and the revival of Stoicism 88

Cioran and the Inner Life 92

Internal self-sufficiency? 96

Philosophy as protection 98

Concluding remarks 101

Chapter 3: Cioran and Religion 102

Introduction 102

Cioran's Eastern Orthodox background 104

Cioran and the anti-rational approach to God 107

The individual struggle with God 112

Cioran and the Saints 115

Paul and Luther 117

Cioran and Simone Weil 120

Cioran and Joseph de Maistre 123

Cioran and J.S. Bach 133

Cioran, Buddhism and Gnosticism 135

Conclusion 138

Chapter 4: Cioran and Judaism 140

Introduction 140

The Transfiguration of Romania 140

‘A People of Solitaries’ 147

Cahiers 153

Critiques 155

Considerations: Salvation from History 161

Life engagement and anti-Christianity 165

Chapter 5: Cioran’s Philosophy of History – Eschatology Postponed 169

Introduction 169

Cioran’s historical thinking in the 1930s 171

Post-war 176

Cioran and Kojève 183

Kojève's anthropology: desire and recognition 185

Post-History 194

Philosophical resistance 197

Mysticism and *The Fall Out of Time* 200

Christian echoes 205

Philosophers and Dictators 209

Conflagration as Hope 214

Conclusion 220

Chapter 6: Cioran and Post-Christian Salvation 233

Cioran on happiness 233

Early writings 234

Tears and Saints 238

A Short History of Decay 239

All Gall is Divided and *The Temptation to Exist* 241

History and Utopia: Glimmerings of Hope 242

'The Tree of Life' 243

Considerations 247

Cioran's Post-Christian worldview: a comparison with George Santayana 249

Catholicism 252

Angst and religious despair 256

A deeper pessimism 262

Conclusion 266

Chapter 7: Cioran and Natality 273

Arendt and Natality 273

Cioran, Beckett and the tragedy of birth 283

Cioran's birth pains 290

Action and the metaphysics of stasis 298

Conclusion 308

Conclusion 311

Bibliography 321

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List of Abbreviations

OHD *On the Heights of Despair*

TS *Tears and Saints*

SHD *A Short History of Decay*

AGD *All Gall is Divided*

TE *The Temptation to Exist*

HU *History and Utopia*

FT *The Fall into Time*

NG *The New Gods*

TBB *The Trouble with Being Born*

DQ *Drawn and Quartered*

AA *Anathemas and Admirations*

EN *Entretiens*

CH *Cahiers 1957-72*

Introduction

Philosophy and the pursuit of happiness

Although many trends in contemporary thought lean toward the dismissal of anthropomorphic privileging and are instead committed to a resituating of humans on a naturalistic plane of investigation, there is at least one key element of human life that continues to distinguish *Homo Sapiens* from other species and which enables the enterprise of philosophy to commence, namely its self-reflective capacity. As the Latin etymology indicates, humans define themselves as the animals engaged in the pursuit of wisdom. The central aim of this pursuit can frequently be distilled into a deceptively straightforward question: 'How ought I to live?' For the vast majority of those who pose the question it is most probably not a matter of a morally normative 'ought' that is being sought, it is most likely rather a means of asking 'How can I be happy?'

For most of post-Hellenic philosophical history the question of happiness has not featured prominently. Instead, questions of epistemology, metaphysics, ontology and ethics have dominated. However, in more recent times the topic of happiness and human flourishing has re-emerged in both academic and popular philosophy, a trend that may perhaps be attributable to the general waning of religious belief in the western world and in some

quarters a belief that science can provide adequate answers to questions previously considered the remit of philosophy.

However, it can be plausibly argued that from its inception in the ancient world the primary goal of philosophy was not epistemology, metaphysics, ontology or ethics, but that of happiness and fulfilment.¹ From Socrates onward, the issue of how humans ought to conduct their lives for their own self-advantage and fulfilment assumed a central position in philosophical exploration and the ensuing investigations branched into numerous diverging avenues that constituted the various schools of ancient philosophy.

In its most developed form, the goal was that proposed by Aristotle: *eudaimonia*.

Traditionally translated as fulfilment, the concept contains an ambiguity. On the one hand it refers to a happy and successful life, the subjective experience of the individual human being; on the other, it refers to an objective goal or standard toward which a life aspires. Whereas contemporary thinking tends to emphasise the former element, the latter was the more dominant theme in ancient discourse. A person's life was not worthwhile merely because he or she felt it to be so – there was also the necessity for a public standard recognisable by all, hence Aristotle's emphasis on the possession of worldly goods and social standing as a necessary if not sufficient condition of *eudaimonia*. Despite his later transcendental move, Plato also placed great store on one's position in the social world, hence the protracted investigations of what it meant to be a virtuous citizen, a good ruler and so on.

¹ This is not withstanding the investigations of the Pre-Socratics into the nature of Being that constitute the earliest philosophical inquiries.

By contrast, the Stoics, Cynics and Epicureans took a more cautious attitude to worldly affairs and initiated a turn toward individualist personalism. Whereas they recognised the necessity of good health and a minimum of necessities such as wealth, food and shelter, they were also less inclined to value and indeed were often outrightly hostile to social status. The private individual experience was the final arbiter of being *eudaimon*. Part of what was at issue here is a distinction between something that we might call ethical probity being necessary and sufficient for the good life (e.g., Socrates: ‘The good man cannot be harmed’) and being merely necessary (e.g. the bulk of Aristotle’s work), though looming large nonetheless.

Differences aside, one feature was present in all schools of ancient thought that concerned themselves with the pursuit of happiness and which urged an attitude of caution, namely the Principle of Alteration, which stated that human affairs were unstable, prone to sudden change and collapse and that outside of certain elementary facts such as ageing and death the future was unknowable. Despite this Greek and Roman fatalism, however, the feasibility of the search itself was never called into question. Even Cynicism, despite its surface appearance, offered its version of happiness: disdain for worldly goods and social convention would liberate a person and offer him or her true freedom and thus happiness. The primary assumption common to Epicureanism, Stoicism, Cynicism and so on, is the idea that the right use of reason can lead us to happiness.

Philosophy claimed, and by and large continues to claim, that the enlightened mind is capable of correct observations about both the nature of the world and the nature of

human beings. Ethical thought relies on the belief that by means of an accurate appraisal of circumstance and the self a harmonious mode of life can be discerned whose pursuit will lead to happiness. A properly exercised reason will enable us to discern true arguments from false ones, to differentiate between the Good and the Bad, Virtue and Vice and so on. Such theories presuppose at minimum an ontological match-up between a human being and his or her world in their assumption that reason can map reality and furnish the individual with co-ordinates for eudaimonia, happiness, and contentment.

However, a core fact that is sometimes ignored in much of the commentary on happiness ancient and modern is that both Plato and Aristotle shared the view that true happiness has an intimate connection with the Transcendental. In the *Theaetetus*, Plato claims that the omnipresence of evil and misfortune in the world is so pervasive that an escape is needed into the realm of the transcendent.² The human must somehow merge with the Divine. Aristotle, despite his lifelong pre-occupation with the natural order and human social arrangements, asserts the existence of a superior Transcendental virtue pertaining to Divinity.³ Fortunately, the power of reason possesses an efficacy that may be termed salvific: we can elucidate the Forms (Plato) and the degree of separation between the embodied human and the realm of the Transcendental (Aristotle). Regardless of their differences, both concur in claiming that an individual can enjoy at least a minimal participation in the Good which has its ontological foundation in the Divine.

² *Theaetetus* (175c5-176b2).

³ *Nicomachean Ethics* (X7-8).

Cioran and the pursuit of happiness

The work of E.M. Cioran can be situated within this genealogical tradition of eudaemonist thinking, but his unique contribution to philosophy and theology lies in his relentless exploration of the *impossibility* of self-fulfilment and happiness. Cioran, I believe, is the greatest philosopher of the 20th century in terms of his exploration of unfulfillment, discontent, uncertainty and doubt concerning the human condition and philosophy itself, and it is this that merits prolonged examination of his thought. In a series of works commencing with *On the Heights of Despair*, written at the age of twenty-two, Cioran conducts a relentless examination of each form of activity by which humans seek eudaimona, ranging across politics, religion, art and history, and finds each wanting, largely based on an insuperable disjointedness at the core of the human condition between self and world, self and self, and self and God. From the classical position where happiness is viewed as a fraught but feasible endeavour (as also reflected in modern efforts, as the title of Martha Nussbaum's *The Fragility of Goodness* indicates), Cioran arrives at a position whereby happiness is essentially unthinkable owing to the uncontrollable variables and uncertainties that constitute human subjectivity, the external world, and the Divine.⁴

Cioran does not proceed via traditional discursive methods. Proposing theses, arguing their premises and justifying their conclusions is not his mode of philosophising - indeed it is anathema to him. He writes mainly in the essay and aphoristic forms. Following his thoughts

⁴ The title of a popular Spanish work on Cioran can be rendered 'Cioran: A Manual of Anti Self-Help.' Alberto Dominguez, *Cioran Manual De Antiayuda* (Ediciones B, 2017).

where they lead him, Cioran employs an aporetic method as a heuristic tool in order to highlight the obstacles that impede both complete knowledge, either of self or the world and consequently a viable eudaimonia. His approach is what may best be described as 'organic' in that while his prose is carefully crafted to maximise its rhetorical effect it also aims to remain as faithful as possible to the initial emotions that inspire the thoughts contained therein. Cioran describes himself as 'the secretary of my own sensations', a picture that combines both the original impulse to write and the necessary honing of the initial impulse to philosophise.

Although such an approach may be seen as, and undoubtedly is, a reaction to the crisis of values in European thought that began in the 19th century, it is still by and large, alien to the western philosophical tradition.⁵ Of those thinkers who employ the aphoristic style, only his predecessor Nietzsche may be seen to have eventually been accepted within the canon of western philosophy. However, while the crisis of ethical discourse in philosophy may be a factor in Cioran's style it can be contended that a major influence on his thought and method - and one that places him also with Plato and Aristotle in seeing a link between human fulfilment and the Divine - is one that has been by and large previously ignored in most secondary commentary, namely the Orthodoxy of his youth. Although I will explore this in more depth throughout what follows, for introductory purposes it is worthwhile to note that Orthodoxy is generally regarded as possessing a more mystical and eschatological consciousness than western varieties of Christianity. The focus on humanity's ultimate end

⁵ It may be objected that Nietzsche introduced the fragmentary and aphoristic form into western philosophy, but in terms of aim he still clung relentlessly to a vision about a satisfactory life through the concepts of the *Übermensch*, Eternal Return, Dionysiac affirmation etc. We will return to a comparison between Nietzsche and Cioran at a later stage.

and the awaiting of the Parousia frequently lends it a more apocalyptic and other-worldly air than Catholicism and Protestantism. Its central aim is *theosis*, union between man and the divine. Such a goal implies a hopeful and constructive view of human potential, with ascetic self-discipline and rejection of worldly temptations leading to a sanctified life. However, Cioran's anthropology, as we shall see, tends far more toward views commonly associated with western views of the irredeemably fallen nature of humanity, condemning the individual to wander in a landscape of doubt and self-division. Such an atmosphere finds an echo in the writings of Cioran, which are heavily infused with a consciousness of disaster and endings, and the salvific desires of a humanity at odds with itself, irrespective of whether any such salvation is possible.

Methodology

The aim of this thesis is to recover Cioran for an English-speaking audience and show how his insights and mode of philosophising can function as a valuable foil and commentary on many trends in contemporary philosophy. As well as hopefully bringing Cioran to the attention of the broader philosophical community, it is also hoped to demonstrate how Cioran exemplifies a certain category of thinker who inhabits the area of thought labelled by William Desmond as 'the between', referring to that form of philosophy that finds itself situated between faith and disbelief, but is unable to occupy either safely or with any degree of assurance.⁶ Cioran also exemplifies what Erich Heller terms 'the disinherited mind', those thinkers who find themselves grappling with the remains of an exhausted

⁶ William Desmond, *Being and the Between* (State University of New York Press, 1995).

cultural inheritance and seek to forge a new path.⁷ Finding himself operating in a cultural era broadly regarded as post-Christian, Cioran is both unable and unwilling wholly to abandon the categories of thought and judgement endowed by the Christian tradition, and as a result occupies an unusual position on the philosophical spectrum where he offers a unique perspective on a wide variety of philosophical topics and schools. What makes his explorations compelling and unique is his in-depth knowledge of key theological issues and the manner in which he redeploys and adapts them for his own purposes. To confirm the validity of this approach it is important to note an observation made by one of his biographers concerning Cioran's youth:

Not for nothing was he the son of a vigorously intellectual Romanian Orthodox priest and therefore very familiar with the doctrines of the Christian faith – doctrines that, furthermore, he had struggled both to understand and to confute....His younger brother Relu recalls long nights spent over bottles of wine, during which Cioran argued intricate theological questions with his father and theological students from the seminary in Sibiu.⁸

Critical studies of Cioran tend to adopt a genealogical approach and fasten on a readily agreed line of tradition from whence he emerges. Typically, this line focuses on figures such as Schopenhauer, Nietzsche and Dostoyevsky's Underground Man, amongst others. Cioran is commonly labelled as a "pessimist", "nihilist" or "Gnostic", an anti-rationalist and modern Diogenes. Whilst the truth of such positioning is unquestionable, it also runs the risk of ossifying the dynamism and power of his writing and may render it easier for a more

⁷ Erich Heller, *The Disinherited Mind: Essays in Modern German literature and thought* (London: Bowes and Bowes, 1975).

⁸ Ilinca Zarifopol-Johnson, *Searching for Cioran* (Indiana University Press, 2009), 124-25.

traditional form of philosophical orientation to dismiss him as an unserious malcontent. I believe such an approach to be mistaken and in order to bring out the strength of his thought and method I propose in this thesis to engender dialogue between Cioran and thinkers regarded, correctly or otherwise, as more “conventional”. By juxtaposing Cioran with philosophers such as Sartre, Martha Nussbaum, Santayana, Hannah Arendt and others I hope to show that the radical form of questioning practiced by Cioran may be seen to possess a force that is hard to deny and that more typical styles of philosophising may profit by acknowledging.⁹

In terms of forensic methodology, I believe it somewhat fruitless to adopt a strictly analytical approach whereby aphorisms and declarations by Cioran would be dissected and examined for logical coherence and truth value. Cioran wrote no major systematic treatise that can be examined for force of logical cohesion, architectonic unity and originality. The force of Cioran’s work emanates from the organic whole, and its trajectory is best appreciated when placed alongside the work of others. Such a Wittgensteinian manner of ‘showing’ is, in my view, a more fruitful means of employing Cioran to illuminate issues and themes in the thought of others, rather than a more highly focused semantic and definitional approach. Hopefully a more ‘gestalt’ based approach may serve to re-position Cioran from the margins to a place of more central importance. In what follows I will outline briefly some of Cioran’s central preoccupations before subsequent chapters engage in a more detailed investigation.

⁹ Without going so far as to endorse Nick Land’s claim that “One of Cioran’s jokes is of inestimably greater value in making contact with Nietzsche than the whole of Heidegger’s ponderously irrelevant *Nietzsche*.” Nick Land, *The Thirst for Annihilation: George Bataille and virulent nihilism (an essay in atheistic religion)* (Routledge: London, 1992), 155.

Religion

Despite his frequent labelling as a nihilist or pessimist, Cioran is not a “straightforward” atheist of the type characteristically associated with members of the existentialist school that were his most famous philosophical contemporaries. His relationship with religion is complex and defies easy categorisation. In short, he may be described as one who has lost faith and despairs of finding God, but cannot, nevertheless, subscribe to an easy atheism and materialism.¹⁰ In Cioran’s anthropology, human relations with the divine are essential and cannot be lightly discarded. Throughout his writing there is a continual engagement with God, whether it be in the shape of an imagined dialogue with a postulated deity, or a form of Job-like lamentation at God’s seeming absence or silence. This leads to a continuous engagement, albeit in a bricolage and scattergun fashion, with many religious traditions and strands of Christian theology. His engagement with religion is also deeply intertwined with his ruminations on the historical process and the perceived decline of European culture and civilisation. Later chapters will focus on specific aspects of Cioran’s lifelong engagement with and interrogation of religion.

The flesh

One of Cioran’s basic premises is that philosophy begins with the flesh. The vehicle that carries a human through time is, of course, their body, and it is their dialectical relationship with this embodiment and its various illness and moods that engender their disposition

¹⁰ In this he bears a certain resemblance with Camus, but the latter never lost a form of humanistic optimism that Cioran never found acceptable and indeed was privately somewhat caustic about.

toward existence. By and large, Cioran's writings reflect the tempestuous nature of his own corporeal existence which, as will be seen, often borders on a Gnostic one of imprisonment within the flesh and a rejection of the Christian view of the body as being sanctified by the incarnation, death and resurrection of Christ. As a consequence of this turbulence, his thoughts and reflections come to 'embody' this strained relationship.

'The spirit is the offspring of an existential illness, and Man is a sick animal' (OHD: 48).¹¹

There is a certain double meaning at play here: Cioran dismisses those thinkers who disregard the body and who pretend to cleave to an idealised abstraction of the human being, yet he also intends that only a physiological disposition can guarantee a genuine thought, as long as the individual experience that generates it is not obfuscated behind a rhetoric that seeks to denigrate that experience by subsuming it within a rational system of abstractions and pre-determined categories.

In addition, it is the body and mind at its extremes, most namely when we are ill or depressed, that provide indispensable insights into the human condition. As a form of detachment from our quotidian unawareness of our physical being and immersion in routine, illness and melancholy provide a window into modes of being otherwise inaccessible. Sickness, both mental and physical, generally can drive thought in one of two directions: it can lead to either a feeling of the inescapably corporeal nature of our existence, or alternatively it can push an individual in the direction of detachment from the

¹¹ Original in italics.

physical, leading to a perspective that seeks for the transcendental, even if that search, as with Cioran, is one doomed to frustration.

However, it is important to stress that Cioran's view of the "advantages" of illness or the body's contingency and the mind's weakness do not lead him in the same direction as the Orthodoxy of his background. Whereas the latter may view suffering as redemptive or at the very least a means to establish a solidarity with the suffering of Christ, Cioran's emphasis is, as stated, more of an approach that frequently borders on the Gnostic. Physical illness reveals a fundamental antagonism between consciousness and our body, and our complicated relationship with time itself, as our perception of temporality when ill differs from when we are healthy. Our debilities may not mean we have been taken out of this world, but they can impart a deepened sense of the contingency of our lives. Nevertheless, when ill we remain embodied humans, as for Cioran there is no escape from the physical, bar death, but we may gain a new perspective that allows access to the ontological disjointedness at the heart of our existence.

The body thereby functions as both a source of knowledge, and, in its instability, as an impediment to happiness. Consequently, human beings are entangled in an ontological dilemma, whereby their very essence may simultaneously be their greatest hindrance toward a lasting contentment. Furthermore, there is also the inevitable fact of death contained within our own flesh, which places a strict finitude around our striving for knowledge and eudaimonia. While this may lead to the temptation of Gnosticism for Cioran, he is unable to follow that line of thought through to its end, as although he may countenance the existence of an evil demiurge responsible for the creation of this world, he

has no faith in the existence of a benevolent God above that deity who will rescue humanity from its entrapment in the world of matter. As a result, his work often inhabits the tone and cadence of a lamenting Job and Jeremiah, crying out for divine solace in the wasteland.

Ennui

Cioran also focuses on an element of human experience that has received little enough attention from philosophers: boredom. The English word carries insufficient weight adequately to convey Cioran's purposes as they are contained in the French word *ennui* (or indeed the Italian *noia*). Ennui signifies more than a mere temporary inability of the mind to locate activities or intentional objects that would engage its attention and provide mental plenitude; rather instead it indicates an ontological emptiness, an invasion of Nothingness over quotidian human activity - indeed at its most powerful over *all* human activity and pursuits. Such a disposition finds occasional expression in the Ancients (most notably in Marcus Aurelius) but rarely is it brought centre-stage and employed as a dispositional framework from which to survey life as it is so frequently throughout Cioran's oeuvre. The results of this are to yield a unique perspective on the human condition that undermines the form of rational enlightenment and desire for human flourishing that characterises much contemporary thought.

From Aurelius's weariness through to the *acedia* of medieval thought, ennui has a deep onto-theological basis. The fatigue expressed in Aurelius's *Meditations* is a key genealogical predecessor of Cioran's ennui. The emperor's reflections on and expressions of human

weariness stem from a man who occupied the highest social and political position in society and lacked no material goods. Yet it was precisely this satiety that led Aurelius to a view whereby life did not appear to possess a sufficient plenitude for the emperor to affirm it. Only Divinity and the possibility of post-mortem life appeared to offer that happiness, given the emperor's uncertainty as to the value of human life.¹² Similarly, the acedia of medieval monks was defined as a form of spiritual dryness, whereby the soul 'dried up' and could no longer imbibe or even perceive the goodness of God and his Creation. Instead, the human being was left empty and desiccated and incapable of finding satisfaction in the mundane world. Significantly in the light of Cioran's condemnation of excessive intellectualism and valorisation of the rural life of his childhood, an oft-prescribed remedy was intensive manual labour. By reconnecting with the lowest strata of Being, namely the earth itself, the human being was repositioned within the framework of the ontological superstructure that led to God.

For Cioran, the existence of a ladder from man to God is highly problematic, but it is incorrect to label him as either a nihilist or an atheist. Cioran's orientation is still focused on the Divine, but instead of finding its presence at the core of existence there is, more often than not, a vacancy or silence that leaves human beings alone in the field of the mundane. His writings reflect the changing moods of a disenfranchised seeker of God. The question then becomes what is left in human life that is of value? Cioran's caustic survey of the human condition in search of an answer to that question frequently bears a strong resemblance to the bitter and nihilistic tone of Ecclesiastes.

¹² R.B. Rutherford's *The Meditations of Marcus Aurelius: A Study* (Clarendon, 1991) focuses throughout on Marcus's deep-seated pessimism.

Emotions

Cioran's complex views on the nature of human emotion can also be connected to the holistic nature of Eastern Orthodoxy. Unlike certain highly intellectualised forms of western religious metaphysics, as perhaps best exemplified in Thomism, the broader personalism of Orthodoxy attributes great value and importance to the role of emotions in attaining theosis and personal salvation. The most extreme form of this is to be found in the tradition of the 'Holy Fool', a person who sacrifices everything for God by abandoning all worldly goods and ideals, and instead functions as a standing reproach to the society in which he lives.¹³ Such a concept has obvious genealogical forerunners in Diogenes and the Cynical school, but Orthodoxy transformed it into playing a salvific role for the individual aspiring to union with God. Here a form of extreme emotion as exemplified in rejection of the social can be utilised in an outward and visible sense for personal salvation.

Cioran's attitude towards the emotions embodies some of these views but is also more ambivalent and reflects the uncertainty toward the passions found in the ancients. On the one hand, the emotions function as the guiding impulses and sources of desire that propel the human being in his or her quest for fulfilment. On the other hand, owing to the intrinsic instability of both the individual and its world, emotions are frequently unreliable in leading

¹³ See Ewa Majewska Thompson, *Understanding Russia: The Holy Fool in Russian Culture*, (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1987).

to any settled form of contentment. If all is in flux, then how can a changing and transitory emotion lead to long-term satisfaction? It is this paradox at the heart of human emotion that leads Cioran to adopting a shifting position, dependent as ever on his own philosophical mood. Often, he will recommend the Stoical idealisation of *ataraxia*, the reasoned regulation of all emotion in order to attain an untroubled existence; at other times, he will laud and encourage the pursuit of violent emotions, as in his view they are the only genuine and unmediated forms of human experience that are not diluted or neutered by reason. It is this shifting dynamic that lends much of the polemical force to his thought.

Cioran's distrust of excess ratiocination leads periodically to an advocacy for individuals who live lives of unrepressed emotion, regardless of the disaster that ensues as a result, as per the Holy Fool tradition, and figures such as Dostoyevsky and Luther are praised for their refusal to restrain themselves in their pursuit of a truth guided by the passions. In such moods, Cioran comes close to advocating a vitalistic philosophy of life associated with figures such as D.H. Lawrence and Nietzsche, an approach that places a lived fullness of emotional capacity as the apex of human aspiration.

In keeping with this perspective, Cioran also mandates certain forms of life deemed by social mores as failure as being in reality forms of triumph and self-fulfilment. Not only is this failure deemed to be an assertion of the individual against social standards of success and happiness, but it can also represent a form of self-actualisation achieved through the pursuit of emotions generally deemed to be 'self-destructive' and 'negative'. For Cioran, the decision to follow those emotions to their destructive conclusion is a sign of vitality and individual self-assertion that declines to yield to the collective. Of course, this can be

problematic in terms of effects on others but for Cioran the basic urge to fidelity to one's emotions is deemed laudable. Failure in this sense is also an inverted form of asceticism: rather than denying or suppressing one's emotions and desires one can deny the world by pursuing one's most self-destructive passions. What Cioran despises is what Auden referred to as 'the moderate Aristotelean city', a world of well-regulated emotion geared to a state of conformity designed to suppress extreme feeling.

Central to this line of thought is the turbulent and mutable forms of desire and volition. Contrary to the form of philosophising that would seek to have human desire guided by a magisterial intellect carefully discerning optimal forms of the Good, Cioran's view of human desire is more akin to that found in Augustinian and Reformed schools of Christian thought. The will is a warped and opaque force that moves in uncertainty and is prone to, and indeed dominated by, desires that are often inclined toward vice and self-destruction. Only an unflinching acknowledgement of this by the philosopher can render thought authentic.

Cioran circles back to Socrates's claim that philosophy teaches us how to die, but he takes and refashions that notion in a manner that renders it unrecognisable from its original form. The Socratic injunction to die well is replaced by what at times amounts to an injunction to die chaotically and in ignorance. This, for Cioran, would exemplify the Socratic injunction toward self-knowledge, as it is his contention that an honest self-examination results in a recognition that the self is a battlefield of conflicting emotions and desires, and that the human world is little more than a macrocosmic extension of that inner turmoil. Cioran considers a life and philosophy that does not seek a final terminus of rest and assurance to be more faithful to the human experience than one that seeks certainty and serenity. At

times he can resemble the Old Testament Prophets in his rage and condemnation of a self-satisfied and complacent quotidian existence.

History

Cioran's preoccupation with the chaos and instability of the inner life is mirrored by a fascination with the historical process seen through an eschatological perspective. In his youth, he flirted with right-wing Romanian politics, but disillusionment was swift to arrive. Although ostensibly non-political from then on, Cioran was a fascinated observer of what, like so many of his contemporaries, he took to be the decline and spiritual exhaustion of the western world. This emptying out augmented his own sense of alienation from human life, although the catastrophe of World War Two led to a change in tone from the Nietzschean histrionics of his pre-war works to a more resigned perspective, without, however, losing his own personal vigour. As we shall explore in a later chapter, in spite of the apparent desiccation of western culture and the catastrophic culmination of the historical process with the Second World War Cioran periodically re-engages with history in a somewhat desperate attempt to seek salvation through either a final apocalypse or a re-awakening of history that would reinvigorate humanity from post-war somnolence.

Having here outlined some of the central contours of Cioran's thought, and before entering into Cioran in depth, I will offer a brief survey of the literature in English that engaged with Cioran before the stirrings of more recent academic interest. Then in Chapter 1, I shall examine Cioran's employment of the aphoristic form and offer a comparison with aspects of

Nietzsche's thought to show how the former is engaged in what may be termed an 'anti-Dionysiac' project. In Chapter 2, I shall demonstrate how Cioran's mode of thinking can be harnessed as a useful foil to more conventional philosophising by employing certain of his insights and views in a discussion of the philosophical anthropology employed by Martha Nussbaum and Pierre Hadot.

In Chapter 3, I shall explore Cioran's wide-ranging religious interests and delineate his preferences amongst 'God-haunted' thinkers. In Chapter 4, I shall explore the contentious topic of his relationship with Judaism and how this feeds into his views of embodiment and the historical process. In Chapter 5, I will examine his philosophy of history, primarily by means of a comparison with Alexandre Kojève and tease out the aporias and contradictions of Cioran's secularised eschatological hopes.

In Chapter 6, I shall explore Cioran's soteriological investigations by means of a comparison with George Santayana and examine whether Cioran's form of de-Christianised quietism is viable. Finally, in Chapter 7 I shall examine Cioran's return to the source of his philosophical and theological disquiet, namely the fact of birth. By means of a comparison with the thought of Hannah Arendt concerning natality, I shall place Cioran's reflections on birth within the Augustinian strand of Christian thought.

The general aim of this thesis is to construct as coherent a view as possible of the religious bases of Cioran's thinking as one operating in a post-Christian landscape of thought and culture. I have endeavoured to respect the fissiparous and wide-ranging nature of his views,

while endeavouring to form as comprehensive and coherent a view as possible of the religious impulses that determine much of his thought.

Cioran: English literature survey

Before entering into a discussion of the central English language texts on Cioran, it is worthwhile to briefly examine four of the key works on him in French. This will help to delineate and sample the central concerns of much French critical exegesis of the Romanian, and provide a useful counterpoint for the differing responses evoked by Cioran in English language commentators, which may in turn illuminate some important cultural and philosophical differences between the Anglophone and Continental worlds of thought. This will provide an overall critical framework for my own subsequent explorations, which are partially intended to bridge some of those gaps and divergences.

Sylvie Jaudeau's *Cioran ou le dernier homme* (1990) deals heavily in the notion of Cioran as a fusion of Buddhist, Cathar and Gnostic, the last of which derives from his oft-repeated claims that the world must be the work of an incompetent or evil demiurge, so blatant are its faults and injustices. As a result, Jaudeau claims that Cioran's ethics, if we can derive any from his writings as a whole, are those of the Christian heretic Cathar sect, who viewed the flesh as evil and an imprisonment, and consequently advocated non-procreation as a moral choice. Linked with this is Cioran's liking for a Buddhist doctrine of nothingness and a final escape from consciousness. I shall return to this last point in Chapters 5 and 6, exploring it in both the context of Cioran's philosophy of history and personal soteriology respectively. While agreeing with Jaudeau in her claim that Cioran favours an 'alleviation' of consciousness, I shall show that Cioran's thought is of such a non-directive nature that the

shortcomings and failings of such a preference make it of questionable coherence and perhaps ultimately unsustainable.

Patrice Bollon's *Cioran, l'hérétique* (1997) is a highly laudatory work that provides valuable biographical information and praises what the author views as Cioran's anarchism in his post-war writings. Viewing Cioran as a Nietzschean-style demolisher of all illusions but as a stylistic inheritor of the French *moraliste* tradition, Bollon sees the Romanian's mature work as being a direct result of his youthful involvement with right-wing thought and institutions, and in some ways as constituting an apologia for his youthful follies. While thorough, the work is borderline hagiographical and fails to engage with the lacunae and inconsistencies of Cioran's thought, revelling in the perception of him as a destroyer of ideologies and belief systems. In Chapter 5 when discussing Cioran's philosophy of history, I will show that the Romanian did not quite divest himself of all extravagant hopes and extreme positions, as Bollon claims.

Simona Modreanu considers Cioran in two volumes, the first entitled simply *Cioran* (2003), a member of a series of works concerning Romanian exiles in Paris, *Les Roumains de Paris*. This study offers a biographical overview of Cioran in its first half, before turning to a thematic survey in its second. Modreanu places great importance on the technique of paradox in Cioran, which enables him to simultaneously envelop and transcend differing views on a particular subject matter, a heuristic that protects his liberty and renders difficult, if not impossible, the challenge of attributing too firm a categorisation on nearly every aspect of his thought. Her second volume entitled *Le Dieu Paradoxal de Cioran* (2003) is, as the title suggests, an exploration of the concept of God in the works of the Romanian, which Modreanu believes is the most important over-arching and linking concept

throughout all of Cioran's works. Exploring his various religious preoccupations from Gnosticism to Buddhism to the lives of monks and saints, Modreanu offers a detailed and nuanced view of Cioran's often paradoxical and contradictory preoccupations with the divine, which counters the commonly held view of him as a nihilist and cynical atheist. For Modreanu, Cioran belongs to the 'sorrowful atheist' category of non-believer put forward by Berdyaev, rather than the 'triumphant atheist' that dominates much of contemporary thought. While agreeing with this, I hope to show in my own work how the category of salvation still operates persistently in Cioran's work, assuming many forms in his struggle to come to terms with the human condition.

Sylvain David's *Cioran: un héroïsme à rebours* (2006) offers an approach refreshingly different from more mainstream studies of Cioran by focusing on the relationship between the author and the social and cultural context in which he lived and wrote. Rather than reading Cioran's marginality solely through a heuristic of solitude and interiority, David employs a prism similar to that of the Frankfurt school in tracing the social relations that define the space between an author, his text and the world at large. Seeing Cioran's work as at once both a critique and a contribution to the fissiparous nature of an atomised modernity, David places Cioran as a more socially embedded figure than the majority of commentators. While agreeing with much of the general thrust of this claim, particularly in regard to his thoughts on history, I hope to show in the latter stages of this thesis that Cioran's 'hopes', insofar as we can speak of such a thing, do ultimately return to a form of deep personal interiority and solitude.

Turning now to the key works in English, when speaking of the reluctance to confront a certain form of thinking that may prevail in different cultures and philosophical traditions,

John Pilling has declared that ‘the elliptical gloom which the French call *cafard* cannot be expected to flourish in England’.¹⁴ Pilling makes this claim in a piece dedicated to promoting the value of Cioran’s thought, and the benefits that may come from a serious engagement with his work. Yet in spite of the fact that recent years have seen a slow infiltration of Cioran’s name into the outer reaches of mainstream philosophical discourse, there has yet to emerge any prolonged and in-depth consideration of his thought. As a prelude to my own investigation, it is first necessary and instructive to review the most significant of the comparatively small number of articles and volumes about Cioran that have appeared in a slow trickle since he was first registered in the English-speaking world.

Cioran’s first serious advocate in English was the American cultural commentator Susan Sontag in an introduction to his 1968 work *The Temptation to Exist*. Before examining this, however, it is instructive to first briefly look at a piece Sontag wrote concerning the French thinker Simone Weil five years previously. Speaking of the appeal and the necessity of engaging with Weil, Sontag declared that:

The culture-heroes of our liberal bourgeois civilization are anti-liberal and anti-bourgeois; they are writers who are repetitive, obsessive, and impolite, who impress by force—not simply by their tone of personal authority and by their intellectual ardor, but by the sense of acute personal and intellectual extremity. The bigots, the hysterics, the destroyers of the self—these are the writers who bear witness to the fearful polite time in which we live.¹⁵

Sontag states that ‘ours is an age which consciously pursues health, and yet only believes in the reality of sickness. The truths we respect are those born of affliction.’ Sontag declares

¹⁴ John Pilling, ‘E.M. Cioran: An Introduction,’ *PN Review*, Jan 1979, 17.

¹⁵ Susan Sontag, ‘Simone Weil’, *The New York Review of Books* February 1, 1963.

she shares none of Weil's extreme views on life, religion, politics and so on, but is nevertheless compelled to admit that regarding that extremism we are 'moved by it [and] nourished by it'. She believes that some denials of a rational and ordered view of the world can be 'truth-giving, sanity-producing, health-creating and life-enhancing.' This is what she finds in Weil, and despite the fact that she finds much of Weil's thought unsound and, in many instances, simply wrong, Sontag lauds Weil as 'one of the most uncompromising and troubling witnesses to the modern travail of the spirit.' With certain modifications this description could equally apply to the present era and the essence of E.M. Cioran. His writings are repetitive, obsessional, jagged, designed to wound and are uninterested in any form of rational dialogue with interlocutors or opponents. Their extremity stems from an avowed disbelief in the meliorative and progressive powers of Socratic dialogue. What defines most extremist discourse, whether it be in philosophy, politics or elsewhere, is its insistent urge to progress in a clear direction. Cioran, by contrast, often advocates loudly and shrilly, for stasis, both personal and political.

These features of Cioran's thought are taken up and expanded by Sontag in her introduction to *The Temptation to Exist*. Sontag begins her essay by remarking on the dominance of the historical mode of thinking that functions as the paradigm of contemporary discourse, a movement that began with the Enlightenment. In response to this undermining of absolutist modes of thoughts two trends emerged. The first was ideological, a materialistic interpretation of humanity coupled with a progressive political agenda, whose most significant form was Marxism. The second was a move to break down traditional philosophical exegesis and discourse. Fragments, aphorisms and short essays were used to achieve an authentic response to the new historical mode of thought. Thinkers such as Kierkegaard, Nietzsche and Wittgenstein were the most prominent of such authors, and,

according to Sontag, Cioran is the heir apparent of that line, and he carries it further than any of his predecessors.¹⁶

What differentiates Cioran from his more classical predecessors such as La Rochefoucauld, Gracián and even Wittgenstein is that whereas they still endeavoured to map reality by means of the aphorism or fragment, Cioran is focused almost exclusively on tracing the twists and turns of his own thinking. Most crucially, he is dedicated to mapping what is an almost perverse form of Hegelian dialectics: his thinking will veer in one direction but will lead to an equally sincere antithetical thought. Cioran is devoted to recording both and is committed by his own intellectual authenticity to refuse a commitment to either. According to Sontag, given the absence of foundational thinking in contemporary philosophy, the criterion by which we value a philosopher is that of risk, difficulty and personal engagement. There can be no return to philosophical innocence by a disavowal of consciousness for religious belief à la Kierkegaard, or the simple abandonment of philosophy à la Wittgenstein; we are obliged to go through to the end of wherever thinking will lead us, and Sontag believes Cioran does this better and more fearlessly than any of his contemporaries.

The relentless internal movement of Cioran's dialectics are regarded by Sontag as still belonging to the western tradition of thinking, embodying a form of Faustian endeavour whereby, as she puts it, Cioran is at one and the same time both his Prometheus and his eagle, the protagonist and antagonist: 'Philosophy becomes tortured thinking. Thinking that devours itself – and continues intact and even flourishes, in spite of these repeated acts of self-cannibalism.'¹⁷ Cioran flirts deeply with Buddhism, but his essentially western mode of

¹⁶ Susan Sontag, Introduction to E.M. Cioran, *The Temptation to Exist* (University of Chicago Press, 1998), 7-29.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 14.

thought prevents him from an abnegation of the rational ego, however desirous he may be to find such a path. Sontag characterises Cioran as being the direct inheritor of Nietzsche and controversially claims that Cioran says nothing that Nietzsche had not already said (a claim I will discuss later), but that he deepens the dilemmas in a more ruthless way than the German: 'He must tighten the screws, make the argument denser. More excruciating. More rhetorical.'¹⁸

Co-existing with this 'internal' journey, however, is what Sontag regards as a more traditional form of discourse concerned with history and the destiny of Europe. Cioran is characterised as a more conservative form of thinker in his view that an excess of thought and rationality has contributed enormously to the "devitalisation" of Europe. Too much idealism is detrimental to the natural health and self-belief of nations and cultures. Cioran therefore finds himself in a paradoxical position whereby he is committed to plying the far reaches of his own thought while simultaneously recognising that such an activity can lead only to social and historical decadence.

In this regard, Sontag considers Cioran to be a significant exemplar of a classical form of temptation that can overcome the excessively intellectual: the voluntary surrender to barbarism in order to escape the painful aporetics of socially alienated thinking (how much she knew of Cioran's involvement with right-wing organisations in the 30s is unclear). In spite of his seeming obsession with futility and nothingness, Cioran is one of the most persistent elegists for a certain form of European civilisation and tradition that he believes is in a state of irredeemable decay. Thus he is at once an intellectual revolutionary and a cultural conservative. He is 'the last, perhaps, of the elegists of the passing of Europe – of

¹⁸ Ibid., 14. See 46-53 below for a comparison between Cioran and Nietzsche.

European suffering, of European intellectual courage, of European vigor, of European over-complexity. And determined, himself, to pursue that venture to the end.¹⁹

Sontag concludes her essay by returning to her comparison of Cioran with Nietzsche: both are spiritual aristocrats, both believe in a form of thinking against oneself, and both perform a merciless critique of modernity. But for Sontag, Cioran, unlike Nietzsche, refuses to engage in any attempt to overcome Nihilism. Indeed, he still operates with a form of Platonic dualism: mind v body, health v sickness, cultural decay v flourishing and so on, all destined to end only in the void. Sontag suggests a Nietzschean critique of Cioran would serve to undermine these dualities. She concludes that 'Cioran's fierce, tensely argued speculations sum up brilliantly the decaying "urgencies" of western thought, but offer no relief from them beyond the considerable satisfactions of the understanding.'

In spite of Sontag's praise, Cioran gained little attention in the English-speaking world in the 60s and 70s. Surprisingly perhaps, given the predominantly political orientation of his work, one favourable commentator was Edward Said, who in a short article described Cioran as 'exquisitely intelligible' and as a 'man of very strong dislikes' who 'is a particularly energetic example of...writing at the zero degree'. He disagrees with Sontag's placement of Cioran in the tradition of Novalis, Rilke, and Kafka and instead compares him to Borges, as a 'master of the apocryphal utterance'.²⁰

Less favourably inclined was the American novelist John Updike, who in a review of Cioran's work described him as 'not so much a thinker, as a poser', and as a man 'claustrophobically at home with horror, pain, self-denial and rage'. Perhaps reflecting his own concerns with

¹⁹ Ibid., 19.

²⁰ Edward Said, 'Amateur of the Insoluble,' *The Hudson Review*, Vol 21 No.4 (Winter 1968-9), 769-773.

sex and the body, Updike finds Cioran's denigration of both distasteful, and Cioran's aphoristic and fragmentary style only occasionally successful, as, in opposition to Sontag's praise for the same, it 'betrays the shifting perspectives of an intelligence committed only to itself.' Updike compares Cioran to the characters found in Thomas Mann's short story 'At the Prophet's' which features the disciples of an absent prophet reading aloud from their master's apocalyptic work, which strikes the narrator as too destructive, hopeless and inhumane.²¹

More favourably inclined was the English critic John Pilling, who, in his 1979 'E.M. Cioran: An Introduction' described him as 'the most neglected serious thinker of our time'. Pilling ascribes Cioran's neglect to a reluctance to engage with his 'radical critique of humanism'. Pilling declares that a serious and fair-minded engagement with Cioran's thought is necessary in order to avoid 'reclining complacently in accepted and acceptable ideologies'. Pilling characterises Cioran as endeavouring to synthesise the stoicism of Marcus Aurelius with vitalism but ending in a radical scepticism that constantly undermines itself. According to Pilling, Cioran actively promotes Decadence in order to hasten the final dissolving of humanity into the void, a quest that takes on a religious character. Pilling describes him as 'the greatest living master of meditation without an object.'²²

Substantial secondary literature in English is sparse. *The Temptations of Emile Cioran* (1997) by William Kluback and Michael Finkenthal was possibly the first book length study to appear in English.²³ Surveying the central themes of Cioran's writings, it is marred somewhat by the authors' frequent interjection of their own personal distaste for many of their

²¹ John Updike, 'A Monk Manqué,' *The New Yorker*, 12 May 1975: 138-141.

²² John Pilling, 'E.M. Cioran An Introduction,' *PN Review*, Vol.6, Iss. 1, 1979, 14-17.

²³ Michael Finkenthal & William Kluback, *The Temptations of Emile Cioran* (American University Studies, 1997).

subject's ideas and is determined to pin him down as a form of modern-day Gnostic Buddhist.

An Infamous Past: E.M. Cioran and the Rise of Fascism in Romania (2005) by Marta Petreu is a translation from the Romanian of a work aimed, as the title indicates, at revealing the depths of Cioran's involvement in the right-wing tide that overtook Romanian politics in the 1930s.²⁴ It is a detailed biographical study that places his early thought in its genealogical place amongst similar right-wing advocates at the time. The author is critical of Cioran's political leanings of that period, and the work ends with a brief investigation of his disenchantment at the end of the Second World War. One effect of this work was to discourage certain critics from further examination of Cioran, as he now appeared to be permanently labelled with the tag of Fascist.

Searching for Cioran (2009) by Ilinca Zarifopol-Johnston is a biography that was curtailed by the author's death. It is strong on Romanian history and Cioran's cultural background and traces his life until his decision to abide permanently in Paris in the early Forties, providing much anecdotal evidence as to the nature of Cioran's philosophical development but lacking deep engagement with the nature of his thought.

There are relatively few articles on specific aspects of Cioran's thought. Notable exceptions include Elaine Marks' 'The Limits of Ideology and Sensibility: J.P. Sartre's "Reflexions sur la question juive" and E.M. Cioran's "Un Peuple de solitaires"' .²⁵ Marks criticises both Cioran's and Sartre's studies of Judaism and the Jewish people as being little better than idealistic projections of their respective authors' romantic and political agendas. Marks claims that

²⁴ Marta Petreu, *An Infamous Past: E.M. Cioran and the Rise of Fascism in Romania* (Ivan R. Dee, 2005).

²⁵ Elaine Marks, 'The Limits of Ideology and Sensibility: J.P. Sartre's "Reflexions sur la question juive" and E.M. Cioran's "Un peuple de solitaires"' *The French Review*, Vol. 45 No.4. 779-788.

Cioran's notions concerning the topic lack any credible historical and sociological methodology and instead trade in religious and cultural stereotypes. The article is notable also for being thusfar the only attempt to compare two thinkers who were contemporaries and, in many ways, asymmetrical reflections of each other, a topic I will discuss later.²⁶

Aleksandra Gruzinska examined the structural similarities in the antisemitism of Cioran and Octave Mirbeau in her '(Anti-) Semitism 1880s/1990s: Octave Mirbeau and E.M. Cioran'.²⁷ Each proclaimed a form of anti-semitism in their youthful writings and each later repented. They also shared a tendency toward wilful self-contradiction and 'self-rewriting' in their work.

G. Regier undertook a significant comparative study of Cioran and Nietzsche, within which the author traced Cioran's attitudes toward the German thinker over the course of his career. Regier notes that that attitude was one of constant scepticism, contrary to those such as Sontag who believe that Cioran owed Nietzsche a serious debt of influence. Cioran is portrayed as constantly critiquing Nietzsche's excessive tendencies and his detachment from ordinary life. Cioran's sympathy for Nietzsche lies more in his pity for the latter's tragic and lonely life.²⁸

More recently, Joseph Acquisto has written of the attempted salvific role of writing itself in Cioran's work.²⁹ In 'Falling into Salvation in Cioran', Acquisto examines the various means of palliation in Cioran's work, such as music, literature, silence and suicide, but concludes that these can only provide temporary respite for the Romanian. The only method that appears

²⁶ See 151-53 below.

²⁷ Aleksandra Gruzinska, '(Anti-)Semitism 1890s/1990s: Octave Mirbeau and E.M. Cioran', *Rocky Mountain review of language and literature*, 2001, Vol. 55 (1), 13-28.

²⁸ Willis G. Regier, 'Cioran's Nietzsche', *French Forum*, Vol. 30, No. 3, (Fall 2005), 75-90.

²⁹ Joseph Acquisto, 'Falling into Salvation in Cioran', *Studies in 20th and 21st Century Literature* (2014), Vol. 38 Issue 1.

consistently alleviatory in Cioran is the very act of writing itself, which allows a form of secular *ekstasis* that allows the writer to carry on living in the midst of a world from which he finds himself deeply alienated. These ideas are developed further in a later book-length comparative study of redemption in the works of Cioran to Baudelaire, Benjamin Fondane and others.³⁰

In summary, the comparatively sparse attention received by Cioran leaned toward viewing him as a disruptive maverick operating in a Nietzschean style of iconoclasm. Aside from Kluback and Finkenthal, there was little attempt to provide an in-depth and thorough continual examination of Cioran's key themes, the like of which I hope to provide in what follows.

³⁰ Joseph Acquisto, *The Fall out of Redemption Writing and Thinking Beyond Salvation in Baudelaire, Cioran, Fondane, Agamben and Nancy* (Bloomsbury, 2015).

Chapter 1

Cioran and the Aphorism

Cioran is best known as a writer of aphorisms. Whilst this does not exhaustively encompass all of his writings, it is a reasonably accurate characterisation. In this chapter, I propose to examine the nature of the aphorism, the motivations behind its usage, and what the results of an aphoristic form of philosophising might be. This will be done primarily by juxtaposing Cioran's use of the form with that of Nietzsche once we have examined certain elements of the aphorisms of Georg Lichtenberg. The complexity of the aphorism in both style and content will be examined. In conclusion, a number of Cioran's aphorisms will be examined in order to ascertain their means of function and their philosophical intent.

It should be noted from the outset that although Cioran is frequently referred to as an aphorist, he also produced many essays of a conventional type dealing with various themes and figures. Many of his books consist of miniature essays held together by a rough thematic similarity. I do not intend to confine the use of the word 'aphorism' here to one or two line observations, which is perhaps the image the word conjures up; it is also used to denote the one paragraph essays that constitute much of his work. In those books, beginning with his first volume *On The Heights of Despair*, the miniature essays consist of a string of generally terse and combative statements of frequent acerbic wit, used for iconoclastic purposes in a Nietzschean style.

The aphorism – form and purpose from Lichtenberg to Nietzsche

J.P. Stern in his in-depth study of Georg Lichtenberg explores the nature and structure of the aphorism and offers a tentative definition of the form as

a self-contained, pithy sentence whose organization involves a partial reversal of the traditional matter-and-form dichotomy and a second look at a part of itself [...] Its charm hides in an antithesis, perfectly integrated, issuing from a double look at a word or an idea. It conceals its autobiographical source yet displays its process of generation. It is self-conscious, yet never exhibits its author's self-consciousness unmodified [...] It uses ideas culled from all manner of experience, or again the findings of science, philosophy, literary theory, and any other numbers of inquiries, yet it defies all the systems to which they belong and all coherence wider than itself.³¹

The materiality of the aphorism, both in its own written form, and as a reflection of both the disposition and the cultural epoch of the writer is central to understanding its deployment. It is these concerns that should prevent us from dismissing the aphoristic form as merely a kind of philosophical whimsy, a sideshow entertainment marginal to more "serious" undertakings carried out in systematic and architectonic prose works. Within itself, the choice of the aphoristic mode carries a serious position and verdict on the nature of philosophising.

Stern proposes that Lichtenberg employs the aphoristic form as a means for 'science to break and exit for itself into a world of concreteness and palpable reality.'³² It is Lichtenberg's endeavour to convey an 'unabridged apprehension of the real' that guides his

³¹ J.P. Stern, *Lichtenberg: a doctrine of scattered occasions: reconstructed from his aphorism and reflections* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press 1959), 216.

³² *Ibid.*, 125.

practice of the fragmentary form, as, while never relinquishing his commitment to science, he is highly conscious of the limitations of the scientific method in conveying a picture of lived experience. Inductive inference and deductive theorising by necessity must select little and exclude most of reality, or at least reality as experienced from the first-person perspective. Therefore, the aphorism in Lichtenberg's hands endeavours to be a fusion of individual experience generalised into gestures toward universal truth. As Stern puts it, 'aesthetic value stands as the emblem of concrete experience.'³³

When we examine the transition from the aphorism as practised by Lichtenberg to that of Nietzsche the differences are enormous and fundamental. The play of ideas and language we find in Lichtenberg is aptly described by Stern as 'a nominalist's maximal admission of a Platonic minimum.'³⁴ Or to put it in other words, the aphorist seeks to maintain a fidelity to his primal experience while by necessity having recourse to language, which by definition must be capable of expressing generalities in order to convey that individual, unique and unrepeatable experience. But whereas Lichtenberg stands by his belief in a reality that can be mapped and expressed through both science and the aphorism, Nietzsche famously declares himself a perspectivist for whom there are no facts, but merely interpretations. A metaphysical position such as this entails a radical change in motivation for the employment of the aphoristic form. The aphorism is now not, or at least not solely, a map of reality, but a means of *fashioning* both reality and its reader. We thus find ourselves grappling with the nature of language itself: to what extent can we measure the descriptive and prescriptive elements of language, and how far, if at all, can they be separated?

³³ Ibid., 126.

³⁴ Ibid., 178.

We thus pass from Lichtenberg's primarily didactic mode of aphorising to a more creative form found in Nietzsche. And it is with Nietzsche that we see how deeply entwined with the complex question of the aphorism's relation to reality is another of its unique features: its curious relation to time. For Nietzsche, the aphorism is a weapon to be deployed against Platonism. The latter, which seeks permanence and certainty in timelessness, is best attacked by a form of writing and playful philosophising that trades in the importance of the moment (*Augenblick*) and seeks to undermine stasis by elevating the truth-value of a fleeting moment or insight. The Nietzschean aphorism is thus part of a strategy of a life-enhancing *praxis*, one that seeks to remake the reader and their world, testifying to a strong belief in the power of new myth-making, becoming and an openness to what is yet to come and what yet may be fashioned. The horizon of the Nietzschean aphorism is future-orientated, operating as an invitation and path to a greater and healthier sense of being. The implication in the Nietzschean universe is that the common reader may be labouring under a series of maladies imposed by conventional morality and social norms from which Nietzsche, as doctor-aphorist, will seek to relieve the willing patient. Such a view is inextricably connected to Nietzsche's insistence on the primacy of physiology and the dispositional function generated by the health or sickness of our organs. The reader, their health, their outlook and their reading habits are all intimately related. It is the aphorism that Nietzsche believes can provide the sharpest and most potent form of medicine. Jill Marsden claims that for Nietzsche the aphorism is 'that which sets the limit rather than that which is defined *by* a limit.'³⁵

³⁵ Jill Marsden, 'Nietzsche and the Art of the Aphorism' in *A Companion to Nietzsche* (Blackwell, Oxford, 2006), 22.

Yet there is a curious paradox in the very nature of the aphorism that may hinder the Nietzschean project of future-building and self-reinvention. On one level an aphorism is a fragment of reality lifted from the flux of the quotidian and elevated to a special status that in some manner throws a light on the rest of our experience. Insofar as an aphorism can be re-read with profit and still generate either its original impact, or at least some proximate form, it possesses the ability to repeat and modify both a moment and a feeling over and over again. Yet the impression generated from each reading may not and most likely will not be identical – it will vary depending on many complex and interrelated factors: the mood of the reader, his or her initial philosophical disposition, the sequence in which an aphorism is read in relation to other aphorisms and so on. Thus, within itself the aphorism carries its own form of instability: its effects may escape both the intention of its author and that outcome which a reader may have hoped to reach by choosing to engage with the aphorism to begin with. The effects of reading an aphorism may strengthen the force and flux of becoming and thus, ironically, escape the parameters of any direction in which a visionary such as Nietzsche may wish to push his reader.³⁶

Cioran and Nietzsche

Turning to Cioran, of central importance in endeavouring to situate his use of the aphorism is his complicated relationship with Nietzsche.³⁷ It is a complex relationship in terms both of the apparent resemblances between the two thinkers and Cioran's recorded comments on

³⁶ Insofar as the Nietzschean project is an embrace of becoming over Being, this outcome may not necessarily be an undesirable one from a consistently Nietzschean perspective, or at least one that privileges flux over all other things.

³⁷ The most thorough examination of this topic, in terms of recording Cioran's remarks on Nietzsche, is Willis G. Regier's, 'Cioran's Nietzsche' *French Forum*, Vol. 30, No. 3 (Fall 2005), 75-90.

the German, which are keen to disavow any similarities. Many of the latter are to be found in the various interviews Cioran gave over the years, and while there is a consistency to them we must always be aware of the almost ubiquitous dislike of most philosophers to acknowledge influence or debt to those who came before them. Therefore, we find Cioran recording in his diaries: 'No one has influenced me. I speak for myself. It is ridiculous to cite Schopenhauer or Nietzsche or whomever in order to define my "Lebensgefühl"' (CH: 690-1). Cioran stresses repeatedly that in terms of positive influence Lev Shestov and George Simmel are the thinkers who carried most weight, yet of course to take such a disavowal of Nietzsche at face value would be foolish and plainly mistaken, as, regardless of a direct influence, Nietzsche was in all probability the most potent figure in European philosophy in the first decades of the twentieth century. Cioran was of course familiar with his works, so we can speak meaningfully of a reaction, if not an influence, if we mean by the latter solely an urge to imitate, follow and develop.

Let us therefore first examine the discernible similarities between Nietzsche and Cioran. There is in the first instance the business of *praxis*. For each thinker the aphoristic mode is simultaneously a type of philosophy and a type of living: to engage with the text, to read the words in an involved manner leads to a certain change of disposition in the reader that may or may not extend into the reader's life and comportment. One way of expressing this is that the reader is being read and possibly modified by the text. If this is the case, then the deceptively frivolous nature of the form of the aphorism is, in fact, a screen for a more serious philosophical project of self-reorientation toward the world. In engaging in such *praxis*, Cioran is, like Nietzsche, partaking of a venerable tradition, for, as Jill Marsden has pointed out, the first use of the aphorism seems to occur in the *Corpus Hippocraticum*, a body of observations designed to diagnose and prescribe in matters of health and wise

living. Thus, while on a superficial glance Cioran's work may appear iconoclastic, in many ways it is a classic model of investigation and guidance. In this manner, writing and philosophy itself becomes more than a detached cognitive analysis of a series of signs upon a page, it is instead a holistic engagement of the embodied human with the materiality of writing, in a complex process that moulds and transforms the reader and their world.

There is also the matter of the indifference of both Cioran and Nietzsche to moral custom and opprobrium: 'When I write, man is then for me something unthinkable, so to speak. Then I do not care about the possible consequences of a phrase, or an aphorism, I feel free in regard to all moral categories' (EN: 181).³⁸ This observation puts us in mind of Nietzsche's declaration that 'man is something to be overcome.' In tandem with this is the disregard each has for any compulsion to take refuge behind philosophical jargon whose real function may be to occlude a lack of substance: Cioran's vocabulary is in no way technical or sophisticated; he does not invent new terms intended to capture previously unexpressed emotions or concepts and it is in this regard, at least, that he does acknowledge openly an affinity with the German: 'I believe that in philosophy it is not necessary to endlessly invent new words. Nietzsche did not create words, and that did not reduce his philosophy' (EN: 106).³⁹ The temptation to indulge in linguistic invention is also something to be overcome.

Cioran frequently speaks against the elaborate architectonic systems of thinkers considered philosophical giants: 'Aristotle, Aquinas, Hegel – three enslavers of the mind. The worst form of despotism is the *system*, in philosophy and in everything' (TBB: 117). He is

³⁸ "Quand j'écris, l'homme est alors pur moi quelque chose d'impensable pour ainsi dire. Je ne me soucie pas alors des conséquences possible d'une phrase, d'un aphorisme, je me sens libre à l'égard de toute catégorie morale." Translations from *Entretiens* are my own.

³⁹ "Je crois qu'en philosophie, il n'est pas nécessaire d'inventer sans cesse des mots nouveaux, des termes techniques. Nietzsche n'a pas créé de mots, ce qui n'a pas amoindri son oeuvre."

convinced that the enormous linguistic cathedrals they construct are, despite their authors' intentions, prisons in which the true nature of humans and their capacities are denied, warped or simply misrepresented. This is achieved primarily through a wilful misuse of language, where ordinary words are taken and remoulded, stripped of their normal usage and deployed in an unreal and idealised manner that reflects only the philosopher's agenda.⁴⁰ This reminds us of Nietzsche's declaration that 'my ambition is to say in ten sentences what everyone else says in a book – what everyone else *does not* say in a book.'⁴¹ These words are partly echoed in Cioran's 'Write books only if you are going to say in them the things you would never dare confide to anyone' (TBB: 27). There is an irony at play here, in that, as we have noted, each employs relatively everyday language to achieve this end, whereas one's initial impulse may be to assume the necessity for a dramatic reconfiguration of language in order to express both the suppressed and the unthinkable. But if reason as a systematic and discursive method of arriving at truth is disdained or viewed with suspicion, then there appears no particular reason to privilege logical and sequential exposition expressed in obtuse philosophical terms as the exclusive ground of philosophical truth or even speculation.

Cioran's anti-Dionsyiac project

However, while there are plentiful similarities in terms of form and tactics between Cioran and Nietzsche, the divergence in aim is profound. One path into exploring this gulf is by considering a statement from Cioran:

⁴⁰ This aligns Cioran in some ways with so-called Ordinary Language Philosophy and especially with Wittgenstein's attempt to bring language back from its metaphysical to its ordinary use.

⁴¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), 51.

Nietzsche began to write aphorisms when at the beginning of his madness, when he started to lose his reason. For me, it was a sign of fatigue. Why explain, demonstrate – it's not worth the trouble....I write aphorisms from a distaste for everything. (EN: 210-11)⁴²

The throwaway remark about Nietzsche seems hardly to be taken seriously, if we take *Human, All Too Human* as marking the start of Nietzsche's aphoristic phase, given that it was written many years before the beginning of his breakdown. In so far as we take Cioran's comment at face value, it is indeed true that he chose the aphorism as a mode of expression from the very beginning of his philosophical career, whereas Nietzsche passed through a more conventional philosophical phase before breaking the shackles of expectation. More crucially, Cioran alludes to the fact that for Nietzsche the aphorism is a mode of liberation and aspires to be a vehicle for Dionysian ecstasy and self-overcoming, whereas for him the aphorism is employed, with important qualifications, for a more pessimistic purpose from the beginning of his work. Even the Nietzschean-like energy and defiance of *On the Heights of Despair* and *Tears and Saints* are modes of expressions for an underlying sense of absurdity and religious despair whose depths found a more suitably lower-key expression in the post-war works, so on one level Cioran is indeed correct to assert that a certain fatigue or desperation is present in his work from the beginning.

While Nietzsche often declares vocally his intention to transform man, Cioran's own statements on his use of the aphorism appear almost casual and disinterested. In conversation when asked if he aims for the minimum in expression, he replies that 'It's exactly that. Not to convert people. Not to convince people. I don't like to convince' (EN:

⁴² "Nietzsche s'est mis à écrire des aphorismes au début de sa folie, quand il a commencé à perdre son équilibre. Chez moi, c'était un signe de fatigue. Pourquoi expliquer, démontrer – ce n'est pas la peine."

42).⁴³ The danger of such comments, and indeed that of employing the aphoristic mode in general, is the possibility of not being taken seriously when compared to architectonic writers such as Kant and Hegel. In a way, a writer like Cioran finds himself negotiating a perilous quandary: he condemns philosophy as a systematic enterprise, pokes fun and sarcasm at it, yet he himself, assumedly, seeks to be taken seriously on many levels. Similarly, one must also consider with due caution Cioran's oft-repeated claims that he writes only when he is depressed and uses writing as a means of unburdening himself of his misery. While this may be true in a broader personal and psychological sense, it is simply inaccurate to imagine him casually throwing off aphorisms while in the grips of despair. One can on many occasions see in his posthumously published *Cahiers* the first form of a thought or observation that is later remembered, reshaped and presented as an aphorism, particularly in the case of *The Trouble with Being Born*. It is important to recall that Cioran frequently discusses the pains that attended his writing process. Each sentence is finely honed and crafted, the result of many re-workings in a language the author frequently confesses as possessing a fundamentally alien quality to him, in spite of his acquiring the reputation of his being a master of the medium. There is, in truth, very little that is casual in Cioran's work, taken as a whole.

The question then presents itself as to on *what* level does Cioran wish to be taken seriously.

It is here that an observation of Nietzsche becomes relevant:

The philosophic life misinterpreted – at the moment when one is beginning to take philosophy seriously, the whole world fancies that one is doing the reverse.⁴⁴

⁴³ "C'est exactement ça. De ne pas convertir les gens. De ne pas les convaincre. Je n'aime pas convaincre."

⁴⁴ Cited in Shapiro (1984), 3.

We are immediately thrust into the matter of interpretation and irony, a matter complicated in Cioran's case by the shifting moods and tones of his writing, which vary from ironic and detached to cheerfully playful, seriously engaged, hopelessly depressed and even at times apparently suicidal. Here we see another central difference between Cioran and Nietzsche in terms of their employment of the first-person singular. Whereas Marsden suggests that Nietzsche's polyvocal style 'contributes to the feeling that aphoristic writing speaks *of* and *to* the body but it is not a corporeality which neatly dovetails with an authorial ego,'⁴⁵ Cioran adopts a more regular and consistent authorial voice, one whose main register is subdued, resigned, and stricken, in spite of the periodic rhetorical excesses. There is a tonal consistency in outlook and attitude that enables us to trace a relatively consistent authorial voice throughout Cioran's work. The same analysis that has been applied to La Rochefoucauld could also be used to describe Cioran: 'heterogeneity is counterbalanced by the employment of a narrow repertoire of stylistic devices, the recurrent use of favourite words and phrases, and the pervasive sense of a highly individual (and highly coherent) speaking voice.'⁴⁶

Related to this is Cioran's remarks on his writing process and what he imagines the reader will endeavour to do when contemplating one of his aphorisms:

Between the feeling and the phrase, there is a huge space....Everything that separates the feeling from the phrase is not perceptible in what I write....So the reader has to make an

⁴⁵ Marsden (2006), 28.

⁴⁶ E.H. and A.H. Blackmore & Francine Giguère Introduction to François de la Rochefoucauld *Collected Maxims and Other Reflections* (Oxford University Press, 2007), xxviii.

effort of imagination to get back from the phrase to the feeling...But it is very difficult to go back to the source, because I do not express the route. (EN:51) ⁴⁷

This contrasts sharply with Nietzsche's condemnation of those readers who seek to recuperate the journey from the aphorist's thoughts to the final product:

Readers of Maxims. – The worst readers of maxims are the friends of their author when they are exercised to trace the general observation back to the particular event to which the maxim owes its origin: for through this prying they render all the author's efforts null and void, so that, instead of philosophical instruction, all they receive (and all they deserve to receive) is the satisfaction of a vulgar curiosity.⁴⁸

When confronted with such divergences between Cioran and Nietzsche we are obliged to attempt a delineation of the former's general position. While Cioran himself consistently denied any systematic intention in his work – such as he frequently derided in others - I would argue that taken as a whole there *is* a unity of approach in both style and content that once delineated and critically assessed should place Cioran in the ranks of serious philosophers and enable his work to be properly appreciated, and not viewed as merely a form of bohemian nihilism to be taken lightly and as a product of merely dilettantish dabbling. Thus hopefully we can escape one of the dangers that attends reading a great number of Cioran's observations at one sitting that JP Stern warned of when discussing the perils of over-indulging in Nietzsche's aphorisms: 'Taken individually, they are bright and penetrating... "full of thorns and secret spices", but read in any number, they tend to cloy

⁴⁷ "Entre la sensation et la formule, il y a un immense espace....Tout ce qui sépare la sensation de la formule n'est pas perceptible dans ce que j'écris...Donc la lecteur devrait faire un effort d'imagination pour remonter de la formule à la sensation....Mais il est très difficile de remonter à l'origine, parce que je n'ai pas exprimé le parcours."

⁴⁸ Nietzsche, *Assorted Opinions and Maxims*, 129, quoted in Marsden (2006), 31.

and repeat one another, with much the same barbs being flung over and over, at much the same targets.⁴⁹ Without the clarity and structure provided by those systematisers Cioran so despises, the same risk may be run of his coming off as the philosophical equivalent of a momentarily eye-catching but ultimately ephemeral thinker who does not merit serious attention.

In response to this line of critique, I wish to argue that the core divergence between Cioran and Nietzsche, and the key thrust of Cioran's entire philosophical project, lies in his taking a form of expression deemed appropriate to an age of fragmentation, breakdown and cultural collapse and employing it in the service of a rehabilitation of an extremely classical human anthropology, but also one that fuses Greek notions of Fatalism and Destiny with Christian notions of Sin and the Fall. Whereas, according to Shapiro, Nietzsche uses the aphorism in order to 'frustrate the idealistic and rationalistic attitudes typically evoked by the philosophical book,'⁵⁰ Cioran is performing a double inversion: he is by his own declarations assaulting "the system," but he is doing so in order to restore a vision of humanity and life that rests partly on decidedly classical and rational grounds, at least in the sense those words carried prior to Enlightenment optimism. Yet in a further extra twist, Cioran rejects the ontological assertions about gods and God that are essential to Greek and Christian doctrines, while retaining the ethics and anthropology: he is a fatalist without Olympus, and a Fallen creature without the hope of heaven. In this manner, the aphorism is a fitting vehicle of expression for a perspective that still very much draws from the worldviews that shaped European thought and culture but rejects its baseline foundations and spiritual

⁴⁹ Stern (1979), 20.

⁵⁰ Shapiro (1984), 415.

beliefs. The fragmentary nature of the aphorism is the perfect means of expression for a thinker operating in such a cultural twilight.

The power of Cioran's work, therefore, with its disillusioned baseline, lies in its liberating effect, but the form of liberation advanced by Cioran is not that of the sort offered by Nietzsche, who speaks in terms of possibility, openness and horizons to be travelled toward. Cioran endeavours to liberate by stripping back and demolishing the clutter built around human beings by philosophers over the millennia. What he reveals is a picture unflattering to the emancipatory hopes of both Enlightenment and post-war thinkers, but it is a picture that he considers to be more honest and truthful, and in that truthfulness, according to Cioran, lies the limited reality of freedom. While Shapiro summarises the aim of Nietzsche's aphoristic art as being 'to summon free spirits into being,'⁵¹ an aim which may initially have a certain parallel with Cioran's intentions, Cioran intends to liberate his readers from the weight of philosophical expectations, one possible variety of which may arise from a commitment to Nietzsche's Dionysiac project. The free spirits Cioran wishes to liberate are those who will be unencumbered by extravagant philosophical hopes.

Thus while Nietzsche intends the aphorism as a constructive tool in the re-assessment and development of a new ethics, a lightning rod intended to illuminate the future, Cioran's aphorisms are intended to point in the opposite direction: they ground us in our inescapable selves and modes of being, and prevent us from becoming lost in fantasies of liberatory emancipation that would ignore our fragmented essence. For Nietzsche, the liberation of hitherto suppressed desires based on animal appetites deemed to be vices offers a possibility, however vague, of an entire reconfiguration of the human animal and its society,

⁵¹ Ibid., 407.

one that would in some way be more life-affirming, or at least honest in its accommodation to our biological and mental drives. But for Cioran our essence is something more immobile and confined. He too is fascinated by physiognomy, but less in its alleged re-fashioning and more in its constrictive and inescapable boundaries. Whereas for Nietzsche the aphorism is a horizon setter, one which the reader is encouraged to go beyond, for Cioran the boundary element of his aphorisms is designed to demarcate a space wherein human possibility is contracted and limited, and its ambition is often shrunk back to the level of mundane reality.

This is most pointedly expressed when Cioran delivers an explicitly damning verdict on Nietzsche's emancipatory project in an extended meditation in *The Trouble with Being Born*:

To a student who wanted to know where I stood in regard to the author of *Zarathustra*, I replied that I had long since stopped reading him. Why? "I find him too *naïve*..."

I hold his enthusiasm, his fervours against him. He demolished so many idols, only to replace them with others: a false iconoclast, with adolescent aspects and a certain virginity, a certain innocence inherent in his solitary's career. He observed men only from a distance. Had he come closer, he could neither have conceived nor promulgated the superman, that preposterous, laughable, even grotesque chimera, a crotchet which could only occur to a mind without time to age, to know the long serene disgust of detachment.

Marcus Aurelius is much closer to me. Not a moment's hesitation between the lyricism of frenzy and the prose of acceptance: I find more comfort, more hope even, in the weary emperor than the thundering prophet. (TBB: 85-6)

Here the difference between two forms of aphorising is clearly marked out. Cioran's accusation is that ultimately Nietzsche took refuge in fantasy and solitude owing to his

inability to live amongst men and reconcile himself with the quotidian. As a consequence, his aphorising partook of insubstantial and fantastic notions of human self-overcoming that are, in the final analysis, little more than verbal fantasies designed to console an irreconcilably alienated individual. Regardless of the truth or falsity of Cioran's indictment, as a statement of his own position Cioran's statement is indispensable, placing him as it does firmly in the tradition of writers such as La Rochefoucauld, Chamfort, and Montaigne, men grounded in the real, whose caustic observations on human society and behaviour possess, for Cioran, more worth and substance than the extravagance of the *Übermensch*.

Indeed, it is La Rochefoucauld to whom Cioran is closest, not perhaps merely in terms of style but more significantly for the broader theological background of his thought. A contemporary of Pascal, La Rochefoucauld was read by many of his contemporaries as a type of Jansenist who had imbibed extreme pessimism from what would be later deemed a Catholic heresy. His central theme of the inescapability of human vanity and self-love has been described as 'ultimately a punishment imposed on the human race because of sin – a punishment from which there is no escape.'⁵² A contemporary of the French aphorist described his work as 'a very powerful and ingenious satire on the corruption of nature by original sin...and on the malignity of the human spirit, which corrupts everything when it acts by itself without the Spirit of God...'⁵³

Such descriptions could equally well be applied to Cioran, for whom the aphorism is intended to express an element of the world's fragmented nature which its author considers to be fundamental to existence, and for whom the concept of Original Sin, interpreted in

⁵² E.H. and A.H. Blackmore & Francine Giguère, Introduction to François de la Rochefoucauld *Collected Maxims and Other Reflections* (Oxford University Press, 2007), xxiv.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, xxix.

however loose a manner, was indispensable. Endeavouring to construct a system would in some sense constitute a “betrayal” of reality in its declared multiplicity and variety. Yet with Cioran there is an odd paradox at work, namely that whereas the aphorism is often regarded as a faithful vehicle for an expression of the world’s mutability, Cioran’s worldview is in the final analysis one that is closer to classical than Romantic principles, as he has a view of humanity and the world that is essentially unchanging from the beginning of his oeuvre to the end, even including the work of his youthful political period. That view can be encapsulated as one of limitation and folly, one that may often be viewed as tragic, in spite of its comic and absurd aspects.

If, for example, we compare Cioran to Lichtenberg, the latter, in the view of J.P. Stern, finds himself in the position of recording endless one-off ‘occasions’, moments of intuition and insight that he is unable to unite into an architectonic whole owing to his suspicions of “the system”. Cioran is able to escape this quandary by his utilisation of religious concepts that he claims to find indispensable, namely the Fall and Original Sin. Every one of his observations occurs within the light cast by his adherence to these concepts that play a central role in his philosophical anthropology. Without such a framework Cioran would face the possibility of falling into a purely nominalistic model of random, one-off observations that would be no more than the recordings of passing whims and fancies. He would then be open to the accusation that Stern suggests Lichtenberg is vulnerable to, that of finding ‘himself committed to numberless superstitions – that is, moods and acts in which singular occasions and objects are charged, more or less arbitrarily, with absolute value and powers.’⁵⁴

⁵⁴ Stern, (1979), 242.

Alongside his disregard for the Nietzschean project, Cioran also lies in sharp contrast with the Existentialism and Marxism of his own time. Cioran does not subscribe to any notion of the re-fashioning of the self or of history. The repetitive content of his aphoristic work can be said to mirror the repetitive nature of the self and of history, a form of motion whose expression is nevertheless constant and generally unvarying. Consequently, the stylistic flair of the aphorisms become important as a means of expressing a limited form of freedom within the constraints of both the aphoristic form and the limitations of both the human condition generally, and the individual self in particular.

This leads inevitably to the question of whether we can judge an aphorism to be “true” or not. Here the matter becomes more complicated, as a reader’s response to an aphorism may depend entirely on whether they are impressed or not by the skill and style with which it is expressed, which in turn may lead to its own difficulty, as one may be so impressed by the style and wit of the aphorism that one is too dazzled to probe much into its truth content. But ideally a well-honed and witty aphorism may lead its reader to reconsider a broad swathe of issues that he or she may have taken for granted prior to the “shock” delivered by a short epigram or insight. Its effect may be compared to a flash of lightening that briefly illuminates a piece of darkened landscape, with the proviso that a well-honed aphorism may encourage the reader to probe the landscape for themselves based on the light delivered by the writer.

This leads us to the relevance of an aphorism from Cioran on the nature of aphorism-writing:

To collect one's thoughts, to polish up certain denuded truths – anyone can manage that, more or less; but the *edge*, without which a pithy shortcut is only a statement, a mere maxim, requires a touch of virtuosity, even of charlatanism. (DQ: 169)⁵⁵

As Joshua Dienstag points out, 'a *charlatan*, in French, is originally a sort of lay practitioner of medicine, someone whose services were available for purchase in the public square to address whatever concerns a passer-by might have. [...] It was only with the professionalization and privatization of medicine that a *charlatan* became a "mere charlatan."' ⁵⁶ Such a description reminds us of the perennial battle between putative wisdom and the Sophists in Greek philosophy.

Cioran is indeed a charlatan in the original sense of the word, but in a manner that accords with his dread of systematisation: he is not offering an ordered series of steps and remedies in the Epicurean mode that claim to lead to happiness if followed faithfully; he is instead the equivalent of the street-peddler offering an assortment of wares that may or may not work for those prepared to gamble with his remedies. Thus, he is entitled to and claims a certain amount of the irony and distance that comes from his trade – on one level he is as utterly committed to his philosophical enterprise as Nietzsche, while on another his lack of hopes for any fundamental reconfiguration of the human condition allow him a distance that the latter cannot afford owing to his deep investment in forging new and unimagined horizons. Consequently, Cioran's work may be said to have certain affinities with Foucault's project of the 'art of the self', but Cioran's attempts at therapy can be tenuous, prone to regression and far less systematic and programmatic than Foucault's undertaking.

⁵⁵ The charlatanry here should not be confused with Greek sophism, which critics such as Plato characterised as being a truth-free mode of rhetoric designed for individual empowerment.

⁵⁶ Joshua Dienstag, *Pessimism: Philosophy, Ethic, Spirit* (Princeton University Press, 2006), 243.

In order to begin an examination of Cioran's method, let us now consider a number of aphorisms from *The Trouble With Being Born*:

“Ever since I was born” – that since has a resonance so dreadful to my ears it becomes unendurable. (TBB: 3)⁵⁷

The aphorism begins by citing a commonly used phrase, ‘ever since I was born’, one used reasonably regularly in ordinary discourse, usually in a manner that is associated with a certain sense of self-assurance or at least self-acceptance in being able to recount something of one's own existence, perhaps then proceeding to outline a regular feature of one's life that has remained constant. It may be used to assert familiarity, regularity and a concomitant security: something is solid in a world of change.⁵⁸ Cioran then focuses on a word that is seemingly casual and innocuous, a time marker and conjunction that is employed on numerous occasions each day in most conversation and discourse: *since*.

What does the word ‘since’ do? It lays down a marker in time from which we construct a temporal narrative that frames the subsequent discourse; in and of itself it is perfectly harmless and casual. Cioran's “trick”, if we wish to use that term, is to make us pause and reflect on a seemingly innocuous word and ponder its deeper signification. If we care to imagine a potential sequence of thought the aphorism engenders it may be that we realise, firstly, how casually we regard and view the passage of time. It is most likely reasonable to assume that time's passage for most of us, most of the time, is an uncontroversial affair, marked by quotidian duties and occasionally larger landmarks such as marriage, jobs and so on. The first effect of Cioran's thought is to make strange something that is usually so

⁵⁷ “Depuis que je suis au monde” – ce depuis me paraît chargé d'une signification si effrayante qu'elle devient insoutenable.”

⁵⁸ Of course, the phrase may equally be employed in a negative manner, “Ever since I was born more and more forests have been cut down” etc.

unremarked and casual - that we are temporal creatures who exist in the medium of time, and then perhaps, if we care to continue imagining a possible reaction to the aphorism, we may be led to reflect on our mortality: we are temporal creatures moving forward in time but one day we will end: our personal time journeys are finite.

But whereas perhaps a thinker or aphorist of a more conventional disposition might be tempted to induce a reflection on death and mortality, Cioran turns that convention on its head and instead forces our train of thought in the *opposite* direction. We are pushed back toward birth, to contemplate not only the ultimately bizarre fact of having been born at all, but the potentially even stranger fact that there was an infinity of time prior to that when we did not exist. Consequently, in Cioran's eyes birth takes on a fatalistic air, in a manner akin perhaps to those of the Greek tragedians or the Hebrew prophets, for whom there was nothing casual or typical about a human life – each one was specially marked and weighed with a unique and often tragic destiny. Therefore, if we provisionally accept that as one possible reaction to the aphorism, we can see how Cioran begins with a commonplace, moves it possibly in one direction and then finishes by pushing our thoughts in another one entirely, with overtones that are precisely the *opposite* of the casual nonchalance with which the commonplace 'ever since I was born' is usually uttered. This is also an expression of what I described earlier as Cioran's 'classicism', if by that we may indicate a certain worldview that dwells on life's finitude, limitation and those inescapable patterns that all lives must inevitably follow, even those that ostensibly appear to break boundaries and redefine the normal.

My faculty for disappointment surpasses understanding. It is what lets me
comprehend Buddha, but also what keeps me from following him. (TBB:7)⁵⁹

Here we see Cioran in a somewhat more playful mode, although the underlying message is a stark one. There is a humorously ironic tone in the opening phrase, as typically something that ‘surpasses understanding’ is associated with objects or emotions deemed positive (‘the peace that passeth all understanding’), but instead Cioran uses it to convey the extent of a negative capability. The second phrase continues the irony, as it is Cioran’s capacity for disappointment that allows him to understand the Buddha, a figure usually connected to liberation and freedom. The closing phrase employs a playful use of hubris and irony, as it is a faculty for disappointment, which may be also viewed as an inability to be deceived that prevents Cioran from becoming a disciple of the Buddha. Therefore, it is the ability to be disappointed that furnishes greater wisdom than that on offer from a figure typically associated with ultimate wisdom. We may assume that that which Cioran rejects of the Buddhist message is the promise of liberation through the annulment of the self. For a disappointed man, such a promise may appear as yet one more false idol in a world of unrealisable goals. The aphorism also contains an indirect critique of the usual emancipatory promise held forth by philosophy, namely in the power of reason and thought to liberate. Cioran turns such notions on their head by nominating disappointment as that which frees the individual, although in keeping with his more general aims, it is a freedom that lies with the recognition of unsurpassable human limitations. Disappointment is a powerful tool, as it enables us to detect mirages of freedom and possibility. With further

⁵⁹ “Ma faculté d’être déçu dépasse l’entendement. C’est elle qui me fait comprendre le Bouddha, mais c’est elle aussi qui m’empêche de le suivre.”

irony, it is disappointment that spares from further disappointment. There is no invocation to experiment with new life-projects or beliefs, stasis appears almost as a desirable goal.

It is not worth the bother of killing yourself, since you always kill yourself too late. (TBB:32)⁶⁰

Here we see an instance of a pithy playfulness on Cioran's part that is almost shocking in the casual manner with which it appears to treat the extremely serious matter of suicide. The initial clause, with its use of 'bother', suggests suicide is no more serious an undertaking than blowing one's nose, or stopping in order to scratch an itch; its casualness instantly undermines the usual gravity with which the topic is treated in philosophy and indeed in life. It is a rhetorical tactic that instantly undermines the seriousness with which we habitually comport ourselves and weigh up the value or lack thereof of our lives. It is an oblique attack on self-seriousness, a call to regard ourselves with more lightness, in order, perhaps, to make life less heavy and more bearable. The second clause's apparent callousness may, in fact, both mask and reveal a serious ethical injunction: do not commit suicide, life is not worth the trouble, it is worth less than you are, no matter how you may doubt that in those moments when contemplating self-destruction.

We then turn to the concluding phrase, which informs us that we always commit suicide too late. What can such a bizarre comment mean? Again, the apparent playfulness and disregard for suicide masks a serious intent that becomes apparent only upon reflection. I would suggest that Cioran is claiming suicide is always a move made too late due to the fact that the pain and suffering that would drive us to self-destruction have already been

⁶⁰ "Ce n'est pas la peine de se tuer, puisqu'on se tue toujours trop tard."

experienced and felt. Suicide will not remedy or undo that which has already been experienced.⁶¹ It is the paradox of suicide that it only appears as a palliative after the worse has already befallen.⁶²

There is another less obvious background to this aphorism whose resonance projects into the history of post-war French existentialist thought. In spite of Joshua Dienstag's characterisation of Cioran as an existentialist, Cioran did in fact view Sartre and Camus with intense suspicion, and I would contend that this aphorism also serves as a barbed commentary on Camus' best-known work *The Myth of Sisyphus*. There Camus presents an elaborate if not wholly convincing argument against suicide by, in short, declaring that humanity's only dignity comes from its voluntary decision to continue its role in the unequal partnership with the world which generates the feeling of absurdity in the first place. For Camus, it is a knowing and self-aware embrace of absurdity with its subsequent attempts to affirm human dignity that constitutes our nobility. We are, in some manner, meant to be almost grateful for this opportunity to represent humankind and its tragic predicament in our own lives. Cioran's response, on the surface, is to airily dismiss such sophistical convulsions and treat self-destruction as a matter hardly worth bothering with. The surface lightness of the aphorism instantly undercuts Camus' seriousness and portentousness. By deflating the heaviness of the issue of suicide, Cioran is attempting to provide a way forward

⁶¹ Of course suicide is also undertaken with a view to evade inescapable future suffering that may as yet be an abstraction, but it is fair to say that Cioran is here working with the usual model of a person being driven to destruction by experiencing unendurable suffering.

⁶² One is reminded of Edgar's "And worse I may be yet. The worst is not. So long as we can say 'This is the worst.'" It is not wholly impossible that Cioran, a lifelong Shakespeare obsessive, may have had this somewhere in mind when formulating the aphorism.

that may be graspable without too much reflection and tortuous introspection the like of which Camus engages in.⁶³

Even the very title of Cioran's volume *De l'inconvénient d'être né*, rendered by Cioran's translator Richard Howard as *The Trouble With Being Born* performs its own aphoristic function as a slyly ironic commentary on the human predicament and its associated difficulties. From within the field of most ethical discourse, life is treated as an immensely serious issue with which we are expected to grapple in a fully committed and moral fashion, with the aim of self and world betterment. Cioran's title, however, carries implications of frivolity and lightness, as if being born were on the same level as having a stone in one's shoe. But as always with Cioran there is a complex strategy being deployed: while the title of the volume is humorous it contains within endless ruminations of despair and aporetic dead ends that are very rarely found in more conventional philosophical discourse, which assumes almost invariably that ethical problems are treatable and that a way forward can be found through the right use of reason. Cioran's title is almost akin to the philosophical equivalent of a honey-trap, a title designed to lure one into what may appear as a light-hearted journey through the human predicament.

⁶³ It is also worthwhile to note in passing that it has been suggested that Cioran's contemporary and friend Samuel Beckett also had Camus in mind in one of his narrator's pithy quips in *Malone Dies*: "Be born, that's the brainwave now, that is to say live long enough to get acquainted with free carbonic gas, then say thanks for the nice time and go." The relationship between Cioran and Beckett is a topic we will return to later.

Chapter 2

Ethical Deformity: Cioran, Nussbaum, and Hadot

Introduction

Cioran's work is highly fragmentary, dispersed across many forms and ranges across numerous topics. His work also possesses a deeply repetitive quality, as his views remain essentially the same from his early writings to his last. In order to express and elucidate Cioran's thought in a manner that displays his value to philosophy and critical thinking, I believe that the most effective approach is to examine a number of philosophers whose own work provides a useful body of material against which to employ Cioran as a critical foil. In this chapter I will focus on aspects of the work of Martha Nussbaum and Pierre Hadot. To anticipate, I will argue that each presents a similar philosophical anthropology of humanity that is excessively optimistic and one-sided, a perspective that seeks, knowingly or otherwise, to occlude the darker elements of our emotional and affective lives that are considered a threat to philosophy as traditionally conceived. Such a view lacks a particular form of nuance and realism that I believe Cioran's darker vision provides.

Although I will return to a more-in depth study of Cioran's anthropology later, for the moment it is sufficient to state that one of its core components most central to the discussion here is a version of the doctrine of Original Sin: humans are divided creatures, highly opaque to themselves, often maintaining conflicting desires and beliefs, fractured

and frequently prone to the basest vices, which in themselves often provide the main motives for action, and quite frequently provide a large portion of the essence of a person's emotional life, affective drives and general motivation. In turn, Cioran believes that human collective political and social life often reflects the baser elements of the individual condition, and rarely displays the type of ideals and behaviour held up as models by traditional ethical and social thinking. From a historical perspective, Cioran avers that some of the most efficient and durable of human civilisations have been based upon a strict hierarchical structure that seeks to contain the worst elements of human nature with inflexible moral codes and punitive political mechanisms, a view that stands in stark contrast to the form of contemporary liberal thinking favoured by Nussbaum and Hadot.

For the purpose of introducing Cioran's conception of philosophy and his anthropology of the human, I intend to examine certain core aspects of Nussbaum and Hadot's thought that consistently put forward a fundamentally optimistic and constructive view of human nature and our capacity both to remake ourselves and shape the world around us. I will then employ observations from Cioran to function as a critical exegesis. In doing so, I am aware that there may be a danger of unwittingly straw-manning and decontextualizing some of Nussbaum and Hadot's positions; nevertheless, I believe it is both a feasible and important necessity to delineate their view of the human, as in many ways they are representative of a form of mainstream philosophy that Cioran so vigorously opposes. Nussbaum and Hadot both are deeply attentive scholars and philosophers of sincere ethical engagement whose work is worthy of deep attention. It is for those very reasons that I believe their writings to provide an excellent source of material by which to introduce some of Cioran's thought and a more critical view of human possibilities.

Nussbaum's Philosophical Anthropology

Martha Nussbaum's *The Fragility of Goodness* is a study of the role of luck and contingency in the pursuit of a virtuous life as presented by classical Greek philosophers and dramatists. It is part of her broader philosophical project to rehabilitate the emotions within a form of revised cognitivism that views feeling and passion as possessing strong truth values, which if filtered through a lens of Aristotilean eudaimonism can facilitate human flourishing.

Nussbaum's philosophical hero is Aristotle, whose naturalism and analysis of human activity she adopts by and large, modifying it, as we shall see, to provide strong support for a project that is in its essence constructive and progressive, and carefully positioned to be part of a broader liberal political agenda. A core part of her philosophical armoury is a judicious and critical examination of various novelists and playwrights, through which Nussbaum believes we can acquire greater skill and discernment in the pursuit of a virtuous life. Nussbaum's project is in essence emancipatory and utopian.⁶⁴

To begin with, Nussbaum's view of nature and existence as a whole is a fundamentally positive and affirmative one. Her ontology is one of plenitude and an inherent goodness; she shares the sense of wonder and curiosity that inspires her philosophical master Aristotle. Indeed, a concept such as self-loathing or doubt has an almost immoral aspect: 'We should not have disgust: for "in everything natural there is something wonderful".'⁶⁵ To

⁶⁴ An excellent overview of Nussbaum's project, with a sharply critical approach, can be found in Chapter 6 of Charles Altieri's *The Particulars of Rapture An Aesthetics of the Effects* (Cornell University Press, 2003), 153-181.

⁶⁵ Nussbaum (2001), xiv.

elucidate Nussbaum's anthropology, let us first examine some of her declarations concerning the nature of human life, agency and the pursuit of the good.

One sees that a lot of human vulnerability does not result from the very structure of human life, or from some mysterious necessity of nature. It results from ignorance, greed, and various other forms of badness.⁶⁶

The fragility of human beings that results from the fact that most human beings are lazy or self-preoccupied [...] should not count as necessary suffering; it should count as culpable wrongdoing, and we should not prize its fruits in any way, or even suggest that they might be background conditions of genuine human goods.⁶⁷

Nussbaum appears to assume unquestioningly that all human beings should seek the good, to act virtuously, to employ reason in a sane and balanced manner and so on. If they do not, they are simply uninformed, lazy or indifferent and require a form of re-education.

Nussbaum also assumes that emotions are forms of cognitive judgement that can be modified and retrained under the guidance of those who are more enlightened in order to facilitate human flourishing. The picture of humanity that emerges is that of an essentially well-disposed and malleable entity, prone to error and misjudgement that can be reformed to pursue personal happiness in a just and even-handed manner once the emotions and drives are tamed and recalibrated under the auspices of right reason.

When attempting to probe the essence of human benevolence and its relationship with the world at large, Nussbaum speaks of the 'valued features of our goodness: its internal integrity, its ongoing fidelity to its own laws, its responsiveness of vision.'⁶⁸ This view

⁶⁶ Ibid., xxx.

⁶⁷ Ibid., xxxi.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 50.

assumes the internally consistent nature of goodness, its self-transparency, its openness to experience and its readiness to adapt to circumstances. There can be no questioning of its integrity or of the possibility of its admixture with vices and self-serving motivations. This is a characterisation in keeping with Nussbaum's general approach to humanity: the search for goodness and the desire to act virtuously is assumed. If it is lacking, it is due to benighted malice, sloth or poor education. A conscious desire to be bad or even indifferent is not contemplated as a rational possibility.

Correspondingly, human agency is a powerful and potentially unified force. In spite of her avowed openness to the fragility of human life and the pursuit of happiness, contingency in terms of the circumstantial aspects of one's human identity is not an insurmountable barrier to the pursuit of the good, the true and the beautiful:

I shall also be leaving aside one part of the question about excellence, namely the luck of birth or constitution – the role of factors the agent does not control in endowing him with the various initial abilities required for living humanly well. I shall only assume...that the answer to this question is not such as to close off all of our other questions.⁶⁹

Nussbaum is also a firm advocate of a shared reason, the possibility of meaningful dialogue and the establishment of a rational consensus:

[People] need to learn what they really think. When, through work on the alternatives and through dialogue with one another, they have arrived at a harmonious adjustment of their beliefs both singly and in community with one other, this will be the ethical truth.⁷⁰

⁶⁹ Ibid., 6.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 10-11.

Truth is objective and accessible through a judicious employment of human agency: 'If we are each led singly through the best procedures of practical choice, we will turn out to agree on the most important matters, in ethics as in science.'⁷¹

Human disaster and misfortune, while terrible and regrettable, are also vehicles by means of which we can attain ethical progression: 'Hard cases like these [the ethical dilemmas of tragedy], if one allows oneself really to see and experience them, may bring progress along with their sorrow, a progress that comes from an increase in self-knowledge and knowledge of the world.'⁷² Here we see a traditional philosophical investment in the power of reason and philosophy to rule and regulate the individual and world. At this point we are obliged to interrogate what Charles Altieri terms the 'egregious imperialism' of this type of thought through the lens of Cioran's critique of philosophy's unspoken assumptions concerning the human condition.⁷³

A Cioranian Critique

Let us now turn to a critical examination of Nussbaum's position, employing various observations of Cioran as a means of response.

Firstly, serious issues arise with Nussbaum's use of words such as 'good', 'virtue', 'richness' and so on. There are no definitions or serious attempts within *The Fragility of Goodness* to

⁷¹ Ibid., 11.

⁷² Ibid., 45.

⁷³ Altieri (2003), 173.

delineate the precise content of these words; Nussbaum appears to assume their meanings are obvious and shared by all.⁷⁴ This brings us neatly to a declaration from Cioran:

Each opinion, each view is necessarily partial, truncated, inadequate. In philosophy and in anything, originality comes down to incomplete definitions. (TBB:33)

If we are prepared to admit the almost infinite messiness of life and the uncertainty shrouding our ethical activity, limited definitions are inevitable, not merely a contingency that can be overcome by continual cogitation and an ever-widening accumulation of facts. Our epistemological faculties are constitutively limited, so by extension our ethical definitions are partial and orientated in certain directions that may be determined by biological dispositions, as well as the values inculcated by whatever social and cultural settings we grow up in. There does not appear to be any obvious means available by which we can transcend these limitations and conditions; thus, we are obliged to use such words in a manner that at least recognises their contingent and only partially explicative power, and not perhaps in the universalist manner desired by Nussbaum.

The power of language in ethical debate to create an illusion of unanimity, conformism and ultimately reassurance is rarely commented on in mainstream philosophy, and certainly not by Nussbaum. Apart from the uncertain content of various terms, she resorts continuously to uncritical employment of first-person plural phrases such as ‘our rich emotional lives’, ‘our orientation toward the good’, ‘our common humanity’ and so forth. Consensus, or at the very least the possibility of consensus, is not doubted. Cioran is highly critical of such language, claiming that

⁷⁴ Altieri makes a similar complaint when interacting with Nussbaum’s *Upheavals of Thought*. “When one uses her index to see what she means specifically by “reason”, one gets very disappointing results.” Altieri (2003), 283, footnote 7.

[Man] is the chatterbox of the universe; he speaks in the name of others; his self loves the plural. And anyone who speaks in the name of others is always an impostor...The implicit plural of "one" and the avowed plural of "we" constitute the comfortable refuge of false existence. (SHD:19)

Such a critique calls into question the very possibility of any true universal ethical consensus as determined by a putatively right reason.

Cioran also calls into doubt Nussbaum's belief that human communities are engaged in a search for moral improvement to begin with. In his view, it is not moral striving or excellence that defines a community, but precisely the opposite:

I am always amazed to see how lively, normal and unassailable *low feelings* are. When you experience them, you feel cheered, restored to the community, on an equal footing with your own kind. (AA:18)

Cioran's anthropology could hardly be more different to that of Nussbaum. He assumes the commonality of base impulses, the constitutive role they play in human societies, and the paradoxically egalitarian outcome of their employment, as their universal nature ensures that no one rises above his or herself very frequently in a manner that would alienate and shame his or her fellows. The struggle to be good and virtuous seems curiously unreal, as if it is a forced departure from our normal moral lassitude.

Of course, Nussbaum could reply that she is dealing with an idealised model of human moral aspiration, but there is little sign of this in *Fragility*. The assumption is instead that the natural impulse of the individual is toward continual self-improvement and moral effectivity, as evidenced by the aforementioned declarations concerning the natural desire for the good. Nussbaum refers to the Greek practice of treating philosophers, dramatists and poets as

ethical guides as a form of proof that Athens was engaged in a continual process of self-integration and moral improvement, but this is surely at best a selective interpretation of the evidence. Outside of the world of philosophy and drama, Athenian mores did not drastically or even significantly alter in the century or so of its cultural peak, with perhaps its most significant feature being the assumed superiority of Athenians over fellow Greeks, and Greeks over barbarians. The philosophy of Socrates and Plato and the comedies of Aristophanes are replete with references to the supposed moral and intellectual laxity of Athenians, and of course ultimately Socrates was executed after being labelled a subversive threat by his own society.⁷⁵

Cioran rejects all such notions of an idealised philosophical and cultural past, and clearly has a less ameliorative view of the individual than Nussbaum:

It is easier to *get on* with vices than with virtues. The vices, accommodating by nature, help each other, are full of mutual indulgence, whereas the jealous virtues combat and annihilate each other, showing in everything their incompatibility. (TBB: 25)

What does Cioran mean here? Whereas Nussbaum believes human vices to be capable of containment or even elimination through the correct use of reason, Cioran believes the vices to be a fundamentally constitutive component of the individual. It is simply unimaginable for a human to possess or even approach the kind of moral perfection advocated, for example, in Aristotle's portrayal of the perfectly just man. When Cioran speaks of the accommodating nature of vices, he is referring to the inescapably self-indulgent nature of perhaps the majority of people and their readiness to justify those

⁷⁵ Thucydides captures brilliantly the political instability and moral chaos of Athenian life in its supposed golden age in his classic history.

indulgences and moral omissions. Thus, greed can lead to a philosophy of selfishness which in turn can lead to a moral abdication of responsibility towards others and so on. It is comparatively easy to construct a lifestyle where motivations that are self-orientated can fit alongside each other and allow a form of life to develop that is no less potent and effective than Nussbaum's preferred models of perfect moral probity and universal concern for the flourishing of other human beings. Such a model tends to orientate outward and possess an all-encompassing nature. Therefore, if I am to adopt compassion as a universal value in the manner espoused by Nussbaum, I am obliged to be compassionate toward all, not merely family or friends, or those who align themselves with my own view. But to extend compassion as a universal virtue can and most likely will clash with another virtue such as, for example, justice, which by its nature demands differing treatment of each individual depending upon their merits and failings. The absolutism of classical definitions of the virtues can lead to forms of conflict and tragedy that are simply insoluble. There is also the issue of confronting the sheer weight of human suffering and injustice which in its totality may overwhelm any well-disposed rationalist in their melioristic quest.

While Nussbaum does admit that the pursuit of differing goods may lead to a situation of impossibility, she declines to share the opinion of Hegel that such conflicts can lead to intractable tragedy; instead, she avers that a more judicious employment of reason can help avoid or at least alleviate such scenarios. In her discussion of Greek tragedy, she claims

we see a wrong action committed without any direct physical compulsion and in full knowledge of its nature, by a person whose ethical character or commitments would

otherwise dispose him to reject the act. The constraint comes from the presence of circumstances that prevent the adequate fulfilment of two valid ethical claims.⁷⁶

The form of human anthropology presented by Cioran does not appear to be an option for her. The possibility that an individual may simply be ill-disposed towards another, or possess a genuine, clear-sighted intention to cause harm in order to advance their own self-interest and be fully cognisant of the consequences is not discussed. This perhaps emerges most clearly in her discussion of Aeschylus's *Agamemnon*. In the play, Agamemnon sacrifices his daughter Iphigenia to ensure the success of the Greek expedition against Troy. In spite of his initial despair and reluctance, Agamemnon does so in a manner that is clinical, calculating and free of practically all regret, as he has decided, after reflection, that it is his duty to place the interests of the expedition above that of his family. For Nussbaum, this is simply unacceptable. She describes Agamemnon's stance as 'chilling and appalling' and proceeds to lambast him for his lack of emotional turmoil in making such an apparently clinical decision, even to the extent of proposing what he should have said: 'Once he had stated the alternatives and announced his decision, Agamemnon might have been expected to say something like, "This horrible course is what divine necessity requires, though I embark on it with pain and revulsion."'”⁷⁷ In her view, Agamemnon is simply a damaged human being who has need of being taught the correct emotional response to such a scenario. It is this prescriptive element of Nussbaum's reading of tragedy that undercuts her own avowed aim to take the drama, and by extension “wrong” emotions, seriously on their own terms. The possibility that Agamemnon may, in fact, mean what he says, that he has performed the necessary emotional steps as per a shared scale of Greek values in order to

⁷⁶ Nussbaum (2001), 25.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 35.

make the sacrifice, that he has made a clear and rational decision to put the needs of his army above those of his daughter is simply not countenanced. He simply *must* be mistaken and stand in need of emotional re-education.

An almost identical interpretation follows in Nussbaum's reading of *Antigone*. As with so many commentators, Nussbaum criticises Creon for his prioritising of civic duty above all other duties, including family obligation. She does, however, also criticise Antigone for her clinical dedication to familial duties, but still feels obliged to declare that of the two, 'one [Antigone] is far more correct.'⁷⁸ But this is not sufficient. Nussbaum declares that 'Hegel erred in not stressing the fact that Antigone's actual choice is in the play's terms distinctly superior to Creon's.'⁷⁹ Yet there is no argumentation as to why Antigone's preferences are superior, never mind *distinctly* superior, to those of Creon. After all, Antigone, it could be argued, jeopardises civic cohesion, the possibility of unity before an enemy and so on, an interpretation that would have been readily understandable to many members of a Greek audience. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that Nussbaum's individualist ethics are simply incapable of grasping the historical truth of societies that placed greater importance on group collectivity and welfare than contemporary liberal configurations.

Cioran's observations concerning the human condition and the psychology of self-assertion may instead offer a far more plausible and realistic reading of the play, and ethical quandaries generally, than Nussbaum's approach:

Action's sovereignty comes, let us admit it straight off, from our vices, which master a greater contingent of existence than our virtues possess. If we espouse the cause of life and

⁷⁸ Ibid., 52.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 67.

more particularly that of history, they seem useful to the supreme degree: is it not thanks to our vices that we cling to things and that we cut something of a figure here on earth? (HU: 63)

Rather than love and reason, an approach based on desire and ambition struggles far less to accommodate the tragic collision that is at the core of *Antigone*. A proponent of Nussbaum's approach could point to Creon's repentance and admission of folly late in the play, but for Cioran this would be only a *post facto* concession in the face of insurmountable circumstances, and moreover occurs only after Creon knows Antigone is doomed:

Spared, our enemy obsesses and aggrieves us, especially when we have *resolved* to abhor him no longer. Indeed we truly forgive him only if we have promoted or witnessed his fall, if he affords us the spectacle of an ignominious end or –supreme reconciliation!– if we contemplate his corpse. (HU: 58)

Nussbaum's prior commitment to a set of emotional values that are very much standard to contemporary political liberalism are clear. What does she have to say of use in the face of individuals who make differing commitments to hers, apart from the belief that they are wrong? More pointedly, her view once more emphasises the specific social matrix within which Nussbaum is operating. It is difficult to see what she would say to whole societies for which martial valour is the highest value, such as Sparta or Ancient Rome. Sacrificing family preferences for civic duty was a commonplace in such worlds, and was in fact a source of pride and glory. It is here, perhaps, that Nussbaum runs up against the limits of her own cultural formations. As Cioran puts it, no matter how well-intentioned the urge to understand those different to us may be, '*The other*, it must be confessed, seems to us more or less of a lunatic. We follow him only up to a point; after that he necessarily strays, since even his most legitimate concerns strike us as unjustified, inexplicable' (AA: 143). There is

then the temptation to take refuge from such unknowing by adopting a detached posture: 'to be objective is to treat others as you treat an object, a corpse – to behave with them like an undertaker' (TBB: 38). Cioran's claim here is that we often perhaps seek to avoid a deep knowledge of others, as a truly empathetic reading of those with radically differing views may unsettle our confidence in our own foundational positions. We are tempted to call off our quest and simply declare that others are deficient in our form of morality, as Nussbaum appears to do.

Moreover, if we have indeed reached a negative conclusion about many of our own motivations, then what is there to prevent us from plausibly attributing similar low drives to others? In fact, such a course may well be the rational option based upon the unquestionable analogical similarities between human beings. It would seem, therefore, reasonable to assume that others act on a mishmash of motives which render our suppositions as to their motivations and desired outcomes even more problematic than they were to begin with. Our own motives are uncertain, others' motives are uncertain, and the final outcome, if there is any finality that can be defined, is hazardous. This is not a scenario favourable to strong ethical definitions and programmes of action that aspire to moral goodness. As Cioran puts it:

How imagine other people's lives, when our own seem scarcely conceivable? We meet someone, we see him plunged into an impenetrable and unjustifiable world, in a mass of desires and convictions superimposed upon reality...By what necessity does this man shut himself up in a particular world of predilections, and that man in another? (SHD: 18)

Values as Historical

As touched upon, perhaps the most striking element in Nussbaum's anthropology of the human is the absence of the historical perspective. This is deeply ironic in a book dedicated to philosophers and dramatists of classical Athens. To give the most pertinent example, it is well documented that pride in one's city and a contemptuous view of other Greeks was a core component of Athenian society; likewise, Spartan pride consisted in what it considered to be its military superiority to other cities that stemmed from a philosophy of virility and toughness. Most tellingly perhaps in regard to Aristotle is his well-known view on slavery as a natural necessity and the inferior qualities of those who are in such a position. Nussbaum casually evades this problem by remarking that Aristotle is 'mistaken' on the issue but does not elaborate. It is only in the foreword to the revised second edition of *Fragility* that Nussbaum concedes 'it must be admitted that in his ethical and political writings distinct rankings of human beings are recognised: women subordinate to men; slaves to masters.'⁸⁰ Nussbaum declares this a grave fault, as it supports 'morally irrelevant hierarchies of class, rank, honor, and even sex and gender, that divided human beings in their world' and this cannot provide a 'morally adequate view of the world.' But she does not provide any argument as to why this is so; it is simply asserted. Quite often it appears that she is engaged on appropriating elements of ancient thought to be harnessed in support of what is in essence a contemporary liberal emancipatory project, and indeed she explicitly declares

⁸⁰ Ibid., xx.

this in the same foreword: '[My aim is] not to reject Enlightenment ideals but to appropriate the Greeks as allies of an expanded version of Enlightenment liberalism.'⁸¹

By contrast, Cioran holds a far more sceptical view of the liberal project, viewing it in many ways as both a novelty and an aberration: 'The basis of society, of any society, is a certain pride in obedience. When this pride no longer exists, the society collapses' (DQ: 101). The tacit assumption in Nussbaum is the preferment given to a society of autonomous individuals, seeking the good in a manner that is both individual and yet also harmoniously collective. The possibility of other social formations such as Monarchy, Oligarchy and so on is not countenanced. The existence of a society such as Sparta, and indeed most European societies until the period commencing with the French Revolution which conformed to the observation by Cioran concerning social hierarchy, is not commented upon. Analogously, the possibility that humans may find fulfilment in activities such as war, combat and destructive activities toward others is simply not an option for a perspective such as Nussbaum proposes. Her view of the human could easily appear to be an extremely narrow one that seeks to define the essence of the human condition in accordance with Enlightenment principles. Nussbaum's willingness to sanction re-education designed to eliminate certain emotional dispositions that discriminate between humans based on ethnicity, race and so on is a strong indication of this.

By contrast, Cioran is committed to a view of humanity that sets major importance on the historical and the cultural. His view is a version of Spengler's: civilisations are self-contained cultural entities that possess a natural life cycle, peaking when that civilisation manifests its values with pride and aggression, then inevitably declining into a path of decadence and

⁸¹ Ibid., xvi.

ultimate dissolution. A culture's philosophers, artists and theologians reflect the progress of that cycle and Cioran is fond of drawing parallels between different cultures and their commensurate points on their growth and decline, but the idea that ancient Greek thinkers could be harnessed to provide support for a contemporary project of liberal emancipation would be considered by him as delusional folly. To have Aristotle without slavery, without male patriarchy, without his distaste for democracy would be a gross misreading. For Cioran:

We conceive freedom only for ourselves – we extend it to our neighbours only at the cost of existing efforts; whence the precariousness of liberalism, a defiance of our instincts, a brief and miraculous success, a state of exception, at the antipodes of our deepest imperatives. By our nature we are unsuited to it: only the debilitation of our forces makes us accessible to it. (HU: 3-4)

Here it is instructive to examine Nussbaum's contestation of the pessimistic interpretation of *The Women of Trachae* put forward by Bernard Williams.⁸² She denies Williams' claim that the play's closing speech is a testimony to the unavoidability of pain, suffering and evil. She does this by arguing that the characters blame the 'great indifference' of the gods towards human welfare. By viewing the gods as in essence being super-powered humans, she claims that we can attribute to them agency and moral responsibility and hold them accountable for their actions and omissions. In short, if the gods had acted more appropriately no tragedy would have occurred. The gods can be educated out of their indifference and/or cruelty and by extension if the gods are capable of being reformed then

⁸² Bernard Williams, 'The Women of Trachis: Fiction, Pessimism, Ethics' in *The Greeks and Us* eds. Robert B. Loudin & Paul Schollmeier (University of Chicago Press, 1996).

how much easier it must be to reform mere humans.⁸³ But it is arguable that this is a wilful misreading of the Greek conception of the Divine, where gods were seen as being intractable and precisely that which Nussbaum abhors: fickle, changeable, often indifferent, equally ready to interfere with or abandon human life and so on. There was no current in Greek philosophical thought that believed the gods could be “re-educated” - that was one of the things that made them gods to begin with. Nussbaum wishes to take the tragic cosmology of the Greeks and refashion it in the form of an enlightened liberal polis.

Nussbaum’s views on the possibility of re-education stem from her cognitivist view that emotions are ‘only as reliable as the cultural material from which they are made.’⁸⁴ She contends that ‘a good philosophical critique of cultural norms will entail a critique of culturally learned emotions.’⁸⁵ She also declares adherence to Plato’s view that emotions ‘can cement the mind to culturally entrenched error.’ In short, her view of human nature is one in which all emotions are grounded in cultural formations; therefore, if the cultural formations can be modified the resulting emotions will be different and more suitably appropriate for the pursuit of virtue. There is no identification, however, of the transcendental faculty that is able to surmount these emotions, evaluate them and decide which are good and which are bad. If one pursues a hard theory of solid cultural formation, then how can we ever access a realm of neutral and transcendent judgement, and why should such a perspective, if it exists, necessarily lead to the desired liberal outcomes? The same issue arises when examining history as a whole, and passing judgement on differing societies and epochs. Doubtless, Nussbaum would reply that historical facts are in some way

⁸³ This is a summary of Nussbaum’s response to Williams’ essay found in the preface to the second edition of *Fragility* xxxiii-xxxvi.

⁸⁴ Nussbaum (2001), xvii.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

contingent and with the proper re-education a more harmonious form of personal and social living would be possible. But this is to ask the very serious methodological question of how often a philosopher can play the contingency card when attempting to deal with inconvenient facts that appear seriously to impede a universalist moral theory.

Viewed from a theological perspective, Nussbaum's view is essentially Pelagian, a denial that the human will is broken, or at the least crooked and deformed. Cioran comments that

there is no proof of any kind that the will is *good*; it is even certain that it is anything but, the new will equally with the old...Evil being inseparable from action, the consequence is that our undertakings are necessarily directed *against* someone or something; at the limit against ourselves. (HU: 108)

Furthermore, Cioran contends that, *contra* the entire thrust of the project of self-knowledge espoused by Nussbaum, it is partial knowledge of our very selves that enables us to act at all:

We must beware of whatever insights we have into ourselves. Our self-knowledge annoys and paralyzes our daimon – this is where we should look for the reason Socrates wrote nothing. (TBB: 74)

Cioran here argues that an honest appraisal of our motivations and desires may render us incapable of action. This is another paradoxical possibility of the virtue of honesty. If we engage in an honest self-assessment it is surely inevitable that we will discover that many, if not most, of our motivations are self-interested, shabby and designed to gratify our desires. If this is so, then I am duty-bound from a liberal perspective not to act upon them, and if this scepticism is taken to its logical conclusion, then it is quite possible that we will finish in complete paralysis, as we may be caught in an endless circle of self-questioning and self-

doubt. On what basis, then, are we to act, apart from the necessity of satisfying our basic biological needs?

Thus, according to Cioran, when we do act, we are engaged by necessity in an uncertain enterprise. Nussbaum does not deny this, but her main focus is on the contingent nature of external goods necessary to constitute our happiness according to the Aristotilean model; there is far less doubt on her part concerning the nature of the self that does the willing to begin with. She assumes that our over-riding motives are indeed noble and compatible with concepts of justice and respect for others. But for Cioran this is highly unlikely: 'The more you are a victim of contradictory impulses, the less you know which to yield to. *To lack character* – precisely that and nothing but. (TBB: 40)' There is a lack of modesty about most philosophical enterprises that can render ethical theory in particular foolish and naïve. There is also the temptation, if we do not at least attempt to engage in scrupulous self-honesty, to believe ourselves better than others: 'What other people do we always feel we could do better. Unfortunately we do not have the same feeling about what we ourselves do. (TBB: 49)'

Yet there may be, in spite of their manifold differences, some common ground between Nussbaum and Cioran. As we have seen, Nussbaum argues consistently for the affective capacity of the emotions in playing a constituent and strong role in our moral lives. For her, emotions are valuable and insightful modes of human disposition that, if trained and modified according to liberal ethical standards, can and do contribute to the fullness of a human life. She disputes Plato's promotion of the pure intellect to the role of arbiter. Cioran also believes in the power of emotions, albeit in a manner that differs significantly from Nussbaum. He declares that 'all means and methods of knowing are valid: reasoning,

intuition, disgust, enthusiasm, lamentation. A vision of the world propped on concepts is no more legitimate than another which proceeds from tears, arguments, or sighs – modalities equally probing and equally vain’ (SHD: 146).

Yet whereas Nussbaum believes in the proper regulation of the emotions in order to orientate the individual toward a pre-determined set of goals and responses, Cioran, it could be argued, is more faithful to the authentic human experience of a life lived without such a pre-ordained teleology. For him, the human being in its usual muddle of conflicting emotions, desires and unguided intellect is a more authentic view of the person than the idealised moral agent Nussbaum seeks to construct.

Pierre Hadot and the revival of Stoicism

The work of Pierre Hadot focuses on a philosophical recuperation and re-invigoration of the ancient schools of philosophy that centre on orientating the individual in a manner that would lead to a balanced and well-ordered life. Hadot re-examines the classical works of Stoicism, Epicureanism and their related philosophies in a manner designed to illuminate the structural similarities amongst them and to argue that they present a more-or-less identical strategy in the pursuit of this goal. Hadot by and large endorses the arguments of those philosophies, consequently in the following discussion I will use ‘Hadot argues’ and ‘The Stoics/Epicureans etc argue’ interchangeably.

One of Hadot’s central purposes is to emphasise that for the Ancients philosophy was not simply a process of ratiocination designed to probe the nature of reality, it was a *lived practice*, intended to inform, transform and guide the whole of a human life, and not exist

only as an intellectual hobby for leisured dilettantes: 'Philosophical discourse, then, originates in a choice of life and an existential option.'⁸⁶ Hadot strongly emphasises the nature of wisdom as praxis, and that quite often most of the ancient thinkers did not write treatises, or at best considered it a secondary activity. Their lives exemplified their thought, and the example they set was intended to inspire others and demonstrate the truth of their doctrines, something quite often exemplified in the fact that many famed names from the era were members of philosophical schools that endeavoured to create a communal form of existence, Epicurus and his followers in their garden being the best known.

For Hadot, despite their doctrinal differences, the various schools held key beliefs in common, the most central perhaps being that 'you need only yourself in order immediately to find inner peace by ceasing to worry about the past and the future. You can be happy right now, or you will never be happy.'⁸⁷ Hadot proposes that through *askesis* or what he terms 'spiritual exercises' the individual 'raises himself up to the life of the objective Spirit; that is to say, he re-places himself within the perspective of the Whole.'⁸⁸ Such exercises lift us from an inauthentic state of egotistical and harried immersion in the present to a true consciousness and inner freedom. In Stoicism, this is attained largely through the process of *prosoche* or attention, which is 'a continuous vigilance and presence of mind.'⁸⁹ The present moment thereby becomes the only true reality – the past is gone and need no longer concern us, and the future does not exist, so we should not expend energy worrying about what it may bring. Insofar as we do prepare for the future it is through *praemeditatio malorum*, whereby we imagine and prepare for possible future calamities such as indigence,

⁸⁶ Pierre Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy?* (Harvard University Press, 2002), 3.

⁸⁷ Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life* (Blackwell, 1995), 69.

⁸⁸ Hadot (1995), 82.

⁸⁹ Hadot (1995), 84.

poor health, loss of loved ones and so on. Hadot contends that in spite of its differences with Stoicism, Epicureanism proposes a near-identical set of practices that will enable us to focus on present pleasures, and most importantly the sheer pleasure of existence itself. In terms of groundless fears, the most famous example is, of course, that of death, which, according to the Epicurean position, is not to be feared, as by definition when we are death is not, and vice versa. We can and never will know death in any meaningful experiential sense.⁹⁰

In order to avoid the charge of such philosophies being individualistic and world-rejecting forms of escapism and apolitical indifference, Hadot proposes instead that there exists a deep connectedness between physics, metaphysics and ethics.⁹¹ All three disciplines are indispensable in attaining the goal of *ataraxia*, freedom from care and disturbances that plague the lives of most humans on a daily basis. Centrally, physics is an enjoyable intellectual activity in and of itself, but also enables us, from the Epicurean perspective at least, to take pleasure in our own place in the universe. Stoicism concurs, claiming that we have a kind of moral duty to study and appreciate the divine nature of creation and our own small but dignified role in it. In this regard, physics enables us to attain to the most vital aspect of ancient thought that Hadot seeks to promulgate, namely the attainment of a universal 'bird's eye view' of existence: 'physics can be a contemplative activity, which has its end in itself, providing joy and serenity to the soul, and liberating it from day-to-day worries.'⁹²

The reason this calm will follow is due to several complementary and interlinked factors: as a result of attaining a higher perspective we see that our lives are part of a general universal

⁹⁰ Cf. 'Learning to Die' in Hadot (1995), 93-101.

⁹¹ Pierre Hadot, *The Inner Citadel* (Harvard University Press, 1998), 78-82.

⁹² Hadot (1995), 97.

order, the *Logos* or Reason that guides and shapes all things; this will enable us to view the particular trials and sufferings of our individual lives with greater equanimity as we will understand that everything that occurs is part of a greater providential unfolding. This higher vantage point will also enable us to conduct our existence with more detachment and thus less susceptibility to deep damage from the contingencies of the world that we are unable to control, as we realise that our lives are but a quantitatively minute and almost insignificant part of the wider cosmos. In terms of ethical praxis, Hadot contends that the universal perspective will also lead to a form of humanistic values taking hold, as we will see that each individual life is, in its most fundamental aspects, equal to all others, and that each is as worthy of dignity and consideration as any other. This doctrine is particularly strong in Stoicism, where a belief in a providential *Logos* is far more emphasised than in Epicureanism, with its focus on a measured hedonism.⁹³

Several features of Hadot's thought are worthy of emphasis. There is a solid and providential link between the individual and the Cosmos. With instruction, guidance and practice, the mind is capable of discerning reality and adjusting his or her behaviour accordingly; there is no radical ontological displacement between the mind and its surroundings. There is also an emphasis on harmony: the mind will uncover a deep unity between it and the cosmos as a whole and the individual human will find a disposition towards peaceful co-existence with his or her fellows based upon ontological equality. The unspoken implication is that individual differences are somehow trivial or ultimately irrelevant once we have the wisdom to adopt the universal perspective advocated by these doctrines. The core attributes of our lives are universal ones. If employed correctly, reason

⁹³ This is a summary of 'The View from Above' in Hadot (1995), 238-248.

can in fact lead to a form of *theosis*, as ‘the Stoic sage is the equal of God.’⁹⁴ For Hadot, the ideal is one of Stoic imperturbability: the inner self can be ringfenced from the outer world, in spite of its fundamental placement within the greater Logos:

Although Stoic physics makes it seem as if events are woven inexorably by Fate, the self becomes aware of itself as an island of freedom in the midst of a great sea of necessity [...] If I can discover that the self I thought I was is not the self I am, then nothing can get to me.⁹⁵

Cioran and the Inner Life

Cioran has little patience for the ideal of self-sufficiency and invulnerability established by the Stoics and championed by Hadot:

The stoic’s maxim, according to which we should submit uncomplainingly to things which do not depend upon ourselves, takes into account only external misfortunes, which escape our will. But how to accommodate ourselves to those which come from ourselves? If we are the source of our ills, whom are we to confront? Ourselves? We manage, luckily, to forget that we are the guilty parties, and moreover existence is tolerable only if we daily renew this lie, this act of oblivion. (TBB: 81)

Cioran’s observation is reminiscent of the critique of Nussbaum presented previously. As with the latter, Hadot appears to be operating with an anthropology of the individual that implicitly assumes the essential goodness and transparency of human beings. There is little countenancing that a person may be deeply flawed or divided in their essence, that their will may be multiform, and that a person’s sense of meaning may be heavily invested in the

⁹⁴ Hadot (1998), 76.

⁹⁵ Hadot (1998), 112.

messiness of the contingent world and their own complicated relationship with things and people. Hadot assumes that the attainment of a “high” perspective automatically leads to a purgation of the inner self and its disruptive and less benign components. In his view, once we attain the higher perspective a benevolent disposition and a desire for goodness will become operative.

By contrast, Cioran holds fast to the notion of the individual as a deeply corrupt and incoherent entity, motivated by a combination of competing and often contradictory drives and desires. He is possibly the greatest non-religious upholder of the doctrine of Original Sin in twentieth century thought. For him, the universalist vantage point is no necessary guarantee of benevolence, and indeed there may be no apparent logical or ethical connection between the high view and a kind disposition. Why should not a bird’s eye view lead to a feeling of indifference, contempt or even disgust with the human species? The spectacle of humans performing a limited variation of essentially identical and repetitive actions is no less likely to inspire those feelings than any others. As evidence, we can return to a thinker whom we referenced at the outset of this work, and one to whom Hadot dedicated much time to: Marcus Aurelius.⁹⁶

There are abundant entries in the *Meditations* that reflect a less idealised picture of the Stoic seeker after truth and equanimity than Hadot is prepared to contemplate, and one that would instead support Cioran’s perspective. For instance, Aurelius writes:

Look at the characters of your own associates: even the most agreeable of them are difficult to put up with; and for the matter of that, it is difficult enough to put up with one’s own self. In all this murk and mire, then, in all this ceaseless flow of being and time, of changes

⁹⁶ Hadot’s study of Marcus is suggestively entitled *The Inner Citadel*.

imposed and changes endured, I can think of nothing that is worth prizing highly or pursuing seriously. No; what a man must do is to nerve himself to wait quietly for his natural dissolution; and meanwhile not to chafe at its delay...⁹⁷

It should be noted that this is a reflection that appears almost midway in the *Meditations* as they are arranged in modern editions. Assuming this to be an accurate placement, it is worthwhile to observe that Marcus's weariness appears after innumerable exhortations to adopt the universalist, detached perspective so valued by the Stoical movement.⁹⁸ Hadot claims that these repeated expressions of weariness and disgust are in fact Marcus practising the standard Stoic exercise of reducing things to their constituent parts in order to dissolve any overwhelming and disempowering emotions they may generate in us, but their frequency and tone suggest that this is a somewhat evasive attempt to explain away what seems genuine discomfort and unease.⁹⁹

Cioran, by contrast, is suspicious of what he deems to be the frequent grandstanding of stoical thinkers: 'Stoicism for show: to be an enthusiast of *nil admirari*, an hysteric of ataraxia' (AGD: 29)¹⁰⁰ This cynical observation touches on a core point of the form of Stoicism favoured by Hadot: if on the one hand we are to strive for at least a degree of ataraxia through the practice of meditative exercises, detachment and so on, then how we do subsequently engage in the form of humanistic benevolence that Hadot claims follows from an adoption of the bird's eye-view? To act in the world demands a minimum of emotional engagement and the exercise of certain perspectives that by definition need to

⁹⁷ Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* (Penguin, 1964), 5.10, 82.

⁹⁸ Hadot's optimistic view of Marcus finds a pessimistic counterpart in Marcus Rutherford's *The Meditations of Marcus Aurelius – A Study* (1991).

⁹⁹ Hadot (1998), 163-179.

¹⁰⁰ Cioran's line has an echo in Renan's characterisation of Aurelius: "This frenzied renunciation, sometimes pushed as far as sophism, finally conceals an immense wound. One must have said farewell to happiness to arrive at such excesses!" Quoted in Hadot (1998), 245.

be narrow, exclusionary and focused. To act demands a choice and a preference; utter detachment would logically lead to the form of inaction espoused by, for example, the most rigorous of Buddhist sects. Acting demands at the very least an implicit assumption of the traits of individualistic personhood: 'I am this person, with this loyalty, this preference, who wishes to accomplish this specific end' etc. Hadot, however, disagrees:

All spiritual exercises are, fundamentally, a return to the self, in which the self is liberated from the state of alienation into which it has been plunged by worries, passions and desires. The "Self" liberated in this way is no longer merely our egotistic, passionate individuality: it is our *moral* person, open to universality and objectivity, and participating in a universal nature or thought.¹⁰¹

Cioran has little time for such a deracinated self:

Thought which liberates itself from all prejudice disintegrates, imitating the scattered incoherence of the very things it would apprehend. With "fluid" ideas we *spread ourselves* over reality, we espouse it; we do not explicate it. Thus we pay dearly for the "system" we have not sought. (AGD: 33)

We are left to question the gap that exists between our everyday selves and, to employ Kantian terminology, our transcendental apperception. Can we really step from the latter - in the sense of the bird's-eye view favoured by Hadot - back down to our everyday life? Whereas in contemporary usage the word 'prejudice' has been loaded with an almost entirely negative connotation, the term can be examined in a more constructive sense as constituting an essential and indispensable aspect of personhood. This is best stated by a

¹⁰¹ Hadot (1995), 103.

thinker who looms large in the work of Cioran and to whom we shall return later. Joseph de Maistre writes:

Nothing is more vital to him [Man] than prejudices. Let us not take this word in bad part. It does not necessarily signify false ideas, but only, in the strict sense of the word, any opinions adopted without examination. Now, these kinds of opinion are essential to man; they are the real basis of his happiness and the palladium of empires [....] Individual reason... is, of its nature, the mortal enemy of any association whatever because it gives birth only to divergent opinions.¹⁰²

There can be no personhood without prejudice, preference and concrete situatedness. The bird's-eye view may grant us a temporary universalist perspective, but it offers little in the way of concrete guidance in individual personhood. The critic could respond that an awareness of the contingency of my specific situation within the world is a palliative against excess, but whether this has any measurable influence on lived behaviour is surely questionable.

Internal self-sufficiency?

Cioran also calls into question Hadot's notion of a "pure", morally well-disposed self, one that once elevated to universal reason will act in a morally admirable fashion, self-sufficient in its relation to the *Logos*. Ironically, Cioran's emphasis on a secular form of Original Sin finds a source of support from an observation made by Hadot himself. When discussing Husserl, Hadot points to the latter's use of a motto from St Augustine to support his

¹⁰² Joseph De Maistre, *The Generative Principle of Political Constitutions Studies on Sovereignty, Religion, and Enlightenment* (Routledge, London and New York, 2011), 108.

emphasis on the internal cogito as the ground of all reason: *Noli foras ire, in te redi, in interiore homine habitat veritas*: 'Do not lose your way from without, return to yourself, it is in the inner man that truth dwells.'¹⁰³ Hadot cites this appropriation by Husserl as an admirable motto by which philosophy can carry on the quest for rational certainty and self-sufficiency. However, Hadot, in his keenness for historical and scholarly accuracy, explains that Augustine's line is a derivation arising from a mistranslation from Paul's *Letter to the Ephesians*, where Paul calls on Christ to come and dwell in the inner man in order to help us to a fullness of life and purity of spirit (*in interiore homine Christum habitare*).

Yet Hadot seems to miss the greater philosophical implication of Paul's original exhortation, which is a declaration that the inner man alone by himself *is not sufficient* either to grasp the light of reason or live an ethically admirable life. The inner man needs something else, or in Christian terms someone else, that being Christ, for a genuine transformation.¹⁰⁴ In a further irony, it was Augustine himself who provided a sharply insightful and polemical criticism of the Stoics, and in particular their vindication of suicide as a rationally meditated means of dealing with the sufferings of life:

I am astounded at the effrontery of the Stoics in their contention that those ills are not ills at all, when they admit that if they should be so great that a wise man cannot or ought not to endure them, he is forced to put himself to death and depart from this life. Yet so great is the stupefying arrogance of those people who imagine that they find the Ultimate Good in this life and that they can attain happiness by their own efforts that their 'wise man' (that is, the wise man as described by them in their amazing idiocy), even if he goes blind, deaf and

¹⁰³ Hadot (1995), 65.

¹⁰⁴ Hadot tries to anticipate this criticism by claiming the Christian *Logos* and the *Logos* sought by the Stoic are identical, but certain Protestant forms of Christian theology hostile to Hellenic influences on Christianity would deny this. As well as being the *Logos*, Jesus is also in his human nature a man who interacts and forms the life of the believer. He is not purely abstract reason.

dumb, even if enfeebled in limb and tormented with pain, and the victim of every other kind of ill that could be mentioned or imagined, and thus is driven to do himself to death – that such a man would not blush to call that life of his, in the setting of all those ills, a life of happiness! What is a life of bliss, that seeks the aid of death to end it! [...] Then what keeps the Stoics from humbling their stiff-necked pride and admitting that it is a life of misery? ¹⁰⁵

Philosophy as protection

A foretold misfortune, when it at last occurs, is ten, is a hundred times harder to endure than one we did not expect. All during our apprehensions, we lived through it in advance, and when it happens these past torments are added to the present ones, and together they form a mass whose weight is intolerable. (TBB: 113)

Cioran's observation is akin to Augustine's and is a sharp critique of a central spiritual exercise of Stoicism and its related philosophies: the *praemeditatio malorum*, the anticipation of future evils, which, according to the theory, will negate or at least dull the impact made when the anticipated evil occurs. Cioran here takes the opposing view: to meditate on suffering is a form of suffering itself, so from a utilitarian perspective the amount of evil in the world is added to.

His observation also highlights a function of the imagination not considered by Hadot and his Stoic predecessors, namely that the imagination may be so powerful as to render the subject appalled and apprehensive by the very act of anticipatory foresight. It may simply be wiser to live in the moment without pondering the essentially illimitable number of evils that could befall us at any moment. From a practical perspective, it may simply be more

¹⁰⁵ Augustine, *City of God*, 19.4, translated by Henry Bettenson, (Penguin, 1984), 855.

efficacious to consciously limit the scope of our consciousness in order to be able to function at a very basic level in our quotidian lives. To employ an everyday example, those who suffer from fear of flying generally report a constant brooding and imagining of disaster when they have to fly. This form of *praemeditatio* is certainly not the kind of foresight that will aid them in living equitable lives. Hadot could reply that the nervous flyer is letting their irrational emotions intrude too much, but then this could be seen as a form of question-begging that assumes the efficacious nature of a reasoned anticipation to begin with. Similar examples can be found in the area of hypochondria, where an excessive brooding on potential illnesses makes a person's life obsessively unbalanced, and in a highly ironic sense from the perspective of the *praemeditatio*, in fact causes illness owing to excess stress and anxiety.

Hadot addresses this issue and the seeming contradiction that arises when the Stoic imperative to seek the higher universal stance of past, present and future is placed alongside the injunction to dwell solely in the present by attempting to abstract away future potential dangers: 'misfortunes...which are merely possible are not misfortunes *for us* [and] according to Stoic principles, misfortune itself – which may perhaps occur, is not really a misfortune.'¹⁰⁶ But this seems somehow contrived. If an imagined misfortune is not for us, then why adopt the initial universal perspective? And the claim that misfortune is not really misfortune seems forced at very best and may quickly collapse in the face of actual experience.

It is not the instinct of self-preservation that keeps us going, it is only the impossibility of *seeing* our future. Of seeing it? Of merely imagining it. If we knew all that lies ahead of us, no

¹⁰⁶ Hadot (1998), 206.

one would stoop to persist. Since every future disaster remains abstract, we cannot absorb it. Moreover, we do not even absorb it when it falls upon us and *replaces* us. (DQ: 124)

Cioran is here calling into question the very possibility of foresight and objective knowledge concerning the human condition. We may imagine, foresee, visualise and anticipate as much as we like, but whether such practices come close to the lived reality of what awaits is debatable. It is, of course, another manner of phrasing the common saying about the difference between expecting and receiving. Whereas for Hadot this is countered by the concept of eternity and the immensity of time performing the role of welcome anaesthetic upon our individual will, for Cioran there is something contrived and untrue to our lived experience in such a perspective:

We can conceive of eternity only by eliminating all the perishable, all that *counts* for us.

Eternity is absence, being that fills none of the functions of being; it is a privation erected into...something or other, hence it is nothing or, at most, an estimable fiction. (DQ: 152)

Time and becoming is the element in which our individuality unfurls and where the self finds its true mode of being. Cioran expressly condemns the ideal of unity and the dissolution of the ego favoured by Hadot and the Ancient schools:

If it were true that 'we breathe in the One' (Plotinus), on whom would we take revenge where every difference is blurred, where we commune in the indiscernible and lose our contours there? As a matter of fact, we breathe in the multiple; our kingdom is that of the "I", and through the "I" there is no salvation. To exist is to condescend to sensation, hence to self-affirmation. (HU: 62)

Concluding remarks

In this section I have presented certain core elements of the anthropological and ethical programs presented by Martha Nussbaum and Pierre Hadot. I have then furnished observations by Cioran that perform the role of a critique of their views. It seems a then inevitable and unavoidable question as to which outlook is the more correct. But of course there is rarely if ever in philosophy (outside of studies in logic and philosophy of mathematics perhaps) a means of adjudicating between rival claims. At best, we can aim for a presentation of competing views and see if any illumination or deepening of our view of the human situation follows. My main purpose here has been to propose that Cioran's perspective on the human condition affords us insights into certain key elements of human beings and their behaviour that receive less attention in most philosophical discourse than they merit. Of course, in many ways the divergent views discussed here represent a re-situating of the classical theological dispute between Augustinianism and Pelagianism, a conflict that is continually at work in most ethical argumentation even if it is less obvious due to the falling away of the Christian worldview in contemporary culture, a topic to which we shall return later. It is Cioran's strength to be able to harness insights from non-secular perspectives and apply them continuously in his survey of the human condition. Having indicated this, let us now turn to a closer examination of Cioran's relationship with religion.

Chapter 3

Cioran and Religion

Introduction

As noted at the end of the preceding chapter, Cioran's philosophical anthropology resonates with central elements of Christian thought, most notably that of Original Sin. Although commonly labelled as an atheist and a nihilist, Cioran's thinking on religion is certainly not that of the convinced materialist who regards all discussion of God and salvation as delusion and atavistic superstition. On the contrary, religion, faith and God are constant topics in his writings, and ones he dwells on with an obsessive force. Although he personally lacks faith, he discusses God with the urgency of a man with a serious investment in belief, or at least the need to believe. God is an object of thought that is interrogated relentlessly, with a mixture of wonder, horror, reverence, disdain and respect. The depth and seriousness of his engagement is perhaps expressed best in his declaration: 'Not one moment when I have not been conscious of being outside Paradise' (TBB: 30).

Cioran's "atheism" is of the religious variety, one that through the strength of dialectical negation finds meaning precisely in God's absence. The world is infused and made meaningful by that divine emptiness, and theological speculation becomes paramount, although riddled with paradox and contradiction. Cioran engages in a theology of the void, one that seeks God although doubting his existence, whilst simultaneously condemning life and being deeply attached to it. Consequently, it is unrealistic to expect Cioran's theological speculations to display the type of rigorous systematic coherence found in denominational

works of theology. To illustrate, I.P. Culianu comments on Cioran's divagations within a mere four pages of his essay on Joseph de Maistre:

First, we see him criticizing the Augustinian position that harm is a *privatio boni*. Then, straight away, he becomes a Manichaean to affirm that Good and Evil are coeternal principles. On the following page, he goes into the Occamist heresy, according to which man in the cosmos has no special value before God, making him no more important than ants. Two pages later, he delves eagerly into the territory of the Messalian heresy, stating that evil is part of human nature, and then he ultimately comes to Origenism. How can we explain human history if not with an original rift, a source of multiplicity and of evil? Four heresies in four pages. No one could envy Cioran this record, not even the heresiologists themselves.¹⁰⁷

To anticipate, Cioran's engagement with God and the Divine may, with qualifications, be considered as belonging in the family of irrational existentialism, the kind associated with philosophers such as Lev Shestov, Karl Jaspers, Nietzsche and others. The religious figures that compel his attention are those who come face to face with God, or who, failing that, cannot contain their unquenchable desire for God. Of particular interest to him are those individuals whose personalities may be labelled "extreme". In their depth of emotion, persistence and uncompromising engagement with the divine, Cioran's pantheon of religious heroes includes amongst others Paul, Luther, Pascal, and Simone Weil. It is the fanatical persistence with which those individuals seek to do battle with God and are

¹⁰⁷ Quoted in Mirko Integlia's *Tormented by God: The Mystic Nihilism of Emil Cioran* (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2019), 172.

unafraid of the consequences that follow upon their combat that compel his attention and admiration. The purpose of this chapter is to provide a general overview of this and other key themes in Cioran's engagement with religion which recur in greater detail in subsequent chapters.

Cioran's Eastern Orthodox background

In terms of Cioran's engagement with religion and his overall attitude to seeking God it can be contended that a major influence on his thought and method is one that has been by and large previously ignored, namely the Orthodoxy of his youth.¹⁰⁸

Cioran's father was a Romanian Orthodox priest, a figure whose authority was unquestioned not only in his household but in his native village. Cioran grew up in an atmosphere steeped in religion, with an especial Orthodox emphasis on the liturgy, and most importantly from a philosophical perspective the doctrine of *theosis*.¹⁰⁹ To abbreviate, *theosis* is the belief that the purpose of life is union with God, and that this is achievable via a synergetic process involving God's love, human self-transformation and ascetical self-emptying. In this regard, Orthodoxy differs quite significantly in tone and atmosphere from western Christianity and theological thought, as, to speak in broad but accurate terms, the latter has tended to favour a more juridical brand of theology that places emphasis on the fallen and sinful nature of the human being who can be saved in Catholicism only by the sacraments, penance and good works, and in Protestantism by divine intervention and grace. Orthodoxy

¹⁰⁸ Likewise, the fact that Nietzsche's father was a Lutheran minister appears to have merited little attention from scholars, with the notable exception of Giles Fraser's *Redeeming Nietzsche: On the Piety of Unbelief* (Routledge, 2002).

¹⁰⁹ The early chapters of Ilinca Zarifopol-Johnson (2009) provide a detailed account of Cioran's childhood and parents.

in general holds a more hopeful view of human capacities; it has been frequently observed that whereas western Christianity tends to focus more on the Cross and Jesus's sacrifice, Orthodoxy emphasises more the Resurrection and life eternal.¹¹⁰

As a useful guide to this division and as a platform from which Cioran's approach and tone is more comprehensible it is worthwhile quoting at length Nikolai Berdyaev, the eminent Russian thinker and critic, who wrote from a position of Orthodox belief:

To the spiritual nature of Orthodoxy belongs the primordial and inviolable ontologism which first presented itself as the manifestation of Orthodox life and only then, of Orthodox thought. The Christian West went by ways of critical thought in which the subject was opposed to the object, and thus the organic whole of thinking and the organic connection with life was violated. The West is more capable of a complex unfolding of its thinking, its reflection and criticism, its precise intellectualism. But here was a violation of the connection between the one who knows and thinks and the primordial and original existence. Cognition came out of life, and thinking came out of existence. Cognition and thinking did not pass through the spiritual wholeness of the person, in the organic unity of all his strengths.¹¹¹

Cioran would add to the final sentence 'and his weaknesses'. Mood, disposition, physical health and illness play key roles in Cioran's work, designed to expose the failings and limitations of more traditional rationalistic approaches to knowledge. Cioran lays great emphasis on the idea of a lost unity resulting from humanity's relentless pursuit of

¹¹⁰ Philip Sherrard's *The Greek East and The Latin West* (Oxford University Press, London, 1959) offers a comprehensive and comparatively impartial overview of doctrinal differences and emphases, despite Sherrard's personal commitment and clear preference for Orthodoxy.

¹¹¹ Berdyaev, Nikolai 'The Truth of Orthodoxy', <http://www.chebucto.ns.ca/Philosophy/Sui-Generis/Berdyaev/essays/orthodox.htm>. originally published in *Vestnik of the Russian West European Patriarchal Exarchate* (Paris, 1952), 4.

knowledge, devoting, as we shall see, a number of writings to the story of the trees of life and knowledge in Eden.

The emphasis Cioran places on human weakness and ignorance stems in part as a response and reaction to the doctrine of *theosis*, as outlined by Berdyaev:

The juridical understanding of redemption as a carrying out of a judicial process between God and man is somewhat foreign to Orthodoxy. It is closer to an ontological and a cosmic understanding of the appearance of a new creation and a renewed mankind. The idea of Theosis was the central and correct idea, the Deification of man and of the whole created world. Salvation is that Deification. And the whole created world, the whole cosmos is subject to Deification. Salvation is the enlightenment and transfiguration of creation and not a juridical justification.¹¹²

Where Cioran differs from this is in the presentation of a perennially Fallen world, where knowledge is partial and elusive, and humanity finds itself living in uncertainty and ignorance. He leans toward the western tradition in matters of Original Sin and the inescapability of our self-divided nature. Cioran does, however, share the broad scope of Orthodox thought, in that his remit does not confine itself to the local or narrowly historical but instead ranges over the entire spectrum of human existence, from its origins in natality until its imagined end. His perspective can be said to be an Absolutist one, in the broadest sense of having an eschatological horizon. To quote Berdyaev once more:

The final and most important feature of Orthodoxy is its eschatological consciousness. The early Christian eschatology, the anticipation of Christ's second appearance and the coming of the Resurrection, was to a greater extent, preserved in Orthodoxy. Orthodox eschatology

¹¹² Ibid.

means a lesser attachment to the world and earthly life and a greater turning towards heaven and eternity, i.e. to the Kingdom of God. In Western Christianity, the actualization of Christianity in the paths of history, the turning towards earthly efficiency and earthly organization resulted in the obscuring of the eschatological mystery...¹¹³

As may be inferred from the above, and once again at the risk of overgeneralisation, there is an extremely paradoxical approach to human possibility found in Orthodoxy, particularly in regard to a key theme of Cioran's investigations: humanity's physical embodiment. For the east, despite the lesser importance granted to earthly life, the body and earthly life is viewed more holistically in its eschatological approach; for the west, the body and history have often been viewed more as outright hindrances on the path to God, in an often reason-based, teleological approach derived from Aristotelean natural law as modified by Aquinas. The eastern view encourages Cioran to consider all elements of those religious thinkers with whom he grapples, not only their avowed doctrinal beliefs, but also their personality, health and disposition, a factor which helps explain his abiding fascination with figures such as Paul, Luther and Dostoyevsky. Similarly, the emphasis on eschatology is transferred by Cioran to the domain of history, where, as we shall see, he investigates the temporal process with an obsessive rigour in his quest for meaning.

Cioran and the anti-rational approach to God

An essay entitled 'The Philosophical Role of the Reformation' by Leszek Kolakowski provides further significant insight into the kind of viewpoint from which Cioran is operating, one that also offers a framework to chart Cioran's deviation from the holistic Orthodox approach into

¹¹³ Ibid.

a more western individualistic stance, although one that ultimately combines elements of both. Subtitled 'Martin Luther and the Reformation', Kolakowski's essay explores the general contempt felt for philosophy and natural reason that permeated the Reform movement. He traces the germ of this phenomenon to Luther, who writes in his 34th thesis that 'human nature has neither good precepts nor good will'¹¹⁴ and then proceeds to uncompromisingly attack Aristotle and the Scholastics. In Luther's view, anyone who claims logic is necessary to theology is a heretic, and all of Aristotle's thought is to theology as darkness is to light (*'Breviter, totus Aristoteles ad theologiam est tenebra ad lucem'*).¹¹⁵ Cioran appears to broadly agree with Luther's damning judgement in his own essay on the great Reformer: 'It is not an accident that Luther calls reason a whore. By nature and function, reason is a whore, surviving by simulation, versatility, and shamelessness [...] Only the naïve still proclaim it as our greatest possession. Luther has exposed it for what it is' (TE: 175).

Kolakowski then explores the two paths that developed from Reformation rejection of natural reason: the mystical and the existential. Each begins in the same place, a total resignation that is consequent upon the belief that a corrupt nature does not lead to God. Contrary to Aristotle, Aquinas and the Scholastics, there is no glimmer of light amidst the human soul that enables it to find its own way to salvation – instead the human being is corrupt all the way through and the best we have is an awareness of that wretchedness and unworthiness. Furthermore, nothing we can do in this fallen world with our fallen nature is sufficient to bring salvation, hence the Reformed denial of the efficacy of 'good works'. Even

¹¹⁴ Leszek Kolakowski, 'The Philosophical Role of the Reformation: Martin Luther and the Origins of Subjectivity' in *The Two Eyes of Spinoza & Other Essays on Philosophers* (St. Augustine's Press, 2004), 148 (*"nec rectum dictamen habet natura, nec bona voluntatem"*).

¹¹⁵ Calvin had a more benign view of natural reason, but ominously claimed that one of its functions was to ensure that we cannot plead ignorance of God at the Final Judgement.

the desire itself for salvation can be viewed as yet one more base and self-interested motivation.

According to Kolakowski, if we take this seriously then one of the few available paths is that of mysticism: we conclude that 'all individual existence is an evil, and the true fulfilment of human destiny must be loss of individuality and oneness with destiny, *theosis*: an existential transformation into the infinity of the original source of being'.¹¹⁶ It was this path that led to the great German mystical tradition that in turn led to Romanticism and eventually Hegel, although it should be noted here that Kolakowski's use of the term *theosis* differs somewhat from the Orthodox one, the latter maintaining as it does a full role for the individual in an earthly synergetic union with God. As we shall see, Cioran's first sustained piece of writing on religion is a study of the saints and mystics, and throughout his life he would frequent Meister Eckhart.

Kolakowski focuses, however, more on the existential than the mystical option, one that is of great relevance to providing insight into Cioran and his entire project. According to Kolakowski, the lack of faith in natural reason not only leads to belief in the collapse of salvation through works, it also destroys the idea of salvation through doctrine, due to the unbridgeable abyss opened up between the world of faith and the world of discursive thought. Faith does not now mean an endless quest for knowledge of God, the construction of prayers, rites and liturgy – it is instead wholly a matter for the inner self. It is faith pure and simple, undiluted by speculative cogitation, that is believed to lead to an entire regeneration of the spirit. Luther promulgates a faith that '*non nisi in homine interiore regnare possit*' ('is able to reign only in the inner man'). A consequence of this view is the

¹¹⁶ Kolakowski (2004), 154.

illegitimacy of churches, congregations, and liturgy. If all that is of any potential value is the inner self, then of what use are gatherings of people who formulate abstractions, rites and formulas? Before God each person stands alone facing judgement on their soul; the aggregation of humans in a self-designated collective has no relevance to the life of 'Faith alone'.¹¹⁷

What is the individual left with? All forms of external and worldly support are gone, belonging as they do to a corrupt nature. All that remains is a concrete and irreducible subjectivity, naked before the verdict of God. The only useful function our natural reason possesses is an entirely negative one: the ability to deny itself. We are left in a world where submission, waiting and personal humility is the only path available, whereby one seeks to tighten the individual self while simultaneously holding it in contempt *and* preserving a desire for that corrupt and sinful self to be saved. In Kolakowski's words, '[The existential consciousness] is condemned to an eternal anguish of uncertainty; it cannot lead to the final peace which mysticism brings, after long tribulations, to its chosen.'¹¹⁸ These themes and ideas were developed to the full by Kierkegaard in his condemnation of bourgeois Christendom in the 19th century, and it is of course Kierkegaard who inspires the existential school of the 20th century. Cioran himself will follow this trail, as his early interest in the saints and mystics eventually exhausts itself.

Although not mentioned by Kolakowski, another link in the chain from Luther to modern existentialism is Lev Shestov, the Ukrainian anti-rationalist thinker who produced a series of studies that sought to undermine reason as being a self-sufficient tool for understanding the

¹¹⁷ Of course Luther was obliged to disavow this line of thought to some extent, given the necessity of establishing a rival church to Rome, but that does not disqualify the logical consequence of his thought.

¹¹⁸ Kolakowski (1998), 157.

nature of the human condition, and perhaps more importantly denied that the kind of reason-centred ethical philosophies such as Stoicism and Epicureanism could ever lead to the kind of tranquil poise they promised in the face of an apparently indifferent universe. Although he never explicitly embraced religious faith, Shestov turned more and more to the Bible generally, and in particular the study of figures such Kierkegaard and Luther in his later writings.¹¹⁹ Cioran was a great admirer of his work and credited him as being the ‘thinker who enabled me to abandon philosophy (EN: 58)’, by which he meant systematic and analytic investigation.

It is into this school of isolated subjectivity, seeking salvation and not finding it that Cioran falls. Kolakowski’s description of those who follow the existential path describes Cioran in an almost uncannily accurate fashion: ‘If [the existential mind] discovers God, it will try to engage in a private dialogue with Him – a dialogue no one outside it can hear or understand or judge. If it does not discover him, it must see itself as a sterile absolute, with neither root nor ultimate aim: being for itself, pure negativity, “*passion inutile*.”’¹²⁰ Cioran’s more personal reflections on God and his own non-belief embody this mode perfectly. His thoughts trace the path of a consciousness attuned to the possibility of God, but which is unable to definitively find Him, and is instead confined to a purgatorial zone between faith and outright atheism.

¹¹⁹ Shestov’s most important work on these themes is *Athens and Jerusalem* (Ohio University Press, 2016).

¹²⁰ Kolakowski (1998), 159.

The individual struggle with God

Cioran shares Heidegger's view that we live in the era of 'the gods that have fled': 'History divides itself in two: a former time when people felt the vibrant nothingness of divinity and now, when the nothingness of the world is empty of the divine spirit' (TS: 6). From his first writing on a religious topic, *Tears and Saints*, Cioran holds to the view that God is, or was, the one to whom we speak in our darkest hours: 'Now we are inconsolable because we have no one to speak to. We have been reduced to confessing our loneliness to mortals. This world must once have lived *in God*' (TS: 5-6). God is the figure to whom we turn when we have abandoned or been abandoned by the world of human beings: 'The more you loathe humanity, the riper you are for God, for a dialogue with no one' (AA: 86). For Cioran, God is the limit figure of absolute solitude and isolation: 'If He is who is called God were not the symbol par excellence of solitude, I should never have paid Him the slightest attention. But ever intrigued by monsters, how could I neglect their adversary, more alone than any of them?' (AA: 202).

The confrontation of the individual with the limits of their finitude and the often catastrophic and extreme responses to such a predicament is of key importance to Cioran. It is from this that his love of the Old Testament comes, as so many of the stories therein consist of an individual encountering God and the dramatic consequences that follow. Adam, Noah, Abraham, Job et al have a personal relationship with the deity; paradoxically perhaps they are spared the need for faith in the sense of belief in 'things unseen'. For those individuals, religion is a lived experience, a personal encounter with an awesome power and mystery. There may be faithlessness in the sense of personal infidelity and disobedience, but there is no such phenomenon as doubt or disbelief. They have met God, they are not

susceptible to Cartesian doubt, they believe. Again, this is an enviable position for one haunted by scepticism and the disenchantment of modernity to the degree Cioran was.

Furthermore, the Old Testament is characterised by a lack of the moralism that Cioran perceives to be at the heart of the New Testament. In the former, we are presented primarily with a story of human disobedience and lack of fealty to God's commands that results frequently in catastrophe for the individual concerned, and, most dramatically with the Flood, humanity as a whole. A large portion of the appeal of this tale lies in its reflection of what Cioran considers to be an accurate depiction of human psychology and anthropology: humanity as self-willed, disobedient, and with an inclination toward calamity. Man is a Fallen creature that needs fear in order to obey a God who is portrayed often as a capricious and moody tyrant, one who frequently makes incomprehensible demands on his creatures. Cioran's sympathies lie with the bewildered and helpless protagonists, who cannot make sense of the position in which they find themselves, but who nevertheless strive to cope as best they can. It is this bafflement in much of the Old Testament's protagonists that Cioran finds so appealing in human history and behaviour generally: the absurdity of the impasse between consciousness and a world it has neither created nor can control. Cioran's attraction to Judaism also becomes a pertinent point to consider here. The Old Testament features prominently the Jewish tradition of 'protest', most clearly in the figure of Job and his lamentations over the apparent injustices of God's world. Cioran finds this an attractive and compelling activity, one lacking in the New Testament and the apparent unquestioning acceptance and obedience of the Apostles and Jesus's followers. The act of protest is an assertion of human dignity, and indeed Cioran's entire career and writing can be seen as belonging far more to the tradition of Biblical protest than it does to the activist existential tradition as exemplified by Sartre and Camus: 'Disagreement is a sign

of spiritual vitality. It culminates in disagreement with God. Were we to make peace with God, we wouldn't live anymore...' (TS: 75).

These issues are exemplified also by Cioran's life-long passion and obsession for Dostoyevsky. Whereas often perhaps a fixation for that author is a phenomenon of turbulent teenage years, for Cioran his love of the Russian author was permanent and unchanging. Of all the various cultural icons he revered it is probably fair to claim that Dostoyevsky occupied the pinnacle. It is the latter's "extremism" that Cioran found so amenable: the desperate search for faith, the resultant extreme psychological states and dispositions that are utterly unamenable to conventional society, the all-or-nothing quality of his writings. All of these features were brought by Cioran into his own musings on religion and in particular his reflections on the figures we have mentioned. Cioran's taste for the irrational becomes a relevant matter here. He is not an irrationalist of the mindless, nihilistic variety. His is a protest against the limitations of reason that would seek to impose a straitjacket of thought on the 'rational man', as exemplified, for example, in the Stoical tradition. His irrationality is in the same genealogical tradition of Dostoyevsky's Underground Man, and Lev Shestov's lifelong assault on the claims of reason to be in perfect harmony with the universe and its operations.¹²¹ It is in those books of the Old Testament such as Job and Ecclesiastes that such a protest is embodied in its purest dramatic form, one most likely inaccessible to conventional philosophy. For Cioran, God is the only worthy adversary. Man in his limitations is a comparatively petty opponent, whose ways and patterns are all too clearly discernible to a disenchanted observer. God's absence,

¹²¹ See in particular for this theme Shestov's *Dostoevsky, Tolstoy and Nietzsche* (Ohio University Press, 1969).

unpredictability and apparent whimsy make him a far more compelling target for the form of thought practised by Cioran.

Cioran and the Saints

The seriousness of Cioran's engagement with religion can be gauged from the fact that one of his first books, *Tears and Saints*, is a study, or rather compendium of observations and encomia of the medieval saints who obsessed him in his youth. In particular, Cioran focuses on female saints, the most prominent of whom for him were Teresa of Avila and Catherine of Siena.

Ostensibly, Cioran's study can be compared to Nietzsche's analysis of the character and motivations of the Christian saint and ascetic.¹²² But whereas Nietzsche operates entirely from within a hermeneutic of suspicion and disbelief Cioran is more sympathetic and admiring of those figures. He is impressed and indeed awe-struck by the devotion of those who seek a personal union with God and who shun worldly commitments and practices: 'Shall I ever be so pure that only saints' tears could be my mirror?' (TS: 5). The willpower necessary for such an undertaking and vocation strike him as exceptional, and as a worthy object of study in terms of the extremities that human beings are capable of. The mystical ecstasy the saints aspired to and claimed to have periodically attained elevates them above the more humdrum forms of human love and sexuality: 'Love for mankind renders saints uninteresting. Their virtue has no biographical interest. When we talk of love, only God can ward off banality' (TS: 8). The most compelling feature of the female saints for Cioran is

¹²² A good chronological exploration of Nietzsche's shifting views on sainthood can be found in David McPherson's 'Nietzsche, Cosmodicy, and the Saintly Ideal', *Philosophy* Vol. 91, Issue 1, January 2016, 39-67.

what he perceives to be a form of erotic suffering in their desire for union with Christ:

‘Without the *voluptuousness of suffering*, saintliness would not interest us any more than a medieval intrigue in some little provincial town. Suffering is man’s only biography; its *voluptuousness*, the saint’s’ (TS: 9).

Cioran is intrigued by the saints’ desire to overcome the boundaries of the ordinary human condition. The quotidian and the normal are anathema to the saint – he or she also refuses to be only an ordinary believer; instead, they desire to transcend the earthly and attain *theosis* in the most direct way imaginable: ‘The desire to be *in* God does not go with life *near* or *under* him, the lot of fallen creatures. And if I cannot live, let me at least die in God. Or better still, let me be buried *alive* in him!’ (TS: 63).

Yet as always with Cioran, his attitudes are ambivalent and often contradictory. While on the one hand he declares that ‘an appetite for God can only be a symbol of nihilism’ and ‘betrays a deficiency of vital instincts’, on the other mysticism is ‘an eruption of the absolute into history. Like music, it is the crowning of culture, its ultimate justification’ (TS: 65).

Likewise, although Cioran reveres the saints, in a manner reminiscent of Hume and Nietzsche he periodically expresses his suspicion of the Christianity without which they would not exist: ‘Good health is the best weapon against religion. Healthy bodies and healthy minds have never been shaken by religious fears. Christianity has exploited for its benefits all the illnesses that plague mankind’ (TS: 67).

Paul and Luther

If saints were initially objects of ambivalent awe for Cioran, the Apostle Paul is a figure whom Cioran loathes, albeit with a grudging recognition that in Paul he sees a mirror image of the fanatical and uncompromising aspects of his own character which found their fullest expression in his youthful flirtation with far-right ideology. Paul's intensity, his unyielding nature and his hatred of those whom he considers the enemies of Christ are what Cioran considers to be the former's strengths and the main forces behind the founding of the institutionalised Christianity of which he is so suspicious.

Primarily, Cioran finds Paul's observations on appropriate sexual conduct to be 'nothing short of disgusting' (TE: 169). He blames Paul for imposing inhibitions that 'still paralyze our instincts' two millennia after his life. Equally serious is Paul's lack of style and poetic vision. In contrast to the saints and mystics he admires, Paul has 'none of the prophets' lyricism, none of their cosmic and elegiac accents' (TE: 169). Instead, he has only 'bad taste, verbiage and marketplace rant.' Cioran's Paul is one who has a 'breathless frenzy, plebeian hysteria, hated of learning.' Cioran attributes the aspects of Paul's character that he finds distasteful to the latter's 'insecurity', which in turn led to the hectoring and bullying nature of the Epistles. It is Cioran's allegiance to philosophy, or at least his own variety of it, that fuels his loathing for Paul, whom he labels as 'the first barker of the Greco-Roman world' (TE: 171). Cioran's ideals are silence, solitude, withdrawal and detachment (however imperfectly he practises them himself), but in Paul he sees the first and most powerful example of a hectoring religious demagogue.

Paul's extremism in turn inspires some of Cioran's most extreme polemics: 'To hate him *up close*, as a contemporary, I cancel out twenty centuries and follow him on his rounds: his

successes discourage me, his tortures fill me with delight' (TE: 172). He views Paul as the harbinger of decadence, the leader of a movement that would end Antiquity and its philosophical culture, in particular that of Stoicism. Cioran appears to believe that Christianity eliminated the possibility of Stoicism gaining wider traction amongst people at large, in which case, 'resignation, had it become compulsory, would have taught us to endure our misfortunes with dignity, to contemplate our nullity in silence' (TE: 173). He imagines a scenario where we would have suffered 'our destinies without a murmur: accusing no one, condescending to neither melancholy nor mirth nor regret, reducing our relations with the universe to a harmonious system of regrets.' Characteristically, such an idealisation would, as we have seen in the previous chapter, eventually give way to disappointment and weariness with the Stoic goal.

Of direct descent from Paul in Cioran's pantheon of Christian icons is Martin Luther. Again, Cioran's interest in Luther comes from the latter's utter intransigence, his refusal to compromise and the depths of his hatreds, except that Cioran is far more favourably disposed to the Reformer than to Paul.¹²³ Luther is distinguished in Cioran's view for embodying precisely the form of holistic approach toward the Divine favoured in Orthodoxy and one that stands directly opposed to Stoicism:

If I so love Luther, it's because one cannot read anything of his, letter, treatise, declaration, without saying to oneself 'here is a man in his body and his bones'. And in fact he is never *abstract*, everything he puts forward is full of himself, it is *him* everywhere. It's the

¹²³ It is quite probable that Cioran was influenced to explore Luther's works by the influence of Lev Shestov, who praised the Reformer for his rebellion against reason in works such as *Sola Fide* and *Athens and Jerusalem*.

contrary of detachment - this ideal, so opposed to my nature, which I've set for myself for so many years to no avail.' (CH: 608)

Equally important for Cioran was the fact that Luther re-vitalised what Cioran perceives to have been a moribund Christianity, static and dead in its certainties and social embeddedness. Luther achieved this by re-igniting the importance of sin and evil. In doing so, he presented a picture of the human being that was fuller and more authentic than a sanctified notion of goodness that sought to relegate the devil to a metaphor: 'Pure, religion would be sterile; what is profound and virulent in it is not the divine but the demoniacal. And the attempt to spare it the Devil's society would render it anaemic and mawkish, would degrade it' (CH: 175).

Cioran attributes this rehabilitation of Satan to Luther's instinctive religious genius, one that stemmed from his own passionate temperament, unencumbered by rationalisations that would seek to render the cosmic drama of Christianity more palpable to those with a distaste for anything beyond the rational:

The Devil is necessary. The religion that dispenses with the Enemy debilitates itself, grows sterile, becomes a vague querulous piety. Luther, with the strength of his peasant neurasthenia, possessed the necessary instinct to collar both the forces of Good and those of Evil. Unceremonious, savory, his coarseness is never offensive. (CH: 175)

Nevertheless, Cioran also suspects a large amount of self-aggrandising melodrama in Luther's public career, one that served to promote his own importance to the world: 'Far from being a haven, Luther's faith was a self-induced shipwreck, eagerly sought after, a danger which flattered and exalted him in his own eyes' (CH: 175). It is difficult to avoid speculating that this observation contains a veiled self-critique.

Cioran and Simone Weil

As cited earlier, in an essay on figures whose extreme lives mirror the extreme and uncompromising nature of their beliefs Susan Sontag writes that '[They] have their authority with us because of their air of unhealthiness. Their unhealthiness is their soundness and what carries conviction.'¹²⁴ One such figure who impresses and holds Cioran's attention and admiration is Simone Weil. The extreme nature of her life and beliefs is an obvious attraction for the aphorist whose own life pursued an extremity of a different order. Many of Weil's followers regard her as a veritable saint and martyr, but for Cioran she is a compelling figure largely because she embodies much of the contradiction and incoherence that can mark a life entirely devoted to God. A large part of her power for him lies in the fact that Weil's pursuit of God took place within a theology of absence, and her own life was a pursuit of the Divine through the most emblematic experiences of the first half of the century: factory life, war, and Nazism.

Weil's thoughts on God are of the sort that appeal to Cioran, insofar as Weil's deity inclines strongly toward a God that is possible only to those who have followed the path of the existential disavowal of reason outlined earlier. In many ways it is a form of negative mysticism, in that Weil's God is a reality only in being manifested in the love felt and shown by the seeker. It is not an external object that can be found and worshipped: 'We have to believe in a God who is like the true God in everything except that he does not exist.'¹²⁵

Unlike Cioran, who ploughs the emptiness of contemporary human life in a vain quest for

¹²⁴ Sontag (1963).

¹²⁵ Weil (2002), 115.

the divine, for Weil, the void itself is the necessary precondition for God to manifest himself in the empty interior of the suffering individual: 'God's absence is the divine form of presence which corresponds to evil – an absence that is felt.'¹²⁶

Weil's views on evil and its origin are also of a kind to appeal to Cioran. Weil employs a version of the Jewish notion of divine withdrawal, *Tsimtsum*, to speculate that God emptied himself and withdrew in order to permit the creation of the world. Sin and evil are attributes of this existence, the fact that there is something other than God. By making the world the result of God's withdrawal, Weil can at once both claim that God is the author of the source of evil and sin, whilst simultaneously declaring that such phenomena occur only in his absence.¹²⁷ For Weil, we can therefore exist only in this absence, a position that is parallel but not identical to Cioran's existence in a world absent of God. More directly appealing to Cioran's latent Gnosticism is Weil's characterisation of God's choice of Creation as a culpable act: 'The great crime of God against us is that he created us; that we exist. Our great crime against God is our existence. When we forgive God our existence, our existence is forgiven by God.'¹²⁸ Likewise, passive acceptance is the most that Weil appears to offer in way of coping with our experience in a world dominated by the mechanisms that afflict us, the 'gravity' of the natural world to which she contrasts an unforeseeable and only occasionally illuminating Grace. To consciously strive to do good may entail the unintentional creation of evil, in a smaller scale repetition of God's creation of the world. Yet if Weil's thoughts bear points of contact with Cioran's religious views, in keeping with his focus on the moods and dispositions of those who compelled his attention, it is her

¹²⁶ Weil (2013), 343.

¹²⁷ The Thomist theory of second-tier causality bears some resemblance to Weil's ideas, although God is certainly not absent in Thomas's view of the world.

¹²⁸ Weil (1970), 263.

personality that intrigues him even more. As a figure who espoused in her writings a form of extreme self-abnegation and humility to God's will, and a pursuit of an all-encompassing love and mercy that dwelt on human suffering to an almost unnatural degree, Weil simultaneously embodies a highly intolerant and unforgiving attitude toward the world and others. This intolerance of other cultures and religions is clear in her writings yet has evoked little comment from critics and admirers.¹²⁹ In particular, her hatred for her native Judaism possesses a virulence little matched in other writers. She groups Ancient Israel, Rome and Nazi Germany as a set of analogous social formations designed to embody totalitarianism and stifle the individual spirit, yet she is utterly oblivious to her own intolerance of views that differ from her own. Whereas contemporary ethical attitudes may find Weil's intransigence and single-mindedness distasteful or unacceptable, for Cioran such extremes only serve to add to her authenticity. As we shall see presently in our discussion of Joseph de Maistre, Cioran supports the view that a religion can only be taken seriously if it declares itself to be true before all others, if it shuns tolerance, ecumenism and so on. The truest representatives of a religion are those who brook no opposition and express no doubt – only then can the forces of scepticism and nihilism be held at bay. In her dogmatism and fanaticism Cioran likens Weil to an Old Testament Prophet:

A long discussion yesterday evening with a Hungarian poet...about Simone Weil, whom he considers a saint. I said I admired her too, but that she wasn't a saint, that she had too much of that passion in her, that intolerance she hated in the Old Testament from which she emerged and which she resembles in spite of her contempt for it. A female Ezekiel or Isaiah. Without faith and the reservations which faith implies and imposes, she would have been

¹²⁹ The major exception being Paul Giniewski's refreshingly critical and unsentimental *Simone Weil: ou, La haine de soi* (Berg International, 1978).

fiercely ambitious. What stands out in her is the will to force acceptance of her point of view at all costs, by overwhelming or even doing violence to her interlocutor. I also told the Magyar poet that she had as much will and energy and determination as a Hitler...¹³⁰

Citing Weil's remark that 'every time I think of Christ's crucifixion, I commit the sin of envy', Cioran remarks 'I am stupified by the pride of this unbearable woman who came within a hair's breath of sainthood. Her desire for martyrdom, her sublime impudence. But what is a martyr? A mixture of saint and provocateur' (CH: 6-7).

No doubt there is temptation to view Cioran's attraction toward such "extreme" figures as being a reaction against his own all-pervasive scepticism, a desire to seek refuge from the void in the certainties those individuals espoused, as well as a refuge from the flattening spiritual effects of an all-pervasive spiritual modernity. Doubtless there is a measure of truth in such speculation. Nevertheless, his investigations and observations also provide a comparatively rare and unique perspective on such figures, concerning whom the critical literature is often unadventurously neutral and discreet. Cioran may also be viewed as a thinker who voices our fantasies of the extreme that we seek to avoid acknowledging and from which we hide, even while knowing they exist. (This will also be apparent later when we discuss his views on politics and dictatorships).

Cioran and Joseph de Maistre

A figure to whom Cioran devoted one of his longest essays was Joseph de Maistre, a Savoyard aristocrat, lawyer and later ambassador to the Russian court of Alexander the

¹³⁰ Cioran, E.M. Howard, Richard & Manea, Norman 'From "Cahiers"' *Conjunctions*, 1998, No.31, 299.

First.¹³¹ A devout ultra-montanist Catholic who first welcomed the initial reforms of the French Revolution, de Maistre was horrified by the excesses of violence and de-Christianization that ensued in the early 1790s. His reaction to this was to engage in a series of writings that deepened his loyalty to the Pope, expressed his unshakeable belief in a Divine Providence that acted with utter ruthlessness in human affairs, and expressed a vision of humanity which saw it as almost utterly corrupt and in the grips of an inescapable Original Sin.¹³²

De Maistre's view of the innate and inescapable nature of human and social violence is unforgiving and uncompromising:

In the whole vast dome of living nature there reigns an open violence. A kind of prescriptive fury which arms all the creatures to their common doom: as soon as you leave the inanimate kingdom you find the decree of violent death inscribed on the very frontiers of life. You feel it already in the vegetable kingdom: from the great catalpa to the humblest herb, how many plants die and how many are killed; but, from the moment you enter the animal kingdom, this law is suddenly in the most dreadful evidence. A Power, a violence, at once hidden and palpable. . . has in each species appointed a certain number of animals to devour the others. . . And who [in this general carnage] exterminates him who will exterminate all others? Himself. It is man who is charged with the slaughter of man. . . The whole earth, perpetually steeped in blood, is nothing but a vast altar upon which all that is living must be sacrificed without end, without measure, without pause, until the consummation of things, until evil is extinct, until the death of death.¹³³

¹³¹ 'Joseph de Maistre An Essay on Reactionary Thought' in E.M. Cioran *Anathemas and Admirations* (Arcade Publishing, 1991), 22-78.

¹³² Currently, the only modern biography of de Maistre is Richard le Brun's *Joseph de Maistre: An intellectual militant* (1998), which unfortunately contains very little analysis of the writings themselves and is reviewed by Steiner (1988).

¹³³ De Maistre (1993), 216.

De Maistre is implacably opposed to Enlightenment conceptions of a liberating Reason being employed to free Man from “superstition” and pave the way to a society based on a conception of humanity and the world that excludes the Divine. As the Revolution continued in a seemingly unstoppable manner, de Maistre occupied an even more intransigent reactionary position, summed up best in his statement that ‘everything good in human life comes from the priests.’

The power of de Maistre’s low view of humanity and the likelihood of the kind of world that would result from the abandonment of Christianity is best expressed by George Steiner:

Joseph de Maistre’s ‘night-vision’ in the *Soirées* may well be the principal feat of precise foresight in the history of modern political thought and theory. It makes the ‘futurology’ of Rousseau, of Hegel and Marx look utterly shallow. The age of the Gulag and of Auschwitz, of famine and of ubiquitous torture, of Idi Amin, of Pol Pot and of Ceaucescu is exactly that which de Maistre announced. The nuclear threat, the ecological laying waste of our planet, the leap of endemic, possibly pandemic, illness out of the very matrix of libertarian progress, are correspondent to the analysis and prevision of the *Soirées*.¹³⁴

In a manner typical of studies of philosophers by fellow-philosophers, Cioran’s 1958 essay on de Maistre reveals much of his own views as well as providing an exposition of the latter’s. One key attraction of de Maistre for Cioran is the manner in which - like Paul, Luther and Weil - he conducts his writing and thinking, namely in an aggressive and uncompromising style characterised by writing of high intensity and aggressive polemic. De Maistre ‘philosophises with a hammer’ and has no interest in contemplating other perspectives. As an example, Cioran cites de Maistre’s belief in the literal existence of Adam

¹³⁴ George Steiner, ‘Darkness Visible’ *London Review of Books* November 24, 1988.

and Eve: 'The entire human race is descended from one couple. This truth has been denied like all the rest; and what of that?' Cioran simultaneously condemns and approves this strategy, noting that: 'The original thinker forges ahead rather than digging in: he is...an enthusiast, a breakneck...In order to offer any opinion about anything, bravura action and a certain capacity for thoughtlessness are necessary' (AA: 73). It is this intransigence combined with a high rhetorical style that makes de Maistre and Cioran kindred thinkers.

A further point of contact between Cioran and de Maistre is their shared love of the Hebrew books of the Bible. According to Cioran, de Maistre 'in his style evokes the image of an Old Testament prophet,' (AA: 24) as seen in his blanket condemnations of his enemies and unwillingness to brook even the idea of compromise. 'Any Frenchman who is a friend to the Jansenists is either a fool or a Jansenist'; 'Everything in the French Revolution is miraculously bad' and, perhaps most shocking to contemporary sensibilities, 'In all the universe there can be nothing more peaceful, more circumspect, more humane by nature than the tribunal of the [Spanish] Inquisition' (AA: 25). Cioran concurs with de Maistre in his emphasis on the Old Testament God and the necessity of emphasising unquestionable authority, as in his opinion, 'we understand nothing about religions if we suppose that man flees a capricious, wicked and even ferocious divinity, or if we forget that he loves fear to the point of frenzy' (AA: 34).

For de Maistre, the claims of Enlightenment philosophy were not merely incorrect, they were vain and deluded attempts to ignore an unpalatable truth about the world: 'There is only violence in the universe, but we are deceived by modern philosophy, which asserts that all is for the best, whereas the worst has corrupted everything, and in a very real sense, all is for the worst, since nothing is where it belongs' (AA: 27). Cioran utilises de Maistre's

comments on evil and worldly disorder to put forward his own thoughts on the topic.

According to Cioran, de Maistre involves himself in a paradox, as, on the one hand, he appears to cleave to a semi-Manichean or Gnostic view when he states that 'Everything is evil' yet also, in Augustinian fashion, states that 'evil is a purely negative force', that has 'nothing in common with existence' and is a 'schism in being' (AA: 35). Cioran adheres to a variation of the first view, arguing that 'Evil is worth [*vaut le bien*] as much as Good, even exceeds it in indestructability and plenitude' (AA: 35). By 'worth' Cioran is referring to evil not in terms of moral value, but rather in terms of effective potency. Again, in his typical style, Cioran appears to reject the position that he has just affirmed – evil as privation – and in a view that is considered heretical in Christian thought, he holds that 'Good and Evil principles coexist and mingle in God' (AA: 35). It is only this view that allows us to retain any coherence when contemplating the issue of God's omnipotence, for if we attribute only good to God we then have no way of conferring intelligibility on the world, 'on all it contains that is monstrous, mad and absurd' (AA: 35). For Cioran, it is evil that is the motor of all action; it is the force that enables us to escape from the prison of the self and express ourselves within the world, as otherwise we would 'vegetate in [the] monotonous perfection of the Good.'

Indeed, in Cioran's view it was the principle of Evil operating in God that moved him to create the world of Becoming, but, in a typically playful and perverse reading, we are not, as long as we choose to remain active in the world, permitted to blame God, as his "prestige" as the first guilty party in Creation is unassailable. According to Cioran, 'By making us his accomplices, He associated us with that vast movement of solidarity in Evil which sustains and affirms the universal confusion' (AA:36). The further corollary that seems derivable from Cioran's position is that we have no right to complain about God or the world's evil as

long as we knowingly continue to participate in that self-same world. As long as we eat, consume, and reproduce we are his willing accomplices. It is such a view that is one factor in Cioran's admiration for monks, hermits and those who withdraw from the world's affairs.

De Maistre's view of human suffering is one that could potentially be termed as deeply misanthropic and kindred to Cioran's, although it could be seen as orthodox from certain theological perspectives, and connects with the Romanian's view of God as the author of evil and suffering: 'No man is punished as just, but always as a man, so it is untrue to say that virtue suffers in this world: it is human nature that suffers, and that always deserves to do so' (AA: 36). For those who would protest the seemingly incomprehensible suffering of the world, de Maistre takes the side of God when responding to Job's complaints: 'Do you suppose there is some common legislator above God who has prescribed how he must act toward Man?' De Maistre's God is a God of awesome power, one that strikes fear into the hearts of men: 'The more terrible God seems to us, the more we must redouble our religious fear of Him, the more ardent and indefatigable our prayers must become...' (AA: 37). Here we encounter a feature common perhaps to many thinkers marginal to the mainstream: a certain fetishization or love of violence, or at least of the fantasy of violence.

In a telling passage for Cioran that bolsters his own claims that God is inescapable, regardless of whether one believes or doubts in him, de Maistre portrays a universe where any attempt to evade or ignore God is futile: 'I ask all the malcontents, what should be done? Depart from the empire, perhaps? Impossible: it is everywhere, and nothing is outside it. Complain, sulk, write against the sovereign? Only to be trashed or put to death' (AA: 37). De Maistre's God seems very distant from the world of the New Testament, where God is portrayed as a figure of love and forgiveness. Indeed, de Maistre's recommendation

for modes of worship is entirely fatalistic: 'There is no better side to take than that of resignation and respect, I may even say of love: for [...] He must absolutely be served, is it not better (whatever He be) to serve Him with love than without love?' (AA: 37).

For De Maistre, and as for Cioran, the topic of Original Sin is of vital importance. De Maistre's views on the effects of the Fall are at the core of his philosophical anthropology. For him, humans are fundamentally self-divided creatures who cannot maintain inner unity or fixedness of purpose for any serious length of time. His view combines the Platonic tripartite division of the soul with Christian views of our sinful nature:

Every intellect is by its very nature the result single yet in three parts, of a perception that apprehends, a reason affirms, and a will. The first two powers are only weakened in man, but the third is broken [...] It is in the third power that man senses himself fatally wounded. He does not know what he wants; he wants what he does not want; he does not want what he wants; he would want to want. He sees in himself something that is not himself and is stronger than himself.¹³⁵

Cioran dissents, however, from de Maistre in locating the cause of this ontological fracture. According to the latter (and according to standard Catholic theology), Original Sin is the result of an original transgression: 'All suffering is a torment imposed for some crime, present or original.' Cioran, however, prefers to interpret the doctrine as indicating a 'flaw, a vice of nature [...] It is inscribed in our very essence: primordial disorder, calamity affecting good and wicked, virtuous and vicious alike' (AA: 38).

Consequently, it may be argued that while Cioran is committed to the same bleak and unadorned view of the world and human behaviour as de Maistre ('His observations seem

¹³⁵ De Maistre (1993), 36-37.

to us exact'), his view of the human condition is, if anything, more pessimistic than the latter's. For de Maistre, human weakness and self-division comes from a primordial transgression that can be overcome eventually by God's grace, even if that remedy involves long and tortuous suffering. For Cioran, a form of brokenness and entropy is built into the originary human condition – as we shall see, whether there exists a way out for him is never fully resolved in his work. In any event, however he may differ from de Maistre in his analysis of the precise cause, he concurs in the general structure of the event: '[Original Sin] traces our failure to our separation from the All.' For de Maistre that 'All' is a loving and obedient relationship with God; for Cioran it is the sheer fact of having been born, existence itself.

For both Cioran and de Maistre, the attraction of the doctrine of Original Sin also lies partly in its recourse as a weapon against revolutionary doctrines and utopian schemes: 'Does it not postulate the invariability of human nature, irremediably doomed to corruption and collapse?' (AA: 42). Cioran further expands this thought by claiming all varieties of metaphysics partake in this model: 'All metaphysics are reactionary, as becomes any form of thought that, seeking constants, emancipates itself from the superstition of the diverse and the possible' (AA: 42). There then appears a subsequent consequence that all attempts at action that would significantly alter human life are futile and not worthy of consideration. Cioran connects this with the appeal of theocratic rule: namely that Man is too inherently corrupt to act in a just matter: 'He is too corrupt to deserve freedom [...] he does not know how to use it, and that when it is granted him, he uses it against himself' (AA: 47).

However, while the two share many unflattering views of human possibility and enlightenment, there are key differences. For Cioran, de Maistre is not attuned to the one

aspect of religion that he himself finds so compelling. The Savoyard is 'indifferent to the encounter of human solitude and divine solitude, much more accessible to the problems of religion than to the dramas of faith' (AA: 49). His view of Christianity, and in particular Catholicism, is a juridical and political one first and foremost. Much of his writing is intended to shore up the power of the Catholic Church, and to sustain it under the onslaught of the French Revolution. As Cioran wittily puts it: 'If he preferred the Father to the Son, he preferred the Pope to either' (AA: 49).

Yet occasionally de Maistre is compelled, in spite of himself, to consider theological issues that transcend the political: 'But if we consider men, comparing them with each other, what will become of them, when Evil being annihilated, there will be no more passion or personal commitment? What will the Self become when all thoughts will be common, like all desires, when all minds will see each other as they are seen?' (AA: 50). De Maistre finds himself puzzled by a paradox that seems inescapable when considering the search for union with God, one that reminds us of Cioran's criticism of the putative 'World-Soul' of Stoicism: can we speak meaningfully of absorption into God if the self that seeks is dissipated or annihilated and no longer has a personal perspective with which to be aware of mystical union? Such disquietude reminds us of Kolakowski's characterisation of the alienated soul who yearns for God but is unwilling to sacrifice his own individuality to attain it. The most explicit expression of this dilemma comes when de Maistre declares that 'Man is subject to time, and nonetheless he is by nature alien to time, so much so that the notion of eternal happiness, joined to that of time, fatigues and frightens him' (AA: 53).

Connected with the themes of the individual and his place in the whole is the necessity, according to de Maistre, for strong authority in order to ensure successful adherence to

religious belief. Men left to themselves are weak and unable to resist temptation – only a higher authority invested with Divine right can keep them in check. In this world that duty, divinely sanctioned, belongs to the Catholic Church, with the Pope and his infallible decrees at the summit. But according to Cioran, de Maistre would find no place in the Catholicism of today, which is ‘prudent, accommodating, measured’ and as a result is ‘in utter deliquescence’ (AA: 65). Cioran records an ironic instance of encountering this form of ecclesiastical weakening and self-destruction:

The eminent ecclesiastic sneered at Original Sin. “That sin is your livelihood. Without it you would starve to death, for your ministry would have no further meaning. If man has not fallen since his origins, why has Christ come? To redeem whom, and what?” To my objections, his sole response was a condescending smile. A religion is finished when only its adversaries strive to preserve its integrity. (AA: 18-19)

Cioran believes that only by shunning ecumenism, by declaring sole possession of the truth and by displaying a ruthless intolerance can a religion survive: ‘A faith that acknowledges other faiths, that does not believe itself to possess a monopoly on truth, is doomed to ruin, [resigns] itself to being no more than a phenomenon of civilization’ (AA: 74).

Cioran ends his essay with an apparent summary condemnation of de Maistre’s overall thought: ‘the more we frequent him, the more we are reminded, a contrario, of the delights of scepticism or of the crying need for a vindication of heresy’ (AA: 78). Yet it is worthwhile noting that in his diaries he confesses to having been seduced by his views: ‘I have almost ended by adopting the views of those I have most opposed...Having attacked Joseph de Maistre, I suffered his contagion...By dint of thinking against someone or something, you become its prisoner, and reach the point of loving that servitude’ (CH: 283).

Cioran and J.S. Bach

If de Maistre embodied a pole of the negative affinities Cioran felt for Christianity, J.S. Bach represented the antipode. Of central importance to his engagement with religion, and indeed his life as a whole, was his relationship with Bach's music. Cioran idolised the composer his entire life, but his love for Bach's music was not confined purely to aesthetic dimensions: it also encroached on his thinking regarding the nature of God and how one may come to experience his presence, or at least intimate the possibility of that presence.

Inevitably, Cioran expressed these possibilities in his typically exaggerated manner: 'Bach's music is the only argument proving the creation of the Universe cannot be regarded as a complete failure. Without Bach, God would be a complete second-rate figure.' More sardonically, he declared that 'If there is anyone who owes everything to Bach, it is undoubtedly God' (AGD: 116). Cioran's devotion to the composer was of the utmost personal importance, and he often indicates that it is Bach who saved him from the abyss and despair of total non-belief: 'And when you think that so many theologians and philosophers have lost days and nights in searching arguments for His existence, forgetting the only valid argument: Bach.'¹³⁶ Regular attendances at performances of Bach's music were a staple of his life: 'At the Church of Saint-Séverin listening to the organ and 'The Art of Fugue', I repeated to myself: "Here is the refutation of all my anathemas"' (AA: 21).

¹³⁶ Cioran quoted in Vasile Chira, 'The Metaphysics and Theology of Music' citing *Cioran și muzica .Antologie.* text selection by Aurel Cioran, Edition coordinated by Vlad Zografi. (Bucharest: Humanitas PH. 1996).

It is worthwhile to observe that one of the most prominent Orthodox theologians writing today is of a similar mind to Cioran. David Bentley Hart, in his magnum opus *The Beauty of the Infinite*, writes that 'Bach is the greatest of Christian theologians, the most inspired witness to the *ordo amoris* in the fabric of being [...] No one as compellingly demonstrates that the infinite is beauty and beauty is infinite.'¹³⁷ For Hart, Bach's music possesses a boundless openness and variation that yet relies on a fundamental adherence to basic and simple chords and themes. In Hart's view, this mirrors perfectly the eternal openness and variation in Creation that he believes lies in Christian Trinitarianism. But whereas for Hart, a committed believer, Bach is an expression of God's beauty and generosity, for Cioran, Bach is more of a tantalising possibility, a hint or suggestion of another order of things, but one that cannot by itself provide irrefutable proof of the Divine.¹³⁸

Of course, criticisms of the aesthetic approach to establishing the existence of the Divine are readily available: one may simply deny that aesthetic pleasure is a proof of anything other than itself, a subjective experience, usually quite fleeting, that makes up a very small part of experience for most people. More bluntly, there are those who are simply indifferent, or even hostile, to the music of Bach. It is worth noting that Samuel Beckett, a writer sometimes associated with Cioran and a personal friend of his, held Bach in contempt, referring to him as 'the divine sewing machine'. Bach's music was too formally perfect, too mathematical, and theologically compelling to sit well with Beckett's vision of a broken universe. According to his cousin John Beckett, himself a composer, Beckett despised 'the seamless, and short, endlessly repeated musical phrases.'¹³⁹ However, it should also be

¹³⁷ David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite* (William B Eerdmans Publishing, 2004), 282-283.

¹³⁸ For an exploration of Bach's theological dimensions see Jarislov Pelikan's *Bach among the Theologians* (Fortress Press, 1986).

¹³⁹ James Knowlson, *Damned to Fame* (Bloomsbury, 1996), 180.

noted that for Beckett the music of Schubert occupied much the same level of regard and worship as did Bach's for Cioran. Cioran is aware himself of the perils of adducing the effects of music as a proof of the existence of God: 'Music exists only so long as hearing it lasts, just as God exists only as long as ecstasy lasts. The supreme art and the Supreme Being have this in common, that they depend entirely on ourselves' (AA: 126).

Cioran, Buddhism and Gnosticism

One of Cioran's responses to a frequently hostile view of Christianity was to develop a deep interest in eastern thought, and in particular Buddhism. He finds the Buddhistic doctrines that promote a positive concept of Nothingness particularly enticing. Unlike western concepts which tend to associate the word with desolation and annihilation, the liberating aspects Nothingness carries in Buddhism deeply appeals to him, as it is a promise of liberation from both time and the self.¹⁴⁰ As we will see in a later chapter, Cioran's obsession with the fact of having been born becomes a major theme, one that finds an echo in the Buddhist doctrine of birth being the source of all suffering. Cioran himself declined to procreate, finding for once a practical application for his philosophy. However, aside from non-procreation, the Buddhist exhortations toward detachment and withdrawal are doctrines Cioran cannot apply: 'The solutions Buddha proposes are not mine, since I cannot give up desire. I cannot give up *anything*.'¹⁴¹

¹⁴⁰ Peter Sloterdijk explores Cioran's investment in Buddhism in *You must change your life* (Malden: Polity Press, 2013), 73-82.

¹⁴¹ Cited in Marius Dobre, 'Traces of Buddhism in the works of Emil Cioran' *European Journal of Science and Theology* June 2013, Vol. 9, No. 3, 9.

Gnosticism is another form of religion that also appeals deeply to Cioran. A religion or philosophy that possess innumerable variations and texts, in its most broad outline Gnosticism declares that this world is the creation of an evil demiurge and that salvation lies in passing through to a pure world beyond, created and ruled by a benevolent deity.¹⁴² Cioran frequently references the Cathars, the group of Christian Gnostics based in Languedoc who taught that the world of matter was evil, that Jesus was a messenger sent from a pure realm of existence and that abstention from procreation was the means to salvation. Their doctrines were condemned as heresy by the Church. (It is also worth noting that the Cathars and the Languedoc civilisation was an object of passionate investment to Simone Weil.)¹⁴³

It could be argued that for Cioran Catharism represents a combination of the best elements of western and eastern Christian traditions. From the east, an emphasis on self-abnegation and a renunciation of the material world; from the west, an emphasis on the desire and promise of personal salvation in a world elsewhere. In an essay on the concept of the Demiurge, Cioran reverses the Augustinian approach to evil, that which declares evil is non-substantial and has no true ontological weight in the economy of a good God's creation, and declares instead that it is good which lacks substance and has no place in a world that is fallen: 'the good is a great, unreal force, a principle which has miscarried from the start'(NG: 3). He reiterates the position he stated in his essay on de Maistre, that good and evil must be consubstantial in order for there to be a world at all; goodness by itself is weak and anaemic, and by definition requires the prior existence of suffering and evil in order to be a

¹⁴² See Hans Jonas's classic study *The Gnostic Religion: The Message of the Alien God and the Beginnings of Christianity* (Beacon Press, 2015).

¹⁴³ See Malcolm Barber's *The Cathars: Dualist Heretics in Languedoc in the High Middle Ages* (Routledge, 2013).

meaningful concept. Consequent to this is the incoherence of a creator God whose essence is goodness, and which is the core of Christian theology. For Cioran, only the theory that this world is the creator of an evil, or at best incompetent, demiurge possesses coherence and is in keeping with human experience. Cioran is not, however, a literal believer in the demiurge – for him the notion can function as a useful outlet for human frustration: ‘Upon whom else would we vent our failures, our miseries, ourselves? [...] The Demiurge is the most *useful* god who ever was’ (NG: 5-6). Cioran argues that the essence of such gnostic mysticism is to escape the realm of the Demiurge; it is the ‘refusal to consort further with him and to applaud his works.’ Cioran believes that had the early Christians embraced Marcionism, the earliest form of Gnosticism in the Christian tradition, the Church would have avoided its fall into marginality in the present day. Instead, it opted for declaring evil to be of no ontological substance and God to be wholly good, a position which laid itself upon to the standard criticisms of such a theodicy that seems dismissive of lived experience.

Yet Cioran is not an uncritical admirer of Gnostics, Manicheans and the like. He perceives in them an acute taste and almost appetite for evil and suffering. By granting evil and suffering an ontological weight that outstripped all other features of existence they enabled their own lives to have a purpose and a meaning as their personal virtues had a role as beacons in so dark a world. Otherwise, their lives and the nature of their experience may have lacked all content and direction (NG: 9). In spite of this reservation, Cioran often adopts a Gnostic framework when assessing human action and in particular the act of procreation. For him, biological reproduction is a form of mimicry of the Creator, the irresistible urge to perpetuate a botched creation. Cioran is horrified by the fact that ‘what should be a gift as exceptional as genius has been conferred indiscriminately upon all’ (NG: 10). To procreate is

an act that contains a substantial amount of sadomasochism: 'to procreate is to love the scourge – to seek to maintain and augment it' (NG: 11).

Cioran distinguishes between pleasure and joy, viewing the former as deceptive, shallow and fleeting. Yet it is pleasure alone that motivates the act of fecundity, and its insubstantial and transitory peak at the height of the sexual act only serves to underscore the fraudulent nature of creation. Cioran views human overpopulation as a disastrous phenomenon, and one that prevents the individual from remaining 'still, face-to-face with God' (NG: 12).

Cioran concludes his thinking on the Demiurge with an examination of the difficulty of belief in age of self-awareness and scepticism: 'But what is there to convert to, and what is there to abjure, in a state of chronic lucidity?' (NG: 15). Excessive critical self-awareness and a forensic scepticism applied to all faiths can leave us desperate for even the *possibility* of prayer and belief.

Conclusion

To recapitulate, Cioran's engagement with religion was a deeply committed and engaged one, despite, or indeed perhaps on account of, his non-systematic and fluctuating beliefs. Conscious of living in an era that appeared to herald the end of Christianity, Cioran was unable, and/or unwilling, to cut himself off from that tradition or religion generally, despite periodically expressing his wish that he could be liberated from thinking about such matters: "'You speak of God frequently. It is a word I no longer use,'" an ex-nun writes to me. Not everyone has the good fortune to be disgusted by it!' (AA: 190). In many ways, Cioran's lifelong dialogue with God is one of continual challenge and blasphemy, one that comes

from a thinker desperate for an answer from a silent heaven.¹⁴⁴ As alluded to earlier, Cioran exemplifies the type of thinker labelled by Erich Heller as a 'disinherited mind', an individual who finds themselves deeply rooted in European philosophical and religious thinking, but for whom that tradition has seemingly exhausted itself. Unable to see a new way forward, such a thinker is left to ponder amidst the ruins.

For Cioran, religion and the engagement with the divine is primarily an individual undertaking. It is this trajectory that means he is able to preserve a religious spirit that may have perhaps been threatened if it had been invested in a particular denomination. Instead, Cioran is a religious viator who wanders the landscape seeking salvation but is stranded in a no-man's land between belief and despair. It is this independent spirit that makes his wide-ranging explorations of numerous religious figures and traditions lively and perceptive, as well as providing an often unique critique of secular philosophies. Investigating and charting the strengths of innumerable positions and religious attitudes, Cioran was unable to find any personal satisfaction, but it is emblematic of his entire oeuvre that one of his last recorded utterances was 'I am not an atheist.'¹⁴⁵

¹⁴⁴ For an exploration of blasphemy as fervent and righteous belief see Marilyn McCord Adams, 'In Praise of Blasphemy!' *Philosophia* 30, 2003 (1-4): 33-49. For comparative purposes, Cioran's relationship with God and Divinity does not quite fit into what Richard Kearney has termed 'anatheism', the return to God after a period of atheism by an individual who cannot quite bring themselves to believe with total conviction, but who also rejects a fundamentalist atheism. Cioran never truly embraced atheism even in his hyperbolic, Nietzsche-style writings.

¹⁴⁵ Zarifopol-Johnston (2009), 174.

Chapter 4

Cioran and Judaism

Introduction

Cioran's lifelong obsession with Judaism and the Jewish people is a complicated issue that feeds into many different strands of his thought and serves as a constant barometer for the direction of his philosophical and theological investigations. It is also a controversial matter, insofar as his connections with the far-right Romanian organisation known as The Iron Guard is concerned. In this chapter I will first survey briefly the historical aspect of Cioran's pre-war writing and thinking on Judaism before examining his post-war work on the subject. Although from a certain angle his post-war writing appears quite different, it does in fact continue and develop many of the same themes that he had explored prior to the conflict and his disengagement from politics and any form of social activism. Key issues such as historical destiny, the nature of religion and modernistic disenchantment will recur in later chapters but find their first real substance in his reflections on Judaism.

The Transfiguration of Romania

Although commonly referred to as a Romanian, it is important to note that Cioran was born and grew up as a subject of the Austro-Hungarian Empire; the townland of his youth was annexed to Romania only after World War One. Therefore, from the beginning being Romanian was never a simple matter for Cioran; the historically contingent nature of his

nationality drove him to expend much thought and energy on pondering history and destiny.¹⁴⁶

Cioran's views on Judaism and the Jews is intimately connected with his broader philosophy of history, the core of which touched on briefly. Cioran subscribes to a form of Spenglerian historical destiny: with few exceptions individuals are of little consequence, civilisations rise and fall and human voluntarism is powerless in the face of such seismic movement. Ethnic groups that survive and flourish develop cultures that reach a critical highpoint of artistic and historical achievement, but this is inevitably followed by a decline into what is termed 'civilisation', which eventually ossifies, loses self-belief and crumbles, either dissolving through decadence or foreign conquest. Cioran held to this view consistently throughout his life.¹⁴⁷

To return to Romania, the inter-war period was a turbulent one for his country, as although the state attained its largest ever territorial expanse debates about Romanian culture and identity were a mainstream and lively part of life. As with practically every other country in Europe at that time, the role the Jewish population played in national and cultural identity was a prominent topic that generated extreme positions and emotions. It is estimated that in the 1930s Romania had a Jewish population of approximately 728,000, comprising roughly 4% of the population.¹⁴⁸ Cioran threw himself into these debates with all of his youthful brio and typical commitment.

¹⁴⁶ The early chapters of Zarifopol-Johnston's *Searching for Cioran* (Indiana University Press, 2009) provides historical context for Cioran's political odyssey. Marta Petreu, *An Infamous Past: E.M. Cioran and the rise of Fascism in Romania* (Ivan R Dee Inc, 2005) is an in-depth study of the rise of the right in Romania.

¹⁴⁷ See Cristina A. Bejin *Intellectuals and Fascism in Interwar Romania* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019) for a discussion of the influence of Spengler on Romanian intellectual life in the inter bellum period.

¹⁴⁸ See Keith Hitchins, *A Concise History of Romania* (Cambridge University Press, 2014), 159-227 for details of Romanian history between the wars. Statistical demographic breakdown is provided on P.180.

The starting point for any investigation of Cioran's complex relationship with Judaism comes with an examination of *The Transformation of Romania (Schimbarea la fata a Romaniei)*, published in 1936. This work, published a few years after his philosophical debut *On The Heights of Despair*, is a polemical examination and exhortation of his fellow Romanians and their country's destiny. By and large it is a scathing critique, written in the exuberant and hyperbolic Nietzschean style favoured by Cioran at that period. He lambasts his countrymen for their sloth and apathy, accuses them of being a second-rate nation and laments deeply the fact that Romania has 'no destiny'. It is this lack of a historical destiny, in the Spenglerian sense of the term, that leads Cioran to devote a chapter to Romania's Jews.¹⁴⁹

To anticipate, in the pre-war years Cioran had an ambivalent attitude of admiration and revulsion for Jews, a not uncommon perspective amongst many Fascist thinkers, who could not help but admire what they perceived to be the unity and strength of the Jewish people, whilst simultaneously harbouring a resentment based upon their existence being viewed as a threat or impediment to the national unity they desired for their own people. In what follows, I will focus briefly on key passages from the chapter on the Jewish people that contain direct relevance to Cioran's post-war thinking, where notions of historical eschatology came to the forefront and ideas concerning unique destiny were of paramount importance.

The first point bearing consideration is that, as ever with Cioran, he brings his own unique perspective to the Jewish question. He is not a conventional anti-Semite, one that blames the Jews for all of his country's problems; *Transfiguration* is first and foremost an

¹⁴⁹ Cioran agreed finally for *The Transfiguration of Romania* (referred to hereafter as *Transfiguration*) to be republished in Romania in 1990, the year after the fall of the Communist dictatorship, but crucially only on condition that the chapter on the Jews be excluded. The book has never been translated into English.

indictment of Romanians themselves and their sluggish performance on the stage of world history. Cioran makes clear that the question of the Jewish presence in his country is not central to this verdict:

Would Romania's existence have been any less miserable had no Jews been present here? To what extent would that have raised her historical level (the only one that counts)? Obviously, there would have been less corruption, but from there to history is still a long way. At worst, the Jews *postponed* Romania's greatest hour; under no circumstances can they be seen as the cause of our misfortune, of our eternal misery.¹⁵⁰

Cioran blames the narrowness of conventional Romanian nationalism on its anti-Semitic focus and declares that the Jewish presence in the country is only a 'peripheral problem'. However, he then moves forward to analyse what he considers the key features of the Jewish character and their historical destiny:

No other nation has been so hungry for land and for life. Nevertheless, their stunning strength comes from the religious experience of their attachment to earthly life. *They were so concerned with their fate that they turned it into an earthly religion.* Judaic messianism perfectly matches Judaic religion. No other nation has benefitted more from God. Maybe this is why their fate is so terrible, maybe it is all about divine retribution...¹⁵¹

Cioran begins by immediately delineating the Jews as a people apart. He also accedes to the notion of their possessing a deeper attachment to life than other races, and although it is not entirely clear from the above excerpt, he appears to convey the idea that the Jews fashioned their religion as a consequence of their love of life, as a form of self-appointed

¹⁵⁰ All quotations from *Transfiguration* are taken from Petreu (2005). This passage from p.123.

¹⁵¹ Petreu (2005), 125.

divine exceptionalism. Clearly, he is operating with a cautious, if not outrightly suspicious view, of the Jewish people.

The Jew is not our fellow man, our kind, and no matter how close we become, the chasm is still there, whether we like it or not. It is as if they were descended from a different breed of monkey from ourselves, condemned to a sterile tragedy, to hopes that always turn out to be false. It is at a *human* level that we cannot get close to them, for a Jew is first *Jewish*, and only then human.¹⁵²

Cioran here takes his separatist view of the Jews a step further in an extremely hyperbolic passage that seeks to cement the view that Jews are a race apart. Although on first reading the reference to a 'different breed of monkey' appears extremely insulting and abusive it is worth pointing out that it is most likely an allusion to the popularity of Darwinian theory and its widespread use in public discourse at the time. Indeed, and in keeping with Cioran's mixture of admiration for and horror of the Jewish people at this time, it can also be read as a form of compliment: Gentiles are all descended from the same ape, they are essentially indistinguishable from one another in their mundanity, whereas the Jewish people is an exceptional case whose unique characteristics set them apart from the herd and merit special attention.¹⁵³ A further key aspect of Jewish uniqueness is its historical resilience and Cioran's conviction as to the race's indestructibility: 'It [Jewry] survived Hellenistic Greece and the Roman Empire, and will certainly outlive the West, hated and despised by all the other nations who are born and know death...'¹⁵⁴

¹⁵² Ibid., 126.

¹⁵³ This attitude was not unique to Cioran. One of his professors, Nae Ionescu, once declared to the Romanian Jewish writer Mihail Sebastian: 'Are you, Iosef Hechter, a *man* from Dunarea Brailei? No. You are a *Jew* from Dunarea Brailei.' Ibid., 127.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 137 quoting *Transfiguration*.

However, it cannot be denied that in the context of Romanian history and culture, the Jews are portrayed in a negative light. Relations between Jews and Romanian Gentiles are characterised by 'contempt and hatred'; Jews are defined by 'vampirism' and 'aggressiveness', they are 'the smartest, the most gifted, and the most brazen of nations,' a 'hardworking people of exploiters using their century old...cynicism and experience to exploit their host nations.'¹⁵⁵ For Cioran, they are a 'nuisance' that had 'invaded' Romania, perverting the life of the people they infiltrated: 'The Romanian democratic regime has worked only to protect the Jews and the Jewish-Romanian capital,' and so 'they have gained amazing authority over the Romanians.' Whilst such sentiments may be always common to anti-Semitism irrespective of time and place there can be little doubting Cioran's sincerity in renewing their expression.

Cioran views the Jews as an impediment to Romanian cultural unity and as a stumbling block to its future world status: 'The Jews have always opposed any attempt meant to consolidate our nation and our political system'; 'The Jews do not wish to live in a strong Romania, aware of its own identity. As Romanians, we desire nothing but a strong Romania, with a will to power.' But such ideals are simply not possible with a strong Jewish presence in the country: 'If we were to give absolute freedom to the Jews, I firmly believe they would change even the name of the country in less than a year.' Indeed, even their very presence in Romania is a matter of suspicion to Cioran: 'After the war only the Jews managed to get their hands on us.'

However, the portrayal of Jews in this youthful work is not entirely negative. Cioran states that they deserve credit for being at the forefront of social awareness over the previous

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 126.

hundred years: they have ‘highlighted, during the past century, the capital importance of social problems.’ But there is a caveat: whereas ideally social unity would aspire to a higher form of life, the Jews have ‘inserted the material idea into socialism’ thereby ‘contaminating’ collectivism.¹⁵⁶ Cioran states that ‘the theory that the Jews are “responsible” for the Russian Revolution is absolutely idiotic.’¹⁵⁷ But nevertheless, ‘they projected in Communism all the elements likely to justify and facilitate their peregrinations’ and they achieved the transition ‘from socialist idealism to flat materialism.’¹⁵⁸

What is Cioran’s “remedy” for the Jewish issue? He declares that ‘considered from the vantage point of world history, the Jewish problem is impossible to solve. It is the curse of history....’ Even were there a global apocalypse, ‘the last people to disappear would be the Jewish people.’ However, ‘*national* solutions’ do exist, although these are, by definition, of localised efficacy. Cioran toys with the notion of assimilation, but quickly disregards it: ‘How could we, a small people, assimilate the most irreducible ethnic phenomenon in history?’ Cioran can only state that ‘We, the Romanians, can find salvation only in another political system.’

Cioran’s chapter concludes with a typically hyperbolic declaration that encapsulates his simultaneous attraction and repulsion toward his subject matter: ‘The Jews are *unique* in every single way; like no one else, they live with the crushing burden of a divine curse. If I were a Jew, I would instantly kill myself.’¹⁵⁹ Cioran noted in later years that ‘after reading

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 127.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 127.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 128.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 133.

the book, my mother said: "One cannot tell whether you are for or against the Jews. The impression I got was that of a tormenting mixture of feelings."'¹⁶⁰

'A People of Solitaries'

In the 1930s Cioran ventured a philosophical and personal gamble that Europe could be revitalised: Germany would lead the way, and Romania would follow its example and finally take its place on the world-stage. Post 1945, Cioran viewed that gamble as an extravagant and hubristic failure, to be deeply regretted. Following the war Cioran viewed Europe as historically exhausted, its mission ended, if not fulfilled. The future, such as it was, belonged to the East and Africa; European society was decadent and its inhabitants were akin to Nietzsche's last men: lacking in vitality and belief, wandering aimlessly in a landscape of crumbling beliefs and causes. Religious institutions, too, participated in this decline. The Catholic Church was weakening in the face of social liberalisation and unable to match the strength it had displayed in the Middle Ages. Even more reprehensibly for Cioran, its doctrines of Original Sin and the Fall were under threat in an age that eschewed persecution and fervent belief.¹⁶¹

Of course, the annihilation of European Jewry was a fact that could not be ignored by Cioran. According to some chroniclers his views on Judaism took a decisive turn toward the sympathetic due to the friendships he established with certain Jewish artists and thinkers in Paris following his move there. Most significantly, he played a role in attempting to free his

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 135.

¹⁶¹ See 250-1 below.

Jewish Romanian friend Benjamin Fondane from the Gestapo in 1944. This effort was in vain and Fondane perished in Auschwitz.¹⁶²

Following the war, the contemplation of Jewish destiny becomes a fixed obsession for Cioran.¹⁶³ In spite of European obsolescence the Jewish saga continued, largely in the shape of Israel and its political struggles. Despite the Holocaust, the Jews, although diminished, still lived and were intact. For Cioran this is crucial. As per his pre-war writing, Cioran continues to assent regularly to the idea that Jews are indeed a chosen people, marked out by a special destiny. They embody history in their very being, and in 1956 Cioran produced an essay entitled 'A People of Solitaries' (*'Un peuple de solitaires'*) in which he returns to the Jewish question.

The essay is in many respects a reworking of the core themes of his 1936 work, the central difference being that its tone is almost completely admiring and respectful, with only a few gentle criticisms of its subject matter. In terms of focus, the essay alludes only generally to actual historical events; the main concern is the historical-eschatological destiny of the Jewish people and their unbridgeable and admirable differences from non-Jews.

Cioran begins the essay by re-stating his belief in the unique quality of the Jewish people and the incomprehensibility of their 'fate which seems to derive from a supernatural logic' (TE: 79). He claims the Jewish people 'readily sacrifice to illusion; it hopes, it always hopes too much...' According to Cioran, it is this hope that enables the Jews to survive a constant stream of catastrophe. The Jew 'represents the alienated existence *par excellence*.'

¹⁶² Fondane had been a close friend and disciple of Lev Shestov. See Arta Lucescu Boutcher, *Rediscovering Benjamin Fondane* (Peter Lang Publishing, 2003), which contains an interview with Cioran about their friendship.

¹⁶³ Cioran's *Cahiers* are also sprinkled with references to Israel and his concern for its survival. See below.

Alienation and exile are his destiny, and no matter what cause he may support in the hope of political and social emancipation, he will always end alienated and in a perpetual exodus (TE: 81).

It is the spirit of contrariness and rebellion that marks the Jewish character. Cioran speculates that it was this that stopped them from converting *en masse* to Christianity, and this rejection 'remains the Jews' finest exploit, a *no* which does them honor' (TE: 81). He reiterates the core differences between them and the rest: 'The inhabitants of the globe are divided into two categories: Jews and non-Jews. If we were to weigh the merits of the former and the latter, unquestionably the former would prevail' (TE: 87).

According to Cioran, it is the Jews' lack of a home and their perennial deracination that grants them a perpetual vitality and energy. As a result, they have avoided the fate reserved to those peoples and empires that settle and remain on one territory: stability, decline and extinction. It is this constant motion and frenzy for movement that Cioran claims to have been a source of his own personal salvation: 'How many times, when I was indulging the prospect of my ruin, have I not thought of their stubbornness, their persistence, their comforting as well as inexplicable appetite for being!' (TE: 91). In words almost identical to those used in *Transfiguration*, he declares that 'possessed of a religious destiny, he [the Jew] has survived Athens and Rome, just as he will survive the West, and he will pursue his career, envied and despised by all peoples who are born and know death' (TE: 91).¹⁶⁴

Cioran then makes a brief reference to his pre-war attitudes and writings with a somewhat paradoxically defiant and unapologetic *mea culpa*:

¹⁶⁴ See P.141 above for the almost identical phraseology.

Unable to forgive them for the major part they had played in world history, I began detesting them with a determination born of both love and hatred. The radiance of their omnipresence made me better realize the mediocrity of my country, doomed - I knew it- to wither and die; they, however - and this I also knew - would survive forever and under any circumstances, no matter what happened. (TE: 91)

Cioran then expresses particularly his love of the Old Testament, a book that made his nights of insomnia and torment tolerable, and specifically the 'poignant sallies of Job and Solomon' which justify 'the hyperboles of my gratitude' (TE: 92). It is the Jewish gift for survival that 'teaches us to come to terms with a dizzying, unendurable world; they are *masters at existing*.'

Cioran then turns to contemporary matters, expressing his profound gratitude that 'to contemporary history...they have given an accelerated cadence, a splendid breathlessness, a superb cadence.' For him, only the Jews and their destiny is of interest, gentiles are uninteresting and with them 'one falls asleep' (TE: 91). Without their presence all is lifeless, and 'a dead city is a city without Jews.'

Lest the essay should appear as a straightforward homage to Judaism, Cioran also hints at the diverse and complex emotions they provoke: 'Our reaction to them is almost always murky: by what precise behaviour are we to adjust to them, when they locate themselves above and beneath us, on a level which is never our own?' Cioran re-iterates the gulf that separates Jew from Gentile: 'We have nothing to offer them. And what they have to bring us – is beyond us.' Only a Jew who fails at being Jewish can come close to the Gentile: 'It is as if he had retreated toward ourselves, toward our conventional and ephemeral humanity. Must we thereby deduce that man is a Jew *who has not gone all the way*' (TE: 95).

Cioran continues by reflecting how hope, motion and becoming lie at the essence of Jewish life, their desire to persevere despite history's opposition, and how their endless adaptive capacities enable their survival, summed up for him (employing a common and questionable trope) in their general mastery of financial affairs: 'Finance and *De Profundis!* - unprecedented incompatibility. Perhaps the key to their general survival' (TE: 96). It is this ability to adapt, to absorb and move on that gives rise to their strong sense of irony and sarcasm, seeing through, as they do, the various deceptive guises of the world.

This energy and constant motion contrast favourably with the fundamentally static and sclerotic nature of other races and nations: 'Our ancestors have bequeathed us the legacy of their endless sleep, their mute and somewhat intoxicating desolation, their long sigh of living dead men' (TE: 99). Related is the notion of protest at one's fate; while many Gentiles admire the Book of Job, for Cioran the depth and passion of Job's protest against God are uniquely Jewish and attain a depth inaccessible to a Gentile: 'Our pains are too timid. And our dreads.' For this, Cioran blames Christianity: 'Christianity has made our fears anaemic...What can we expect from a genuflection that has lasted twenty centuries?' But the Jews as a race have inherited Job's brio: 'They never yield before the evidence of an iniquitous world. Revolutionaries by instinct, the notion of renunciation never occurs to them...' (TE:100).

However, for Cioran this optimism is also a form of madness: 'The optimism of the plague-stricken...According to an old treatise on psychiatry, they furnish the highest percentage of suicides. If true, this would prove for them that life deserves the effort to cut oneself off from it, and that they are too attached to it to be able to despair *to the end*' (TE: 101). Yet this tendency parallels a cultural pattern whereby Jewish treatment of death is 'deliberately

superficial', perhaps because the Jews 'have only life before them', whereas when it comes to others, and particularly the west, 'only ephemeral civilisations willingly chew the cud of nothingness.'

Cioran claims the language of renunciation and quietism is abhorrent to Judaism. They do not seek the peace that comes with attainment of the Absolute. Struggle, difficulty, obstacles, all are sought out to maximise the experience of life. These characteristics mirror the temperamental God of the Old Testament, a being who in his moods, whims and caprices charms Cioran, in contrast to the peacemaker Jesus. This turbulence is evident in the nature even of their happiness, which, according to Cioran, is of a restless nature: 'they poison their pleasures, devour them, set about them with a haste, a frenzy which keeps them from affording the least solace' (TE: 105).

In response to an imagined challenge from a sceptic of his rhetoric, Cioran states that it is by their destiny rather than their nature that the Jews are exceptional. If one were to declare that the Germans also have a destiny, Cioran replies that that of the latter is time-bound, and indeed, in reference to the war, has passed; in fact he speculates that German persecution of the Jews was motivated by an envy of the Jews' greater destiny: 'They too wanted to be chosen: nothing predestined them to that condition' (TE: 105). In spite of its depth and savagery, Cioran contends that one day the Holocaust will be only a memory amongst all the other instances of Jewish persecution. In the future, German hatred and destruction will be 'only an episode in the epic of the Jews.'

For Cioran, exile and wandering are the fate of the Jew. Even Israel is only a 'provisional' country. 'It is their mission to keep watch' and this will 'last until the end of time.' Cioran concludes his essay by stating that there is something 'non-terrestrial in their passage, and

that they will forever rush to a future happiness that mirrors their original sacred beatific vision, leaving behind all the other races who 'are resigned to their mediocre destiny' (TE: 107).

Cahiers

Apart from 'A People of Solitaries' it is also worthwhile to note a number of the many entries Cioran made concerning Jews and Judaism in his *Cahiers* over the years. These serve to underscore the depth and consistency of Cioran's engagement with the topic. The most pointed entry is Cioran's declaration that '*Metaphysically speaking, I am a Jew*' (CH: 254). By this, Cioran was most likely referring to his own exile from his homeland, as well as his post-war detachment from history and political causes. Perhaps also there is a touch of self-aggrandising melodrama: Cioran as the persecuted, the victim, the friendless one.

Cioran's horror of anti-semitism generally, and the Christian variety in particular, emerges after a Church visit: 'March 10, [1965] – Yesterday at the Église de Billettes, the *Passion According to St. John*. They read the Gospel According to St. John which, at least starting with the imprisonment of Jesus, is nothing but a diatribe against the Jews. Christian anti-Semitism is the most virulent of all, the oldest and the most deeply entrenched. One wonders how they could read such a text *in public!*' (CH: 138).

A more enigmatic statement is the declaration that 'there is something worse than anti-semitism. It is anti-anti-semitism' (CH: 314). It is difficult to understand Cioran here. Perhaps he is referring to what modern parlance labels "virtue-signalling", the attempt to appear virtuous in public by declaring one's loyalty to popular moral causes. Perhaps, more

speculatively, he fears the draining away of the special status he accords to Jews and Judaism if anti-semitism ceases to exist, as in many ways it is the constant vilification and singling out of the Jewish people that grants them a certain mystique and mystery that would vanish if they were simply to be treated as but one more race, one more people amongst all others, an issue to which we will return.

Cioran also appears to believe that beyond France it is Jews alone who truly understand his writings: 'Outside of Paris, there is hardly anywhere except among American Jews, rendered still more nervous by psychoanalysis, where my "writings" have found an echo' (CH: 380). Immune to such receptivity are Romanian Jews, whom Cioran laments on account of their being dulled by contact with his countrymen: 'We have sterilised them. We have made them lose their religious genius. No miraculous Rabbis amongst them, no Hasidim...We have made them almost as *superficial* as ourselves.'¹⁶⁵

He also reiterates his belief in the unique malediction that the Jewish people cannot escape: 'All nations are accursed. The Jewish people more than the rest. Its malediction is automatic, obvious, entire. Self-evident.'¹⁶⁶ Later he speaks of his self-identification with them: 'My affinities with the Jewish mind. A taste for mockery. A certain tendency toward self-destruction, unhealthy obsessions; aggressiveness, depression tempered or aggravated by sarcasm [...] the sense of being a victim, even in moments of happiness.'¹⁶⁷

Occasionally criticism appears: 'What can be held against the Jews: each of them tends to occupy too much room; nothing satisfies him, and he keeps spreading, *manifesting* himself. Jews know no *limit* in anything. That is their strength and their weakness. They go too far in

¹⁶⁵ Cioran, Manea, Howard (1998), 285.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 286.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 288.

everything, and inevitably collide with others, those who also seek to advance, but lack the means.¹⁶⁸ Darker perhaps is his comparison of tribal Judaism with Nazism that echoes the views of Simone Weil: 'Nazism is the spirit of the Old Testament applied to Germans; Nazism is the German Jehovah' (CH: 294). On another occasion Cioran attempts to diffuse the anti-semitism of an acquaintance: 'PN, Catholic educated and of the Right, is not able to console himself over Jesus being Jewish. I explain to him it's that which is extraordinary. But prejudices....' (CH: 709).

The last recorded statement from Cioran concerning Jews has a more poignant note. Petreu reports that even on his deathbed the issue of his pre-war political stance preoccupied Cioran, who declared haltingly 'I...am...not...an...anti-...semitic.'¹⁶⁹

Critiques

The most strident criticism in English of Cioran's 'A People of Solitaires' comes from Elaine Marks in a comparative analysis of Cioran and Sartre's *Reflexions sur la question juive*.¹⁷⁰ Marks labels Cioran's methodology as 'emotional-aesthetic' and claims that it is not an 'efficacious means of exploration'.¹⁷¹ However, Marks does claim that Sartre is one of Cioran's targets, and that his 'deliberate frivolity' is a means of countering 'Sartrean seriousness'. Contrasting Cioran's intuitive, emotional approach to Sartre's dialectical

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 289.

¹⁶⁹ Petreu, (2005), 139.

¹⁷⁰ Elaine Marks, 'The Limits of Ideology and Sensibility: J.P. Sartre's "Reflexions sur la question juive" and E.M. Cioran's "Un peuple de solitaires," *The French Review*, Vol. 45, No.4. pp. 779-788.

¹⁷¹ Marks (1972), 779.

method, Marks avers that the former is endeavouring to paint a picture of the Jewish people whose keynote is stasis and immobility: 'we have a permanent, absolute essence.'¹⁷²

In Marks' view Cioran's essay is a collection of 'the random sparks of his mental ramblings.'

In opposition to Sartre's moral intentions, Cioran's aim is primarily aesthetic, an attempt to paint a religious mythology. Yet in spite of this, or perhaps indeed because of it, Cioran merely paints a picture that is 'conventional' and 'caricatural'. Marks states that 'the Jew is being used as arbitrarily and unscrupulously as [by anti-semites].' Cioran operates with an antihistorical vision that 'makes it impossible for him to cope with the facts of Jewish history'.¹⁷³ The paradox of Cioran's deep philosophical scepticism is that it allows any rhetorical flight of fancy or elaborate speech, although Marks suspects Cioran does so in order to chisel yet another clichéd portrayal of the Jew: 'Cioran is the puppeteer manipulating his helpless marionette.'

For Marks, Cioran's chief failing (and Sartre's also) is the refusal 'to be disturbed by the intrusion of facts.' Cioran's anti-intellectual stance means he must 'refuse any material that is not intuitive.' In her view the central defect of such an approach is that of irrelevance. Cioran is 'incapable of dealing with questions for which other disciplines have begun to provide verifiable answers.'¹⁷⁴ He is a victim of a 'language game'. To prove her point, Marks quotes a long passage from Michel Leiris that contains a summary of historical and anthropological views on the Jewish people current at the time. This, states Marks, tells us more than anything written by Cioran (and Sartre). She concludes that 'Science, in 1970, has

¹⁷² Ibid., 777.

¹⁷³ Ibid., 785.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 787.

explored a greater portion of reality than either ideology or sensibility,' and that writers such as Cioran must take these explorations into account.

In response, one could claim that certainly Cioran is not interested in cataloguing a list of historical facts concerning the Jewish people and their historical reality, but that Marks in turn may be guilty of a narrow positivistic approach. A writer of Cioran's intelligence and sensibility is well aware that he is not writing a factual investigation; it may be contended instead that he is working through the idealised (in the philosophical sense) picture of the Jews that has permeated European culture since Roman times. That image and its associations have changed little and Cioran is seeking to explore it both as a means of confronting his own political past and exploring his views on history in the light of the apocalypse of the war. While certainly Cioran does nothing to alter or amend conventional images of the Jewish people, and indeed deepens them by the sheer fact of his reiterating them, he is not necessarily operating under the kind of ethical obligation to dispel it that Marks assumes he should be. Furthermore, Marks herself avers that there are indeed characteristics unique to the Jewish people but does not elaborate on what they are. Also, in spite of her criticism of Cioran she states her belief that Cioran's method can 'produce superb moments of insight', although she never pinpoints exactly which moments she is referring to.¹⁷⁵

A similar form of criticism is offered by Susan Sontag, who although one of Cioran's earliest champions in the English language, and an advocate of his "method", found 'A People of Solitaries' to be a 'weak' essay that falls 'below his usual standard of brilliance and

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 787.

perspicacity'.¹⁷⁶ According to Sontag, Cioran displays a startling 'moral insensitivity to the contemporary aspects of his theme', assumedly referring to the lack of any explicit reference to the Holocaust, which is alluded to only indirectly as being yet another chapter in Jewish suffering. An admirer of his other work, Sontag 'can scarcely help finding Cioran's essay surprisingly cursory and high-handed'.

Cioran himself viewed this criticism with indignation and disdain and vented in his diaries:

In her preface to the American edition of *The Temptation to Exist*, Susan Sontag writes that that my essay on the Jews is the most superficial, the most cursory chapter in the book. On the contrary I believe that it is the best, and by far. How lacking in instinct these critics are! Can a text so impassioned be "cursory"? I carried it within myself for years. And what an idea, to declare a thing superficial because one doesn't like it!¹⁷⁷

Although Cioran's remarks do not offer any point-by-point refutation of Sontag's criticism, it surely offers proof that Cioran intended the essay in deadly seriousness, and that it was not an exercise in mere frivolity, or a rehashing of clichés.

Another perspective comes from Sylvère Lotringer, who contends that Cioran is consciously re-working a volume by Léon Bloy, *Le Salut par les Juifs*.¹⁷⁸ Bloy was a violently polemical Catholic writer, famous for his intensely aggressive and hyperbolic prose that attacked relentlessly his opponents in France, as well as the elements in the Catholic Church that he disapproved of (in practice this was nearly the entirety of it). In *Le Salut par les Juifs*, Bloy performs an unusual strategy designed to outflank and humiliate the French anti-Semitic writers of his time, whom he views as cheap and materially obsessed. He takes the tropes of

¹⁷⁶ Sontag (1968), 20.

¹⁷⁷ Cioran, Howard and Manea (1998), 290.

¹⁷⁸ Sylvère Lotringer, 'L'eloge fait aux Juifs', *Pardres* 2005/1 (No. 38), pp.99-115.

anti-Semitism, gives them his ostensible agreement but then reminds his Christian readers of the point made in the book title: that Christian salvation arose from a Jew, that final redemption will come only when the Jews convert, and therefore all hopes for final salvation come through the Jewish people who are sacred to God and whose presence in history is consequently indispensable, regardless of how loathsome or disagreeable a Christian may find them. Bloy's anti-Semitism is therefore taken to a higher level of development, in his own eyes at least, one that in his view transcends the materialistic emphasis of his contemporary anti-Semites, who focus exclusively on the alleged Jewish obsession with money and monopoly in business, while simultaneously ignoring the fact that so many Catholics are obsessed with money and in no way live in accordance with Christian precepts of charity and disavowal of wealth.¹⁷⁹

Lotringer argues that Cioran is following Bloy's method, if not aim. By supporting the Jewish rejection of Christianity, by praising Judas, he is simultaneously succeeding in both supporting and vilifying the Jews. By his support of their rejection of Christ, he renews the cause of Christian anti-Semitism, while also displaying, or at least appearing to display, solidarity with the Jewish people. There may also be a further form of revenge at work: by re-enforcing the traditional view of the Jewish people Cioran is exacting a form of revenge on Christianity: he is showing not only how vicious, but also how vacuous Christian anti-Semitism was or is. Lotringer further claims that Cioran seeks vengeance against the Jews for having, unintentionally, so obsessed him in the 1930s and having contributed to his pro-Fascist stance. He speculates that this may also be due to a certain envy on Cioran's part: only the Jews can claim to have suffered more than he has, only Jewish misery can match

¹⁷⁹ Leon Bloy, *Salvation through the Jews* translated by Richard Robinson (Sunny Lou Publishing, 2020).

his own. By deflating Jewish pretensions in a satirical manner, he leaves the ground free for his own woes.

Yet there are many difficulties with this interpretation, not least being the plentiful comments scattered throughout Cioran's notebooks concerning Jews and Judaism. Cioran frequently refers to Jewish figures, tying them into the general observations he makes in 'A People of Solitaries'. There is never any indication that he views them with contempt or was using his essay as a stick with which to beat both Jews and Christians. The remarks only serve as evidence to re-affirm the views presented in the essay. All of the evidence indicates that Cioran clung to the notion of the Jews as a unique human grouping from the beginning to the end of his career, and that on balance they evoked in him far more admiration than contempt, so while Bloy's writing may indeed have served as an inspiration for Cioran he himself also seized on a form of 'Salvation through the Jews', except that he re-configured common views on the Jewish people for his own purposes.

It is also possible to suggest that while Lotringer may be incorrect in seeing Cioran's essay as a form of score-settling with Judaism, there is undeniably a connection between the latter's distaste for Christianity and his valorisation of the Jews. Certain strands of Christian thought declare that at the Final Judgement all Jews will convert to Christianity and Salvation will ensue. In the meantime, the mere existence of Judaism constitutes an affront to those eschatological hopes, a fact that could be nothing other than a source of pleasure to Cioran in the moments when he is most resentful toward the religion of his upbringing.

Somewhat similar to the critique of Marks is that of Michael Kluback, who questions whether Cioran's terms have any real meaning in the contemporary world, and if his portrayal of Israel is a romanticised fiction: 'We can imagine a secular destiny for Israel

involving a political and economic role in the momentary resolution of volatile Middle Eastern conflicts [...] We can imagine the Christian-Jewish problem to be of minor importance. The chosenness of Israel and the redemptive power of the Cross can be viewed as background scenery to a world that knows that economic and political stability are far more vital to survival and hope than theological claims.’¹⁸⁰ Kluback believes Cioran’s essay may be read as little ‘more than an *apologia pro vita sua*’.

One way of responding to the complaint of irrelevance may be to partially adapt Kluback’s perspective and suggest that while Cioran’s ruminations may indeed be of no consequence to those uninterested in religious or theological matters, there is as a matter of fact a strong and vibrant Orthodox Jewish segment of Israeli society who have considerable leverage in political affairs and whose numbers are growing. Consequently, theological issues concerning Jewish destiny may not be quite as irrelevant as Kluback suggests. The more philosophically and theologically invested response is that which applied to Marks’ commentary: Cioran is working through a certain cultural and religious image of the historical phenomenon of Jewishness as perceived in European culture, and seeing how its future may develop, both on a larger scale and in terms of his own views on history.

Considerations: Salvation from History

Having reviewed Cioran’s writings and assessed the critical responses, it is appropriate to see if any conclusions can be drawn from the material. As we have seen, it is certainly not Cioran’s purpose to draw up a list of factual statements about the Jewish people, to

¹⁸⁰ Kluback & Finkenthal (1997), 195.

chronicle their history in a rigorous manner, and to separate truth from falsehood with the aim of enlightening the historical record. He is instead operating with a view of the Jewish people that has been a standard one since Roman times. He has no interest in challenging, modifying, or criticising it. Indeed, his writings only serve to reinforce it and perpetuate it. We then must ask ourselves what function does it serve his thinking in doing so?

Any answer to that question remains somewhat opaque. Does the special quality of the Jews somehow “redeem” history for Cioran? And if so, in what manner? From a constructive point of view, the survival of the Jewish people after millennia of discrimination and persecution may serve as a form of “revenge” against history, which in Cioran’s view is largely a procession of slaughter, conflict and individual tragedy. The Jews in some way, and even in spite of the Holocaust, buck this trend. Recall that Cioran adapts Spengler’s philosophy: cultures and races come and go, everything is doomed to enact a cyclical rise and fall. However, one constant can be found: the Jews. They persevere in spite of all. For Cioran, who views humanity as a prisoner of Time, this is in some sense perhaps a triumph: the perseverance of the Jewish race is a lone victory against the entropic forces of history and destiny.

A critic of this view could claim it reflects little more than Cioran’s nostalgia for an idealised view of history, one where destiny and mission is dramatically embodied and this is arguably correct. As we shall see in depth in the next chapter, Cioran may be seen as a kind of disillusioned Hegelian, one who in spite of his avowed religious scepticism still holds to the idea of historical eschatology. By focusing on Judaism and the Jews, Cioran is able to provide a lifeline for his pre-war historical teleological notions. Despite the European catastrophe, history still continues and finds a point of focus in the Jewish people, who simultaneously

embody history while defying its entropic and corrosive effects, a form of survival that from a Spenglerian perspective appears quasi-miraculous.

Such remarks tie in, in some manner, with Lotringer's comparison of Cioran to Bloy. One of the most vital of Christian themes is Salvation, its necessity and nature. In Christian terms, it is brought about through the intercessionary love of Jesus. To state a fact that is in essence simple but also one with enormous theological ramifications, Jesus was Jewish, therefore salvation comes through a Jew and a form of re-worked Judaism. It is not difficult to see Cioran's fascination with Judaism as stemming from this Christian theological truth: the Jews are the bearers of salvation.¹⁸¹ Cioran re-works the salvific function of the Jews for his own purposes by employing them as his mode of possible salvation from history.

More broadly, and as we have emphasised from the start of this thesis, Cioran occupies a genealogical position somewhere in between Christian and post-Christian thought, if by the latter we mean those who have discarded Christianity completely and seek to map out their philosophy in a secular setting devoid of all nostalgia and yearning for religious belief. Cioran certainly does not occupy that space – his thought is saturated with religious categories, terms, and preoccupations. Nor, of course, is he a Christian. Instead, he grapples continuously with the dilemma of being a thinker who has been formed by religious and Christian categories but is unable to see any way to move past them, nor, we may suggest, does he wish to move past them, as what lies beyond is a featureless "horizontal" world, lacking all of the drama and historical possibility of the Europe of his youth and the philosophical speculation and political turmoil it inspired.

¹⁸¹ As is evinced in John 4:22.

By aligning himself with the figure of the idealised Jew Cioran is protecting himself from the possibility of evaporating into that undifferentiated post-Christian world of materialism, in both the philosophical and consumerist sense of the term. Cioran's Jew is both part of and an outcast from history, its eternal victim and yet by his banishment a type of victor. It is not difficult to see how such a role would be agreeable to Cioran, whose life and thought embodied that of the sceptical commentator, embodying, ironically enough, a form of the Christian injunction to be in the world but not of it. By holding to the idea of Jewish destiny, Cioran can evade the worst extremes of the Nietzschean 'Last Man' syndrome: the deracinated individual cut adrift from culture, history and religion who exists in a perennial present, with neither future nor past to anchor him, and lacking any cause worthy of his devotion.

Keeping a theological debate alive is a form of defence against the utter disenchantment of the world as threatened by Modernism. As we shall examine in more detail in the next chapter, theological and eschatological speculation may function as a form of defence against the paralysing homogeneity and levelling effect of a secularisation process that is determined to defuse history of its most extreme and potentially agonistic forces. Constant reflection and speculation on theological matters is one manner by which the ennui of peace and secularism may be combatted.

Such a possibility is also contemplated by Michael Finkenthal, who writes that 'Cioran often told us that he was always stimulated by hatred: therefore, in order to stimulate him, in order to turn on his creative fervor, in order to affect his life, the Jews had to be hated, not loved by him!'¹⁸² While Kluback may err in only assigning hatred of the Jews to Cioran, he

¹⁸² Kluback & Finkenthal (1997), 204.

rightly points out that he was 'a late romantic and a decadent, his mind was a resonance chamber in which western culture interfered with Balkanic echoes'. The Eternal Wandering Jew is a figure Cioran follows to the end.

Life engagement and anti-Christianity

As we have touched on above, a key aspect of Cioran's attraction to Judaism is its oppositional placing in regard to Christianity, which I shall elaborate upon here. Unlike the latter (as commonly perceived), Judaism is very much a religion of the world and the body. To be a Jew means to have a very specific physical identity: one is descended from a long line of Jewish forerunners; a male Jew has undergone circumcision, a physical marking and emblem of Abraham's covenant with God. The Judaic identity is very different in key aspect to those which constitute Christianity, in which one's identity is formed largely by an attitude of "inwardness" and where one's physical markings and descent is entirely irrelevant. In contrast, to be Jewish means to be very much involved in the world and to be an active participant in history. As the beloved people of God, they are earmarked for a special destiny and thus combine the historical and the religious in their very existence, as opposed to Christian life which has traditionally followed Augustine's 'two cities' cleavage of the world and heaven. History and ontology become one in the embodied Jew. Nor does Judaism pay the same amount of attention to the afterlife which characterises much of Christianity's focus; Judaism has little to say about one's post-mortem prospects and the emphasis is almost entirely on this world and one's conduct therein.¹⁸³

¹⁸³ For an elaboration of these themes see Michael Wyschogrod, *The Body of Faith: God in the People Israel* (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc. 2000).

Such a view finds affinities with Cioran's full-blooded approach to both life and philosophy. He despises abstraction and idealism and prefers to dwell on the concrete and the here-and-now. History and destiny are constant themes and pre-occupations, as is the body and its vicissitudes. For the Jew, there is no ontological divide within the self that so defines the dualism inherent to popular conceptions of Christianity.¹⁸⁴ The body is the person, and the manner in which the person conducts their life is a reflection of the depth and intensity of their faith. Whereas Christianity's attitude toward the world is often ambiguous, seeing it on the one hand as part of God's good work and on the other as a realm ruled by Satan, Jewish theology invariably views Creation as an unquestioned good and life as a gift to be embraced thoroughly. Such views find many affinities with Cioran's own engagement with life and devotion to a philosophy of the moment.

Consequently, Jewish investment in life may appear more thorough and fuller to one such as Cioran than the more equivocal Christian engagement, an important consideration for a thinker who continuously stresses his own innate vitality, in spite of his philosophical pessimism. Jewish life becomes a more holistic committed enterprise than a Christian life lived under the shadow of Platonic dualism and possible denigration of the material world. The notion that Jewish life involves a fuller engagement with reality than Christianity entails is of great attraction to a thinker who consistently employs a mode of hermeneutic suspicion to overly abstracted philosophies and worldviews. Because a Jew is an embodied instrument of God's will he or she is engaged in a more devoutly engaged form of life than the average Christian, who may only intermittently attend to his or her religious

¹⁸⁴ Of course, Christian doctrine denies dualism and asserts the indissolubility of soul and body, but in the popular imagination there is an immortal soul and a perishable body, the former deemed of utmost value, the latter of questionable, if not negative, worth.

commitments: a religiously observant Jew is ideally obliged to attend to far more religious precepts than their Christian counterpart, their lives becoming sanctified in nearly all aspects of everyday life.¹⁸⁵

The hypothetical deeper commitment of Judaism to human life in all its aspects and its more wide-ranging embrace of human possibilities is connected to an important aspect of Cioran's philosophical anthropology: the importance of the emotions generally classified as negative and harmful, such as hatred, revenge, spite and so on. These are viewed by Cioran as the main drivers of human affairs, being viewed as at least just as potent and real, if not more so, than emotions such as love, kindness, etc. Whereas in Christianity the former set of feelings are viewed as sinful and to be opposed in the human personality, Judaism can take a more open approach to them, most conspicuously in regard to hatred and the proper way in which to regard one's enemies, based upon Scriptural writings. Rabbi Meir Soloveichik has pointed out that 'the Hebrew prophets not only hated their enemies, but rather revelled in their suffering, finding in it a fitting justice.'¹⁸⁶ Detestation of those who oppose or hinder God's commands is not merely acceptable in Judaism, it can be considered a moral duty to hate the morally wicked: 'Regarding a *rasha*, a Hebrew term for the hopelessly wicked, the Talmud clearly states: *mitzvah l'noso* – one is obliged to hate him.'¹⁸⁷ This is not gratuitous hatred for its own sake; Judaism believes that God hates the wicked, therefore it behoves his creatures to hate them also. The gap between Christian forgiveness and Jewish enmity toward the ungodly is encapsulated in the Hebrew phrase: *yemach shemo* – 'May his name be erased', a phrase employed when speaking of any great enemy

¹⁸⁵ Of course, these are generalisations akin to the generality of Cioran's ruminations, and the reality possess many degrees of truth and intensity. Its nearest form in reality is the life of Orthodox Jewry, of which Cioran spoke highly.

¹⁸⁶ Meir Soloveichik, 'The Virtue of Hatred,' *First Things* (Feb 2003).

¹⁸⁷ Ibid.

of the Jewish nation. Its intention, one of total ontological erasure and annihilation, is in startling contrast to Christian prayers and hopes for the forgiveness and redemption of one's enemies.

Cioran, too, speaks of the healthy aspects of hatred. Not only can it relieve the individual of the pressures accruing from unexpressed resentment, but its very expression may lead to its own dissipation. On a broader level, from Cioran's perspective the repression of hatred and the unequivocal dispensation of forgiveness may lead to a flattening of life and a halt to the historical drama. If hatred, envy and desire for what others possess or how they act were removed from the constitution of humanity what would be left but an insipid sameness? Of course, we are here operating on the level of language and rhetoric. It is hatred and resentment confined to the verbal or the written, a mode of expression available to those who choose to decline physical expression of such feelings.

In summation, I contend that Cioran held to, reiterated and deepened traditional European conceptions of Jews and Judaism for the purpose of strengthening his own philosophical theories concerning history and its mysterious unfurling. On the philosophical level, the deeper level of engagement Judaism proposes with the world was an attractive quality for a thinker so thoroughly committed to an exploration of the human condition in all its aspects, attractive and otherwise, and finally, on a personal level, Cioran's fascination with the concept of Jewish uniqueness may well have served as a personal bulwark against the homogenising and desacralising forces at work following the Second World War. Our next chapter will investigate Cioran's broader thinking on history.

Chapter 5

Cioran's Philosophy of History - Eschatology Postponed

Introduction

In this chapter I will explore Cioran's philosophy of history, tracing its development from his 1930s pre-war writings through to his post-war reflections. I will argue that although Cioran's overall philosophical anthropology and ethics may indeed be broadly termed "pessimistic", if there is a residue of hope or possibility for humanity in his work it lies within his thoughts on the historical process. Furthermore, while Cioran's thinking in general is often described as isolated and maverick, I will place his writings on history in a genealogical stream of thought that runs through French 20th century philosophy, focusing particularly on the famous Paris seminar on Hegel's *Phenomenology* run by Alexandre Kojève from 1933-39. As we shall see, Cioran's ruminations become much more comprehensible, particularly regarding his speculations concerning 'post-history', when placed within that framework. I shall argue that Cioran's ideas represent a nuanced and deep set of reflections and modifications of Kojève's end of history hypothesis.

But equally important, and in keeping with the view of Cioran as a secularised religious thinker that I have emphasised throughout this thesis, is the theological backdrop in which Cioran is operating, as I believe his obsession with history can be best viewed as a secularised eschatology. In his writings the endpoint of time is denuded of a divine telos and is instead brought down to the immanent. Such a reduction brings enormous if not

insuperable challenges, however. How can there be an endpoint if temporality is not overcome? What becomes of the human species if there is no divine transfiguration? Does talk of the “end of humanity” make any sense outside of a transcendental framework? These questions apply equally to Kojève, who also came from an Orthodox background and whose philosophical concerns can be seen to be grounded in particularly Russian eschatological traditions. Comparing the two can usefully illuminate the nature of Cioran’s thinking.

As ever with Cioran the “hope” he proffers is not of a variety that would be readily accepted by either the world at large or the philosophical community in particular, seeing as that hope consists in the desire that humanity in its present modality and social collective ceases to exist, and that *Homo Sapiens* becomes more akin to an animal species, deliberately restricting the use of its cognitive faculties to cater solely for its immediate biological needs. Such a conclusion stems from Cioran’s inability to commit to any firm belief in the possibility of divine redemption.

A secondary form of salvation Cioran aspires to if the first is not attainable is the continuation of the historical drama on a large scale with war and conflict being paramount in order to fend off boredom and existential despair. However, looming over these two possibilities for Cioran is the possibility of falling into what he terms ‘sub-time’, a state of being characterised by intense alienation, apathy and disengagement with all human affairs, where one feels utterly out of synch with the normal temporal march of human existence. To continue the religious parallels, post-history constitutes for Cioran a version of Paradise, where one is redeemed from the normal quotidian of desire and frustration and instead exists in an untroubled peace; sub-time can be viewed as a form of Purgatorial existence,

where one wanders in a denuded landscape with no glimmer of redemption, and finally, with his typical brio, the desire for a re-ignition of history may be classified as Cioran's equivalent of the Inferno, the twist being that such a state is considered preferable to the purgatorial 'sub-time' he so dreads.

Outlandish and even ludicrous as this may seem on first appearance if read in a literal fashion, if interpreted instead sympathetically in its genealogical place in European thought Cioran's view of the historical process appears far less idiosyncratic and provides fruitful material for reflection on the very nature of thought itself and the greater enterprise of philosophy. In the genealogical stream to which Cioran belongs he and thinkers such as De Maistre, Rousseau, Heidegger, Kojève and Sartre – otherwise so varied in background, creed and ideology – share an obsession with what they perceive to be the problematical nature of freedom. Humanity either does not know what to do with it (Sartre), is deprived of it (Rousseau), misuses it (De Maistre), does not properly understand it (Heidegger), or has too much of it (Kojève). Cioran offers his typically idiosyncratic approach to this issue.

Cioran's historical thinking in the 1930s

At first sight Cioran's abiding interest in history and the historical process may seem incongruous given his reputation as a philosopher of pessimism and alienation, aspects of existence invariably associated with the solitary individual. Philosophers, historians and thinkers immersed in history generally are prepared to invest the historical process with some form of meaning and purpose, seeing in it by and large a gradual accretion of knowledge or moral growth, whether it be on the Hegelian scale of the absolute triumph of reason or those who hope for more modest forms of social amelioration. Cioran's

philosophical origins lie, however, in the 1930s, a decade of political and social fermentation, where avoiding speculation on the historical process was a near impossibility for European thinkers.

However, Cioran's immersion in these topics becomes more explicable if we bear in mind his preoccupations with religious themes, and his status as a secularised thinker who frequently operates with theological categories. His engagement with fascism, historical destiny and rebirth, and, as we saw in the last chapter, Judaism, is easily more comprehensible if viewed as a form of secular eschatology, with death and resurrection on a national scale dominating his consciousness in his youth. An indicator of this is that one of the unusual and distinguishing marks of Cioran's philosophy of history is that it develops in parallel with, and indeed is often inseparable from, his abiding interest in mysticism. A glance at his works published in the 1930s presents an unusual spectacle in that works that seem deeply individual and despairing – *On the Heights of Despair* and *Tears and Saints* – are published in between works such as *The Transfiguration of Romania* and a continual stream of articles commentating on the political scene in Europe and Germany in particular, where Cioran was entranced by what he referred to as 'Hitlerism' and the possibilities it offered for a rejuvenation of that country and, more importantly, as an example for Romania to follow.

Although upon first sight such a pairing of history and mysticism may appear incongruous, on closer examination Cioran's fascination with both issues stem from a common source of a religious nature: namely the desire, continual and oftentimes desperate, to transcend the everyday and escape the banal reality of quotidian existence. Indeed, that desire finds expression in both an inner and outer direction: mysticism for the former and history for the

latter. The tension between advocating both mysticism and a positive philosophy of history is obvious. Although generalisations about mysticism are contested and problematic by reason of its intensely subjective nature, it can be safely stated that one of its most obvious characteristics is its eschewal of the outer world, and most certainly that of politics. The goal of the mystic may be characterised as seeking to escape the diachronic flow of time, to transcend the ephemerality and insubstantial nature of quotidian temporality and to attain a moment of eternity in the here and now. Of course, by definition such an experience cannot endure for long and the mystic is returned to the everyday, but having experienced – or at least having believed they experienced – a form of transcendence the quotidian is quite liable to be devalued as being but a poor substitute for eternity.

By contrast, politics and the historical process are marked by an immersion in the flow of time, an inescapable synchronic process that has no apparent end, either a natural one or an idealised one. It is perhaps in the field of first ideology and then historical eschatology that Cioran's embrace of both history and mysticism can be best viewed and understood. By definition, natural time cannot be stopped whereas ideology in its essence seeks in many regards to put an end to the flow of historical time. By seeking a final point of human social and cultural development, in a certain fashion nature is overcome and transcended. The teleology of the species, or at least of that part of the species represented by the ideologists, seeks to inhabit a perennial present and stable social structure, and thereby a form of political Platonism is achieved. In terms of eschatology, an end of man on the secular plane can only be achieved by somehow "going beyond" history and ideology, a topic to which we will return later.¹⁸⁸

¹⁸⁸ See 191-193 below.

The first stage of Cioran's thinking in the 1930s on these topics also must be viewed in a broader philosophical context. As we have noted, being heavily influenced by *Lebensphilosophie* and his reading of Lev Shestov and George Simmel amongst others, Cioran occupied from the beginning a zone of thought that eschewed rationalism and logic. System-building, systematic empiricism, conventional idealism, and Neo-Kantianism were all rejected in favour of a lyrical form of Nietzscheanism that in its first expression oscillated between extremes of despair and optimism. In terms of influences regarding the philosophy of history, at that period the unavoidable presence was that of Oswald Spengler, whose *Decline of the West* dominated discussion of historiography and the subject of cultural decadence after its publication in 1923. The core of Spengler's philosophy has been described in a previous chapter, but in regard to the contemporary scene Spengler believed European civilisation was dominated by what he terms Faustianism, the relentless desire to conquer the world and nature by means of technology and manipulation of matter. But according to Spengler that culture has now passed its zenith and we are in a declining phase of civilisation, although western man cannot, in spite of that decline, desist from seeking to further his dominance of the natural world.

Cioran's admiration for German fascism in the 1930s stemmed directly from his immersion in Spengler, mysticism and anti-rationalism. He admired German fascism's focus on the irrational and the emotional in the human psyche. The elevation of a human – Hitler – to the level of a god, the mass rallies, the enthusiasm of German youth and the rejuvenation of a country flattened by both the war settlement and the chaos of the 1920s deeply appealed to Cioran's at once anarchic and idealistic mystic sensibility. It is, however, worth noting that Cioran's admiration for this phase of German politics was not entirely unquestioning or devoid of critical sensibility: he acknowledged the lack of any core ideas in the essence of

“Hitlerism”, saw its limitations and openly acknowledged that dictatorship is a phenomenon that arises only in a country that has perhaps reached the end of its high cultural phase.¹⁸⁹

Given such an acknowledgement, it is unclear what, if anything, Cioran was ultimately seeking from German fascism. At best, it seems he was desirous of Romania finally taking a significant place on the stage of European history, as expressed in *The Transfiguration of Romania*. His hopes for this rested upon The Iron Guard, a right-wing political organisation that embodied a form of Christian Orthodox militarism headed by Corneliu Codreanu, for whom Cioran wrote an elegy upon his murder in 1940. The appeal of Codreanu’s ideas to Cioran concerning the purpose of politics and a nation’s destiny can be more clearly understood when considering the mission statement of the former:

The ultimate goal is not life. It is resurrection. The resurrection of nations in the name of Jesus Christ the Savior. Creation and culture are only means - not the purpose - of resurrection. Culture is the fruit of talent, which God implanted in our nation and for which we are responsible. A time will come when all the world's nations will arise from the dead, with all their dead, with all their kings and emperors. Every nation has its place before God's throne. That final moment, "resurrection from the dead," is the highest and most sublime goal for which a nation can strive. The nation is thus an entity that lives even beyond this earth. Nations are realities also in the other world, not only on this one. To us Rumanians, to our nation, as to every nation in the world, God assigned a specific mission; God has given us a historical destiny.¹⁹⁰

¹⁸⁹ Cioran’s political writings from the 30s are contained in *Apologie de la Barbarie: Berlin-Bucarest* (L’Herne, 2015).

¹⁹⁰ Corneliu Codreanu, ‘A few remarks on Democracy’ (1937) <https://web.archive.org/web/20040906201601/http://www.ucis.pitt.edu/eehistory/H200Readings/Topic5-R3.html>.

Although Cioran may not have shared Codreanu's faith in God or his religious zealotry, his desire for national greatness and the fulfilment of destiny was no less ardent than that of the politician. Themes of apocalypse, resurrection and paradise were taken from their religious context and applied to the horizontal historical plane in the hope that Cioran's personal and political despair would be alleviated by the elevation of Romania to historical greatness. To employ a well-known phrase of Eric Voegelin, Cioran's thought at this period seems a classic instance of seeking to 'immanentize the eschaton'.

Post-war

The Second World War utterly destroyed Cioran's political vague political hopes and disenchanted him thoroughly on a personal level. The initial phase of Cioran's post-war thought is marked by an intense scepticism and radical despair. In works such as *A Short History of Decay* and *All Gall is Divided* the renunciation of history is in effect total. In these works, Cioran provides a view of history and a philosophical anthropology that I shall now summarise.

For Cioran, history tends to be associated exclusively with ideology, and ideology is the province solely of fanatics. The sceptics, idlers and aesthetes are lauded as those people who alone have seen through the veil of delusion that motivates the majority of humans: their indifference and apathy guarantee that they at least will not be complicit in the launching of any new ideologies or belief-systems that may lead to mass bloodshed. Cioran attributes the ubiquity of fanaticism and idealism to the almost inescapable egotism that lies at the heart of the human perspective; unable to escape anthropocentrism, we project our own desires, insecurities and lust for control onto the world at large, a characteristic of

humans that inevitably leads to conflict as innumerable positions and desires can only inevitably clash and conflict (SHD: 3-4).

Cioran has at this point ostensibly renounced the *Lebensphilosophie* that lay behind his political activities of the previous decade. Although he would later speak harshly of Nietzsche, at this moment he feels a tribute is appropriate: 'A false image of life and of history was the result [of Nietzsche's thought]. But we had to pass through such things, through the philosophical orgy, the cult of vitality. Those who refused to do so will never know the relapse, the antipodes and the grimaces of this cult; they will remain closed off from the sources of disappointment' (SHD: 36).

At this stage, Cioran's only interest in history lies in lauding decadent cultural phases, which he views as a mode of relief from the seemingly inescapable fanaticism that characterises human history and in particular the 20th century. He lauds those civilisations that, in his own opinion at least, made a cult of frivolity and irony, nominating the Athens of Alcibiades and the France of the Regency period as two such cultures (SHD: 111-123). Such epochs raised a belief in the ultimate vanity of all things human to a form of cultural and aesthetic ideal and thereby merit the praise of one utterly disillusioned by all ideologies and the historical process generally. But such periods are rare, as the human need to believe in and attempt to realise a meaningful future is impossible to repress for any length of time.¹⁹¹

For Cioran the core problems of human existence remain constant, irrespective of the historical or social milieu, which are perhaps ultimately only window dressings on the same

¹⁹¹ It is however worth noting that Cioran on a number of occasions praised non-western civilisations that were, according to him, obsessed with the stars. Their sense of perspective was too great to become absorbed in the petty trivia of human drama and his love of civilisations obsessed with astronomy was first expressed in *Tears and Saints*. 'Such peoples forsake the allure of horizontal history – that is, delusion – in order to contemplate the infinite.' TS, 124.

essence. Depending on the philosophical trends and fashions of the moments, such central dilemmas may be designated as 'divine', 'absurd', 'existential' and so on, but at bottom all such labels represent the same fundamental inability of most humans to rest content for very long. 'The qualifiers change: this change is called intellectual progress' (SHD: 19).

Although Cioran may appear at this point to be propagating a form of nihilism or despair, it is also worth reminding ourselves of a point made when discussing his use of the aphorism: his anthropology partakes of a form of demoralised Classicism in which the human essence is constant, its modes of expression variations on the same limited themes, and its goals outgrowths of an innate constitution and disposition. For Cioran the curse of history lies in the ceaseless attempts to modify the human essence, to evade at any price the inescapable facts of our condition. We are ontological misfits, ill at ease with ourselves and our nature; our essence is to be tormented by a fundamental restlessness, and human history in all its various cultural and civilizational manifestations is but a testimony of collective efforts to escape or make bearable our fundamental alienation.

Individually, we survive through repression and a limited memory. If we could recall all our pains, if we could somehow experience them in one collective moment the burden and emotional weight would be intolerable. We survive only by divesting ourselves of ourselves, seeking to forge new futures for as long as we have the energy and the will. But there is a further twist in Cioran's anthropology: we may believe that we are seeking some form of salvation, but in reality we are addicted to ourselves, and the dramas and sufferings we subject ourselves to are but manifestations of our self-love. Salvation would imply a release from the self, but we are too harnessed to our identities, however tormented, to desire that.

On a civilizational level, 'wisdom' generally equates with resignation, a sense of futility and expiration. It appears only at the twilight of a culture which has exhausted its natural energy and resources. By structural necessity wisdom requires a catastrophe upon which to reflect. Contemporary – post-war Europe – finds itself in an analogous position to late Greece and Rome. None of the philosophical titans possess allure any longer – their aspirations to knowledge and totality seem a mockery in light of the civilizational catastrophe that has emptied Europe of its self-belief and worldly pre-eminence.

Yet Cioran himself is happy to acknowledge that he too partakes of the common destiny, desiring both wisdom and repose whilst also seeking to avoid it. Before Heidegger declared that 'Only a god can save us now,' Cioran states, 'A god is always threatening on the horizon.' But he does not desire to accept any transcendental solution: 'Let us conduct ourselves so that the god does not settle in our thoughts, let us still keep our doubts [...] the temptation of immanent destiny, any arbitrary and fantastic aspiration being preferable to the inflexible truths [...] we have faith neither in the peace we seek nor in the pleasures we pursue' (SHD: 36).

For Cioran, we act only *against* what we know. The sciences in which contemporary man takes so much pride reveal relentlessly the smallness of the species and the planet in the universe at large, discoveries in biology seem to only reveal how little control we have over our own fate, yet in spite of this on both an individual and collective level we plot and plan and never cease looking for control: 'Only the rational animal has been able to learn nothing from his philosophy' (SHD: 44). Collectively, we are habituated to endless action and the belief in forward motion; sloth and inactivity have assumed the stigmata of vice.

Our worship of time, and the importance we place on the past, present and future is for Cioran but another indication of our servility and entrapment. Incapable of being at rest and finding joy in mere existence, we invest all of our hopes in progress through temporality, whereas seen objectively one moment of time possesses no more or less ontological value than another. Such reasoning also informs his rejection of both political reform and revolution; social meliorism is of no interest for one whose thoughts are at heart eschatological: 'I would bestir myself, at best, for the Apocalypse, but for a revolution....To collaborate with an ending or a genesis, an ultimate or initial calamity, yes, but not with a change for some better or worse...' (TS: 134).

Cioran is also of the opinion that we live in fear of the unrealized potential of our freedom, largely because so many of our deepest desires are frequently negative and, according to Cioran, periodically homicidal. To restrain ourselves from what we desire is both a torment and a necessity. But the man who renounces everything (or rather attempts to renounce everything – total renunciation being impossible in Cioran's eyes) will find himself a wanderer and a stranger on the earth. Life maintains itself only by will and belief, by an excitation of the organs and passionate conviction. The quest to renunciation involves deliberate self-emptying, which will result in an utter lack of motivation and drive.

Cioran's disgust is engendered by the cumulative effect of thousands of years of historical frenzy, the power of which has finally been exhausted. Humanity must soon draw to a close once the "divorce from history" has been consummated. Every grandiose human movement on a large scale engenders violence and bloodshed – the persecuted become the persecutors, the martyrs the tyrants. The oppressed and the tyrants are ultimately alike, all that differentiates them is a relative distance on the scale of time and power.

The immediate post-war scenario saw Cioran utterly divested of any hopes of historical regeneration; instead at this stage he focuses solely on decadence and decay. He claims that 'the activity of a productive civilisation consists in drawing ideas out of their abstract nothingness, in transforming concepts into myths' (SHD: 111). But in decadent epochs the reverse occurs: myths are turned back into concepts, and with the foundational myths of a society dissolved the will to act weakens until a state of culture-wide reflection and paralysis is reached. At such points, a morbid fixation on the individual becomes pre-dominant. For Cioran, psychology in general and psychoanalysis in particular herald the death-knell of culture, as can be seen from the obsessional psychological frenzy that gripped fin-de-siècle Vienna.

Each civilization represents a new configuration of answers to the timeless philosophical questions and the human dilemma. Each will have its growth, apogee and decline, as each of them is 'merely a system of mistakes' (SHD: 115). Prejudices, although false when seen from a standpoint of philosophical objectivity, are the lifeblood of civilisations. They are its driving motor and the creator of a nation's narrative through time. Once they are doubted, rejected and cast aside, the end of that culture is nigh. Oriental civilisations have escaped this fate by and large. History is largely the story of 'civilisations on the run', those which embody a narrative arc of apogee and dissolution.

In Cioran's view the truths of our civilization are worth no more than those of civilizations past. It is a uniquely modern conceit that our truths and knowledge are worth more than those of peoples and cultures long dead. The essential problems and issues do not change – solely the terms which are applied to them. We flatter ourselves that by replacing myths and symbols with concepts that we have "advanced", whereas in reality we have merely

added one more term to the glossary of words for the incomprehensible. 'Strictly speaking, history does not repeat itself, but since the illusions man is capable of are limited in number, they always return in another disguise, thereby giving some ultradecrepit filth a look of novelty and a tragic glaze' (SHD: 138). Our various ideologies are nothing but private delusions made collective: 'A Chinese proverb: "When one dog begins barking at a shadow, ten thousand make it into a reality." – An epigraph to any commentary on ideologies' (NG: 179).

Cioran blames Hegel for the modern conceit of 'Progress' – he failed to recognise that consciousness merely changes its modalities and terms, never its content. As per Spengler, each cultural epoch is perfect and content within itself, late Rome and Greece, the Renaissance, the Regency, all were forms of culture that possessed full awareness of the human dilemma, their common factor being an awareness and aesthetics of decadence and futility, a sense that all cultural possibilities had been exhausted. Contemporary civilisation is no different, but merely lacks the historical knowledge and modesty to realise it.

For Cioran, the innumerable ideologies and fads by which men are promised salvation is an indication that a core human desperation can never be overcome: 'The modern world is just as badly off [as the Ancient World in needing Christianity], judging by the remedies from which it expects miracles [...] One is filled with amazement and even with dread when one hears men speak of freeing Man. How might slaves free the Slave?' (DQ: 15). As our culture becomes more dominated by technology, man's sphere of freedom shrinks even further: 'According to Hegel, man will be completely free only "by surrounding himself with a world entirely created by himself." But this is precisely what he has done, and man has never been so enchained, so much a slave as now' (TBB: 139).

At this immediate post-war stage Cioran's thought is highly individualistic. Despite his periodic reflections on the larger picture of human life, the individual is absolute, the panorama and props of history merely a backdrop to the individual saga, which yet proceeds along a path no less mapped out than that of the collective. We lose ourselves in the historical drama: 'existence thereby committed itself to a cycle of heresies which sapped the orthodoxy of the void' (SHD: 149).

Cioran and Kojève

In spite of his renunciation of historical thinking in the immediate aftermath of the war, Cioran's writings drifted back toward the theme of culture and history in the 1960s. In his aphorisms and several essays Cioran re-engaged with a philosophy of history and sought to discover what if any future there was for humanity in general and European culture in particular. In this and subsequent sections I will investigate the most prominent aspects of these writings and seek to place them within a framework of a secularised eschatology that, if although ultimately speculative to the point of fancy, nevertheless proved impossible for Cioran to resist, seeking therein some form of salvation for humanity.

Although contemporary thinking about history has often sought to accentuate human moral and technological progress, older forms of historical thinking have frequently been marked by a sense of catastrophe and imminent apocalypse:

Hesiod was the first to elaborate a philosophy of history. And also launched the notion of decadence. By doing so, what a light he casts on historical process! If, at the very outset, in the heart of the post-Homeric world, he decided that humanity was in its iron age, what would he have said a few centuries later – what would he say today? Except in periods

clouded by frivolity or utopia, man has always believed himself on the threshold of the worst. Knowing what he knew, by what miracle could he have unceasingly varied his desires and his terrors? (TBB: 131)

Inevitably, the shadow of Hegel must loom over any discussion of the philosophy of history. Although Cioran's references to Hegel are few and disparaging ('To scribble a postcard comes closer to creative activity than to read *The Phenomenology of Mind*'), and he is condemned alongside Aristotle and Aquinas as a reality-evading system-builder, clearly Cioran was familiar with his thought. In particular, I would contend that Cioran's thinking on history can be better understood in the light of the famous seminars delivered on Hegel's *Phenomenology* in the 1930s by the Russian thinker Alexandre Kojève.¹⁹² Although there are no explicit references to Kojève in any of Cioran's writings, it is inconceivable that a figure such as Cioran, who lived in the heart of Paris and partook (in spite of his disavowals) of the hubbub of Parisian intellectual life, would have been unaware of Kojève and his impact.

The parallels between Kojève's thought and Cioran's are extremely striking and surprising, especially given the latter's apparent disavowal of humanity and the historical process in his earliest post-war writings. As we shall see, both Cioran and Kojève seek emancipation through a full unfurling of the historical process, which both consider to be nearing completion, or at the very least is at such a stage that the end of history can be speculated upon in a meaningful fashion. Although on the surface Kojève's project is one of emancipation and liberation, a closer examination of its anthropology reveals a worldview not very dissimilar from that of Cioran.

¹⁹² Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel: Lectures on the "Phenomenology of Spirit* (Agora Editions), 1980.

In terms of the background origins of their thought there is a striking similarity in regard to theological influences. Kojève wrote his doctoral thesis on the thought of Vladimir Soloviev, one of the late 19th century Russian mystical thinkers who advocated a strong theological philosophy of *Sophia*, a form of feminine divine wisdom that he believed played a major role in Christian life. In an engaging essay, Boris Groys has suggested that Kojève appropriated Soloviev's utopian hopes for a universal church of love, and through the filter of his atheism and Hegelianism transformed the idea into his own notion of the universal state of mutual recognition as a vehicle of salvation.¹⁹³ As we have already seen, Cioran lived a very deep existential engagement with the mystics and with Russian thought in his youth, particular in the shape of Dostoyevsky's fiction, so we are presented with a common origin for a later and deep engagement with history and eschatology.¹⁹⁴

Kojève's anthropology: desire and recognition

The core of Kojève's anthropology is desire, specifically desire as socially framed and orientated. Once humans have passed beyond the animal stage of satisfying their basic physical needs, we are to all intents and purposes beyond nature, where desire now becomes centred around the need for recognition and social status. Kojève takes and amplifies Hegel's master-slave dynamic in order to provide a framework by means of which all human history can be made comprehensible. Although of itself a matter of fierce controversy, the following summary seeks to provide an adequate description.

¹⁹³ Boris Groys, 'Three Ends of History: Hegel, Solovyov, Kojève,' in *Introduction to Antiphrilosophy* (Verso), 2012.

¹⁹⁴ See Jeff Love, *The Black Circle A Life of Alexandre Kojève* (Columbia University Press, 2018), 71-90 for a discussion of the influence of Soloviev on Kojève.

Kojève views human socio-political history as having its genesis in armed struggle between two equals. Each wish for supremacy over and recognition by the other. In such conflicts, if the defeated individual does not accept death and wishes to live on in the shadow of the victor, he becomes a slave to his triumphant master. The master has now attained victory and needs no other form of social progress; the slave, by contrast, seeks to overcome his lowly status by the process of *work*, whereby he transforms reality through his labour. As a result, it is the slave who is the driving-engine of history as it is his narrative that pushes history through its various cultural and economic stages. The final stage of this conflict on the macro-level is the creation of a universal homogenous state where all have attained equality in the rank of citizen. The need for universal mutual recognition is assured; the need for struggle and war has been overcome; history in its typical dynamic of struggle and conflict has been transcended.

Beneath this mechanism we can see certain philosophical assumptions. For Kojève, man is an ontological intruder in the realm of nature in a manner very similar to Cioran's view. Desire centres around the core concept of *negation*. Man is driven to alter reality by negating the given in the pursuit of satiating his desires. Once a desire is satisfied, a new one emerges, and the process of change-through-negation repeats itself. Man is a misfit, whose perennial agitation arising from his core emptiness alienates him from both the world and nature. In many ways, the triumph of reason for Kojève is in essence the last and successful stage of previously fruitless attempts to stifle that relentlessly gnawing emptiness at the heart of the human condition. Ironically, the triumph of human history lies in a stifling of the human essence, a form of self-overcoming that consists in a self-annulment of human desire. History returns to nature once the epic cycle of human desire and restlessness has reached an end, primarily by means of a social configuration that supplies humans' basic

needs and eradicates all differences in a universal state. The aim of history is in many ways the eradication of the individual.

For both Cioran and Kojève, nothingness lies at the essence of man. He is a creature who unfurls in the temporal process of becoming and for whom there is no final plenitude or fulfilment. Time is both man's necessary condition for existence and simultaneously his tormentor. Of all concepts it is the most important from the viewpoint of a philosophical anthropology as it provides the grounds for the endless cycle of desire leading to fulfilment/frustration, and then disillusion leading to renewed desire that characterises human existence. It is time that reveals the essential nothingness of man. Nor is this just *à la mode de* French 20th century thought. Hegel had written chillingly that, 'Man is this night, this empty Nothingness, which contains everything in its undivided simplicity.'¹⁹⁵

Apart from the perennial circuit of desire we are also burdened with our unique selves, dominated by traits and idiosyncrasies that were not chosen but which nevertheless control our specific desires to a great extent, whether consciously or otherwise, all unfurling within a temporal process which we know to be finite. The human condition is therefore characterised by a perennial mismatch between our desires and the possibility of their providing lasting satisfaction, leading to an existence that both Cioran and Kojève would argue is largely one of frustration.¹⁹⁶ Cioran declares that

the future, an object of horror or hope, is our true site; we live in it; it is everything for us.

The obsession with advent, which is essentially Christian, by reducing time to the concept of the imminent and the possible, makes us ill-suited to conceive an immutable moment, resting in itself, preserved from the scourge of succession. Even stripped of the slightest

¹⁹⁵ Alexandre Kojève, 'Hegel, Marx and Christianity', trans. H. Giddin, *Interpretation* (1970) 1: 21-42.

¹⁹⁶ Or as Cioran's friend Samuel Beckett put it elegantly, 'The whiskey bears a grudge against the decanter.'

content, expectation is a void which gratifies us, an anxiety which reassures, so unsuited are we for a static vision. (TNG: 29)

In spite of our inability to rest in the moment, we have an eschatological obsession, whether it be personal, religious or historical: 'The obsession of lastness apropos of everything, the last as category, as constitutive form of the mind, as original deformity, even as revelation...' (DQ: 108). It is a part of our constitution to fasten relentlessly on time, its various modalities and supposed meanings: 'Time has an absolute meaning only for the incurable' (DQ: 163).

Cioran employs Hegelian language in agreeing with Kojève that the triumph of the slave is inevitable, although his view of the Master differs considerably from that of the Russian thinker:

Freedom is an expense, freedom exhausts, while oppression causes us to muster our forces, prevents the waste of energy resulting from the free man's faculty of externalizing, of projecting the good outside himself. We see why slaves always win in the long run. Masters, to their defeat, manifest themselves, drain themselves of their existence, express themselves: the unconstrained exercise of the gifts, of their advantages, reduces them to the state of phantoms. Freedom will have devoured them. (DQ: 180-1)

Thus in Cioran's political anthropology the process of historical destiny amounts to a constant stream of slaves replacing masters, who in turn rule over other slaves, who in their turn will overthrow them and so on *ad infinitum*. Cioran differs from Kojève in believing that there is no satisfactory end point for this process, no homogenous universal state. There can come only either apocalypse or post-history from exhaustion, as opposed to post-history driven by enlightened reason.

Nevertheless, for both Cioran and Kojève the path to liberation lies in an annulment of human personality and desire. For Kojève this is brought about by the rational establishment of the Universal and Homogenous state, where all desires will be regulated and satisfied. The universal state will, in essence, be a return to original animal consciousness, from which human history in its cultural, political and social manifestations was fundamentally a form of regrettable and wasteful deviation. Cioran is of the same opinion, although he believes that, in contrast to Kojève's rational and self-conscious Hegelianism, such a goal is an unconscious desire of collective humanity: 'Deep in his heart, Man aspires to rejoin the condition he had before consciousness. History is merely the detour he takes to get there' (TBB: 121). For Cioran the aim is also uniformity and homogeneity, except he aims for a more ambitious goal: the renunciation of language and its concomitant attempt at human mastery of the world.¹⁹⁷

¹⁹⁷ Heidegger also provides a point of intersection between Cioran and Kojève. The latter's lectures on Hegel are generally agreed to present the German idealist through a Heideggerean lens of existential facticity. It has been argued that Kojève deliberately misreads Hegel, or at least weakens his idealism, in order to historicize him and thus be in a position to offer a solution to the problem of human temporality through the attainment of a historical endpoint. Again, certain parallels are discernible between Cioran and Heidegger, and it could be argued that of all other 20th century thinkers it is (ironically, given Cioran's deprecatory remarks about him) Heidegger to whom Cioran is closest in many important aspects of his biography and thought. Each took a form of gamble in the 1930s, investing their political and eschatological hopes in right-wing politics, each believes in their own manner that man has suffered a 'falling away from being', each seeks a way to return to that primordial unity. The centrality of language is the notion that most closely unites them. For Heidegger, Man is the creature that 'speaks Being'. This is a characteristic and a duty that distinguishes him from all other animals and is indeed responsible for his unique value. Heidegger posits a falling away from a primal scenario

In both Cioran and Kojève there is an initial turning away from animal, instinctual life toward a quest for struggle and domination. For Kojève this deviation lies in the desire for recognition from the other. We enter into agonistic relations with the other due to the fact that we wish our desires to become his desires. To make another want what we want, to impose our values upon them is the ultimate form of triumph, more so than even outrightly killing that other. For Cioran, the urge to dominate finds its primal root in language itself. The act of naming and categorising reflects an insatiable human urge to conquer and dominate: 'But to embrace a thing by definition, however arbitrary – and all the more serious the more arbitrary it is, since the soul then overtakes knowledge – is to reject that thing, to render it insipid and superfluous, to annihilate it' (SHD: 7). Man will only accept a world that he has labelled, an object is only acceptable once it has been placed in a human taxonomy, the outrightly other must be tamed and controlled. Cioran's view of names is akin to Adam labelling the animals in Genesis 2: 19-20, except that he sees no God behind the process. So in both thinkers there is an initial rupture with nature, a decisive step toward separation and alienation. The question then remains, from whence this desire to separate originates. Is it due to a calculated misstep or is it merely the inevitable outcome of a fundamental ontological displacement within the essence of the human being?

Kojève's anthropology is one of a fundamentally deep alienation between humans and their world. He rejects a classical epistemology of realism, whereby the knowing subject is confronted with a known object; instead, he claims that

where Man spoke Being felicitously and truthfully, seeing in the Greeks a certain purity which has subsequently been debased, with only the intermittent appearance of faithful speaking thereafter.

One must oppose *natural* Being to *human* Being. Or, to use Hegel's language: on the phenomenological level, *Sein* is opposed to *Selbst*; on the metaphysical level, Space to Time; on the ontological level, Identity to Negativity. In other words, one must see something else in Man besides a *knowing* Subject; and one must *oppose* Man to the (natural) World precisely to the extent that he is this other thing (*Anderes*).¹⁹⁸

These sentiments are echoed almost exactly by Cioran:

Example of anti-nature, man's isolation is equalled only by its precariousness. The inorganic is sufficient unto itself; the organic is dependent, threatening, unstable; the conscious is the quintessence of decrepitude. Once we enjoyed everything, except consciousness; now that we possess consciousness, now that we are tormented by it, now that it figures in our eyes as the converse of primal innocence, we manage neither to assume nor to abjure it. To find elsewhere more reality than in oneself is to confess that we have taken the wrong road and that we deserve our downfall. (FT: 41-2)

Kojève's epistemology is one of radical anti-subjectivity. The only true *Being* is that which exists apart from man; the very existence of knowledge itself appears to be a form of alienation. Man, as a creature whose primary dimension is time, is separated from a posited natural world that is largely static in essence and dwells comfortably in space. The subject and object of classical realism can never coincide. For Kojève this implies therefore that in some sense all knowledge 'is *false* knowledge.' In words that echo strongly with Cioran's anthropology, Kojève states that man 'must have something else for support in addition to passive contemplation of the given. And this other thing, in Hegel, is called Negativity, Time and Action.'¹⁹⁹

¹⁹⁸ Kojève (1980), 157.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid., 158.

Kojève, however, does not lament the disappearance of Man, as his thought is radically anti-human:

The disappearance of Man at the end of History, therefore, is not a cosmic catastrophe: the natural World remains what it has been from all eternity. And therefore it is not a biological catastrophe either: Man remains alive as animal in *harmony* with Nature or given Being.

What disappears is Man properly so-called – that is, Action negating the given, and Error, or in general, the Subject *opposed* to the Object.²⁰⁰

In a recent study of Kojève, Jeff Love has compared the Russian with two writers of great importance to Cioran:

I think it would be more accurate to view Kojève's scepticism or nihilism, if these are properly attributable to him, as being of a totally different kind – that the end of his thinking is to free the world of the mistake that is the human being. In this respect, Kojève resembles Jonathan Swift, not Dostoevsky, and his "nihilism" is his conviction that the aim of human existence is self-extermination as a boon to nature, which, in the human being, has created a devastating viral mistake.²⁰¹

Further related to this is a central concept shared by Cioran and Kojève: the relationship between philosophy and sickness. Kojève speaks of Hegel's "hypochondria" that according to him resulted from the fact that 'he could not accept the necessary abandonment of *Individuality* – that is, actually, of humanity – which the idea of absolute Knowledge demanded.'²⁰² Amusingly, Kojève declares that Hegel overcame this illness in a manner akin

²⁰⁰ Ibid., 158, n.6.

²⁰¹ Love (2018), 327, n.34.

²⁰² Kojève (1980), 168.

to Ecclesiastes by reconciling 'himself with all that is and has been, by declaring that there will never more be anything new on earth.'²⁰³

Another striking connection between Cioran and Kojève and one tied to their parallel thoughts on illness is their attitude toward suicide. For both, having recourse to suicide is an expression of the deepest form of human freedom. Kojève states that 'If there is suicide, there is freedom.'²⁰⁴ To have the capacity to rise above our natural instincts and our deep desire to cling to life is a sign of superiority. As per the Stoics, it is only the low and the slaves who cling to life at all costs; the person who has attained to reason will choose their own exit if and when they deem it appropriate. Cioran continually advocates the notion that having suicide as an option is a means of making life bearable and lauds the Stoic championing of the idea. The obsession with suicide common to both has a common origin, as 'Kojève reread Hegel through Dostoyevsky and Nietzsche, or rather through the thought of a composite philosopher created in the imagination of Twentieth Century thinkers- Nietzsche/Kirilov.'²⁰⁵

As we will see presently, Cioran is too honest a thinker to imagine that his own version of post-history may constitute little more than a form of idealistic fantasy. Unlike Kojève, who appears to have firmly believed in the end of history, (whether manifested in Napoleon, Stalin or the EEC – a shifting allegiance that itself testifies to the instability of the notion of history having an end),²⁰⁶ Cioran is too much aware of the abiding ontological disjunction within the human condition. There is no reason to suppose that the satisfaction of basic

²⁰³ Ibid., 168.

²⁰⁴ Ibid., 155.

²⁰⁵ Paperno, Irina. *Suicide as a cultural institution in Dostoevsky's Russia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997).

²⁰⁶ I shall return to Kojève's political engagements below.

material needs will somehow sate the more violent and destructive tendencies within humanity. Indeed, such a notion seems an odd one, given that there is no historical evidence of a prelapsarian state that demonstrates a humanity content with mere existence as such, although as will see such an Edenic notion haunts the theological imagination of Cioran. He has insufficient faith in the capacity of humans to remain content with any given state whatsoever. The urge to express and thereby subdue appears to lie at the core of our being, indeed it may well *be* that very core. Even those who ostensibly have transcended such a state are not above suspicion, as can be seen from Cioran's ambivalent attitude toward the saints and the mystics (Why do mystics write and for whom? Who is venerated more than saints, and why do the latter allow it?).

Post-History

As we have seen, Cioran talks of the ideal life as a sphere of inaction, whereby the enlightened rise above History and become spectators of the passing show. Historical truths lack all substance, but they do have an essence, that of deception. The passage from one illusion to another in history mirrors that of the transmigration of souls in Buddhism, except that whereas in the latter the individual is desperate to escape the constant cycle of rebirth and suffering historical man is wedded to his nightmares, for he does not see what they can be replaced by. He is addicted. 'Man makes history, in turn, history unmakes Man' (DQ: 37).

History has no goal, but it has a sense of fatality, which gives it an illusory air of purpose and destiny. Its fatality is its logic, its providence. Civilizations always reach the opposite of their goals, the clearest demonstration of history's dark logic and fatality. For example, Roman Republican virtues end in the dictatorship of the Caesars, the Church's first message of

ascetism and worldly renunciation culminates in partnership with the Roman Empire, the French Revolution ends with Bonaparte's dictatorship, Hitler's grandiose plans for Germany end in the destruction of the nation, the Soviet dream of an atheist proletarian freedom leads to the collapse of the country and a form of Tsardom coupled with a re-emergence of Orthodoxy, and so on.

For Cioran, the aftermath of the Second World War suggests the end of history: 'Novalis says: "It depends on us to make the world accord with our will." This is precisely the contrary of everything we can think and feel at the end of a life, and with all the more reason, at the end of history....' (DQ: 183). Cioran declares that we have exhausted ourselves, ruined ourselves by analysis, by an examination of our foundations. We are broken, all we are fit for is the end. We can advance only toward that end, where the air of disillusionment and exhaustion will be so unbearable that we shall turn against each other in a final spasm of rage. The survivors shall be the ones to truly contemplate post-history.²⁰⁷

Although Cioran lacks faith in Kojève's Universal State, he cannot resist speculating, or perhaps more accurately fantasising, about what a post-historical human society would look like. He imagines a world where books and knowledge are banned, where the authorities have realised that to teach history is simply another way of ensuring that history will continue. The perennial present shall be enforced as a mode of being and a form of ethical perfection. Industry and technology shall be eschewed. The concept of an 'event' shall be

²⁰⁷ Here it is of course important to determine whom Cioran is referring to when he says 'we'. Given his frequent faith in the possibilities of historical destiny offered by Russia, and his comments elsewhere about the future belonging to 'the suburbs of the globe', it is safe to assume that he is referring primarily, if indeed not solely, to Europe.

frowned upon and viewed with deep distrust. 'Life would become endurable only among a humanity which would no longer have any illusions in reserve, a humanity completely disabused and delighted to be so' (TBB: 139)²⁰⁸

In keeping with the theme of inverted theology that so characterises Cioran's writings, the disillusioned man at the end of history becomes a form of anti-saint. He has rejected the world and its machinations from weariness and disgust, but he is under no illusion as to his own moral status: this is the main differing point from the saints of religion, who are enshrined in sanctity and holiness. They divinize their ascetism – the anti-saint is merely a victim of weariness and historical exhaustion. As with the simulacrum of sanctity with the saint, the weariness of the last man can create an illusion of morality and benevolence. The last man harms no one, not from good heartedness or love, but from fatigue and indifference. He finds no less malevolent and bitter thoughts in himself than in others, but detached from action by weariness alone, he lacks the will or interest to act, and hence in his ineffectuality can come to assume a deceptive air of tolerance and kindness (SHD: 156). Cioran's post-history is a form of de-divinized mysticism. Historical time is escaped, the usual vicissitudes of human existence are avoided, and a form of peace is achieved. It is mysticism without God or ecstasy, and ultimately as unrealisable a goal for Cioran as divine mysticism. Instead, he is obliged to wander and pick amongst the ruins. As Shadia Drury puts it, 'Post-historical man is an insatiable tourist - history is his entertainment and the world is his museum.'²⁰⁹ Whilst awaiting an end to history that will most likely never come, the man

²⁰⁸ Kojève pushes things beyond Cioran's minimalist picture, claiming that 'Animals of the species *Homo sapiens* would react by conditioned reflexes to vocal signals or sign "language," and thus their so-called "discourses" would be like what is supposed to be the language of the bees.' (1969), 170.

²⁰⁹ Drury (1994), 52.

who is condemned to live in historical time is advised by Cioran to 'try to live as if history were done with and to react like a monster riddled with serenity' (TBB: 18).

Realisable or not, in terms of how a post-historical landscape could come about, both Kojève and Cioran at different points placed their hopes on Russia. Kojève notoriously declared himself a Stalinist who for a time saw in the dictator's empire the final manifestation of history's end. Cioran also harbours almost mystical hopes for the future of Russia. In one essay he declares that 'considered in itself, communism appears as the only reality to which one might still subscribe, if one harbours even a wisp of illusion as to the future: this is why, to various degrees, we are all communists...' (HU: 96). However, Cioran at around the same time also predicts the end of Marxism and the triumphant return of Orthodoxy. Ironically, the predictions of the nihilist have proven more accurate than those of the learned, cynical "realist" bureaucrat.²¹⁰

Philosophical resistance

As an exemplar of philosophical opposition to such concepts as the end of history and of man it is worthwhile to turn to Leo Strauss, for whom such possibilities are regarded with extreme distrust and foreboding, and whose thoughts touch on those of Cioran at many points. In a dialogue with Kojève, Strauss asks if in regard to the idea that a post-historical man could be truly sated, 'Does Kojève not underestimate the power of the passions? Does he not have an unfounded belief in the eventually rational effect of the movements instigated by the passions?'²¹¹ Strauss develops his theme by declaring that a universal

²¹⁰ We will return to Cioran's 'hopes' for Russia below.

²¹¹ Strauss (1991), 207.

homogenous state that requires a dictator who possesses considerably more power and status than everyone else will inevitably breed resentment and eventually rebellion amongst the populace at large and thereby reactivate the historical process.

More incisive from a philosophical perspective is Strauss's observation that Kojève's insistence on work-as-negation as forming the essence of man will in the end undo the universal state. If negation is the essence of all human activity, then the attainment of an end point logically entails an end of *all* human activity, which for an anthropology as time bound as Kojève's must surely entail the end of man as a negating being, which would imply that man's essence had all along been a form of "error" or "mistake". For a classical humanist such as Strauss this is simply inconceivable and morally repugnant. Rather than see the universal state as a likely endgame, Strauss contends that man by nature will simply be incapable of accepting such stasis and his natural appetite for work-activity-negation will lead to a disruption of universal homogeneity and the historical cycle will recommence and repeat itself. This echoes Cioran's distrust of the human inability to settle and find contentment in the moment, and his supposition that boredom would overcome the inhabitants of such a world and history would be once more set in motion, resulting in the inevitable calamities and violence. Consequently, Cioran is resigned to the fact that humanity must 'abide by its indubitable abysses' (DQ: 60).

The most interesting aspect about the impossibility of post-historical peace is that Strauss does not particularly despair at the prospect of the cycle resuming. Indeed his attitude is reminiscent of Camus, in that he welcomes it, declaring that 'that nihilistic revolution may be the only action on behalf of man's humanity, the only great and noble deed that is

possible once the universal and homogenous state has become inevitable.’²¹² Strauss merges Camusian revolt with Nietzschean *amor fati* in his open acknowledgement that the nature of man’s historical experience may indeed be repetitive and offer no ultimate solution, but he claims it will be ‘a new lease of life for man’s humanity.’ Strauss knowingly strikes an ironically Marxist note, calling on the ‘Warriors and workers of all countries, [to] unite, while there is still time, to prevent the comings of “the realm of freedom”. Defend with might and main, if it needs to be defended, “the realm of necessity.”’²¹³

Strauss further criticises the notion of any end of history by appealing, as a classicist, to the fundamental inequality of man. There can be no satisfying universal last state because not all men are capable of the same wisdom; presumably not all men even *want* wisdom. Therefore, an enormous and theoretically infinite state apparatus would be required to keep men in line with the decreed level of conformity, thereby paradoxically introducing unprecedented levels of state control and coercion, as was visible in the reign of Kojève’s hero Stalin. In the face of such humanist rebellion, Kojève was unyielding:

Besides, ‘not human’ can mean ‘animal’ (or, better – automaton) as well as ‘God’. In the final state there naturally are no more ‘human beings’ in our sense of an *historical* human being. The ‘healthy’ automata are ‘satisfied’ (sports, art, eroticism, etc.), and the ‘sick’ ones get locked up. As for those who are not satisfied with their ‘purposeless activity’ (art, etc.), they are the philosophers (who can attain wisdom if they ‘contemplate’ enough). By doing so they become ‘gods.’ The tyrant becomes an administrator, a cog in the ‘machine’ fashioned by automata for automata.²¹⁴

²¹² Strauss, (1991), 209.

²¹³ Strauss (1991), 209.

²¹⁴ Kojève, letter to Strauss 19/9/50 in Strauss (1991), 255.

By contrast, Strauss's classical position is again akin to that of Cioran. Men are too weak by nature and universal happiness is impossible. The idea of the universal state is rendered only even barely plausible by reducing and homogenizing man's shifting moods, goals and emotions to one purported common desire: recognition. Ironically, for a philosopher who insists on the vital necessity of the concrete and the real, Kojève resorts to an idealistic construction that relies upon a series of buzzwords that seek to eschew actual content and specificity. The reality of man's chaotic nature is such that it can only be handled by imagining a theoretical cage in which he is bound.

But whereas Strauss still has firm faith in the classical notion of philosophy as a gradual accretion of knowledge that can temper the worst of the human condition and push aside any notions of history needing an end, Cioran voices the possibility that as secularism grows and historical memory fades, the concept of salvation itself will disappear: 'When I rage against the age, I can calm myself merely by thinking of what will happen, of the retrospective jealousy of those who come after us. In certain respects, we belong to the old humanity, the humanity that could still regret paradise. But those who come after us will not even have the recourse of that regret, they will not even have an idea of it, not even the word!' (TBB: 130).

Mysticism and *The Fall Out of Time*

At this juncture it is worth reflecting on how Cioran's proposed "solution" to the problem of history and historical consciousness sits alongside mysticism. Although Cioran renounced mysticism as a path (for himself at least), there are certain structural similarities between his version of the end of history and the mystical experience. In each there is a striving to

escape the passage of time, or at least certain forms of time. The mystic seeks a complete release from the diachronic passage of the moments, looking to experience a timeless glimpse of eternity. Neither natural nor historical time has the least relevance for him or her, only contact with that which is above time is reckoned of value.

Cioran's ambitions are equally immodest, seeing as they do in civilisation and history a complete error and misstep, a fatal deviation from a posited primordial unity in which human existence was far less troubled than in its civilised form. Both "solutions" posit language as a form of error, or at least in the case of mysticism a distraction. (As has been observed elsewhere, it is a noteworthy irony how much writing the mystics produced given the emphasis on silence, solitude and the ineffable experience of unity with the Divine that they claimed to partake in.) The mystic seeks the silence of eternity and the enjoyment of being present with the Divine, a form of rapture that will dispense with the need for language. Cioran's post-historical man will also have dispensed with language due to having finally understood the catastrophic consequences of attempting to tame the world by means of verbal classification.

Thus in both mysticism and Cioran's world of post-history there is a reaction against origins. Christianity declares that in the beginning was the Word, but the mystic seeks a divine silence, while Cioran seeks to use silence as a means to escape both history and language. In the latter, the historical process is seen as a form of purgatorial or indeed hellish rite of passage and punishment by means of which man can attain a return to that primordial peace from which his insatiable egotism separated him.

It is worth pointing out at this stage that in spite of Cioran's somewhat fantastical notions of a post-history world there is perhaps in it something that defies his usual classification as a

nihilistic pessimist, namely the return to a mode of natural existence and the positing of at least the possibility of a form of a life less characterised by trauma and violence than that which has largely denoted humanity's historical career thusfar. Indeed, contrary to that standard characterisation of Cioran as a pessimist, if anything his notions of post-history may indicate a rare lapse into a form of hopeless and unrealistic optimism of a quasi-mystical nature, whereby a secularised form of the Christian prelapsarian Paradise becomes an object of philosophical longing.

However, Cioran's doubts concerning the possibility of a peaceful post-historical existence are further compounded by his ruminations on the 'fall out of time', a form of failed mysticism. Whereas the mystic transcends time, Cioran laments how often he himself falls beneath it, into a state of being that mirrors the mystic's time, except for him the new temporal dimension is a purgatorial realm. Cioran's 'sub-time', as I shall refer to it, is a form of the mystic's perennial present, except that it is a place without transcendence or even the possibility of transcendence. It is a form of extreme alienation and uncomfortable detachment, devoid of any affective investment in human life, personal or social, and one that certainly lacks any possibility of contact with the divine. To experience it is to feel mocked by God and leads Cioran to declare:

There is an authentic, positive eternity, which extends beyond time; there is another one [sub-time], negative and false, located within it: that eternity in which we stagnate, far from salvation, outside the competence of any redeemer, and which liberates us from everything by depriving us of everything. The universe impoverished, we exhaust ourselves in the spectacle of our own appearances. What cripples us is our incapacity to marry ourselves to the eternal present. (HU: 103)

For an agnostic like Cioran this inverted mysticism becomes a borderline divine experience, except that lived experience of sub-time is so unbearable that Cioran seeks to be 'raised back' to normal human historical time, which, in spite of its vanities, is more suited to the human constitution of desire and satisfaction/frustration than the still and empty world of sub-time. In many ways, that sub-time is a secularised form of the Homeric afterlife or the Jewish Sheol, a grey landscape where the souls of mortals wander without aim or hope of redemption.

The fall into sub-time arises from an initial alienation from both historical and natural human temporality: 'You have dared call Time your "brother", take as your ally the worst of torturers. On this point, our differences explode: you walk in step with Time, while I precede or drag after it, never adopting its manners, unable to think of it without experiencing something like a speculative sorrow' (DQ: 98). The inability to tolerate sub-time constitutes for Cioran a form of proof of his pessimism regarding the human condition. History is indispensable to human existence – our personal cycle of desire-fulfilment finds its larger expression in the drama of history. Utopian political desires are unrealisable not necessarily for practical reasons such as administration and distribution, but rather for deeper human ones, such as our incapacity for contentment and our inescapable proclivity for motion and drama. Thus any idealised post-historical collective existence would in reality succumb to an aggregation of demoralised individual sub-time existences.

Consequently, one of the most oft-repeated aphorisms of any philosopher, Santayana's 'Those who do not learn from the past are doomed to repeat it' would be nonsensical from Cioran's perspective given his reluctant conclusion that we can never make peace with temporality. One can study history as much as one wishes but given the inescapable

parameters of our condition we are doomed to repeat its basic underlying motor – the experience, at varying levels of intensity, of insatiable desire – for as long as we live, both individually and collectively. History may not repeat itself exactly, but in its underlying forms we can observe patterns that repeat themselves, assuming merely different garbs depending on time and circumstance. Cioran asserts that salvation may be simply impossible for humans, whose essence is chaos and uncertainty: ‘To shed the Old Adam is to deprive ourselves of our own depths, it is to thrust ourselves of our own accord into the impasse of purity. Without the contribution of our past, of our mud, of our corruption – recent as well as original – the spirit is out of a job. Woe to the man who does not sacrifice his own salvation!’ (FT: 112).

Sub-time is a mockery of all soteriological hopes: ‘Hell is this motionless present, this tension in monotony, this inverted eternity which issues nowhere, not even into death...’ But perhaps this is because that form of eternal present of which Cioran complains is not that of God: ‘When the eternal present stops being God’s time to become the Devil’s, everything goes bad, everything becomes an autopsy of the intolerable....’ (FT: 178).

According to Cioran, (and containing many echoes of the darker aspects of the anthropology of Luther and Calvin) the Will is a disease, but one that needs to be exercised continuously to keep us in our poise. If we slacken, we fall out of time. Conversely, if we overreach into “superman” territory, we would doubtless explode. Ultimately, given our inescapable bondage to the human will, Cioran acknowledges the fantastical nature of his speculations concerning post-history: ‘What folly to link oneself with beings and things, and what greater folly to suppose that one can loose oneself from them. To have sought renunciation at any price and still to be only a candidate for renunciation’ (DQ: 177).

Christian echoes

In terms of the central aim of this thesis, namely to investigate how Cioran is representative of the persistence of Christian modes of thought in a nominally post-Christian and secular world, we can see how his philosophy of history forms a vital part of that configuration. As with Christianity, in Cioran's view history must also be consummated, but whereas in the former history will culminate in the second coming of Christ and the reign of heaven upon earth, for Cioran the process is desacralized and we are presented instead with the image of a history that peters out after an all-too-human apocalypse. It is an eschatology of immanence, devoid of transfiguration, as in Cioran's tale humanity, not earmarked for transcendence, will regress back to the earth and occupy a place in the natural world.

Yet as ever there is ambiguity in Cioran's vision, as there is still present in his philosophy of history the most notable aspect of Christian anthropology, namely that Man is an *exceptional* creature, separated from both God and Nature alike, possessor of a unique and fatal destiny. From the Christian perspective, Man is chosen for salvation or damnation, whereas Cioran's anthropology represents a melange of classical, Christian and post-Christian thought. On the one hand, human life is marked by a deep fatalism, events are ultimately beyond his control, whether on a personal or historical level – such is the classical influence; then Cioran employs a Christian idea, namely that humanity is somehow separate from Nature - a very unclassical idea considering the constant emphasis in Greek thought on man's position within a harmonious Cosmos – so that Man is, in a manner of metaphorical speaking, elect in his damnation. Whereas Christian thinking relies on the Fall as an explanation for Man's disrupted state, Cioran equivocates between declaring that humanity

was always at odds with itself, or instead opts to place the blame on language and its simultaneously appropriating and alienating powers. Then finally, unable to embrace any form of transcendence, Cioran has recourse to a form of atheistic materialism, namely the idea that the only hope for humanity is a return to a form of base animal life where the satisfaction of basic needs is hopefully enough to sate and quell his darker and more destructive tendencies. Man must be quarantined within immanence in order to prevent any future repetition of his destructive and doomed history.

In Christianity humanity is saved through a form of spiritual transfiguration whose details are unclear and are endlessly disputed among theologians, but the essence of which may be considered as a renewal and transformation. The soul of each individual is maintained but the outer manifestation of that soul is unclear in regard to whether Christian salvation will consist finally in form of pure spiritual existence, such as imagined by Dante in his Empyrean, or else involve a renewal of the physical and re-embodiment in a world where death no longer exists. In Cioran there is a similar structural ambiguity: on the one hand, man will be preserved and there is no final destruction, but there is a core modification in that hubris and violence are eliminated and a 'pure' form of life is posited. It is a form of post-Christian eschatology that retains Christian structures of thought while being unable to admit any possibility of divine transcendence.

For the sake of furthering the comparison, let us consider the most famous imaginative rendering of Christian Paradise, that of Dante. In the *Paradiso* the heavenly spheres are depicted as being places of constant movement and joyous celebration, a continual ecstatic dynamism that intensifies the nearer the saved soul approaches the Divine presence. In Cioran, on the other hand, his earthly paradise is a place of fundamental stasis. Movement,

aside from its most basic forms, has been banished. Thinking and acting on the larger scale are viewed as secular sins, self-expansion as a form of original sin and acquisition is a crime that leads to large scale catastrophe.²¹⁵ In the Christian vision the soul grows in glory as it nears God whereas in the Cioranian view the aim of the self is to dissolve back into undifferentiated Being.²¹⁶

Yet ultimately there are enough similarities between the Christian vision and Cioran's thought to evoke comment. Although Dante's *Paradiso* may contain within itself great movement and expressions of joy, it occurs within a rigorously delineated space, namely Paradise itself.²¹⁷ There is almost an implication that in order to attain true happiness Man must be sealed off, quarantined and have his movement rigorously prescribed within a pre-determined network of circling and ascent. In the Christian vision there is no more History in the conventional sense of the word, no more free movement where Man can choose his destiny or flirt with damnation. Similarly, in Cioran's post-history utopia there is very little freedom of movement. Motion and thought are prescribed in a narrow framework, the self is allowed only a limited capacity within a timework that is both conditioned by time and yet strives toward timelessness. In both Paradise and Cioran's post-history world there is an emphasis on the perennial present. Man shall attain fullness of being and contentment within an eternal now, a moment which does not require fulfilment by a consummation within a future moment.

²¹⁵ A horror of motion, expression and self-expansion is a theme shared with his contemporary Samuel Beckett, a theme that will be explored in the final chapter.

²¹⁶ As well as Christian elements, Cioran's vision here incorporates elements of eastern and Buddhist thinking with which he periodically flirted and idealised throughout his post-war writings.

²¹⁷ It is worth noting that Plato's Republic bears certain structural resemblances to Dante's Paradise most notably in the hierarchical structure, the gradual ascent toward final authority, and the very rigorously controlled spheres of action and possibility of movement.

The Christian vision and that of Cioran and Kojève require a form of death to occur, that is the death of Historical Man. The everyday experience of quotidian and historical time must be eliminated, in order that the death of man in his current mode of being can occur which will then lead to a new and elevated ontological modality. Dante's beatified and Cioran's post-historical humanity occupy a position in eternity from which they can look back and down upon history with wistful regret, occasionally tinged with nostalgia.²¹⁸ However, ultimately for Cioran we may have no recourse but to resign ourselves to our condition and endure our perennially becoming status: 'Progress and the Eternal Return: two meaningless things. What remains? Resignation to becoming, to surprises that are no such thing, to calamities that pretend to be uncommon' (AA: 189).

In many ways when considering these genealogical elements of Cioran's thought Karl Löwith's judgement on the modern world is extremely appropriate: 'The modern mind has not made up its mind whether it should be Christian or pagan. It sees with one eye of faith and one of reason. Hence its vision is necessarily dim in comparison with either Greek or biblical thinking.'²¹⁹ Whilst it would be unfair to describe Cioran's thinking as 'dim' it is certainly accurate to view him as standing at the crossroads of a certain moment in European thought, one where Christian modes of conceptualisation have seemingly been discarded but where their foundational attitudes lie deeply embedded in the mindset of culture and philosophy, a position further complicated by the fact that the most optimistic

²¹⁸ In a paper that parallels discussion here of the limitations of Cioran's 'post-history' world, Bruce Silver argues that the conditions necessary for entry to Dante's Paradise preclude all humanity as presently constituted. 'Dante's Paradiso: No Human Beings Allowed', *Philosophy and Literature*, Volume 38, No 1, April 2014, pp. 110-127.

²¹⁹ Karl Löwith, *Nature, History and Existentialism: and other essays in the philosophy of history* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1966), 77.

of Enlightenment thought has been outrightly discredited by historical events, or at least is obliged to operate with more modesty.

Philosophers and Dictators

If Paradise is a non-starter for Cioran, he is obliged to return to earth to seek another means of exit from the quotidian, and one of his contemplated methods is one shared with Kojève: flirtation with notions of dictatorship. The relationship between philosophers and dictators has a classical pedigree, originating, of course, with Plato's entanglement with Dionysius of Syracuse, continuing with Aristotle's tuition of Alexander, and culminating with Seneca and Nero. In a certain sense, therefore, the attitudes of Cioran and Kojève toward dictators cannot be viewed as particularly anomalous. I would also contend that such an admiration reflects a transposed need for a Divine saviour on to the level of the immanent and the historical. Cioran admits as much: 'How right it was to begin the day, as men once did, with a prayer, a call for help! Ignorant of whom to address ourselves to, we will end by grovelling before the first cracked god to come along' (TBB: 188). The dictator in the thought of Kojève is a man-God who will lead humanity to the peace of the Homogenous State; for Cioran he is the figure who will re-start history and lead humanity to an apocalypse.

Cioran's courting of dictatorships was somewhat less dramatic than that of his philosophical predecessors, but no less committed for that. As previously noted, he dispatched regular articles for the Romanian press in the 1930s extolling the merits of German fascism, which he hoped would inspire his fellow Romanians to raise themselves from the backwater of

history. In the early 40s, according to researchers, he took up some form of diplomatic role at the Romanian embassy in Paris, but details are unavailable, nor is it certain how long this role lasted.²²⁰

In philosophical terms, Cioran is most explicit about the fascination of dictators in his essay 'Learning from the Tyrants'.²²¹ In his view humanity, in its desperation to believe, loves its conquerors and despots as they alone lend meaning to an otherwise unbearably dull and quotidian existence. The conqueror lifts them up in the trails of his glory and elevates their life to a higher plane of meaning. The more bloodshed the greater the purpose, the greater the frenzy. A nation that renounces war and violence has seen the highwater mark of its history and decadence has arrived. It becomes weak and prey to outsiders, who will dilute its already failing identity, until there is nothing left but the memory of former glories.

For Cioran, every individual dreams of glory and power, from the smallest official to the greatest ruler. The city is where this endless phantasmagoria of power is played out and the political arena is the playground of sin, the material manifestation of the Fall. According to him, all humans fantasise of being tyrants at some point. Such fantasies engender madness, our desire for power being a kind of insanity whereby we inflict upon the world our own follies and demented desires. He also believes we secretly long for a dictator who will crush humanity underfoot. Cioran's elitism and lack of any populist instinct comes to the fore when he declares that 'the people' as an object of hope or pity is an illusion. They desire and

²²⁰ See Zarifopol-Johnston (2009), 136-137 who claims Cioran lost the role due to a "comedy of diplomatic manners". After Ion Antonescu outlawed the Legionary movement in January 1942 he personally signed the letter terminating Cioran's post. See also Julia Elsky's 'Eugène Ionesco, 1942-44: Political and Cultural Transfers between Romania and France' in *Diasporas: Circulations, migrations, historie* 23-24, 2014, pp. 200-14. Elsky's focus is on Ionesco but she provides invaluable information on the Romanian cultural mission to occupied France.

²²¹ HU, 38-56.

feed upon tyranny; their duty is to suffer. They enjoy revolutions because it gives them a very rare opportunity to be as insolent and wilful as a tyrant (HU: 45).

Revisiting his past, Cioran declares shamelessly that 'I nonetheless harbour a weakness for tyrants, whom I always prefer to redeemers and prophets; I prefer them because they do not take refuge in formulas...' (HU: 48). In Cioran's view, the tyrant is on one fundamental level more honest than any democratically elected politician because he openly plays out his whims and caprices.²²² Thus the tyrant is the perfect embodiment of the human, as in Cioran's view 'man moves only to do evil' (HU: 48).

The tyrant also unwittingly does the majority of humans a service, as once man is removed from the ascetic restraints of religion, he is delivered unto a perilous and empty freedom (politically embodied for Cioran by liberalism) where there are no idols, no ideals, and no organic roots. Finding this intolerable, he longs for despotism. 'Tyranny destroys or strengthens the individual; freedom enervates him, until he becomes no more than a puppet. Man has more chances of saving himself by hell than paradise' (HU: 10). Cioran's thinking here resembles the classical free-will defence of theodicy: man has meaning only as a result of being endowed to choose and possibly commit evil; otherwise, he is a helpless marionette in bondage to a puppeteer God.

Cioran claims that democracy survives by granting nominal freedom to everyone – thus the vast majority of those who strive and obtain a modicum of power are mediocrities. In this way the freedom of the individual is preserved, as it is only very rarely that an exceptional personality comes to power in a democracy. But for the disillusioned cynic there is only the

²²² Cioran notes in passing that the founders of religions are even more ambitious than dictators because they seek to conquer the conscience of men for all time. Tyrants operate solely on the temporal level: their moment comes and goes. The religious founder conquers for all time.

hope of an intelligent dictator: “‘Enlightened despotism” – the only regime that can attract a disabused mind, one incapable of being the accomplice of revolutions since it is not even the accomplice of history’ (HU: 140).

Once more we can observe a resemblance between Cioran and Kojève. The latter was also of the opinion that a universal tyrant would be necessary in order to instantiate and maintain the universal homogenous state which would provide general recognition and a satisfaction of common needs. For Kojève, the Napoleonic state whose roots were instituted initially by Robespierre was the prototype of the ideal dictatorial polis. In his own time, Kojève saw in Stalin the latest embodiment of the ideal ruler, and remarkably penned a long letter to the Soviet leader, presuming to instruct the dictator in how he should proceed in ensuring that the USSR should come to embody the universal homogenous state of which he dreamed.²²³ Following the disappointment of Stalin’s non-reply, Kojève later transferred his political allegiances and assumed an important role in the fledging EEC, in the midst of which he wrote a substantial essay, advocating the creation of a new “Latin Empire” consisting of France, Italy and Spain.²²⁴

In his debate with Leo Strauss on the philosophical nature of tyranny, Kojève contested the view that the engagement of philosophers with dictators had always ended in catastrophe and served as a form of warning, claiming instead that the link between philosophers and all-powerful rulers had been a fruitful one.²²⁵ This symbiosis had been most notably exemplified in the reign of Alexander the Great, who had dreamt of and made the initial

²²³ See Hager Weslati, ‘Kojève’s letter to Stalin’, *Radical Philosophy* (Mar/Apr 2014). Accessed at <https://www.radicalphilosophy.com/article/kojeves-letter-to-stalin>

²²⁴ See Alexandre Kojève, ‘Outline of a Doctrine of French Foreign Policy’, accessed at <https://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/fr/kojeve2.htm>

²²⁵ Leo Strauss, *On Tyranny* Revised and Expanded edition including the Strauss-Kojève correspondence (University of Chicago Press, 1991).

steps towards founding a universal empire in which distinctions of race and origin would become irrelevant and a common brotherhood would be based on a shared universal biological essence. Kojève claims that this *political* goal was the direct result of Aristotle's philosophical naturalism. This universalism received further impetus from Paul's form of Christian universalism and has been the goal of many if not most political regimes since, finding its most modern manifestation in Kojève's time in the EEC.

For Kojève, the philosopher is eminently suited to political power because, contrary to popular opinion, he sees more clearly than others the concrete historical reality of his time. Kojève's philosopher is, of course, a Hegelian, so is fully immersed in and focused on the passage of time and the flux of becoming, hence his perception of social and political realities is supposedly sharper and more discerning than that of others. He is not just a thinker of the abstract but also a hyper-acute political analyst who merely requires fortuitous circumstances whereby he can become an advisor to those who wield actual political power. It is his clear-sightedness which will overcome the narrowmindedness of the ordinary citizen who ironically deals in the kind of unreal "abstractions" (caused by quotidian necessities) that the philosopher is accused of by the layman. Kojève despises the classical idea of the philosopher as a man set apart by vocation from the stream of life and history, and instead insists – being a good Hegelian – that the timebound and therefore social nature of truth and being demands that the philosopher leaves their garden and immerses themselves in the communal and political life of their time.²²⁶ In an ideal world therefore, the philosopher and the dictator will join forces and unite their specialisms in a bid to bring about the end of needless human strife and conflict, one ironical result of which

²²⁶ Strauss (1991), 148-9.

will be the end of philosophy itself, as by that stage all of reality will be known and comprehended. Kojève replaces the philosopher with the sage in his Universal State. The philosopher is a scavenger and a hunter, desperately seeking the key to understanding; the sage is the one-time philosopher who has the humility to accept the reality of the end of history and the provision of satisfaction of basic desires as the best humanity can hope for. The philosopher is a figure in constant motion; the sage is a figure at rest in a post-historical landscape.

Conflagration as Hope

From earliest times, man has craved a definitive conflagration, hoping to get rid of history once and for all. What is remarkable is that he should have formed this dream so early, at his beginning in fact, when events could not yet have overwhelmed him beyond measure. We must deduce that the terror of what lay in wait for him, of what the ages held in reserve, was so intense, and so distinct, that it quickly changed into certainty, into vision, into hope....
(DQ: 182-3)

There is, uncharacteristically, a continual sliver of hope in Cioran's post-war work that no commentator appears to have registered. Periodically, Cioran will drop a remark or observation that indicates a latent desire for the historical process to resume and for the drama to revive. This hope is intimately connected with his weakness for dictators, but whereas for Kojève the dictator is the man who will lead humanity to peace and an end of history, for Cioran he is the figure who will restart the historical process, by means of which decadence, futility and the possibility of 'sub-time' can be escaped.

The first indication of this hope comes in *All Gall is Divided*, where he states that, 'the West seeks a form of final agony worthy of its past...' (AGD: 55). It is clearly Cioran who seeks this for Europe, and not any political body or population. Similarly, he shortly afterwards laments the absence of any great historical figures ranging across the current stage: 'The 16th century is closest to the 20th in terms of the intensity of its conflicts, but lacks the grandeur of Titans such as Luther and Calvin. We have no more elect' (AGD: 57). A more ambiguous and charged remark follows, as Cioran claims Hitler tried to save Europe by means of barbarity, which was 'the west's last initiative'; 'No doubt Europe deserved something better. Who is to blame if it could not produce a higher-quality monster?' (AGD: 61).

History is an engine that can only work when it is those who are seriously unbalanced or mad are at the wheel; there can be only political equilibrium when mediocre non-entities rule. Catastrophe and drama, in other words history, is provoked by the unbalanced, the impotent and the insomniacs (HU: 62). Cioran in his desperation to escape cultural anaemia seems excited by the prospect of further destruction or at least a revival of the old energies: 'What grim Messiah is about to fall upon us!' (HU: 63). This is repeated shortly after, with an almost erotic frisson at the thought of future monsters: 'Yet one question is justified: will they be inventive enough to appear as innovators, to add to that failure [Adam's]?' (HU: 131).

Cioran is fully aware of the somewhat perverse nature of his desire to see history resume on the epic scale: 'Terror of the future is always grafted onto the desire to experience that terror' (TBB: 211). In his essay 'On a Winded Civilisation', Cioran is explicit about his beliefs concerning the deeper significance of Hitler: 'that vision, grotesque as it was, testified in

their [the Germans] favour: did it not reveal that they alone in the West, preserved some vestiges of energy and barbarism, and that they were still capable of a grand design or a vigorous insanity?' (TE: 57) In a manner common perhaps to marginalised thinkers such as Nietzsche, Cioran may be guilty of indulging in fantasies of violence and destruction to compensate for his own political impotence. To draw a religious parallel, his line of thought may bring to mind the subset of Christian Millenarian groups who hope for the coming of the Apocalypse in order to hasten the arrival of the Kingdom of God on earth. Having abandoned any thoughts of Paradise and dreading the Purgatory of 'sub-time', Cioran has no recourse but to hope the Inferno can enliven him.

Cioran develops this line of thought and "hope" when outlining his hopes for Russia and its destiny that we previously alluded to in his essay 'A Little Theory of Destiny'. Comparing that country with Spain, Cioran claims that both nations are similar in that their own historical destiny pre-occupies them to an inordinate degree. Russian messianism comes from an overflow of pride, an eagerness to impose her faults on the world. Messianism is a feature of a nation's youth, by which Cioran refers to the USSR. Spain differs considerably. Her period of greatness and magnificence is behind her. Since the 17th century she has spent her time reflecting on herself and the causes of her decline and being obsessed by the notion of decadence. It is significant for Cioran that at its peak Spanish Catholicism was a sanguinary religion, utterly convinced of its own rightness and not afraid to shed blood (its own and that of others) for its cause and glory. Only cruelty can impel a nation or an individual to see into life's most profound depths. Cioran reiterates his conviction that philosophy is an expression of weakness of the blood and a decline in affectivity. Spain is tormented by having exited history; Russia by seeking to enter it. In terms of the latter's uneasy relationship with Europe, Cioran views the schism of 1054 as owing its roots less to

theological differences than to national ones. Russia wished to assert its difference, and in doing so remained apart from the dynamism of western history at that time, but it gained in growing a sense of its own unique substance and potential. In a startlingly accurate prediction, Cioran declares that 'after a forced cure of universalism, she will re-Russify, in favour of Orthodoxy' (HU: 26).

It is that same desire for a reignition of history that sparks Cioran's periodic urges and solutions to the post-war acedia that he perceives to have gripped the European continent:

It is incumbent upon the West, if it seeks to make itself illustrious once more by a throb or a vestige of honor, to take back the utopias that, in its need for comfort, it has abandoned to the others, thereby disposing itself of its genius and its mission [...] The West could redeem itself if it once more took upon itself impossible tasks, and regained its old epic bravery and self-belief. Instead it is dying of 'good sense'. (HU: 14)

Cioran claims that time favours the fettered nations, the ones who await their historical moment. Once a nation accedes to democracy it is finished, its mission accomplished. 'A marvel that has nothing to offer, democracy is at once a nation's paradise and its tomb' (HU: 28). In terms of dominating the historical stage, for Cioran it is essential that each nation or culture must believe that its way of life is a form of collective soteriology. Cioran anticipates the advent of Caesarism à la Spengler by predicting that the post-war dream of European unity will be forged not by consensus and agreement, but by violence and tyranny. The old nations will not readily renounce their local obsessions – only a violent hand will lead them to a supranational empire. Europe's future role – and possible redemption – will be to set another example to the world in the forging of a new and all-comprehensive tyranny.

Broadening his parameters, Cioran expresses a hope that history will end with the 'establishment of a tyranny on a large scale, an empire that will include the continents. No more frontiers, no more elsewheres...hence no more freedoms, no more illusions.' The similarity to Kojève's hopes for a Universal Homogenous State are unmistakable. However, any such potential hopes are constantly undercut by Cioran in his awareness of the metaphysical limitations of such fantasies discussed previously and represent a direct disavowal of Kojève's commitments: 'To believe in history is to lust for the possible, to postulate the qualitative superiority of the imminent over the immediate, to imagine that Becoming is rich enough in and of itself to make eternity superfluous' (FT: 122).

There is also Cioran's acknowledgement that his taste for history may be solely a function of his personal taste for disaster and calamity: 'It is my prejudice against everything that turns out well that has given me a taste for reading history. Ideas are unsuited to a final agony; they die, of course, but without knowing how to die, whereas an event exists only with a view to its end. A sufficient reason to prefer the company of historians to that of philosophers' (TBB: 131). Unlike thinkers such as Kojève and Nietzsche, Cioran is fully willing to admit his own personal investment in a yearning for human catastrophe:

I have followed only one idea all the way – the idea that everything man achieves necessarily turns against him. The idea is not a new one, but I have lived it with a power of conviction, a desperation which no fanaticism, no delirium has ever approached. There is no martyrdom, no dishonour I would not suffer for it, and I would exchange it for no other truth, no other revelation. (TBB: 206-7)

Cioran's hopes for disaster and apocalypse also constitute a form of standing indictment against himself as a philosopher and thinker. The vanity of much thought and its impotence in the wider world of politics and history is something Cioran is readily prepared to admit:

At the expiration of a cycle, what else can a disenchanted mind dream of but the impulse of brutes to count on the possible, to wallow in it? Unsited to defend the doubts it no longer practices or to subscribe to the dawning dogmas it despises, such a mind applauds – supreme secession of the intellect – the irrefutable demonstrations of instinct... (FT: 92)

Comparing Cioran's thinking on history with that of the aforementioned Karl Löwith, we are presented once again with an interesting juxtaposition. For Löwith, man's best hope lies in attempting to return to a Greek cosmological view of time with an emphasis on the appreciation of the order of the Logos and man's natural place within it. This is according to Löwith (in a manner that recalls Hadot's hopes) the best philosophical prospect for man, a reasoned and balanced self-situatedness in the grander scheme of the universe, one where humanity can occupy its rightful niche with a rationally derived knowledge of the cyclical nature of time both on a larger cosmic scale and civilisations on a smaller historical one. Humanity is the microcosm within the grander cosmic macrocosmic framework. In the classical pre-Christian world this was the normal perspective and the falling away from a cyclical to a linear perspective was in Löwith's view a loss for humanity, as the investment of hope in a teleological progression is the deep cause of innumerable political disasters. Speaking of contemporary man's bewilderment in the face of his enormous technological progress and the apocalyptic potential of the power contained therein, Löwith regrets the loss of the measured perspective implicit to Greek thought: 'The [Prometheus] myth reveals a holy awe in the face of every assault upon the powers of nature, upon the physical cosmos which the Greeks regarded, in sharp contrast to human powers, as something divine. All

such awe seems now to have vanished.'²²⁷ In Löwith's opinion, one of the high points of classical history, and by extension we may venture of philosophical history, was Scipio Africanus's mood and declaration at the walls of Carthage:

Turning round to me at once and grasping my hand Scipio said, "A glorious moment, Polybius; but I have a dread foreboding that some day the same doom will be pronounced on my own country." It would be difficult to mention an utterance more statesmanlike and more profound. For at the moment of our greatest triumph and of disaster to our enemies to reflect on our own situation and on the possible reversal of circumstances, and generally to bear in mind at the season of success the mutability of Fortune, is like a great and perfect man, a man in short worthy to be remembered.²²⁸

In certain respects, this viewpoint would align itself with that of Cioran, who also periodically expresses his regret at the advent of Christianity and the destruction of the classical era. It was Christianity that invested the western world with a form of eschatological *hope* previously unknown to it, and from which Cioran, in his desperation to see history end, is unable to free himself.

Conclusion

If we endeavour to trace the first engagement of philosophy with history, we can see that in Plato there exists what may be termed at minimum a form of latent disinterest or contempt for the subject, insofar as his philosophy rests entirely upon a radical suspicion of becoming and a valorisation of Being. Transience, becoming, decay and death are in one sense the

²²⁷ Löwith (1966), 160.

²²⁸ Polybius, *Histories*, 38.5.21. Referenced in Löwith (1966), 137.

enemies of thought and man, and Socrates's view that one of the aims of philosophy is to teach us how to die well represents an ultimate form of this. The wise man will not be overly troubled by the ephemera of becoming, not even the spectacle of his own dissolution. The mind or spirit can rise above such fleshy contingencies in its pursuit of wisdom.

Cioran's initial engagement with history in the 1930s could therefore be viewed – aside from being a more local and particularised form of political activism by one individual – as a re-instantiation of the original philosophical encounter with history, insofar as the seemingly meaningless passage of ephemeral and irrevocable moments is to be assigned a deeper level of ethical meaning and purpose. The mind or spirit shall grasp in a totalising fashion the stream of becoming and fashion it into a mirror of Being.

The motivation behind such constructions may be ambivalent, as noted well by Barry Cooper:

Historiogenetic speculations, then, are undertaken in a mood of anxiety, not trust. Historical reality is deliberately distorted so that the story comes out right, that is, in conformity to the imaginative projections of the author. The object of the projection is to eclipse the unsettling reality of historical contingency with a second reality, the comforting meaning of which is the finality of the author's present.²²⁹

There is a qualitative shift in attitude on the part of Cioran when contemplating the passage of time. On the one hand we have in his 'middle period' of the 1960s a serious engagement with time in its historical scale, a sincere grappling motivated by a force that is paradoxical, namely that on the one hand life is seemingly meaningless, which thereby should

²²⁹ Barry Cooper, 'Decrypt: Voegelin and Kojève's Hegel' (2009). <https://sites01.lsu.edu/faculty/voegelin/wp-content/uploads/sites/80/2015/09/Barry-Cooper3.pdf>

automatically disqualify any idealistic construction of a teleological programme, and on the other hand Cioran's identity as a European philosopher, a designation that thereby almost automatically commits him to a form of historical consciousness that cannot but help see in history a form of revelation, even if that revelation is ultimately one of futility and contingency.

History negating itself and delivering man from history back into an ahistorical time may paradoxically for Cioran be viewed as a form of extreme optimism. Cioran – and indeed any serious philosophical pessimist such as Kojève – needs history to stop, for indeed if it does not how can any form of serious philosophising occur? How can thought escape, if only momentarily, its time bound essence and attain to transcendental truth if it is unable to elevate itself from the stream of becoming? If it cannot do so, it becomes merely a form of reportage, a sociology of thought, determined by external contingent circumstances.

In this regard, the attraction toward fascism displayed by Cioran in the 1930s may be seen to have a deeply philosophical element insofar as there is within many fascist movements a certain attempt to deny or at least control time. Political stasis becomes a form of aspiration; perfection has been conceived idealistically and needs to be implemented in the political arena. As a result, a certain frozenness and repetition will inhere in fascistic societies; ritual becomes all-important and a ritual is, amongst other things, a constant repetition of a certain series of acts designed to sanctify and elevate its performers and its audience. Repetition inheres in the very essence of ritual and repetition is one form of attempting to control time while participating in it. Decay and dispersion are overcome by the constantly reborn and repeated ritualistic act, as a framed set of gestures and signs

performed within a slice of temporality are somehow elevated above the normal flow of dispersive time.²³⁰

Fascism operates by a series of often elaborately choreographed rituals centred upon a dictator messiah who has come to redeem previously decadent and entropic time and will restore or elevate the polis to its pristine state. The end point of fascism both incorporates and overcomes time, as it was the prior flow of historical events that led to its advent, yet simultaneously the fascist regime will elevate man to a new level of time where perfection is the norm. Ethics, the result of the spirit's workings, will be able to mould matter and even if the actual flow of time cannot be stopped, it will mould the shape and direction of time's flow in a manner devised solely by the minds of men and in a fashion designed to eliminate or at least contain the contingencies of historical and temporal life as much as possible. (The elaborate funeral ceremonies of eminent figures in fascist societies is also a mark of this, the attempt to regulate and contain death etc.)

Also worth considering is the mystical element of many such regimes. If we are to treat the word etymologically and potentially consider certain Roman ideals (e.g. martial valour, the homeland as sacred, patriarchal hierarchy) as embodying a form of proto-fascism, we are able to discern a valorisation and sacralisation of elements such as the land, the family, household gods and farming. These things (amongst others) are what may be termed "primal" elements of human life, without which nothing can exist. They represent a political attempt to return to the roots of 'Being' and to cut through the plethora of "irrelevancies"

²³⁰ For a fascinating exploration of these themes in regard to Nazism, see Frederic Spotts, *Hitler and the Power of Aesthetics* (Harry N. Abrams, 2018).

and “distractions” that are considered to make up the bulk of liberal democratic politics by its critics.

Such a scything through the perceived ephemera of modern politics appealed to several philosophers, most famously Heidegger, but Cioran was also one of those who saw in the fascist valorisation of the primordial a welcome return to the roots of life that he himself was simultaneously championing in philosophy. The parallels between *Lebensphilosophie* and rise of fascism is a topic that has been discussed most often when considering the case of Nietzsche and his influence on Nazism, but this was not the only case of such a phenomenon occurring in mainland Europe at the time, as the Romanian Iron Guard for whom Cioran expressed such admiration was of a similar pedigree. Tellingly, that organisation was also a deeply religious one, aiming to impose a theocratic regime. It is highly significant that the proudly Nietzschean Cioran of that period, who loudly declared war with God in his religious writings, gave his allegiance to such a political grouping in his more socially-orientated works.

Blood and soil, religion and a distrust of urban sophistication (the etymology of that word becomes philosophically relevant here) therefore become key components in a wholesale restricting of life itself. And it can plausibly be maintained these elements never ceased playing a key role in Cioran’s post-war philosophising: there is the constant distrust and abuse of hermetically architectonic systems, a valorisation of the rural and a view of the urban as decadent, as well as a never-ending dialogue with God even if Cioran is unable to believe in him. Cioran regularly reminds us of his rural origins, relishing the role of the intruder in sophisticated Parisian circles. Of course, there is an element of roleplay in all of this, a form of having it each way, being both the Romanian peasant and the French

intellectual, but in many ways this embodies one of the essential features of his work: the drawing together of many disparate elements from the European tradition, mixed with an agnosticism that is deeply religious, and the running commentary on their collision.

However, all of these hopes were later dismissed by Cioran. His post-war writings may be characterised as a philosophy of exhaustion. The idols that he had he venerated or at least placed his last hopes in pre-war had been struck down by history; now there was nothing left to do except pick through the rubble and see what, if anything, could be salvaged or pieced together. There is a sense of cultural and philosophical exhaustion existing alongside an awareness that there is nowhere new left to explore. Post-war philosophy can only be retrospective, a historical summation of the journey of thought from the pre-Socratics to the present. A vital question that runs through all of Cioran's ruminations on history is whether philosophy itself has come to an end. The spirit of European man has been exhausted, the process initiated by the pre-Socratics has ended with the destruction of Europe and the fall of *Homo sapiens*, if we take that label in its literal meaning.

Of course, Cioran is open to the criticism that his philosophy of post-history, in spite of its apparently grandiose scope, is impossibly Eurocentric. He dreams of post-history for all humanity, when, it could be argued, the apocalypse of the war was a nightmare that owed its genesis to European hubris and folly. Cioran would, with his usual playful ambiguity, hardly deny this. He does indeed dream of an end of history for all men, but also concedes that history on the grand scale will continue and indeed grants that its future protagonists will be from beyond Europe. He himself fantasises about Russia, but regularly acknowledges the potential of Asia and the rise of Islam. If pressed on a charge of sectarianism, he would

also doubtless point to his continual flirtation with Buddhism and his frequent declarations of its superiority to western thinking.

One question consequent upon Cioran's ruminations on history is whether western man, or at least western philosophical man, can live without investing history with some notion of progress. Even though it is a common trope of summaries of European thought that the First World War destroyed liberal illusions of progress, it is notable that the concept and its implications have been enjoying something of a revival of late in both philosophical and more popular discourse. It may simply be that humans are incapable of resisting the temptation to impute some form of progress or decline to the stream of events we label history. We may ask if Schopenhauer's declaration that 'there is no general science of history. History is the insignificant tale of humanity's interminable, weighty, fragmented dream' is too much for humanity to bear.

Cioran's philosophy of history adopts a form of the dialectic that would have undoubtedly horrified Hegel and added weight to Schopenhauer's assertion. Freedom operates in a negating synthesis, overcoming and subsuming itself in order to return man to a state of purely animal being, which, if we adopt a materialistic viewpoint, is no freedom at all. Freedom is useful in Cioran's view only for the annulment of liberty. Once again, we see the parallels between Cioran and his Christian cultural heritage: in Christian thought man is called upon to exercise his rational and spiritual discernment in order to transcend the flawed condition of human freedom that his expulsion from Eden brought about; the highest ideal is to be subsumed within God, where the issue of whether anything like a free human personality can remain is problematic. The ultimate aim of the human as presently constituted in its post-Edenic state is to cease being human and be transfigured.

Equally, however, the yearning to escape the cycle of history is frequently paralleled in Cioran by an urge to escape the Christian heritage of thought that pervades his writings. He will often extoll the values of the classical world, most particularly in regard to its emphasis on Fate and mortality and condemn the 'curse of hope' under which Christianity placed mankind. The acceptance on the part of Stoics and Cynics of mankind's comparatively small position within the Cosmos also appeals deeply to him, as we have seen previously, but he is unable to reach such a position of equanimity, whether due to personal temperament, inherited modes of Christian thought or a mixture of both.

Cioran occasionally echoes the view of Löwith that mankind would be better served by retuning to a classical perspective, but this appears out of reach. Löwith claims that Nietzsche attempted to bludgeon his way back to the Greeks by his advocacy of the *Übermensch* and *Amor fati*, but the highly wrought and oftentimes hysterical tone of his efforts suggest the unnaturalness of the endeavour. It may be that a reversion to past perspectives is simply not possible. For this reason it is worthwhile pointing out that while there may be a temptation to lump Cioran in with figures such as Spengler, Heidegger, Schmitt and Jünger - a group of thinkers generally deemed 'reactionary' – there is a crucial difference between them and the post-war Cioran, namely that while all of those figures in some way idolised and idealised a lost past they considered morally and aesthetically superior to modernity and which they dreamt of reviving, Cioran's thought was not generally prone to such leanings. As a result, it could be somewhat ironically posited that Cioran was an even greater reactionary than any of the aforementioned, given that his form of nostalgia was for Eden: "“You are against everything that has been done since the war.” “No, madam, I am against everything that has been done since Adam and Eve”” (TBB: 136). Cioran views his own form of 'reactionary' thought as being far deeper and more profound

than any nostalgia for a previous period of history, either real or imagined. While to lament Eden is from a secular materialistic level rendering oneself vulnerable to the charge of ultimate fantasy or delusion, it may also be interpreted as a highly Platonic act of philosophical criticism, holding as it does to a traditional philosophical line of holding a lowly opinion of the transience and vanity of all human life and activity.

Such a gloomy view of the historical process may also help explain the high regard for dictators and monarchs shared by Cioran and Kojève. The ruler is elevated above the rest of humanity by his or her unique political power, one that is usually, however, acquired or inherited from an originary act of conquest and violence. Thus by excelling at a very basic and primordial animal act of violence and supremacy the human can paradoxically elevate themselves above the median level of animality by an enlightened response to the fruits of victory. The elevated master no longer experiences any desire for meaningful interaction with his slaves; instead, he is depicted as a jaded and world-weary figure who has in some sense seen the vanity of all things human, particularly, and paradoxically, the need for recognition itself. For Cioran and Kojève there is no ongoing dialectic in the Hegelian sense of an ever-increasing harmony between ideas and the elevation of human reason; rather instead the only elevation that reason can attain is an awareness of its own futility.

Therefore, the type of ruler favoured and idolised by Cioran is different to those favoured by Kojève, namely that of the jaded monarch or emperor – Marcus Aurelius, Charles V, Elisabeth of Austria - who is weighed down by the existential burden of having to rule over a world and a people that he or she regards with a degree of contempt and hopelessness. Reason attains autonomy but the sole activity left to it is a plying of its own vacuity.

However, a further unavoidable question is to what degree Cioran's historical ruminations apply to the non-philosopher, the human subject who makes and lives history. The idea of the "end of history" is most likely to appear ludicrous to the majority, philosophers or not.²³¹ Kojève, of course, would respond that the "ordinary" person does not grasp that he or she is inhabiting the end of history and the end of serious ideological conflict. The critic would reply that Kojève's thesis is unverifiable given the open-ended nature of time and possible future historical developments, and therefore meaningless. Cioran's musings are less susceptible to such rebukes, given that he constantly states that they are precisely that: speculations, wish-fulfilment and a form of secular eschatological hopes, fantasies and delusions.

Furthermore, it may be more profitable to view Cioran's imaginings on post-history as an episode in the history of philosophy itself, and an exercise in thought that may tell us something about the nature of discursive reasoning and speculation. The concept of closure in philosophical discourse assumes here primary importance. Like so much else its genesis can be traced back to the Platonic dialogues where the Socratic dialectic seeks in its development a final closure in which a conclusion can be reached and all aporias answered and resolved. One reading of Plato sees him ending with his positing of the Divine as the final answer to the potentially innumerable and infinite problems that could be attacked through dialogue. By subsuming human speech, temporality and becoming into the timeless perfection of the realm of Forms the problems of being human vanish, indeed it could be argued that *being human* vanishes. Temporality is the key problem or thing to be overcome

²³¹ 'The end of history? The beginning of nonsense!' was reputedly Margaret Thatcher's response to Fukuyama's infamous book.

in the dialogues: that which is capable of change and mutation cannot be that which philosophy truly seeks: the truth must be eternal and immutable.

However, not only are there philosophical questions and dilemmas to be resolved there is also the larger issue of human and social life as a whole. Temporality and change characterise not only the individual life, but also the life of societies and cultures. Fate, fortune and its mutability lay at the heart of most Greek intellectual life – perhaps exemplified most strongly as a theme in Herodotus – and the impression that no one or thing could finally escape time's power appears to have functioned as a major source of disquiet and unease in the Greek psyche. Herodotus's opening sentence in his *Histories* declares that he writes 'in order that the memory of the past may not be blotted out from among men by time'. Such a preoccupation runs continuously into modernity, culminating most famously in Nietzsche's superman figure, the essence of which may be viewed as an attempt to conquer time and temporality by freely embracing and welcoming it in a paradoxical form of rebellious acceptance of human destiny. As stated previously, it could therefore be argued that from its very inception philosophy was a means of combatting, containing and perhaps eventually conquering time. This being the case, not only would individual destiny as a temporal and finite entity require overcoming, so too would the collective fate as manifested in history. In order to end history, time needs to be contained or ended. Temporality must be overcome in some manner.

Jeff Love argues that underlying all of Kojève's thought is a deep and fundamental pessimism akin to that of the darkest expressions concerning the human condition to be found in Greek tragedy. Time cannot be defeated or modified in any significant manner, so the only honourable course is to remove humanity from the fatal equation. Both Cioran and

Kojève promote in differing fashions the option of suicide, the motivations for which spring from a fundamental antagonistic positioning of the human and the natural. There can be no peaceful reconciliation between time and the human as presently constituted.

Consequently, reason in its most potent and revolutionary role becomes a weapon whereby tactics are devised to overcome the human condition. It is a form of emancipation achieved through destruction and/or dissolution.

It was Plato who first attempted to draw the line under the series of contingent and random events we label history by imagining a Republic where order and hierarchy would function to create as static and unvarying a world as possible, and where any deviations from the ordained order were strictly accidental and not the result of an aberrant and uncontrolled human will. Since then, it could be claimed that much of western philosophy has endeavoured to implement that project in its quest for certainty, and disavowal of and indeed revulsion for contingency. Christianity took up this cause with Augustine's division between the City of God and the City of Man, designed with a view to contain human historical contingency by relegating the entire process to nothing but an unfortunate expression of humanity's fallen nature post-Eden. The true life lay in the beyond; everything earthly was but a deviation, as exemplified by the fate of the Roman Empire. Whilst not as overtly religious, much of philosophy has sought to control the contingent and the unpredictable through the devising of architectonic systems, ethical rules, and political prescriptions, all intended to restrain and contain the more chaotic elements of the human

condition. Philosophy dislikes the contingent, and oftentimes when it does acknowledge it seeks to contain it within a larger framework of progressivism.²³²

Within that framework Cioran's post-history ideal may be seen as yet another attempt to contain the uncontrollable. Genealogically, his speculations may represent the culmination of that long endeavour to tame history, occupying as he does a unique space in philosophical thought that straddles both Christian and post-Christian thought (although speculations concerning transhumanism and a new strain in apocalyptic thinking – particularly in regard to potential environmental disaster on a global scale - may constitute another offshoot of the pedigree). It may be that Cioran's utopian dreams for the end of history are no more workable and realistic than those since Plato, but in terms of philosophical genealogy they are certainly not an aberration.

²³² Rorty's pragmatic liberalism would be a prominent modern example of allowing the contingent as much breathing space as possible while still striving for an emancipatory political goal of ongoing and renewable political progressivism.

Chapter 6

Cioran and Post-Christian Salvation

Cioran on Happiness

Happiness is not a term that one readily associates with Cioran. By and large, the thrust and the tenor of his writings is one of disappointment and fatigue, expressed frequently with sarcastic resignation. However, as we have seen when discussing Cioran's ruminations on history his thought is not entirely immune to salvific impulses. While still seemingly nursing hopes for the historical process to resume in Europe, there is also a more individual line of approach toward personal salvation. It is slight, admittedly, but real, nevertheless. In this chapter I shall trace its evolution through the course of his main works and evaluate how it fits into his wider framework.

Cioran's 'formula' for salvation combines notions of quietism; the idea that individuation *per se* is a misstep; the foolishness of seeking happiness in the external world; and the folly of knowledge itself. As we shall see, these notions contain, in typical Cioran fashion, gatherings from several philosophical and religious traditions, but the primary source appears to be the Christian concepts of a prelapsarian Paradise and the inherently baleful nature of an ego-centred wilful existence. As ever, Cioran's soteriology is a unique combination of elements of often questionable coherency, but which in their fearless bricolage invite deeper reflections on many important philosophical and theological notions, such as the self, the will and belief.

Chronologically, Cioran begins his writing career with a characteristic fixation on one extreme of personal happiness: ecstasy, which finds expression in his writings on the saints. Following his wartime disillusionment, there comes a period where he expresses little but cynicism and disenchantment with any such notions. However, in his 'middle period' of historical and cultural writing the quest for individual salvation resurfaces as a final holdout against a world dominated by religious and cultural collapse. Finally, there appears a weary yet wistful resignation to capturing whatever brief moments of consolation the everyday may provide.

In tracing this itinerary, I will compare Cioran's path with that of George Santayana, another thinker who although avowedly atheist also employed Christian categories of thought in his approach to matters of personal conduct. Even more so than Cioran, Santayana remained firmly rooted in the Catholicism of his upbringing, never felt the need to disavow religion, and in fact considered such a possibility as a serious error to be avoided. Comparing the two thinkers will hopefully shed light on aspects of each, as well as help delineate more clearly certain contours of post-Christian thought.

Early writings

On the Heights of Despair seems to indicate by its very title the impossibility of a median happiness for Cioran. Its shamelessly lyrical and quasi-Nietzschean rhetoric circles between periodic avowals of ecstasy and more frequent declarations of suicidal longings brought about by the inability to find an anchoring point in quotidian human life. 'I feel I must burst because of all that life offers me and because of the prospect of death. I feel that I am dying of solitude, of love, of despair, of hatred, of all that this world offers me' (OHD: 8). The

middle-ground is directly condemned by Cioran at this point of youthful frenzy: 'Only mediocrities live life at life's normal temperature; the others are consumed at temperatures at which life cannot endure, at which they can barely breathe, already one foot beyond life' (OHD: 14).

At this stage, Cioran seeks happiness only within the context of insanity: 'I would like to go mad on one condition, namely, that I would become a happy madman, lively and always in a good mood, without any troubles and obsessions, laughing senselessly from morning to night' (OHD: 21). Cioran now begins to develop a theme that will remain a constant throughout his work, namely the unhappiness arising from reason and reflection:

An observation which, to my great regret, is always verifiable: only those are happy who never think or, rather, who only think about life's bare necessities, and to think about such things means not to think at all. True thinking resembles a demon who muddies the spring of life or a sickness which corrupts its roots [...] all this means you are so unhappy that reflection and thinking appear as a curse causing a violent revulsion in you. (OHD: 42)

Cioran then makes an observation that will dominate his subsequent thinking: 'Knowledge is the plague of life, and consciousness, an open wound in its heart' (OHD: 43). This is, of course, in many ways a rephrasing of the Fall story from Genesis and one to which Cioran will devote considerable energy.

Cioran believes that unhappiness is not ubiquitous: there are still those who live in harmony with nature and life, an enviable condition, 'much coveted by those who struggle on the heights of despair'. (OHD: 46). More surprisingly perhaps is his belief in the power of grace to generate joy, even amongst the disabused: '[Grace] alone is a futile leap, a disinterested elan which does not spoil life's naïve charm. Grace is the joy of soaring upward'(OHD: 59).

Grace is necessary for those for whom joy has become unavailable: 'You offer us this joy: but how can we receive it from the outside? As long as it does not spring from our inner resources, help from the outside is quite useless' (OHD: 73). This too will be a consistent theme of Cioran: deliverance must come from the inner man. 'The absolute is inside oneself, not outside, and ecstasy, this paroxysm of interiority, reveals only inner shadows and glimmers of light' (OHD: 80).

At this early stage of his thinking Cioran also begins a theme that will last, namely a critique of renunciation, more particularly of those who display their ascetism. His views here carry a strong flavour of Nietzsche: 'There is much pride and suffering in every renunciation. Instead of retreating discreetly, without a big show of revolt and hatred, you denounce, emphatically and haughtily, others' ignorance and illusions; you condemn their pleasures' (OHD: 81). Cioran claims that a moralising form of ascetism betrays an inability to truly free oneself and claims for himself an urbane form of tolerance for those determined to enjoy life: 'Why should I spoil another's enjoyment with my knowledge? Suffering and the consciousness of its inescapability lead to renunciation; yet nothing would induce me, not even if I were to become a leper, to condemn another's joy. There is much envy in every act of condemnation' (OHD: 81).

At this stage of his path Cioran is a moraliser against the moralisers, his youthful brio leading him to a view whereby ethical imperatives are just one more form of denial of the flux of a reality that is fundamentally non-rational. Given his view of the universe as both infinite and apparently lacking all meaning, Cioran can think of no conceivable injunction against the pursuit of pleasure: 'What's the use of "meaning", after all? Can't we live without it? Universal meaninglessness gives way to ecstatic inebriation, an orgy of irrationality. Since

the world has no meaning, let us live!' (OHD: 99). Similarly, he declares that happiness should come 'when we have persuaded ourselves that there is no truth' (OHD: 112). Here one may be struck by certain parallels between Cioran and Camus, the latter having sought to return the "disillusioned man" to a sensual appreciation of natural beauty and pleasure in his own mere physicality. As we shall see later, Cioran at the end of his life turns to a more resigned and less programmatic form of this endeavour, taking pleasure in unsummoned moments of natural beauty and grace.

However, Cioran wonders why happy people, assuming they exist, do not emerge and advertise their happiness publicly. He speculates in Schopenhauerian fashion that pleasure is fleeting and quick to fade from memory, whereas suffering leaves a more indelible mark. In spite of these lugubrious reflections, Cioran declares that for him personally, 'existence, with its multiplicity of forms, has never ceased to be a source of both delight and sadness' (OHD: 110). He also makes a key distinction between fighting unhappiness and seeking happiness. Whereas the former is possible 'by struggling with ourselves,' all efforts to attain felicity 'are entirely futile. '[Once] you've taken the path to unhappiness; it is the path of no return' (OHD: 117). At this stage Cioran's endeavour seems to be focused on finding a middle ground where one does not succumb to absolute despair, while yet believing that a constant and reliable happiness does not exist.

Tears and Saints

Cioran's second published volume *Tears and Saints* is a product of his youthful obsession with saints and mystical ecstasy. As with *On The Heights of Despair* the tone is extremely lyrical, occasionally frenzied and generally eschews measured discussion. Its mentions of happiness are few, but instructive.

Cioran speaks of felicity only 'from hearsay' and wonders if he 'is not well-equipped for happiness' (TS: 21). In spite of his apparent disdain for the topic, he declares that 'the only interesting philosophers are the ones who have stopped thinking and have begun to search for happiness' (TS: 50). This is so, Cioran claims, because such thinkers have freed themselves from institutional religion and political authorities. On an experiential level, Cioran claims that happiness comes after great pain, a 'voluptuous feeling'. But he later declares that 'he who is not happy naturally knows only the happiness that follows after moments of despair.' He also admits to a fear of 'an insufferable happiness, which, by avenging my past full of dread, would also avenge the misfortune of my having been born' (TS: 94). Cioran announces that happiness is not a good topic for discussion, as 'plenitude has never been a source of poetry' (TS: 102).

We see a restatement of a Nietzschean perspective when Cioran claims that Man is too proud to accept happiness, as it entails security and mediocrity, as opposed to infinity and pain. Suffering bestows a higher value on a person, and so one can only become a man 'through a self-conscious rejection of happiness, through a fundamental inability to be happy' (TS: 112).

A Short History of Decay

In spite of the war and his change of language, Cioran continued to dwell obsessively on the theme of happiness and salvation. In his first major work in French, Cioran strikes a defiant note, questioning the very notion of salvation itself: 'Suppose we do not want to be free of suffering nor to conquer our contradictions and conflicts – what if we prefer the nuances of the incomplete and an affective dialectic to the evenness of a sublime impasse?' (SHD: 27). Such a change of tack may come from the fact that Cioran's pre-war infatuation with the mystics and saints has faded.

But how to attain to the sigh of felicity superior to problems, when no "beauty" illuminates you, and when God and the Angels are blind? [...] The transcendent abyss amazed you like a fall into the heavens. But those heavens have vanished – like the temptations and intoxications – and in the cold heart the fevers of Avila are extinguished forever. (SHD: 34)

This loss of hope in even the possibility of the transcendental leaves Cioran baffled and confused: 'I wanted to become unspeakably normal – and here I am in dazed confusion, on a footing with fools, and as empty as they' (SHD: 42).

Relegated forever to the realm of the mundane Cioran argues that a true rationalism devoid of all ideology and delusions about the future leads to only one conclusion: 'By all evidence, we are in the world to do nothing; but instead of nonchalantly promenading our corruption, we exude our sweat and grow winded upon the fetid air.' The repositioning of man on the natural plain by the triumph of science has not led to what Cioran believes should be its logical consequence: the abandonment of notions of the future. 'Who has become a hero of total sloth? No one folds his arms: we are busier than the ants and the bees' (SHD: 44).

As ever with Cioran, however, a calm acceptance of a rational demystified world is impossible. Shortly after his lament for the passing of his enthusiasm for mysticism, he toys with the notion of predestination, wondering if the misery of some is ordained by an ineluctable fate: 'No one can elude the condemnation to happiness or misery, nor the innate sentence at the preposterous tribunal whose decision extends between the spermatozoon and the sepulchre' (SHD: 46). Cioran adds that it is traditional philosophy's reluctance or inability to deal with the topic of unhappiness that made him lose faith in it: 'I turned away from philosophy when it became impossible to discover in Kant any human weakness, any authentic account of melancholy; in Kant and all the philosophers' (SHD: 47).

For Cioran it follows that any assent to life is itself a form of vulgarity and baseness. 'Is there anything viler than to say yes to the world? And yet we keep multiplying that consent, that trivial repetition, that loyalty oath to life, denied only by everything in us that rejects that vulgarity' (SHD: 60). The only authentic form of life becomes that of the wanderer and vagabond, who abjures preferences and taking sides, '...because all men are necessarily right and wrong, because everything is at once justified and irrational' (SHD: 61). Diogenes becomes the model philosopher for Cioran, abjuring all ethics and metaphysics, ceaselessly observing man as he is: 'The thinker who reflects upon human reality, if he wants to remain within the world, and if he eliminates mysticism as an escape hatch, ends up with a vision in which are mingled wisdom, bitterness and farce' (SHD: 64).

As so often in Cioran we can detect a tension within his thought. On the one hand, happiness and salvation were considered worthy goals, but once the human condition is deemed hopeless the only authenticity lies in an embrace of a fundamental disequilibrium and the notion of happiness itself is worthy only of scorn. 'Consider any human being who

has caught your attention or roused your fervor: something in his mechanism has unhinged to his advantage. We rightly scorn those who have not made use of their defects, who have not exploited their deficiencies [...] hence no greater insult can be inflicted than to call someone “happy” (SHD: 97).

All Gall is Divided and The Temptation to Exist

Cioran’s resentment against the idea of happiness and those who are happy continues in *All Gall is Divided*. ‘To punish others for being happier than ourselves, we inoculate them – lacking anything better – with our anxieties. For our pains, alas! are not contagious’ (AGD: 23). Happiness itself is a rarity because ‘we accede to it only after old age, in senility – a favour bestowed on very few mortals’ (AGD: 50). His abiding fear of mediocrity and equilibrium leads him to declare that ‘between Ecstasy and Ennui unwinds our whole experience of time’ (AGD: 50).

Cioran briefly turns his attention to the greater historical picture, claiming that a widespread atmosphere of mediocrity and complacency leads to mental disturbance in the populace at large. ‘Mental therapeutics abound among rich nations: the absence of immediate anxieties sustains a sickly climate [...] Where peace and hygiene and comfort flourish, psychoses multiply’ (AGD: 125). Cioran continues the indictment in a somewhat caricatured discussion of England and its fall from historical greatness: ‘Instead of goading him [the Englishman] on, encouraging his follies, his philosophers have driven him toward the impasse of happiness. Determined to become happy, he has become so. And his happiness, exempt from plenitude, from risk, from any tragic suggestion, has become that enveloping mediocrity in which he will become content forever’ (TE: 53).

Happiness as a phenomenon is something that, ironically, may inspire fear and distrust. 'It is the first time they [the happy] have emerged from the security of the worst. An unexpected light makes them tremble [...] Perhaps it does not belong to them, perhaps it has fallen to them by mistake [...] They are so ill-prepared for it that, to enjoy it, they must annex it to their old terrors' (TE: 201). Equally, one's happiness or unhappiness is unaffected by the acquisition of religious faith, as it will merely magnify one's pre-existent propensities: 'If you are happy, it will increase the quantity of happiness you received as your birthright; if you are by nature unhappy, it will represent for you only an additional laceration, only a deterioration of your state, an infernal faith' (TE: 201).

History and Utopia: Glimmerings of hope

As we have discussed in the previous chapter, in his middle period Cioran began to explore the historical process in the hope of renewing his faith in some form of cultural renewal or historical shift that would render life meaningful. In spite of his frustrations in that search, *History and Utopia* contains a number of intriguing hints that Cioran is prepared to take a gamble on a new form of mysticism. In the midst of some lugubrious political reflections Cioran declares abruptly that 'there is an authentic, positive eternity that extends beyond time' (HU: 103). Human beings, however, are doomed to exist within the mechanism of temporality, squandering themselves in ceaseless projection and reflection, due to our fatal incapacity to 'marry ourselves to the eternal present, or to steal from it, from our delight, even the tiniest fraction' (HU: 103). It is that hunger for events, for progress, for forward motion that Cioran claims renders man 'resistant to his own happiness and that of others' (HU: 109).

Nevertheless, Cioran claims that '[Paradise] resides within us nonetheless, a supreme given, a dimension of our original ego; now the question is to discover it there. When we succeed, we enter into that glory the theologians call essential; but it is not God we see face to face, it is the eternal present, wrested from becoming and from eternity itself' (HU: 117). In a move highly uncharacteristic of his post-war writings, Cioran declares that 'the remedy for all our ills must be sought within ourselves, in the timeless principle of our nature' (HU: 117). Such assertions possess a decidedly Augustinian flavour, locating the kernel of salvation in the *interiore homine*. In anticipation that he is merely positing one more phantom hope, Cioran states that such a void 'affords plenitude, a fulfilling void – does it not contain more reality than all history possesses from beginning to end?' (HU: 118).

'The Tree of Life'

Amongst all his work, it is in his essay 'The Tree of Life' that Cioran comes closest to expounding a full phenomenology of consciousness and the possibility of attaining happiness. Cioran begins by claiming that introspection is an evil whereby we torment ourselves with the fact of being human. Our only relief comes when 'we manage to sidestep ourselves and participate in the blissful sleep of objects' (FT: 34). Even the alleged possibility of union with ourselves is deceptive; nothingness is preferable.

It is then that Cioran turns to the story of Adam's Fall as a result of his eating of the Tree of Knowledge. For Cioran, this is primarily an allegory of humanity's fatally over-developed consciousness and inability to find equilibrium in the moment. Human consciousness must always be extending itself: either in knowledge, with the endless desire to classify and contain; in time with reflection and projection; and in space, with the accumulation of

objects. Adam in his primordial state embodies a holistic state of being, whose act of betrayal was 'an infidelity to the gift of ignorance' (FT: 35).

Where Cioran, as a non-believer, must necessarily deviate from the Biblical story is his positing of a fundamental ontological fissure within our being. Our inability to coincide with ourselves is latent from the moment of birth, and as we mature, we vainly seek happiness in every external object. 'That aversion, that horror of happiness, by keeping us from finding in ourselves our reason to exist, forces us outside our identity, in a sense outside our nature' (FT: 36). It is this non-identity with ourselves, our incapacity for finding felicity in the passing moment, that translates itself on to the broader stage of world history in the shape of persecutions, wars, genocides etc. Humanity cannot escape extremism, in whatever form or direction. 'If he [Man] exaggerates everything, if hyperbole is his vital necessity, it is because, unbalanced and unbridled from the first, he cannot fasten upon what is, cannot acknowledge or accede to reality without trying to transform and exhaust it' (FT: 39). As a result of this innate restlessness, man becomes the 'great deserter of being.' Inorganic nature is sufficient by itself; organic nature is ontologically destined to consume and destroy in a chain ended only by death. Yet the situation for humans is further complicated by a periodic awareness of the wasteful nature of our behaviour that overcomes us and awakens a desire for wholeness and plenitude. In tones strongly redolent of Pascal's doleful analysis of humanity, Cioran declares that 'by dint of the vague, the equivocal, he is of this world, and he is not of this world [...] A shadow grappling with images, a somnambulist who sees himself walking, who contemplates his movements without discerning either their direction or their cause' (FT: 42). It is this incapacity for peace that leads humanity to seek its meaning in a principle beyond itself. 'If humanity clung for so long to the absolute, it was because it could not find in itself a principle of health' (FT: 43). The search for transcendence on either

the religious or political plane offers a delusory form of health insofar as it takes man out of himself, but invariably any frustrations in those pursuits return us to ourselves more disillusioned and discontented than before.

In opposition to such questing for meaning beyond ourselves, Cioran recommends an attempt at self-recovery, for man to 're-encounter himself and his timeless depths' (FT: 45). For Cioran – in a somewhat Platonic mood - all knowledge of that which is outside the self is in a certain sense false knowledge, concerning as it largely does the external world of becoming and oblivion. Yet as ever there is ambivalence in Cioran's position. While on the one hand recommending an inner withdrawal to the depths of the self, he denies that such a step might be possible: 'What is to be done? Resign from the race? That would be to forget that one is never so much man as when one regrets being so. And such regret, once it seizes one, offers no means of escape: it becomes as inevitable and as heavy as air' (FT: 52). So we are left, as usual, in a position of aporia. The outer world offers no salvation, the inner world no substance.

These themes are further developed in subsequent essays. Cioran claims that 'movement is a heresy'; 'we were created to vegetate, to prosper in inertia, and not to destroy ourselves by speed' (FT: 61). Possessions, goals and ambitions are but a further form of bondage, chaining us ever more tightly to time. 'No one liberates himself if he insists upon becoming someone or something. All that we possess or produce, all that is superimposed upon our being or proceeds from it denatures us, smothers us' (FT: 69).

Yet in spite of his previous denial of interiority being a mode of salvation, the inner self once more becomes the only refuge: 'In a confrontation with our most secret solitude, we discover that there is a reality only in the deepest part of ourselves, and that all the rest is a

delusion' (FT: 120-1). Cioran sounds a note decidedly Stoical and even Christian in advocating the construction of the inner citadel: 'Once a man is steeped in this truth, what can others bestow upon him which he does not have already, and what can be taken from him which might sadden or humiliate him?' (FT: 121). It is rejection of the mechanism of desire and pursuit that will liberate humanity. 'What plenitude, what expansion, when we count on the disappearance of our appetites!' (FT: 138). The social self, responsive to and fearful of peer approval must be abandoned for 'the self of a disabused vision which triumphs here, amid these ghosts' (NG: 40). Although there may be affinities here with themes of traditional Stoical thinking, Cioran does not share any vision of a unified world city of enlightened minds. 'It is hard to see how humanity might be saved en bloc; engulfed in the false, committed to an inferior truth, it will always confuse substance with semblance' (NG: 44).

Not only desire but thought itself is seen as antagonistic to true liberation. While serving initially as a necessary means of severing ties with our habitual modes of being, to become trapped in endless ratiocination 'is to participate in the inexhaustible illusion which begets and devours itself, greedy to perpetuate and destroy itself, to think is to compete with delirium' (NG: 71). To think is to participate, but salvation instead lies in perpetual withdrawal, the very secret of joy (NG: 72). Philosophising itself can become an obstacle to inner peace. Disputing Aquinas's condemnation of stupor, Cioran claims that instead it 'releases us to the essential. A complete metaphysical experience is nothing but an uninterrupted stupor – a triumphal stupor' (NG: 76).

It is here that Cioran also runs into dispute with perhaps the most famous imperative of philosophy: self-knowledge. If the self is but a reactive flux of moods, whim and desire,

enthralled to external contingencies, then - in an implied critique of the Socratic and Nietzschean imperative - what use is it to plumb the depths of that process? 'Self-knowledge – the bitterest knowledge of all and also the kind we cultivate least: what is the use of catching ourselves out, morning to night, in the act of illusion, pitilessly tracing each act back to its root, and losing case after case before our own tribunal?' (TBB: 39).

Cioran further tempers any uncharacteristic optimism in regard to discovering a 'true' self with an admission that total withdrawal from desire is impossible. 'Unfortunately, we cannot exterminate our desires; we can only weaken them, compromise them' (NG: 79).

Suppressed desire inevitably returns, but at least then we know that we have fought it, since its surface re-appearance is, paradoxically, a sign that it 'has been driven from our deepest life' (NG: 80). That which is passing and ephemeral is of no value. 'Existence is legitimate and valuable only if we are capable of discerning, at whatever level, even that of the infinitesimal, the presence of the irreplaceable' (AA: 154).

Considerations

Having surveyed the major texts in order to trace the evolution of Cioran's ideas concerning happiness we now turn to a critical exploration of those views.

Cioran's post-war work can be viewed broadly as an exploration in post-Christian soteriology. Whereas salvation in the traditional sense of divine reconfiguration is not a serious option for Cioran, he still investigates possibilities for fulfilment, or at least equilibrium, in a world stripped of traditional religious hopes. Various avenues are explored that may or may not yield meaning and happiness in a world dominated by ideology.

However, a core quality that differentiates Cioran from, for example, Nietzsche or Sartre is that he is uninterested in a consistent and dogmatic rejection of Christianity. As maintained throughout this thesis, whereas Cioran is undoubtedly not a believer, he is equally far from being an atheist in any rigid or dogmatic sense of the term. Core Christian concepts are retained, theological ideas are explored and employed, and the word 'God' is encountered everywhere in his writings. Appropriately, Cioran's explorations of these themes seem to devolve finally upon a mysticism of nothingness. The world of ideology and politics is abandoned utterly and a return to the self is undertaken. In the absence of any transcendental beliefs or hopes, the only refuge is a form of inner mystical quietism. Not only is the world of man as a social and political being eschewed, but even the notion that any form of non-political individual action in the wider world could provide meaning is regarded with serious doubt. Cioran typically pushes the matter to extremes with his theory that it is individuation *per se* that is the ontological issue that renders human life a perplexing source of constant dissatisfaction.

Consequently, Cioran's metaphysics return, somewhat ironically, to a variation of Christian Neo-Platonism. The undivided whole of pre-individualised plenitude is the sole ethical good; everything that breaks from that oneness is viewed as irretrievably fractured. All an individual's activities, projects and conceptions partake of delusion and are insufficient to bring about a form of satisfaction that is not short-lived. Having experimented with several forms of salvation over the course of his life, Cioran's final position resembles a fusion of Platonism, Christianity and Buddhism in its advocacy of quietism and metaphysical resignation. Certain obscure realms of the internal are deemed to possess an abiding purity that have in some way survived the vicissitudes of time and decay. The parallels with both Buddhism and Gnosticism are clear: life in the realm of history has purged itself, having

been experienced ultimately as nothing but an illusion and realm of suffering. 'What I know at sixty, I knew just as well at twenty. Forty years of a long, superfluous labour of verification'(TBB: 7). For Cioran the challenge is to then abide in that quietism and inner tranquillity, an obvious challenge for a thinker given to, and admiring of, extremes. His primary form of worldly engagement becomes writing itself, the pithy aphorism, beautifully crafted and wistfully despatched, that serves to express the reflections of an individual who regrets his individuality and sees little value in prolonged exposition and rumination.

Cioran's Post-Christian worldview: a comparison with George Santayana

It is at this juncture that Cioran's unusual and unique brand of agnostic thought may be usefully brought into dialogue with the philosophy of George Santayana. As with Nietzsche and Kojève, there are certain biographical similarities between the two thinkers. Although an atheist and materialist, Santayana was heavily influenced by the Roman Catholicism of his Spanish upbringing and cultural milieu in a manner akin to Cioran's maturation in the world of Orthodoxy.²³³ In spite of neither being able to offer assent to the transcendental, neither became an out and out atheist in the sense of embracing a form of materialism that viewed religion as an outgrowth of intellectual immaturity and as an obstacle to a putative enlightenment. Both thinkers retain a respect for traditional Catholicism in particular and the religious impulse in general throughout their work and life. Anthony Woodward has written that 'Santayana had a theological cast of mind without benefit of deity.'²³⁴ Cioran can equally be described as an atheist theologian, or indeed as a believer without God.

²³³ For an excellent study, see John McCormick's *George Santayana: A Biography* (Knopf, 1988).

²³⁴ Anthony Woodward, *Living in the Eternal: A Study of George Santayana* (1988), 125.

Many commentators point to a core Spanish quality in Santayana's thinking, an observation of an unavoidably impressionistic character, but which may be said to refer to a certain fatalism and resignation, with an eye always on finitude and death.²³⁵ Santayana's Spanish Catholicism possessed an abundance of such features, a fact that connects well with Cioran's 'cult of Spain.' The latter remarked frequently on Spain's faded grandeur and an air of fatality that resulted from a general disillusionment that only a nation with a great past behind it could possess. These characteristics also strongly resonate with Cioran's view of his Romanian compatriots as possessed of an irremediable fatalism and resignation, bred by their country's continuous historical marginalisation. In terms of their personal development, each thinker experienced a firm emotional feeling of pessimism from early youth with Cioran expressing his horror of life in his first work *On the Heights of Despair* while Santayana confessed that in his youth the 'material world was like ashes in my mouth.'²³⁶ At that point the Spaniard was seized by the conviction that 'if religion was false, everything was worthless.'²³⁷

Stylistically, each thinker employs notions of paradox and irony in their explorations of existence and their relationship to the life of religion, and each – Santayana in his later years particularly – eschewed a conventional systematic approach. 'Santayana characteristically gives us not arguments for viewpoints, which would be lean and insufficient, but intellectually passionate cases for them; as he also makes intellectually passionate cases for their opposites.'²³⁸ In like fashion, Cioran's views are expressed in a manner deemed

²³⁵ See A. Eliot Youman, 'Santayana's Attachments,' *The New England Quarterly* Vol. 42, No. 3 (Sep. 1969), pp. 373-387 for a good discussion of the Spanish element of Santayana's thought. The theme is also well explored in *Santayana the Philosopher: Philosophy as a Form of Life* by Daniel Moreno (Bucknell University Press, 2015).

²³⁶ Quoted in Lovely (2012), 26.

²³⁷ Quoted in Lovely (2012), 37.

²³⁸ Grossman quoted in Lovely (2012), 19.

unorthodox in standard philosophical discourse, being both passionately emotional and intellectual in their delivery, and often characterised by paradox and contradiction.

While the details of Santayana's ontology and epistemology are beyond our scope here, in broad terms the Spanish-American thinker espouses a philosophy of materialism with a Greek pedigree, combining a form of hybrid Epicurean and Spinozist ethics that encourages a pursuit of happiness that rests upon a recognition of human limits and capacities.²³⁹ For Santayana an accommodation with life is possible if the inescapable limits of the human psyche and the physical world are acknowledged and respected. The wise man will gain knowledge of those limits and act accordingly. Passion will be restrained, and emotions channelled wisely into appropriate outlets where their demands can be satisfied without unbalancing one's personal equilibrium.

In terms of religion, Santayana views it at its best as a distilled form of human wisdom made digestible and acceptable for mass consumption in the form of myth and allegory. Despite his materialism and atheism, Santayana sees religious life as an essential component of a rational life: 'Spirituality has . . . special conditions such as concentration of thought, indifference to fortune and reputation, warmth of temperament disciplined into chastity and renunciation.'²⁴⁰ Religion goes wrong when it is read literally and historically, with the consequent effect of derailing the human mind from its natural and immutable boundaries. Santayana views Catholicism as the Christian denomination that has best encapsulated and transmitted the classical wisdom that espoused such views through the centuries.²⁴¹

²³⁹ An excellent overview of Santayana's thought as a whole is Woodward (1988).

²⁴⁰ Quoted in Lovely (Lexington Books 2012), 23.

²⁴¹ The best overview of Santayana's view of religion is Edward W. Lovely, *George Santayana's Philosophy of Religion: His Roman Catholic Influences and Phenomenology* (Lexington Books 2012).

Catholicism

To delve deeper into their shared views and concerns, an intriguing commonality between Cioran and Santayana is that although they move in the circles of agnosticism and atheism, each holds an almost protective view of the Catholic Church, one that monitors closely its doctrinal development and relationship with society. Why so? In short, each believes that the Church can preserve its integrity only by maintaining its distance from the world, and that its doing so is a matter of vital necessity.

Why do two very different thinkers view the doctrinal integrity of the Church as being a matter of crucial import? The answers in regard to each overlap in some crucial elements and differ according to temperamental divergences. For Santayana, the Church is a bastion of discipline and order, a storehouse of accumulated human wisdom and measured practice that acts as a model of right living passed down through the centuries. It is 'that institution which is constitutionally the most stable, the most explicit of mind, least inclined to revise its collective memory or established usages.'²⁴² Santayana sees Catholicism as a doctrine that contains the best elements of classical wisdom, packaged in myth and readily available to humanity at large. It is the vehicle by which the truth of Greek thought was carried into the post-classical world: '[the] Catholic view is really Aristotle and quite pagan, except that the early fathers who were Platonists may have worked out Catholic doctrine in those terms.'²⁴³

²⁴² George Santayana, *Winds of Doctrine: Studies in Contemporary Opinion* (New York, Scribner, 1913), 25.

²⁴³ Daniel Cory, ed. *Santayana: The later years, A Portrait with Letters* (New York G. Braziller, 1963), 71.

Here, of course, it is difficult not to think of Nietzsche's caustic denunciation of Christianity as Platonism for the masses and it appears undeniable that there is a very large element of elitism in Santayana's perspective. The assumption appears to be that humanity *en masse* is incapable of self-discipline, prudence and emotional balance. Myths that contain promises of reward and threats of punishment are the only way by which men and women may be persuaded to discipline their lower natures, thereby imparting to society as a whole a necessary balance and equilibrium. Concurrent with this is Santayana's loathing of the Reformation, leading as it did in his view to the unleashing of uncontrollable forces that unbalance social and cultural configurations built upon centuries of steady practice and tradition. Santayana's perspective is faithful to his Greek predecessors, who also viewed with horror the threat posed by *physis* (nature) to *nomos* (law). Santayana declares in emphatic tone that 'the three R's of modern history, the Renaissance, the Reformation, and the [French] Revolution, have left the public mind without any vestige of discipline.'²⁴⁴

The reasons behind Cioran's regret at the gradual abandonment of Catholic doctrine are somewhat more complex and initially difficult to fathom. There may be certain structural similarities between his views and those of Santayana, as Cioran's deep and ineradicable sensitivity to life's potential for chaos and entropy may also have led to a view of the Church as a rare point of stability and consistency in Western European history and culture. For a thinker who flirted with and subsequently abandoned (for the most part) history as a source of meaning and diversion, the Church remains as the most prominent symbol and embodiment of transcendental aspiration in the late 20th century. It is hardly accidental that Cioran's notebooks are replete with references to regular visits to Catholic churches in Paris,

²⁴⁴ George Santayana, *The Genteel Tradition at Bay* (New York: Scribner. 1931), 8.

primarily for musical events in which he occasionally finds solace in the performances of sacred music.

However, deeper ontological reasons also lie behind Cioran's disgust at the abandonment of traditional Catholic doctrine that connect in part with Santayana's view of the Church as a necessary touchstone of social disciplining. As we have discussed in previous chapters, the idea of Original Sin becomes a key touchstone in Cioran's writings from the 1950s onwards. As an explanatory concept he finds it indispensable when endeavouring to make sense of what he judges to be the botched history of the species. In spite of his consistent hostility toward Christianity, the doctrine remains in his view its one redeeming insight that no secular philosophy can provide. Despite social and scientific progress, Catholicism remained steadfast for centuries in its low view of humanity in its natural state, and thus when such a pessimistic view fades in the wake of the Church's post-war opening toward society Cioran is dismayed and angered:

How Catholicism has emptied itself of all content! Because in my last book I spoke of the Fall, of Sin, of Malediction, in the Catholic reviews I was treated as a nihilist! Obviously, if I had tackled some 'social' problem....(CH: 289)

All of these theologians who want to be 'with it'. One of them, more or less a disciple of Chardin who can see only the future, answered me when I said to him that he had forgotten Original Sin: 'You're too pessimistic.' How to explain to these people that there is no theology of the Left. (CH: 242)

While we may see here a certain parallel between his view and that of Santayana - the latter viewing the Church as a mythical front for classical notions of humanity, the former seeing Original Sin as a myth that accounts for the constant unrest and instability of human life on

both the individual and social level – there is also a core divergence. Santayana retains a constant optimism in the capacity of the rationally aware human being who is fully cognisant of both his own character and external circumstances to lead a balanced and happy life. The Church and its doctrines are one of the most vital and durable resources available to such an individual by which to attain such equilibrium. For Cioran, however, the Church's anthropology forbids such a hopeful view. Original Sin imputes a fundamental and ineradicable destructive tendency to human nature, such that it is obliged to wage a consistent war against itself and its own natural inclinations that it is almost inevitably destined to lose. Cioran is far more the Augustinian pessimist than Santayana's quasi-Pelagian rationalist.

For Santayana the religious viewpoint bestows order, discipline and regularity. For Cioran, religion in a true sense is an acknowledgement of the unknown and bears more of a resemblance to the *mysterium tremendum* of Rudolf Otto, where the individual dissolves in terror and ignorance in any genuine encounter with the Divine. This divergence can also be seen in the attitude of each toward the Reformation and the shattering of the putative unity of medieval Christendom. For Santayana, the Reformation is an almost wholly unmitigated catastrophe in terms of its antinomian effects on the moral and spiritual discipline of European man. The forces unleashed by Luther and his successors appeal to the basest and most dangerous instincts of humanity which a carefully ordered Catholic society had hitherto kept in check and channelled for constructive purposes. Instead, Protestantism gave birth to a chain of intellectual genealogy that placed emphasis on the centrality of subjective intellect and will as represented by German transcendental idealism.²⁴⁵

²⁴⁵ Santayana develops this theme in-depth in his *Egotism in German Philosophy* (Andesite Press, 2015).

In contrast, as we have seen in an earlier chapter, Cioran professes a constant and deep admiration for Luther as a human being. In his view it is precisely Luther's belligerent and uncompromising insistence on ruthlessly interrogating all tradition and church authority that allowed him to express the antinomian essence of genuine religion, one where the flux and chaos of the human spirit is given full reign. Cioran's is a more literalist and personalist reading of religion, as exemplified in his admiration and respect for the father of the Reformation. For him, Luther is a genuine religious figure, by which is meant a man who grapples on the existential plane with the notions of God and salvation. 'Everything Luther writes comes from his blood and bone...' (CH: 608). For Cioran, religion cannot be a matter of the mythologizing of moral rules and 'just-so' stories; it must be an activity where the human being is utterly engaged in a life-or-death struggle.

Angst and religious despair

Yet in spite of these differences, a further point of convergence between Cioran and Santayana lies in their mutual appreciation of Lev Shestov, the Ukrainian existential religious thinker. For Cioran, as we have remarked upon previously, Shestov was an early influence who taught him to be deeply suspicious of the claims of reason to encapsulate existence, a position that led subsequently to a deep admiration for figures such as Luther, Pascal and Kierkegaard. In contrast, Santayana discovered Shestov later in life when his own mature views were formed, yet surprisingly given his own faith in rationality he found Shestov's anarchic and anti-rational thought amenable to certain strands in his own philosophy.

I am now reading a very well-translated book by Lev Shestov entitled *In Job's Balances*....It is modern, mystical and refreshing: a little Nietzschean, but with a latent belief in the

supernatural, in death a great revelation, which perhaps you might like after too much scientific positivism....His (Shestov's) history is weak, and his views of other philosophers out of focus and arbitrary; but I like him for being un-worldly or anti-mundane, as apparently Russians are.²⁴⁶

Cioran would certainly concur with Santayana's approval of Shestov's unworldliness, having stated that Shestov 'was the man who made me abandon philosophy', by which he meant the systematic attempt by a supremely confident Reason to construct a crack-free edifice within which to contain the flux of existence.²⁴⁷

Further intersections and divergences between Santayana and Cioran are exemplified in their differing approaches to mysticism, surely a significant litmus test of the nature of any religious attitude. Cioran was, as we have seen, in his youth deeply sympathetic to the mystics and their attempts to reach direct experience with the Divine, unmediated by any institutional or rational impediments. Santayana, however, was entirely unsympathetic to the endeavour, describing such individuals as suffering from a 'religious disease' and expressing his distaste for those 'mystics who were not definite in their logic and orthodox in their religion.'²⁴⁸

However, there are also points of convergence on the topic. Cioran's youthful enthusiasm for saints and mystics soured with age until he came to a position of almost Nietzschean disdain for such individuals: 'If the saint's condition is more agreeable than the sage's, the reason for this is because it costs less to wallow in pain than to triumph over it by reflection or pride' (FT: 138). This resembles Santayana's constant scepticism about mystics, seeing in

²⁴⁶ Quoted in Woodward (1988), 124.

²⁴⁷ Cf. *Entretiens* (1995), 21, 23 and *passim*.

²⁴⁸ Quoted in Lovely (2012), 29.

their extremes little more than a sublimated fear of death: 'Has the belief in heaven been more often a longing not to live, than to live forever? I almost think so. And you know the verses of St Theresa and St John of the Cross: "Muero porque no muero [I die in order not to die]."'²⁴⁹

Nevertheless, a core difference between Cioran and Santayana is that the latter's formula for happiness results from a systemised philosophical ethic, namely that of an Epicureanism combined with Stoical elements. It is characterised by a measured, steady approach to life that accepts every aspect of human behaviour on both the micro and macro scale as a natural occurrence that should, in theory at least, elicit no great surprise or revulsion once one has reached an adequate understanding of humanity based on a materialist metaphysics; its working motto could be said to be that of Spinoza: *Non ridere, non lugere, neque detestari, sed intelligere* ('not to ridicule, not to lament, nor to despair, but to understand'). Human life becomes tolerable once we recognise that our chaffing at human limitations is unreasonable and therefore unbecoming to rational intellects. But whereas Spinoza's ethics may lay itself open to the charge of coldness and inhumanity, Santayana does at least allow himself more leeway for the appreciation of the quotidian, rejoicing in nature, poetry, food, travel and so on.²⁵⁰ Cioran may advocate such a philosophy at times in his recommendations regarding humour, cynicism, and a cultivation of the absurd, but there is a continual tension in his work between such endeavours at lightness and the persistent despair he feels and expresses in regard to the human condition.

²⁴⁹ Santayana, *The Letters of George Santayana, Book Eight 1948-52* (MIT Press, 2008), 261.

²⁵⁰ See for example Santayana's 'The Philosophy of Travel' in *The Virginia Quarterly Review* Vol. 40, No. 1 (Winter 1964), pp. 1-10.

Such a contrast may be further perceived between the personal attitude each thinker assumed in regard to the world in their youth. Santayana writes of his *metanoia* in early middle age, where following the emotional disruption brought about by the premature death of a friend, he made a conscious decision to emotionally disengage from human relationships.²⁵¹ By this, he intended the wilful pursuit of stoical *ataraxia* combined with a measured Epicurean pursuit of pleasure. Never again would Santayana allow himself to be emotionally overinvested in the contingent human flux lest its vicissitudes should threaten to overthrow his equilibrium. By contrast, Cioran lived in an atmosphere of perpetual emotional unease and extreme responses to life and its unpredictability. Nor did he seek to escape this (at least not until late in life) by a wilful retreat into a Stoical mental fortress, scorning such endeavours and viewing them as a betrayal of the fundamental experience of life in all of its flux and uncertainty.

Nevertheless, Santayana's respect for the ancient philosophers as the *fons origo* of any worthwhile ethical thought finds a periodic mirror in Cioran, particularly when the latter's exasperation with Christianity is at a peak:

These ancients are always the ones we return to when it is a matter of the art of living, whose secret two thousand years of supernature and convulsive charity have stolen from us. We return to them, to their poise and their amenity, provided that we are free of that frenzy Christianity has inculcated in us. (FT: 66)

Despite this periodic resemblance, a further difference between Cioran and Santayana, and perhaps the most crucial, is their respective attitudes toward the concept and experience of Angst. However much Cioran may acknowledge the wisdom of the ancient ethical

²⁵¹ Santayana writes of this decision in Vol 3 of his autobiography *My Host: the world, Persons and Places* (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953), 8-9.

philosophers in pursuing calm and equilibrium, his work could in one sense be viewed as a lifelong autobiography recording his discomfort with existence. For him, angst is a fundamental ontological category, one where he moves and has his being. Santayana in sharp contrast was highly sceptical of what he perceived to be a fashionable pose in twentieth century philosophy:

As to Angst my quarrel with it is temperamental and you must not take it seriously. The reality is what Schopenhauer calls the Will, the Will to Live. It makes the child anxious to get the breast or the bottle, the lover his girl, the workman his Saturday night wages, and the invalid to get well. You can't help caring. But these natural cravings and fears are occasional, they can be modified or placated, you may "care" about something else [...] What I dislike about calling Will Angst is the suggestion that it is mysterious and non-natural. It is fundamental but can be appeased. It need not end in collapse but may be transcended throughout by charity and reason.²⁵²

Such a perspective would seem exorbitantly optimistic to the disabused Cioran, but Santayana would doubtless respond that Cioran's post-war disillusionment was the result of a miscalculation, or more accurately a surrender to excessive emotion, the like of which was anathema to his own feline insouciance. Santayana is certainly unwilling for the most part to entertain the notion of a fundamental ontological disjunction between man and being, the like of which was affirmed by Cioran and Kojève.

Yet while Santayana's approach may be appealing in certain aspects of its measured rationality and prescribed limitations on emotional engagement it may well be questioned as to how it fares in the face of larger human calamities. For that purpose, it is worth

²⁵² Quoted in Woodward (1988), 18-19.

reflecting on a story told by the American writer and commentator Gore Vidal concerning his meeting with Santayana in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War. Vidal was eager for Santayana's appraisal of the conflict but was shocked by his blasé attitude toward recent events.

When I said to him with youthful despair, that the world had never yet been in so terrible a state Santayana could not have been more brisk, or chilling, "My own lifetime has been spent in a longer period of peace and security than that of almost anyone I could conceive of in the European past." [...] I was sickened and revolted by his sang-froid and cynicism.²⁵³

It could be argued that the kind of detachment demanded by Santayana's ethics leads to a coldness that renders his approach problematic to some. Alternatively, Santayana could respond that protesting his view is a form of sentimentalism and emotionalism that refuses to allow itself to be educated by the facts of human history and conflict. We see this practically expressed in his decision to avoid human attachment following the death of his friend, a rigorous if stern demand made by a rationally guided adoption of a particular ethical perspective.²⁵⁴ As we have seen however, Cioran is suspicious of a too-easy Stoicism that claims to be indifferent to external contingencies. 'But how to accommodate ourselves to those [misfortunes] which come from ourselves? If we are the source of our ills, whom are we to confront? Ourselves? We manage to forget, luckily, that we are the guilty parties, and moreover existence is tolerable only if we daily renew this lie, this act of oblivion' (TBB: 81).

²⁵³ Quoted in Woodward (1998), 115-116.

²⁵⁴ A sympathetic approach to Santayana's ethical practices can be found in *The Ethics of Detachment in Santayana's Philosophy* by M. Brodrick (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

A deeper pessimism

However, as with Cioran, Santayana's views are generally considered to have become less optimistic in relation to possibilities of social amelioration as he advanced in years. His early central work *The Life of Reason* assessed positively the role of rationality in core aspects of human life and society, with the aim of outlining by what means reason rightly employed could generate a more balanced, just and aesthetically pleasing culture and society.

Following the general shock and disillusionment of the First World War, Santayana's writing retracted in scope, with an emphasis focused more on the means by which an individual might comport himself and lead a happy life in the face of ever increasing political and cultural upheaval. It is interesting also that Santayana's last major work is *The Idea of Christ in the Gospels*, a work that has been characterised as being in essence a Gnostic guidebook to distilling individual wisdom from the New Testament, a venture that reminds us of Cioran's intermittent flirtation with Gnostic doctrines.

However, in spite of Santayana's attempt to frame religious belief as a mythological and poetic wrapping for sound moral precepts, he does periodically admit that such a view has an aura of desiccation when compared with that of a 'true believer':

It is not those who accept the deluge, the resurrection and the sacrament only as symbols that are the vital group, but those who accept them literally, for only these have anything to say to the poor, or the rich, that can refresh them. In a frank supernaturalism, in a tight clericalism, not in pleasant secularization, lies the sole hope of the church.²⁵⁵

²⁵⁵ George Santayana, *Winds of Doctrine: Studies in Contemporary Opinion* (New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1913), 56.

Furthermore, there is in Santayana's later thought, in spite of his declared rational optimism, an underlying current of deeper ontological pessimism, or at least a rueful sense of the vanity of human existence.

I confess that the life of the spider, or my own life is not one which, if I look at it as a whole, seems to me worth realising; and to say that God's ways are not our ways, and that human tastes and scruples are impertinent, is simply to perceive that moral values cannot preside over nature, and that what arises is not the good, in any prior or absolute sense, but only the possible at this juncture [...] The spider is a marvel of pertinacity, and I am not without affection for my own arts and ideas; we both of us heartily welcome the occasions for our natural activities; but when those occasions and activities have passed away, they will not be missed.²⁵⁶

The world is as evil for the natural Will as the natural Will is evil for the world. The true sin is cosmic and constitutional; it is the heritage of Chaos. This is the sin of which spirit is the innocent victim.²⁵⁷

The Prayer Book thanks God for our creation, yet in being created we received needs with no assurance that they would be satisfied: for what is our Organic Will, our psyche, but a vast concourse of needs, some urgent, others latent but brewing and rendering us fundamentally unhappy?²⁵⁸

And in spite of maintaining his faith in the power of reason to navigate a well-lived life, Santayana speaks also of 'dark abysses before which intelligence must be silent, for fear of

²⁵⁶ George Santayana, *Realms of Being* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1942) 326-27.

²⁵⁷ George Santayana, *The Essential Santayana: Selected Writings* (Indiana University Press, 2009), 385.

²⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 390.

going mad.’²⁵⁹ He also declares that ‘the spiritual man needs something more than a cultivated sympathy with the brightest scintillation of things.’²⁶⁰

This tone is comparable to Cioran’s later weariness and nostalgia for the pre-natal state: ‘It is only when we live at once within and on the margins of ourselves that we can conceive, quite calmly, that it would have been preferable that the accident we are should never have occurred’ (TBB: 179) as well as statements such as ‘In this life, I’m an accident. Why take it all so seriously?’

As ever with Cioran, the last statement contains a paradoxical negation and affirmation. The absurdism inherent in much of his worldview may indeed lead to a deflation of the salvific hopes of mankind and the consequent lessening of angst and hopelessness. At face value, the statement is a casual summary and apparent endorsement of key elements of the Stoic and Cynical worldview. Yet the very fact of making the statement at all implies a truth that goes against the message. If by nature, we were destined to be casual creatures of the day with no more ontological weight than a butterfly or moth then why would we feel the need to make such a declaration to begin with? The sheer fact of utterance implies a weight or necessity to the species declaring it, and the audience for whom it is intended.

Within such a worldview, the exercise of the will in any manner that reaches beyond the necessity for everyday survival (and even that itself is questionable) becomes folly itself.

Again, the vestiges of the doctrine of Original Sin are apparent in both Cioran and Santayana, as according to both humanity cannot will anything that is not in some measure flawed or egotistical. There would then perhaps appear an almost logical necessity (or

²⁵⁹ George Santayana, ‘Ultimate Religion,’ in *Obiter Scripta*, ed. Justus Buchler and Benjamin Schwartz (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1936), 290.

²⁶⁰ George Santayana, *The Life of Reason: Or, the Phases of Human Progress*, (New York, Scribner, 1953), 268.

temptation) to aspire to the cessation of all willing. In such a framework, the possibility of a constructive ethical discourse becomes largely untenable. A historicist perspective only adds to the uncertainty, as the brutality of 20th century conflict casts enormous doubt on a durable belief in human goodness. Politically, Cioran passed from a flirtation with fascism to a wearily resigned acceptance of liberalism as the form of political life that best promoted peace and allowed disenfranchised and disillusioned individuals such as himself to lead as free a life as possible. In contrast, Santayana's political views became more nihilistic as he aged. For a thinker who emphasised that there existed many different individual and political forms by which a rational being could attain happiness, liberalism was merely one amongst many options, furthermore it was one which hubristically assumed its own superiority and inevitable triumph. For Santayana, communism and fascism could equally command loyalty and adherence from large numbers of human beings.²⁶¹

Cioran and Santayana agree that the unanchored individual finds all teleological thought untenable in the face of post-war nihilism and inevitably conclude that there can be no immutable political and social goal worth striving for. Consequently, a form of ethical caution resulting ultimately in withdrawal ensues. While both agree on this, a critical difference is that Santayana seeks accommodation with the contingent world and has a genuine faith in the possibility of rational happiness based upon an acknowledgement of and accommodation to the limitations of our natural condition. Cioran, by contrast, is unable and unwilling to pursue such a *modus vivendi*, hostile and disdainful as he is to any claims of the sovereignty of reason in the face of the flux of reality. Cioran's decision to record fleeting quotidian beauties in his later books results, paradoxical as it may sound, in a

²⁶¹ For an appreciative but critical evaluation of Santayana's views on liberalism see John Gray, 'Santayana and the Critique of Liberalism' in his *Post-liberalism: Studies in Political Thought* (Routledge, 1996) 18-31.

form of philosophical transcendentalism that lacks a transcendental element. Solitude, isolation and self-reliance become core values, less as a form of universal ethics and more as a personal survival guide. There is, nevertheless, something of a resemblance between Cioran's path and that of Santayana, albeit resulting from very different temperaments.

Likewise, in their respective attitudes toward death we may observe parallels and differences. For the assured materialist Santayana, death is a component of the natural process, the inevitable culmination of a human life, and as with the sages of antiquity it should neither be protested in excess nor perennially avoided. The proper recognition of mortality affords the rational human the correct vantage point from within which to discern their true nature and make their plans accordingly. Personal accounts of Santayana's death bear testimony to the philosopher remaining true to his word and meeting death with an admirable calm and serenity. Cioran, of course, is of the opposite philosophical temperament, as befits an admirer of Paul and Luther. Mortality, death and finitude are the enemies, the mind trashes around desperately in the world's storehouse of philosophies and religions for any form of salvation. Even in the later works that lack the frenzy of the inter-war period and the bitterness of the early post-war writings, one feels that the old gall and rage lurk not too far below the surface of a calm that is not the result of wisdom and adjustment, but rather of fatigue and disabuse.

Conclusion

Much modern ethical philosophy consists in an attempt at what may be termed 'retrieving the ordinary', the impetus behind which is primarily the ebbing of religious faith in the intellectual public sphere of western societies. With religion deemed either archaic or

dangerous, or often both, the onus on much contemporary thinking is to retake the ground previously belonging to theological thought. Two core targets predominate: the body and the quotidian.

In terms of the first, the view tends to be that Christianity was a force that instilled a negative view of the body generally and sexuality in particular. Embodiment and sexual intercourse were viewed as fundamentally “unclean” and a source of sin. Now whether such a view of Christianity is little other than a cliché bred from ignorance or stereotypes is in a certain sense beside the point, as it is that picture that broadly drives the contemporary movement to ‘reclaim materiality’. Of course, such a drive also strikes, intentionally or otherwise, at the heart of western philosophical discourse itself: namely Platonism and its low evaluation of the fleeting and the earthly.²⁶² Consequently, an anti-Platonic move is made in much contemporary thought as the everyday and the flesh need to be re-sacralised. The temporal must be reinstated as the locus of value and the human animal in all its imperfections placed at the centre of discourse. The challenge then becomes to specify what aspects of the quotidian are of value. The need to adopt a broad humanist approach for the familiar challenge of classifying ethical goodness, as distinct from mere biological functionalism, becomes paramount, otherwise there is the risk of ethical discourse collapsing into trivia, sociology or mere folk psychology.

As ever, Cioran weaves in and out of the dilemmas brought by these issues. In his later writings there are tender recordings of everyday moments commonly involving natural and animal phenomena that appear to indicate a renewed interest in and appreciation of the

²⁶² An engaging survey of this theme focusing on thinkers such as Martha Nussbaum and Stanley Cavell, amongst others, is Fergus Kerr’s *Immortal Longings* (SPCK, 1997).

ordinary, yet they are surrounded by the more typical musings on religion, ideology and history. In ethical terms, from the perspective of those seeking moral programmes or thoughts on the development of the species, Cioran can offer “only” a form of quietism and resignation, committed as he is to a form of cultural prognostics ultimately indebted to a version of Spenglerian decline and anti-teleology. Like much contemporary secular philosophy, he is left with the individual in his or her daily life, but unlike perhaps most of them he is unconvinced of the inherent worth of the individual, convinced that frustration and disappointment is the inevitable human lot.

As we have seen in ‘The Tree of Life’ Cioran employs what initially appears to be an extremely literalistic reading of the Book of Genesis in seeking to explore and expound how individuation lies at the root of all human suffering on a personal and historical level. This leads to a number of baffling and key questions regarding Cioran’s view of Scripture: an avowed non-believer but not an atheist, does Cioran believe that the only way to interpret Genesis is by means of a literal reading? On one level no, given his status as non-believer, but equally given his reluctance or else inability to furnish an account of how individuation occurred at an unknown point in history, he takes the text on its merits as an explanatory key and invaluable heuristic for human suffering and frustration. Yet equally, an allegorical interpretation cannot suffice to explain why he claims there is an untouched inner essence of meaning and tranquillity available in the deepest recesses of the individual. In typical manner, he endeavours a path between the two modes of approach.

We see, therefore, that in spite of Cioran’s apparent disavowal of his early immersion in mysticism he has in fact returned to mysticism’s most fundamental principle: salvation lies, if anywhere, on the inside. The earlier lyricism is gone, having been worn away by time and

experience, but the principle is all the firmer for that very reason. Having begun in the inner cell and then ventured into the world of experience and history, Cioran can endeavour to find solace only in what Hadot terms 'the inner fortress'. He has, in spite of his putative disavowal of religion, been obliged by life to acknowledge Augustine's precept that truth lies solely in the inner man. He writes that 'What cannot be translated into mystical language does not deserve to be experienced' (DQ: 66). Yet in spite of this declaration, Cioran is himself unable to access any mystical beatitude and thus frequently in the later works has recourse to more quotidian forms of beauty and peace accessible to all: 'Walking in a forest between two hedges of ferns transfigured by autumn – that is a triumph. What are ovations and applause beside it?' (TBB: 183).

Having renounced and condemned the aspirations of philosophical jargon to systematise experience, he therefore has to exercise caution not only in what he chooses to deem worthy of reporting, but also the language in which he reports it. This results in a more sinewy and stripped back form of aphorism than before. The voice that speaks in *The Trouble With Being Born* has a new tone of sardonic resignation and more clear-eyed disillusion than previous works, as Cioran's self-proclaimed scepticism keeps him suspended between various options and religious avenues. Quietism appears as the consequent route to salvation that holds the least pitfalls. Having embraced a philosophy of non-engagement following the war, political disillusionment morphs into existential disengagement and finally the avocation of non-activity entirely. Such a position represents Cioran's final confrontation with time. Unable to conquer time by turning history into destiny, weary of critiquing what he perceives as the follies and delusions of his contemporaries, he attempts to engender an uneasy truce with temporality, seeking consolation in the passing moments and their occasional effusions of beauty and solace. Salvation is sought in monotony and the

non-realisation of events, but of course such a path runs the continual risk of collapse into dejection, boredom and despair.

Cioran's soteriology may also be viewed as a critique of philosophy itself. The search for knowledge, the final attunement of the mind to reality with its promise of epistemological harmony between subject and object that has haunted philosophy since its inception can no longer be credited, and consequently a thinker denuded of such hopes, with nowhere else to turn, rounds on the philosophical enterprise itself. What better a metaphor for such a destiny than the fatal consequences of the first humans' transgressional eating of the tree of knowledge? Cioran is a direct descendant of Adam, a wanderer in the wilderness with no Eden to return to, hence the sincere if incoherent attempt to construct a philosophy of non-knowing. This "anti-philosophy" is held as the only means by which one may return to the primordial bliss of not-knowing, a phrase more apt perhaps than 'ignorance', which carries with it a connotation of depravation, whereas for Cioran in his extreme moods all forms of knowing are suspect. To return momentarily to our previous chapter, while for Kojève true knowledge lay only in knowing everything, for Cioran true wisdom lies in knowing nothing, but without the Socratic confession of ignorance that has been viewed as the calling card of any putatively honest thinker for two millennia, as he deems it desirable to *not* wish to know anything.

We can therefore conclude that Cioran's soteriology is a unique and somewhat incoherent mixture of mysticism and quietism that features several elements that may also be broadly construed as gnostic. In that regard it seems eminently plausible to place Cioran in the category of post-Christian thought, demarking those who have no faith but cannot be said either to be atheists in the modern sense of the term. Unable or unwilling to break out of

those categories, Cioran wanders amongst them, and in bricolage fashion constructs a makeshift soteriology designed to protect and purify the self from a world of deluded ideology.

However, while Cioran ultimately recommends quietism, a withdrawal from all political and social engagement and encourages desistence from suicide, it may be asked of what use is quietism in a universe lacking a transcendental framework? For the ancient Stoics, the cosmos was a place of rational order and hierarchy where refraining from unnecessary passion was a form of right behaviour and teleological prudence. In the post-Christian world through which Cioran wanders quietism seems to be merely one possible disposition amongst others, attractive perhaps to those (like Cioran himself) who have wearied of Dionysian extremes and renounced all attempts at finding an ontological foothold in existence. His advocacy of quietism and condemnation of individuation may seem somewhat arbitrary and groundless in a world without an over-arching explanatory framework, and in this regard he comes to resemble Nietzsche and Sartre, who also can offer no deep foundational basis for their ethical recommendations. Similar strictures may be applied to Santayana's endeavour to harness an Epicurean form of quietism as filtered through a lens of Catholicism.

Perhaps instead of viewing Cioran through the framework of ethical prescriptivism we would be better advised to view his writings as part of a life lived philosophically, a series of experiments in living that ranged from mysticism, political activism, cynicism and scepticism to a weary resignation.²⁶³ In that case, Cioran may at least be credited with a certain

²⁶³ Santayana frequently declared his writings to be nothing other than autobiographical and denied he was offering a 'system'.

honesty, in that he declines to propose solutions for humanity *en masse* and provides instead a form of solace for those afflicted with a similar malaise in a post-Christian philosophical landscape. In so doing, he resembles a weary Nietzsche, or a Pascal who has lost his wager, and becomes an archetype of the disabused western intellectual who cannot bring himself to religious belief but is equally incapable of assenting to the promises of secular humanism.

Clearly Cioran could state that he never intended to offer any solutions to start with, and that philosophy makes an enormous error in seeking answers in the first place, but one is surely entitled nevertheless to ask where a writer leaves their reader at the end of his work. Yet while the makeshift and perhaps ultimately incoherent nature of Cioran's approach to happiness and salvation may serve as a source of valid criticism of his thought, it may also be possible to simultaneously commend the honesty of his thought and his indifference to contradiction and internal coherence. Cioran is an exemplar of the post-war, post-Christian consciousness that wanders amidst the ruins of Europe, examining the fragments of a once mighty culture. Seeking wholeness or salvation, each fragment is examined, and an attempt is made to piece together a new patchwork structure in which the unhoused individual can find shelter. If Cioran's work may be most convincing when ingested in small doses, as a form of modern cynicism in the manner of Diogenes, then that may be less a reflection on Cioran and more a true reflection of the fragmented nature of post-war European culture.

Chapter 7

Cioran and Natality

Following his explorations of history and the status of humanity in a post-war world Cioran's writing took a more personalistic turn. Having exhausted the possibilities of the social and historical process, Cioran returned to the form of intense subjectivity that had marked his earlier work. In seeking a form of final confrontation with the issues that had obsessed him from youth, he turned his attention to the inescapable cause of all the issues and dilemmas of human life: birth. In this final chapter I shall explore Cioran's reflections on birth and bring him into dialogue with Hannah Arendt, whose concept of Natality, stemming primarily from her youthful engagement with Augustine, was central to her oeuvre. Concurrently, I shall compare Cioran with Samuel Beckett, whose work shows a similar pre-occupation with both natality and Augustine. To anticipate, the thoughts of these three figures help illuminate how backgrounds that share many philosophical and theological pre-occupations can lead to radically different conclusions and moral perspectives, thus showing the highly fissiparous forces intrinsic to a post-Christian world of thought.

Arendt and Natality

In 1929 Hannah Arendt wrote a dissertation on Augustine, entitled *Der Liebesbegriff bei Augustin: Versuch einer philosophischen Interpretation* (On the concept of love in the

thought of Saint Augustine: Attempt at a philosophical interpretation).²⁶⁴ The work represents a critique and appropriation of Augustine's work on memory, natality and community that laid the groundwork for her own individual path in American political science. Focusing on the issue of what it means to love and to be a neighbour in this world, Arendt seeks to distil the possibility of an opening in interpersonal relationships through the lens of Augustine as the groundwork for political and social emancipatory possibilities. I will first delineate the essentials of Arendt's overview of Augustine's position.

Arendt begins with an encapsulation of the Augustinian ideal: 'It is written, "Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself," and only one seized by God is able to do so.'²⁶⁵ For Augustine, love as ordinarily experienced is a form of craving (*appetitus*) for an object in the world; it is in many ways a form of motion that draws us in pursuit to the desired object. The thing desired is a good (*bonum*) for its own sake, as otherwise we would not be drawn to desire it. Concurrent with this is the fear of losing that object once we have attained it. Given that we live in a temporal world of perishable humans and objects our cycle of endlessly renewed desire contains within it its own defeat, as we are condemned to an inevitable level of frustration due to either non-attainment or the fear of loss of the attained object, and the certainty of the perishability of all objects and people.²⁶⁶ The space where mortals desire finite objects is 'the world.' For Augustine such a life has an air of unreality, as 'the true life is one that is both everlasting and happy.'²⁶⁷

²⁶⁴ Published in English as *Love and Saint Augustine* edited by Joanna Vecchiarelli Scott & Judith Chelius Stark (University of Chicago Press, 1996).

²⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.

²⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 9-10.

²⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 10.

In one sense, therefore, given the perishability of all desired objects the real goal of all craving, beyond the contingent specifics of those desired objects, is 'freedom from fear'. Consequently, for Augustine the true goal of all desiring is 'what you cannot lose against your will.'²⁶⁸ Only in eternity, dwelling in the radiant presence of God, can desire be truly satisfied and hence is the *summum bonum*. Misdirected love is that which remains orientated toward this world of mutable and perishable objects and is termed by Augustine as *cupiditas*. Right orientated love toward God and eternity is *caritas*.

Having established these general parameters, Augustine and his place in this world becomes a puzzle and a question to himself (*quaestio mihi factus sum*) and he finds the answer by turning to his origin. According to Arendt, Augustine never believed that 'fearlessness or self-sufficiency can be obtained by man in this world, no matter how much he might strain all his capacities of mind and spirit.'²⁶⁹ The retreat into the fortress of the self, championed by Stoics and Neo-Platonists was not an option for him; the pilgrimage into the self as laid out in the *Confessions* is a journey of doubt and uncertainty where, unable to find a stable footing, Augustine implores God for safety and assurance.²⁷⁰ When God is found as a presence in the inner man, it is as a presence from the outside that has placed itself in the core of the individual as its creator and sustainer, thereby paradoxically resulting in further confirmation of the weakness and ephemerality of the human self left to its own devices. The most authentic form of *amor sui* is not that aimed at the present mutable and mortal self, but at that which will make him immortal and unchanging, namely God. Arendt claims that consequently self-hatred, *odio sui*, is the necessary outcome for Augustine, or perhaps

²⁶⁸ Ibid., 12.

²⁶⁹ Ibid., 23.

²⁷⁰ Ibid., 25.

less forcefully, we must live in a state of self-negation: 'God must be loved in such a way, that, if at all possible, we would forget ourselves.'²⁷¹

But how do we arrive at true and genuine knowledge of God? In order to answer this, Arendt turns to consider the vital Augustinian modification of the Platonic notion of *anamnesis*, whereby the soul possesses latent true knowledge gained in a previous life. To desire is to know what happiness is, to want an object is in some way to know what the reality of that object consists in, otherwise why or how could we ever desire it?

Extrapolating from this, Augustine believes that our knowledge of the happy life can ultimately only have come from a knowledge of that true *summum bonum*, immortal life in the presence of God, from a point previous to our current experience as desiring mortal subjects.²⁷² By searching our memory, we realise that our future-desiring *caritas* is built upon a past that we seek to reconstitute. The past becomes the future, and vice versa, through the act of constructive recollection and projection, as explicated in the famous Book X of the *Confessions*. When we recall our past, we are led to our source and origin in God. Instead of a delusory and harmful dependence on perishable objects, through the act of memory we come to realise our true and purposeful dependence on God. Our beginning becomes our end, and vice versa. It is this act of recall and emphasis on origin that leads Arendt to her first clear statement on natality: 'The decisive fact determining man as a conscious, remembering being is birth or "natality", that is, the fact that we have entered the world through birth.'²⁷³

²⁷¹ Ibid., 28.

²⁷² Ibid., 47-8.

²⁷³ Ibid., 51.

According to Augustine, by seeing birth as a divinely ordained event one finds identity and assurance of purpose by understanding that the ultimate goal of life is to return to one's divine origin. In doing so, the prior status of this world as a 'desert' of finite and unsatisfactory sources of pleasure where humans are driven by *cupiditas* becomes even more acutely accentuated. God is the only source and location of satisfaction and joy, and we are beholden to focus our efforts and thoughts solely on Him. Consequently, one's relations with one's fellow humans is reconfigured. One must love one's fellow man as one has learned how to properly love oneself, namely as a child of God embarked on a shared pilgrimage back to the source of all being. As a result, this world becomes a place of pilgrimage and, from one angle at least, a place of unreality due to its ephemerality and finitude.

Yet in spite of the initial shock of alienation following this ontological realisation, the possibility for true community becomes a possibility. No longer is the world a battleground of mutually indifferent individuals intent on the pursuit of private goods; instead, a mutually regarding community of believers who have identified the supreme good emerges. *Caritas* – the correctly reorientated form of desire by which the Godly is the aim of all action – becomes the dominant motivating force. An important complicating factor here is whether this new optic by which the Christian views their neighbour does in fact reveal their authentic self, or if it is rather a theological reworking of the reality of the neighbour's existence that purposively ignores the quotidian mundane in favour of an idealised reconfiguration. Arendt reads Augustine's position as representing a wholly binary and

exclusive disjunction between this world and the next, and claims that 'it makes the central Christian demand to love one's neighbour as oneself well-nigh impossible.'²⁷⁴

It is certainly true that Augustine's emphasis on future felicity means that one's relation to one's fellows in this world becomes extremely complex. Augustine is wary of enjoying people for their own sake, as opposed to viewing them in an instrumental fashion on one's journey to God, a message which, as Arendt points out, appears decidedly non-Christian, or at least very much the opposite of the Pauline vision.²⁷⁵ An individual is not loved in their individual uniqueness, as constituted by their mundane and contingent selves. Instead, an individual is loved as an idealised bearer of God. Men are loved because 'they have rational souls which I love even in thieves.'²⁷⁶

Related to this is the status of the world itself. On the one hand, the world is, from the Christian perspective, the creation of God. In the primordial sense, Being and the world are divine creations *ex nihilo*. On the other hand, 'the world' is the product of those humans who love it and who constitute it through their desire and actions within it.²⁷⁷ Once the realisation of our true nature and origin has become apparent to those who have been granted the Christian faith a choice has to be made: to love either the world as before, or to endeavour to turn one's love toward the creator of the world and the only true ground of happiness - God Himself - by swapping *cupiditas* for *caritas*.

Arendt then analyses the consequences of this awakening for Augustine's notion of community and neighbourly love. As noted previously, the Augustinian reading of the

²⁷⁴ Ibid., 30.

²⁷⁵ Ibid., 42.

²⁷⁶ Augustine, quoted in Arendt (1996), 43.

²⁷⁷ Ibid., 67-8.

Christian injunction to love our neighbour as ourselves leads to a strict disjunction between our neighbour as he or she actually is in their quotidian life, and our neighbour as an individual who has awakened to their true nature in God. It is as the latter that we are to love the other, seeing in them a fellow soul engaged in the journey back/forward to their heavenly maker. Augustine's ideal community is a group of fellow pilgrims, who through rightly directed *caritas* toward God have been enabled to view the world and its attractions in the proper perspective, namely as a place that if loved wrongly can lead the soul only to despair and ultimate destruction.

But yet for Arendt, there still remains the question as to whether Augustine is engaged in a denial of the true uniqueness of the reality of the individual in their ordinary contingent existence in favour of an idealised and somewhat abstracted conception of them as Christian wayfarers. Arendt once more strongly and unequivocally declares this is indeed the case: 'However, what we cannot understand is how, through this love by which we deny both ourselves and the world, another person can still be considered our neighbor, that is, as someone specifically connected to us.'²⁷⁸ Her reading of Augustine's view of community is a highly oppositional either/or choice between the pilgrim soul and the profane world-lover. If we choose the former, then men and women as presented in their daily imperfections and desires become, to all intents, nothing: 'No individual means anything in comparison with this identical source [God]. The Christian can thus love all people because each one is only an occasion, and that occasion can be everyone [...] It is not really the

²⁷⁸ Ibid., 95.

neighbour who is loved in this love of neighbour – it is love itself. Thus the neighbor's relevance as a neighbor [...] is overcome and the individual is left in isolation.'²⁷⁹

This seeming bifurcation is deepened by Augustine's strictures concerning those who remain entangled with the world in its ordinary everydayness. For Augustine, this can only be the result of sin, as manifested in habit (*consuetudo*). It is habit that keeps us enmeshed in our daily profane activities, and in our endlessly repetitive cycle of desire and frustration. Habit becomes the true ballast that chains us to the mundane: 'Humankind's inclination to value its sins is not so much due to passion itself as to habit.'²⁸⁰ The antidote to this habituation is conscience, the voice that calls us to our true origin, and in doing so renders the world 'a desert'. For those captured by conscience, the social and political arrangements of the world become makeshift arrangements of acute fragility: 'There is no togetherness and no being at home in the world that can lessen the burdens of conscience.'²⁸¹ Yet paradoxically the rendering of the world as a desert provides direction and purpose. The person of faith now concentrates their love and effort toward reunion with the divine source, whereas the seemingly solid and coherent social and political configurations of the mundane world had but provided a false security and illusion of purpose.

However, in spite of these difficulties, Arendt's attraction to Augustine appears to stem from the fact that regardless of a putative life-denying element, the realisation of our true nature as questing souls in search of our divine source does create a form of equality otherwise absent in our mundane existence in a world of social and political inequality. The universalism of the faith – and the Church – creates a form of ontological and ethical

²⁷⁹ Ibid., 97.

²⁸⁰ Ibid., 83.

²⁸¹ Ibid., 85.

equality otherwise absent in our daily affairs. The equality of humans in Augustine stems also not just from our divine origin, but from our worldly origin in Adam and our worldly redemption in the figure of Christ. Therefore, we do not have merely a 'divine history', but an earthly one as well. Our co-status as souls on a pilgrimage home is matched by our shared status as earthly children of sin in Adam that have been redeemed in this world by Jesus's death and resurrection. We are also enjoined to fight for this world in its totality, as there is an injunction to spread the word of God and transform the world into the body of Christ.²⁸² Thus the Christian finds themselves in a world constituted by a number of seeming paradoxes: our mundane life as a human; our spiritual journey as a pilgrim; our disengagement from the world of the quotidian, and finally the injunction to fight for and transform that self-same world. The air of mystery is further maintained by the aforementioned negation of the individual: from the perspective of faith, we are fighting for the community of souls, and yet each soul in its divinity is fundamentally identical, so in fighting for all I am fighting for myself.

These notions of natality and community in her early work on Augustine remained cornerstones of Arendt's mature thinking in her post-war incarnation as a thinker deeply committed to the possibility of positive political praxis, this being specifically embodied in the American liberal ideal and its body politic based upon a division of institutional powers that sought to maximise individual liberty and voluntary association. Her unusual reinvention as a political scientist coming from a background in German *existenz* phenomenology also featured a desire to refute key aspects of Heidegger's thinking. Arendt sought to respond to what she perceived as the stasis induced by the latter's focus on death

²⁸² Ibid., 104-7.

as the fulcrum of his philosophical anthropology. Arendt was deeply opposed to the fatalistic determination of Heidegger's being-toward-death, as revealed most explicitly by an entry in her notebooks where she expresses an emphatic dismissal of any notion of human fallenness or natural estrangement in the world: 'Heidegger is wrong: "man is not thrown in the world"; if we are thrown, then – no differently from animals – onto the earth. Man is precisely guided, not thrown, precisely for that reason his continuity arises and the way he belongs appears. Poor us, if we are thrown into the world!'²⁸³

Her solution to this problem was to reverse the direction of the Heideggerean gaze toward the end and utilise Augustine as a conduit through which the focal point is that of birth. It is natality that rescues the individual in particular and the species in general from the resignation and social and political indifference that Arendt believes characterises the philosophy of Heidegger, and is also a vital retort to the general political apathy and despair that characterises the post-war world:

The miracle that saves the world, the realm of human affairs, from its normal, "natural" ruin, is ultimately the fact of natality, in which the faculty of action is ontologically rooted. It is, in other words, the birth of new men and the new beginning, the action they are capable of by virtue of being born.²⁸⁴

Furthermore, 'Every man, being created in the singular, is a new beginning by virtue of his birth; if Augustine had drawn the consequences of these speculations, he would have defined men, not, like the Greeks, as mortals, but as "natals."'²⁸⁵

²⁸³ Quoted in Champlin (2017), 152.

²⁸⁴ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (1958), 247.

²⁸⁵ Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind* (1975), 109.

A further key component of Arendt's endeavour to escape the Thanatos-centred thought of Heidegger is to move beyond the individual to focus on social and political life. In this manner, she posits the locus of meaning as a form of collective. Narration of the individual's deeds in the collective memory and its transmission to future generations is the source of meaning. Here Arendt returns to classical conceptions of greatness based upon the recollection and narration of great acts in order to prevent them from fading completely into time and oblivion.²⁸⁶

Cioran, Beckett and the tragedy of birth

As a useful overarching concept by which Cioran and Beckett's views on natality can be positioned, I shall draw on the originally Platonic concept of *Metaxy*, as employed in the modern era by Eric Voegelin:

The Life of Reason in the classic sense is existence between Life and Death. The concept of the tension will sharpen the awareness for this "In-Between" character of existence. By "In-Between" I translate the concept of *metaxy* developed by Plato in the *Symposium* and the *Philebus*.²⁸⁷

Concurrent with this is Voegelin's normative definition of reason derived from the classical tradition:

In the Platonic and Aristotelian experience the questioning unrest, carries the assuaging answer within itself, insofar as man is moved to his search of the ground by the divine ground of which he is in search. The ground is not a spatially distant thing but a divine

²⁸⁶ See the chapter entitled 'Political Natality', particularly Section VI 'History as Political Biography' in Patricia Bowen-Moore's *Hannah Arendt's Philosophy of Natality* (MacMillan, 1989).

²⁸⁷ Eric Voegelin, 'Reason: The Classic Experience', *The Southern Review*; Apr 1, 1974; 10, 2.

presence that becomes manifest in the experience of unrest and the desire to know. The wondering and quest is seen as the beginning of a theophanic event that can become fully luminous to itself if it finds the proper response in the psyche of concrete human beings.²⁸⁸

In what follows, the concerns of Cioran and Beckett reflect the status of the individual caught between, on the one hand, the temporal plane separating birth and death, and on the other the vertical one between Heaven and Hell, in which this world often resembles a form of Purgatory. In contrast for Arendt, a deeply secular thinker, the horizontal plane is the only one containing affective moral and political substance.

Turning first to the work of Samuel Beckett, we see a writer who employs and explores similar themes to those outlined above and develops them to the logical conclusions necessitated by one who cannot commit to faith, but nevertheless maintains its formal structures and core salvific concerns. For Beckett, birth is nothing short of a disaster, the first cause in a sequence of calamities and sufferings ending in death. Agnostic to the point of atheism, Beckett, unlike Augustine, is incapable of locating his origin in God and is consequently forced to pinpoint instead the mundane fact of biological reproduction as the catastrophic originary event. As with Augustine, the human subject becomes a question to itself and develops an obsessive search for an origin that would provide truth and, potentially, meaning. Unable to discover such a point that would transcend earthly flesh, Beckett's protagonists find themselves wandering in a purgatorial no-man's land lacking both direction and purpose.

We find such themes outlined and developed in Beckett's first sustained piece of critical writing, his 1931 monograph on Proust. In this work, Beckett deploys and modifies many

²⁸⁸ Voegelin (1974), 244.

Augustinian themes, specifically time, habit and memory, which for Beckett constitute the 'agile monster or Divinity.'²⁸⁹ For Beckett, time, 'that double-headed monster of salvation and damnation', is the focal point of his investigation.²⁹⁰ His view of temporality is more decidedly dark than the questing agnosticism of Augustine; for Beckett 'there is no escape from the hours and the days. Neither from tomorrow nor from yesterday. There is no escape from yesterday because yesterday has deformed us, or been deformed by us.'²⁹¹ This transformative aspect of time is also responsible for Beckett's grim view of the futility of attainment: not only are we subject to ceaseless desire, but given that time changes us, to be satisfied today by the acquisition of that which we desired yesterday 'is as illogical as to expect one's hunger to be dissipated by the spectacle of Uncle eating his dinner.' As with Augustine, the Beckettian individual is at the centre of a temporality that looks both forward and back, but the future is 'sluggish, pale and monochrome', whereas the past is 'agitated and multicoloured by the phenomena of its hours.' The amorphousness of the former is 'lazily considered in anticipation and in the haze of our smug will to live, of our pernicious and incurable optimism, [and] it seems exempt from the bitterness of fatality.'²⁹²

Beckett also appropriates and modifies the Augustinian emphasis on habit in order to strengthen an anthropology heavily indebted to Schopenhauer. Whereas for Augustine habit was responsible for sin (our continued attachment to the world and wilful refusal of the divine), for Beckett habit is the adaptative faculty that enables us to function in the first place. 'Habit is a compromise effected between the individual and his environment, or between the individual and his own organic eccentricities, the guarantee of a dull

²⁸⁹ Samuel Beckett, *Proust Three Dialogues* (Calder & Boyars, 1971), 35.

²⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 11.

²⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 13.

²⁹² *Ibid.*, 15.

inviolability, the lightning conductor of his existence [...] Habit is the ballast that chains the dog to his vomit.²⁹³

For Beckett, memory acts as a form of counterpart to the ossified patterns of habit. Memory is a dynamic creative force that operates, paradoxically, most strongly in those with poor recollection: 'the man with a good memory does not remember anything because he does not forget anything.'²⁹⁴ Memory is an imaginative faculty deployed by a subject changed from the self that did the original experiencing. In such a world of flux, habit, and memory, tragedy means 'the expiation of original sin, of the original and eternal sin [...] the sin of having been born.'²⁹⁵ But whereas for Augustine memory provides the gateway to salvation by recalling our divine origin, for Beckett memory at best may lead to artistic creation, and at worst to a futile remembering.

Having outlined his worldview through a work of literary criticism, Beckett in his early fiction fixed upon the figure of Dante's Belacqua, the Florentine lute maker notorious for his indolence, as his paradigmatic fictional representation of the human predicament.

Discovered crouched on a ledge in Purgatory, Belacqua is cynically contemptuous of the energy and drive of Dante and Virgil in their quest to ascend to Heaven.²⁹⁶ Unconvinced of his salvation, Belacqua instead opts to remain crouched with his knees drawn up under his chin in a pose strikingly akin to the foetal position, refusing to move either forward or back. The emblem of stasis and resignation – if not refusal – of all divine consolation and platitudes, Belacqua's immobility represents not only sloth but may also be viewed as a determined expression of independence, an assertion of the rational will's suspicion of its

²⁹³ Ibid., 19. Or as one of the characters in *Waiting for Godot* puts it more pithily, 'habit is a great deadener.'

²⁹⁴ Ibid., 29.

²⁹⁵ Ibid., 67.

²⁹⁶ Belacqua appears in Canto IV, lines 97-135 of *Purgatorio*.

surroundings. Caught in the literal in-between between Hell and Heaven, Belacqua appears to have largely renounced both speech and sight, his response to Dante's needling observation on his sloth comes in the form of a terse sarcasm: 'Up you go, brave man!' This simultaneous refusal and embrace of the metaxic position forms the cornerstone of all of Beckett's canonical writing.

The protagonists of Beckett's central mature fiction, the trilogy *Molloy*, *Malone Dies*, and *The Unnamable* embody and express these theological themes, taking them to their logical conclusions. A central attribute of these figures is a de-sacralised version of Augustine's *anamnesis*, whereby the characters suffer from partial to almost total amnesia. There is a nagging feeling that something has been forgotten and that a quest of some sort must be undertaken, but neither the endower of the quest or the object sought can be identified. Consequently, there is a mental and physical paralysis resulting from the loss of the teleological thrust, where the mind and body revolve upon themselves, unable to move decisively forward in one particular direction. Time becomes a middle between natality and either death or an afterlife that is viewed with fear and apprehension. The characters ruminate incessantly in a world of obstinate singularities and seeming contingencies that are mulled over in a vague hope of finding traces of purpose or hints of eternity.

Augustine's famous remark concerning our indigent beginnings, that we are born between faeces and urine (*'inter faeces et urinam nascimur'*)²⁹⁷ finds its echo in Molloy recollecting his birth, 'through the hole in her arse, if memory is correct. First taste of the shit.'²⁹⁸ The shift from Augustine to Beckett is one of eschatology to scatology, the sacred to the truly

²⁹⁷ Although commonly attributed to Augustine, the line is, in fact, most likely from Bernard of Clairvaux.

²⁹⁸ Samuel Beckett, *Molloy* in *Samuel Beckett The Grove Centenary Edition Volume II Novels* (Grove Press, New York, 2006), 12.

profane. In similar fashion, the Socratic prism by which death becomes a birth into the world of eternal forms and the Augustinian variant by which death is a return to the divine homeland is viciously satirised by Beckett's protagonists:

All is ready. Except me. I am being given, if I may venture the expression, birth to into death, such is my impression. The feet are clear already, of the great cunt of existence. Favourable presentation I trust. My head will be the last to die. Haul in your hands. I can't. The render rent. My story ended I'll be living yet. Promising lag. That is the end of me. I shall say I no more.²⁹⁹

Whereas for Augustine the introspective journey returns the subject to God, for Beckett the process of memory brings only impressions, fleeting emotions, and a heightening of uncertainty. Death leads to an uncertain future, the greatest fear expressed by the protagonists being that of a repeat of their present existence.

Beckett's *The Unnamable* is perhaps his most potent fictional instantiation of the inward quest. A narrator who is unsure if he is alive or dead seeks to retrace his origin in a torrent of words that become ever more anxious and terror ridden. It is a modification of the *Confessions* by a voice that has nothing to confess, no one to confess to and yet is overwhelmed by guilt and anxiety. Despite the heightened pitch of introspection and maniacal focus on every word and thought, the narrator can find no trace of God or origin, and at the culmination of the monologue possesses not an ounce more certainty than at the beginning. 'Not to have been a dupe, that will have been my best possession, my best deed,

²⁹⁹ Ibid., 276.

to have been a dupe, wishing I wasn't, thinking I wasn't, knowing I was [...] Labyrinthine torment that can't be grasped, or limited...'³⁰⁰

Contrary to Arendt, common to all Beckett's characters is a view of reproduction as the ultimate sin, the criminal act that needlessly reproduces the suffering individual. His protagonists take pride in their impotence, their non-functionality becoming a source of satisfaction, a non-act that becomes a moral triumph. In doing so, another Augustinian theme is brought into play, as in spite of the non-negotiable Christian tradition of exhorting life and reproduction it was Augustine himself who offered a voice in support of human non-fecundity. In his work on the Trinity he responds to objections to the call for Christian celibacy:

But I am aware of some that murmur: What, say they, if all men should abstain from all sexual intercourse, whence will the human race exist? Would that all would this, only in "charity out of a pure heart, and good conscience, and faith unfeigned"; much more speedily would the City of God be filled, and the end of the world hastened.³⁰¹

Augustine's saintly encouragement toward eschatological abstinence finds a more worldly and blunt echo in the mouth of one of Beckett's characters:

I would ban reproduction. I would perfect the condom and other devices and bring them into general use. I would establish teams of abortionists, controlled by the State. I would apply the death penalty to any woman guilty of giving birth. I would drown all newborn babies. I would militate in favour of homosexuality, and would myself set the example. And

³⁰⁰ Ibid., 308.

³⁰¹ Philip Schaff (ed.) *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: First Series, Volume III St. Augustine: On the Holy Trinity, Doctrinal Treatises, Moral Treatises*, (New York 2007), 404.

to speed things up, I would encourage recourse to euthanasia by all possible means, although I would not make it obligatory.³⁰²

Cioran's birth pains

Cioran's position concerning natality can be characterised from one perspective as anti-Rousseau: man is born in chains, is everywhere in chains and will remain in chains. His views on birth are characteristically less structured and formal than either Arendt or Beckett; theological themes are used and employed in a more haphazard fashion, but the prevailing key is one of bewilderment and a regret that contains an awareness of its own futility. Cioran's moods in response to the seeming absurdity of having been born veer between stupefied depression and a cheery fatalism in the light of such an apparently contingent event.

From one perspective, the contingency of our existence allows a certain licence and would suggest we are not to take ourselves too seriously; however, when confronted by factors such as pain and suffering, which seem no less contingent and baffling in their reality than our very being itself, we are prone to feelings of confounded helplessness and the only available response to Cioran is a form of Augustinian focus on natality, but without the comforting assurance of Christian faith. For Arendt, birth is an opportunity and the embodiment of freedom with the possibility of reshaping given circumstances in a dynamic

³⁰² Samuel Beckett, *Eleutheria*, trans. Barbara Wright (Faber & Faber, London, 1996), 44. Cioran was also capable of such splenetic hyperbole: "Pregnant women will some day be stoned to death, the maternal instinct proscribed, sterility acclaimed" (NG: 11).

means; for Beckett, in spite of his pessimistic reputation and the heavily flavoured negativity of his language, uncertainty is the keynote: we simply do not know and cannot judge whether our birth is ultimately to be celebrated or mourned. For Cioran, the tenor is largely mournful. Although he does not rule out God or divine redemption entirely, the sorrows of human life that inhere regardless lend birth an air of a gratuitous catastrophe that can only be mourned and regretted.

Cioran's earliest extended meditation on birth is a piece entitled 'The Refusal to Procreate' in *A Short History of Decay* where in somewhat elitist Nietzschean tones he explores the link between the voluntarily childless and the saint. The former has 'exhausted his appetites' and 'approached a limit form of detachment' (SHD: 127). The latter fetishes his self-perceived sanctity and has 'made his nothingness into a halo'. Saints being exceptional, Cioran prophesies general extinction will result from general weariness as opposed to religious idealism. The ordinary human with the common urge to procreate 'is scarcely to be distinguished from the dog' (SHD: 128).

Cioran's most sustained and developed observations on birth come in the appropriately entitled *The Trouble With Being Born*. There exist many parallels between the Augustinian project and the inward trajectory undertaken by Cioran in this volume. The self becomes problematic to the self, the I becomes an enigma to be unravelled. However, an attitude which, if not consciously and explicitly anti-Augustinian, but is certainly antipodal to the Christian saint is immediately expressed:

We do not rush toward death, we flee the catastrophe of birth, survivors struggling to forget it. Fear of death is merely the projection into the future of a fear which dates back to our first moment of life. We are reluctant, of course, to treat birth as a scourge: has it not been

inculcated as the sovereign good – have we not been told that the worst came at the end, not at the outset of our lives? Yet evil, the real evil, is *behind*, not ahead of us. (TBB: 4)

The widespread fetishization of birth and the refusal to confront its problematic nature renders futile the endless discussions of social issues and the self-congratulatory nature of contemporary societies: ‘Nothing is a better proof of how far humanity has regressed than the impossibility of finding a single nation, a single tribe, among whom birth still provokes mourning and lamentations’ (TBB: 4). Such a condemnation is accompanied by an initially defiant stance of individuality in the face of public indifference and uncritical conformity to biological drives: ‘To defy heredity is to defy billions of years, to defy the *first cell*’ (TBB: 5).

Cioran’s late obsession with birth is partially a fruition of his earlier interest in the Cathars and Bogomils, heretical Christian groups who viewed the material world as intrinsically evil and procreation as sinful, the latter group coincidentally having clustered in the area of his birth. We find here a further resonance with Augustine’s religious life before Christianity, namely his Manicheanism, whose dualistic ontology of light and dark influenced the aforementioned movements deemed heretical by the Church. For Cioran, a refusal of biological imperatives and the overwhelming power of lust puts us on a par with God, as our individuation is heightened and strengthened by defying the Abrahamic imperative to procreate: ‘Unmaking, decreating, is the only task man may take upon himself, if he aspires, as everything suggests, to distinguish himself from the Creator’ (TBB: 6).

However, the tone of Promethean defiance changes and with characteristic honesty and self-criticism Cioran contemplates less heroic strains running beneath his exploration. The fetishization of birth may result from an incapacity to live in the present that consequently leads to a fixation on birth: ‘Never comfortable in the immediate, I am lured only by what

precedes me, what distances me from here, the numberless moments when I was not: the non-born' (TBB: 5). The present appears to be unable to offer a sense of meaning, hence the quest in either origin or end. From such a perspective, Arendt's positing of a moral connection between birth and freedom may also be read as a form of incapacity to settle in the present, and rather instead to be constantly needful of a continuous 'clearing' activity whereby a more tolerable and inhabitable future is projected, but never arrived at. 'Our obsession with birth, by shifting us to a point *before* our past, robs us of our pleasure in the future, in the present, and even in the past' (TBB: 9).

For Cioran, a dwelling on natality may represent a longing for a form of freedom that is simply non-human in its totalising aspirations:

Endlessly to refer to a world where nothing yet stooped to occurrence, where you anticipated consciousness without desiring it, where, wallowing in the virtual, you rejoiced in the null plenitude of a self anterior to selfhood...*Not to have been born*, merely musing on that – what happiness, what freedom, what space! (TBB: 22)

Concurrently, the focus on birth may also merely be an inverted form of desire for Thanatos: 'I long to be free – desperately free. Free as the stillborn are free' (TBB: 9). Pondering our finitude and mortality will eventually result in an impasse of ignorance and conceptual limitations, with the result that the restless intellect can turn only to origins rather than endings: 'When we have worn out the interest we once took in death, when we realize we have nothing more to gain from it, we fall back on birth, we turn to a much more inexhaustible abyss' (TBB: 11).

Contra Augustine, memory is not for Cioran a force for liberation and authentic realisation of the human self. It is closer to Beckett's characterisation in his work on Proust, but without

any possibility of the moments of release afforded by the workings of involuntary memory that generate the urge for artistic creation. Memory in Cioran is more of a tortuous and desperate picking amongst random contingent events:

The obsession with birth proceeds from an exacerbation of memory, from an omnipresence of the past, as well as from a craving for the impasse, for the *first* impasse. No openness, hence no joy from the past but solely from the present, and from a future *emancipated from time*. (TBB: 21)

It is our definition as temporal beings that becomes an insufferable burden for Cioran. His position is akin to that of a godless Gnosticism: 'There was a time when time did not yet exist....The rejection of birth is nothing but the nostalgia for this time before time' (TBB: 17). This gnostic yearning for freedom from time is combined with a Buddhist-like yearning to be free of the contingencies that constitute our time-bound existence: 'If attachment is an evil, we must look for its cause in the scandal of birth, for to be born is to be attached. Detachment then should apply itself to getting rid of the traces of this scandal, the most serious and intolerable of all' (TBB: 19).

Cioran takes his musings on birth a step further back than Augustine's, seeking in the enigma of natality a deeper understanding of Being itself:

It is not my beginnings, it is the beginning that matters to me. If I bump into my birth, into a minor obsession, it is because I cannot grapple with the first moment of time. Every individual discomfort leads back, ultimately, to a cosmogonic discomfort, each of our sensations expiating that crime of the primordial sensation, by which Being crept out of somewhere... (TBB: 16).

The salvific endpoint of such ponderings aspires at very best to a dissolution of the self into the greater mystery of ontological origins: 'Instead of clinging to the fact of being born, as good sense bids, I take the risk, I turn back, I retrogress increasingly toward some unknown beginning, I move from origin to origin. Some day, perhaps, I shall manage to reach origin itself, in order to rest there, or be wrecked' (TBB: 19).

However, in calmer moods Cioran is overcome with a wistful resignation to the seemingly inviolable constitutive boundaries of the human condition. Musing on birth is as doomed an enterprise as all other variations on the philosophical project, 'The emphasis on birth is no more than the craving for the insoluble carried to the point of insanity' (TBB: 18). In such moods, Cioran surrenders to temporality and unidirectionality toward death: 'Pure time, time decanted, freed of events, beings, and things, appear only at certain moments of the night, when you feel it coming on, with the one intention of sweeping you off toward an exemplary catastrophe' (TBB: 40). This resignation and seeming clear-sightedness leads to a certain form of static freedom, one divested of all political and social fantasies: 'Lucidity is the only vice which makes us free – free *in a desert*' (TBB: 12). It is the human incapacity for rest and satisfaction in the present that drives the individual human narrative and the broader narratives of politics and history. But even such awareness is incapable of affording relief from the human condition, 'I know that my birth is fortuitous, a laughable accident, and yet, as soon as I forget myself, I behave as if it were a capital event, indispensable to the progress and equilibrium of the world' (TBB: 6). Rather than seek a putative pre-birth liberation, Cioran resigns himself to being a pilgrim without a destination, 'Paradise was unendurable, otherwise the first man would have adapted to it; this world is no less so, since here we regret paradise or anticipate another one. What to do? Where to go? Do nothing and go nowhere, easy enough' (TBB: 13).

A regretful and wistful attitude toward birth carries within it the implication that the subsequent experiences, modalities, and potentialities of life all fail to satisfy the aspirations and idealisations of the thinking subject. From a philosophical perspective, it perhaps carries within it the strongest expression of self-negating thought: a thought that if were transferred to execution would result in the disappearance of both the thought and the thinker. But that thought cannot be executed, so it and its bearer survive and are obliged to continue both living and thinking. Hence, we are presented with Beckett's ever more desiccated narrators and Cioran's ever decreasing sphere of philosophical speculation which circles ever more around moments of pure perception and fleeting impressions.

The renewal of the classic Platonic motif of *anamnesis* common to Cioran, Augustine and Beckett leads to a process of withdrawal, introspection and remembering, by which the self shall become re-grounded in its origin and in doing so reach plenitude. The very notion of the inner quest is itself paradigmatic of the essence of philosophical inquiry from almost the beginning: namely that truth and therefore happiness of some sort can be found via a combination of introspection and reflection. This is embodied in the Augustine phrase that we have had cause to discuss on several occasions already: *noli foras ire, in te ipsum redi. In interiore homine habitat veritas*: do not go outside, return into yourself. Truth lies in the inner man. For Cioran and Beckett, unlike Augustine, the journey towards the origin yields no revelation or purpose. Instead, it returns him to the present, a present diligently shielded from dreams of the future.

Irrevocably positioned within the world, Cioran and Beckett find themselves in a position whereby Augustine's distinction between *cupiditas* and *caritas* becomes blurred on account of the uncertain ontological position of the agnostic who is unable to affirm the existence of

God. *Cupiditas* is undesirable on account of the world being seen as a place of suffering and finitude; in that at least Cioran and Beckett can find common ground with Augustine.

However, having no firm belief in the transcendent results in *caritas* having no clear object of attention. For both writers the experience of human life is somewhat akin to a purgatorial experience wherein one's ignorance as to whether the divine is real combined with a deeper ignorance of how one would attain it if it were results in a spiritual and intellectual paralysis. It is Pascal's infinity as lived experience.

The journeys of Augustine and Cioran present a reverse mirror image. Augustine begins with the self and progresses outward to construct the enormous view of world history and divine purpose that is *The City of God*; Cioran begins with history and the hope of cultural renewal only to retreat ever deeper into a self that becomes more of a nullity. Beckett, although having abjured history from the very start, represents a mid-point between inner and outer: 'to and fro in shadow from inner shadow to outer shadow from impenetrable self to impenetrable unself by way of neither'.³⁰³ There is consequently a concentration on present moments and fleeting impressions, a fidelity to the now that cannot, of course, be captured, but whose passage can be commemorated by means of the written word.

Cioran wavers between regret at having been born and an appreciation of everyday moments that may occasionally offer glimmers of light: 'Walking in a forest between two hedges of ferns transfigured by autumn – that is a *triumph*. What are ovations and applause beside it?' (TBB: 183). Small epiphanies such as nature affords and encounters with humans unburdened with cultural and intellectual learning seem to offer glimpses of a more authentic mode of human existence. 'In the fact of being born there is such an absence of

³⁰³ Beckett, 'neither' in *The Complete Short Prose* (Grove Press, 1995), 258.

necessity that when you think about it a little more than usual, you are left – ignorant how to react – with a foolish grin’ (TBB: 17). For Cioran, birth may be viewed only with wry regret and the future with uncertainty. More so perhaps than Beckett or Arendt he develops a form of ‘presentism’ which although lacking the kind of depth of ontological direction sought by Augustine or Arendt offers him – periodically – at least occasional moments of consolation provided by the contingencies of life.³⁰⁴

Action and the metaphysics of stasis

In endeavouring to critically assess the positions of Cioran, Beckett and Arendt, all of which share a bidirectional focus on natality and death, we confront the consequences of decontextualising and employing key themes from a religious tradition while not assenting to that religion’s core beliefs. While Arendt employs natality as a key heuristic for a constructive politics and morality, it is necessary to note that Augustine’s broader framework derives from a theological anthropology that in many ways is radically opposed to that of Arendt’s mature political thought. A major feature of her thinking, in the light of her initial engagement with Augustine and employment of the concept of natality, is her own personal lack of religious belief. Without Augustine’s Christian faith, which provides for him final reassurance of felicity and meaning, she is compelled to construct a theory of birth which can at best claim that each new instance of a human life is a renewed possibility of

³⁰⁴ One of Augustine’s other great heirs Jean Calvin also conceded that without faith in God regretting birth was a perfectly legitimate position: “I grant indeed the correctness of their opinion, who considered it the greatest blessing not to be born, and as to the next, to die immediately.” *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 9:3:4.

freedom and potential. Arendt's substitute for religious faith is a trust and commitment to the idealistic hopes of American liberalism.

However, an insistence on dwelling on the ever-renewed spring of natality in a political context most notable for its emphasis on the sacrality of negative freedom from government can be charged with failing to provide any substantive future-orientated content to the freedom thereby celebrated, and can also run the risk of becoming a desperate insistence on an infinite "throwing the dice" of birth. At best, Arendt's hope that birth leads to a 'space of freedom' amidst a generally unchanging system of modernist social configurations that drown the individual in mass society seems something of a desperate holding operation. Arendt's space of freedom comes in a certain curious manner to resemble Heidegger's notion of 'clearings', where the authentic voice of Being may be heard more distinctly, which when translated into contemporary political discourse signify a hope for larger areas for individual expression in whatever space is afforded by the impersonal social mechanisms of modernity.

Arendt's hopeful commitment to American liberalism could hardly be more at variance with the political and historical views of Augustine. R.A. Markus summarises the latter's position:

It is the old age of the world, *senectus mundi*. There is no other decisive phase to look forward to, no turning-point to fear or to hope for; only the end. On the map of sacred history the time between the Incarnation and the Parousia is a blank; a blank of unknown duration, capable of being filled with an infinite variety of happenings, of happenings all equally at home in the pattern of sacred history. None are privileged above others, God's

hand and God's purposes are equally present and equally hidden in them all....The interim is dark in its ambivalence.³⁰⁵

Augustine explodes the cyclical view of history held by the Ancients and instead asserts a directional focus that awaits in hopeful anticipation the second coming of Christ, Judgement and Redemption. In the meantime, the empty space between this now and that then is where modernity and its emphasis on the human will flourishes. However, a fatal paradox ensues: if the twin poles of human history consist of Divine action - incarnation and return – then what is there for the human to will? Whereas for Arendt natality offers the promise of new social and political configurations by which to protect and expand the realm of freedom, for Augustine birth can only ever be a repetition of the always already, another instantiation of the human caught between time and eternity awaiting divine redemption. For those steeped in the Augustinian tradition, the concept of novelty and re-invention as championed by Arendt is a fraught one. Insofar as thinking is committed to establishing generalities then the fact of repetition comes to the fore. There can be no thought unless patterns repeat, to some extent at least, and are capable of discursive explication. Since Socrates the search for the eternal and unchanging has been the originating force of much philosophical endeavour. Within such parameters the will can act, but only within a given frame of possibilities. The concept of the 'entirely new and unforeseen' may from the outset be a sheer impossibility. Thought and action must be conjunctive; one cannot act such that the results of an act are *entirely* incapable of placement within the given schemata of human existence. Thus we are left to question whether the possibility of constant re-

³⁰⁵ R.A. Markus, *Saeculum: History and Society in the Theology of St Augustine* (Cambridge University Press, 1970), 22.

invention as proposed by a meliorative liberalism demands far more modesty in its hopes and expectations than perhaps Arendt is willing to concede.

Yet Arendt is, of course, far too sophisticated and historically aware a thinker not to be cognisant of the challenges facing any meliorative political project in the second half of the 20th century. Her own remarks on the situation facing humanity in the earlier part of the century are curiously redolent of Augustine's tone regarding the time between the Resurrection and the Parousia: 'The chain is broken and an empty space, a kind of historical no man's land, comes to the surface which can only be described in terms of "the no longer and the not yet."' In Europe such an absolute interruption occurred during and after the first World War.³⁰⁶ Arendt combines this with an acknowledgement of the putative fatalism of the Augustinian position, 'I am quite aware that the argument even in the Augustinian version is somehow opaque, that it seems to tell us no more than that we are *doomed* to be free by virtue of being born, no matter whether we like freedom or abhor its arbitrariness, are "pleased" with it or prefer to escape its awesome responsibility by electing some form of fatalism.'³⁰⁷ An entry in her notebooks expresses awareness of the link between action and futility:

Futility of action = need

For permanence –

Poetry or body politic³⁰⁸

³⁰⁶ Arendt (1996), 118.

³⁰⁷ Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind – Willing* (New York Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), 217.

³⁰⁸ Quoted in Jeffrey Champlin, "Poetry or Body Politic": Natality and the Space of Birth in Hannah Arendt's Thought Diary", in *Artifacts of Thinking: Reading Hannah Arendt's Denktagebuch* eds. Roger Berkowitz & Ian Storey (Fordham University Press, 2017).

Arendt's tentative answer was a form of rebirth of the classical ideal, whereby *amor mundi* and the political life assume a role of sacrality, and the narratives recording great political and historical actors and events become sacred texts. The individual ceases to be the focus of meaning, replaced instead by the world of community, 'We die in absolute singularity, strangers after all, who say farewell to a foreign place after a short stay. What goes on is the world of plurality.'³⁰⁹ But this of course faces its difficulties in an ever more fissiparous political and cultural world, with innumerable and often conflicting moral and social groupings living side by side, a difficulty further compounded by the aspiration toward an accommodating neutrality championed by the form of liberalism advocated by Arendt. While Cioran and Beckett would reject Arendt's communitarian approach and classical views of individual greatness enshrined in collective memory, the very act of writing itself becomes for them, if not a form of immortality, at least a form of expression that may resonate in the minds and memories of some. Writing as salvation may not be an option for the agnostic world in which both dwell, but there is a need for expression in the public realm. The lack of an image of the whole condemns them to an existence of equivocation and stuttering, the last being exemplified in written form by the aphorism and fragment, and physically by the circular journeys often undertaken by Beckett's characters, a circularity mirrored by the ever-repeated themes and obsessions of Cioran's essay and aphorisms.

As Elizabeth Barry points out, existence in Augustine and Beckett is rendered in the passive voice.³¹⁰ And indeed Cioran's general philosophical disposition resonates more with

³⁰⁹ Quoted in Champlin (2017), 156.

³¹⁰ Barry, Elizabeth 'Beckett, Augustine and the Rhetoric of Dying' in *Beckett and Death* Eds. Steven Barfield, Philip Tew and Matthew Feldman (Continuum, 2009), 74.

Augustine's *si enim fallor, sum* – For if I am mistaken, I am. The ambiguity of the active and the passive voice in Augustine and Beckett is mirrored in the mood of Cioran's writings. The active tone of the early writings gradually lapses into a tenor of passive resignation and a resigned observance of passing incidents and encounters in the outer world. The endeavour to leave one's mark on the world subsides as the ego shrinks, and both the inability and the questionable nature of the desire to actively impose oneself on existence fades. The written word becomes instead the only means of salvation, or at least a gesture toward salvation as it becomes the sole remaining mode of expression for the desiccated self.³¹¹

Whereas for Arendt the continual creation of a space of freedom around and ahead of the acting subject who acts with an awareness of historical and social development creates a continuously expanding horizon, the temporality of the human condition for Cioran and the Beckettian subject is asocial and individual, the last element in particular leading to an inescapable awareness of personal mortality and the submergence of all social and historical projects under the finality of death. Neither Cioran nor Beckett have the least interest in the socio-political sphere where Arendt resides and places her hopes. As we have seen in previous chapters, Cioran flirted and engaged with grand politics, eventually forsaking them, whereas Beckett's work shows a persistent disavowal and indeed frequent repugnance for such activities and is to all intents and purposes apolitical. Any quest for meaning and salvation in the immanent sphere of the political is for them doomed from the outset, as the sphere of immanence can only ever contain repetitive patterns with minor variations. Indeed, the endless pursuit of individual freedom as espoused particularly within

³¹¹ For the idea of writing as a form of incomplete salvation see Joseph Acquisto, *The Fall Out of Redemption Writing and Thinking Beyond Salvation in Baudelaire, Cioran, Fondane, Agamben, and Nancy* (Bloomsbury Academic Press, 2015).

liberal societies which emphasise the contingent nature of tradition and morality may lead to a further distancing of the individual from his or her social and political surroundings, thereby putative political freedom runs the risk of leading to further philosophical alienation.

From the Augustinian perspective the City of God and the City of Man are forever separated and all attempts to merge the two are doomed to failure from the outset. Arendt ends in a position where politics is the essence of human life and the locus of meaning, the main thrust of which is to continually clear a ground of freedom around the individual subject. It is a more modest form of Hegelianism. For Cioran and Beckett, the ground of freedom is primarily experienced as the ground of religious despair. When political and social life recede, the horizon of finitude becomes dominant and the search for a horizon of infinity becomes paramount.

Contra Arendt, both Cioran and Beckett reflect the darker elements of Augustinian anthropology that can find in life no steady resting place or plenitude. 'From the moment a man begins to exist in this body which is destined to die, he is involved all the time in a process whose end is death. For this is the end to which the life of continual change is all the time directed, if indeed we can give the name of life to this passage towards death.'³¹² The mortal journey of life that consists of death-in-life leads Augustine into a set of questions that foreshadow the aporetic position of the Romanian and Irishman: 'Is he really in life and death at the same time? In life, that is, because he is alive until life is wholly taken away; but in death, because he is dying all the time that life is being taken away from him. For if he is

³¹² Augustine, *City of God* Bk. XIII, Chap. 10 transl. Henry Bettinson (Penguin, 1984), 518.

not in life, what is it that is being taken away, until the process of diminution is completed?

While if he is not in death, what is this taking away of life?'³¹³

For Arendt the theory of birth and freedom leads to a praxis of freedom and novelty; for Cioran and Beckett Augustinian theology leads to a form of anti-praxis manifested in waiting, an activity that contains within itself both the active and passive modes of being. To wait is a conscious active decision, yet the mode as assumed involves passivity and stasis – a surrender to the possibility or hope of salvation coming from outside the realm of the human. Furthermore, if waiting becomes the primary mode of being or philosophising, then the narrativity that undergirds much of human life and how the subject relates to itself and others comes under severe strain. A conscious waiting and passivity will perhaps weaken the societal and personal bonds that constitute much of the quotidian human experience; it will certainly weaken any desire or possibility for social and political action that rests upon the active hope of a better future in this world.³¹⁴

Arendt's focus on natality leads to an enhanced desire and capacity for action; for Cioran and Beckett it leads to an apolitical passivity. The latter pair exists in a world of disenchanted eschatology, where the desired end of divine intervention is viewed with extreme scepticism yet grudgingly clung to as the only possible means of salvation. The focus on birth and its relationship with death mirrors the 'already/not yet' dynamic of Christian revelation. The core event of incarnation/birth has already occurred; the consummation in death/fulfilment is awaited. In the meantime, there is nothing but to maintain one's position. Both Cioran and Beckett refuse suicide, and settle by default on the

³¹³ Ibid., 519.

³¹⁴ Simone Weil could perhaps be classified as an Augustinian thinker who endeavoured to combine a philosophy of waiting with an emancipatory politics, with, at best, uncertain results. Camus, another thinker who began with Augustine, faced similar dilemmas with uncertain conclusions.

decision to continue. For Beckett, this assumes a strangulated form of a Kantian imperative: 'I can't go on, I must go on, I will go on.' Cioran's persistence in being results more from a wistful resignation; life is a *habitus* and once suicide is refused there is, paradoxically, no necessity to consciously decide to continue living given life's involuntary nature.

For Cioran, Augustine and Beckett history collapses into natality – the macrocosm becomes the microcosm, and the entirety of human history becomes a literal discharge and regathering. The efficacy of action is thrown into serious doubt, as the movement and volition of the individual within the broader cosmos appears both figuratively and literally insignificant, particularly when viewed from within the context of the later Augustinian paradigm of near total dependence on Grace. Consequently, the immobility of Belacqua in the work of Beckett becomes a near logical necessity, where Cioran, although less explicit about theological trends in this regard, also tends toward a philosophy of stasis as his writings develop.

Cioran and Beckett's position contains a distancing both from Arendt's being-toward-freedom and Heidegger's being-toward-death. Neither freedom nor death centred ontologies can coherently appeal to thinkers working within a Christian inheritance which they can neither escape nor embrace. For those thus positioned, *amor mundi* becomes highly problematic, in terms of either disposition or a goal to be attained. In classic Socratic terms, it is difficult to love that which is forever passing away. Yet the Christian framework prohibits a complete *contemptus mundi*, given that all Being is the work of God. In spite of Augustine's reputation for a certain harsh austerity in his outlook, it is equally necessary to note that *City of God* culminates in a hymn of gratitude for the good things of life afforded by the world, including procreation: 'His goodness has filled even this misery with

innumerable blessings of all kinds [...] The fault of the first sin could not abolish the marvellous power of seed.³¹⁵ Other blessings include the mind 'capable of knowledge and learning, ready for the perception of truth, and able to love the good.'³¹⁶ Augustine also heaps encomia upon clothing, building, agriculture, navigation, the arts and sciences.

Although Cioran and Beckett have been placed together throughout this examination it is necessary to note one key difference. Whereas Cioran's writings often convey the mood of one who has lost Pascal's wager, Beckett's world is still caught in a liminal atmosphere of not knowing, of a theological uncertainty that cannot quite shut down the final vestiges of hope. Significantly, in one of his most lengthy public declarations on the nature of hope and despair Beckett referenced Augustine in expressing his inability to finally affirm or deny any salvific possibilities:

If life and death did not both present themselves to us, there would be no inscrutability. If there were only darkness, all would be clear. It is because there is not only darkness but also light that our situation becomes inexplicable. Take Augustine's doctrine of grace given and grace withheld: have you pondered the dramatic qualities of this theology? Two thieves are crucified with Christ, one saved and the other damned. How can we make sense of this division? In classical drama, such problems do not arise. The destiny of Racine's *Phèdre* is sealed from the beginning: she will proceed into the dark. As she goes, she herself will be illuminated. At the beginning of the play she has partial illumination and at the end she has complete illumination, but there has been no question but that she moves toward the dark. That is the play. Within this notion clarity is possible, but for us who are neither Greek nor Jansenist there is no such clarity. The question would also be removed if we believed in the

³¹⁵ Augustine, (1984), Bk. 22 Chp. 24, 1070.

³¹⁶ Ibid., 1072.

contrary—total salvation. But where we have both dark and light we have also the inexplicable.³¹⁷

Conclusion

As has been maintained throughout this investigation, Cioran's position on birth is best understood in the context of a post-Christian Europe and the aftershocks of devastating historical trauma. In a continent seemingly denuded of its religious backdrop, the individual *qua* individual in Cioran's philosophy is a solitary figure, bereft of community, moral and political purpose. The possibility of starting once more from the ruins is neither plausible nor desirable for Cioran.

A key factor here that may explain the starkly opposing views toward birth displayed by Cioran and Arendt is that the latter, although having lost her homeland as a result of political upheaval, was never committed to religion or nation in the manner of the former. Consequently, the process of beginning again, both in life and in philosophy was more accessible. For Arendt, natality is unscathed by history; beginning ever again is always possible irrespective of the cultural and political context. There may be a curious paradox at work here, in that Arendt is commonly viewed as a deeply engaged political and historical thinker, yet in many ways her view of human possibility and potential renewal possesses an almost Kantian acontextual purity, whereas the views of the putatively indifferent nihilist Cioran are deeply marked by the historical process and, judging by his span of reference and allusion, carry the weight of millennia of historical struggle and questing.

³¹⁷ Tom F. Driver interview with Samuel Beckett, 'Beckett by the Madeleine' in *Columbia University Forum* 4 Summer 1961 21-25.

In terms of theological-historical background, Arendt's Jewish background is also of relevance. As discussed in a previous chapter, traditionally Judaism is a religion far more 'world-centred' than Christianity. The individual is morally responsible for seeking world-betterment and next-worldly salvation is deemed to be a secondary issue. This world is inherently good irrespective of historical and political vicissitudes as a result of its being the creation of a good God. In such a framework there can be no "old age" of the world, as creation is forever new and sustained in existence moment to moment by God and the efforts of the individual seeking to sanctify the world. Such a view finds its individual and secular correspondence in Arendt's view of natality as a miracle, except here of course it is the individual who sustains the social and political world in being by their ever-renewed commitment to engagement and amelioration. The Orthodoxy of Cioran's childhood, as discussed previously, is almost diametrically opposed to such projects of world-betterment, with the emphasis instead on the fate of the individual soul in a world irretrievably fallen and tainted.

One response to the position held by Cioran and Beckett is to dismiss it outright as nihilism or pessimism, compounded or generated by personal depression. Such a position was held by even as sophisticated a commentator as Voegelin, who found Beckett's work incomprehensible: 'Think of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. A man like Beckett is also one who knows perfectly well that all that agnosticism is blooming nonsense—but he can't get out of it. I don't know why.'³¹⁸ And yet accusations of nihilism and nonsense seem to miss the philosophical and theological depths from which the works of Cioran and Beckett both emerge. An observation made concerning Puritan inhibitions by the American writer

³¹⁸ Eric Voegelin, "In Search of the Ground," in Voegelin, *Published Essays, 1953-1965*, ed. Ellis Sandoz, vol. 11 of *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2000), 246-47.

H.P Lovecraft may offer a useful insight by which to judge the tone both writers strike: '[It springs from] that divine hatred for life which marks the deepest, most sensitive soul.'³¹⁹ To conclude, although the pursuit of philosophy has been associated with the experience of wonder in the face of life, there is another form of wonder generated by the troubling uncertainties of existence, and it is certain that Cioran would agree with Arendt's observation that 'it is as if men since Plato have not been able to take the fact of having-been-born seriously.'³²⁰

³¹⁹ H.P. Lovecraft, *Selected Letters Vol. 1* (Arkham House Publishing, 1965), 315.

³²⁰ Quoted in Champlin (2017), 156.

Conclusion

In this conclusion, I aim to draw attention to the main contributions I have sought to make to Cioran studies. While engaging with a thinker as multi-faceted and paradoxical as Cioran is a challenge for any critic, I hope here to point to some significant issues that have been overlooked in previous critical works.

In the later stage of his writing career Cioran declared: “What I know at sixty, I knew as well at twenty. Forty years of a long, a superfluous labour of verification” (TBB: 7). Cioran’s repetition may be viewed not solely in the light of failure or futility, but also as a form of triumph. To repeat endlessly may be an expression of consistency, even – in spite of Cioran’s horror of the word – of a certain form of truth. To affirm one’s despair, scepticism and doubt over the course of decades is, in one sense, to have arrived at a place of certainty and strength. As I have stated in the thesis, Cioran’s authenticity is one of the defining marks of his work, and doubtless accounts for much of his appeal, a point I will return to below. Yet for the ever self-aware Romanian this paradox brings its own torments: the fear of having settled into a place of certainty, of comfortable reflexes, where scepticism becomes its own orthodoxy. Hence the necessity of ever further writing, to constantly interrogate one’s own scepticism until the act of writing is ended by either silence, fatigue or death. From one perspective, Cioran started at the end and stayed there. His writing and explorations into various fields such as history, mysticism and natalism can be viewed graphically as a series of ellipses issuing from and returning to one stationary point, namely his sceptical self.

Cioran embodies an anti-discursive, anti-hegemonic form of thinking that results primarily from the fragmented state of post-war European culture, but is also a milieu to which he contributes. He is both a critic of the zeitgeist and a fomenter of it. Whereas pre-war, when the cultural mood still harboured hopes of reinvigoration and a positive future, his Nietzschean lyricism exuded dynamism and vigour (even in an ostensibly despairing work such as *Tears and Saints*), post-war, the energy remains but is more subdued and channelled along narrow rivulets of pessimism and scepticism. His philosophical investigations are more honed, wary and less susceptible to expectations of hope and solutions.

I suggest that Cioran's repetition is consonant with what I term his 'failed teleology', the many paths of exploration I have explored in this work, ventured in order to see if salvation is possible on the personal or historical level. All of these expeditions are conducted by means of a highly attuned scepticism that only occasionally allows itself an expression of hope or near-belief. Cioran ventures into different fields of philosophical concern to scour the terrain and report back on what he has found. As the years passed the range of each expedition narrowed, until by the end much of what he wrote was fleeting impressions, private moods and a wistful resignation. I believe viewing Cioran's work as a series of such expeditions is a mode of investigation more faithful to the spirit of his writings than attempting to impose a tighter explanatory framework on a writer who employs paradox, irony and mood to such a great extent, partially in order to be faithful to the movements of his own spirit, and partially to sabotage any such critical pigeon-holing.

Connected with the view of Cioran as an explorer rather than a systemiser, one of his key virtues may be that while he operates in a philosophical context that views the idea of truth

with the utmost suspicion, there is a substitutional form of intellectual virtue available, namely that of honesty. If the old verities of the true, the good and the beautiful no longer have significant purchase in the world of western thought then a fidelity to one's personal lived experience is often applauded as being the highest form of authenticity to which a thinker can aspire, and Cioran with his rages, despair, self-loathing and uncertainty seems a perfect representative of major chords of the current zeitgeist. If Nietzsche was the prophet who foresaw the apocalypse of the 20th century, then Cioran is the lamenting philosopher of its aftermath. But whereas Nietzsche attempted to offer some form of hope with his concepts of the *Übermensch* and the Eternal Return, Cioran can offer no such grandiose projects. Paradoxically, however, he does subscribe to a form of eternal recurrence in emphasising that the follies of humanity are inescapable and repeat ceaselessly with differing forms concealing the same substance, but unlike Nietzsche he cannot in any way endorse an *amor fati*, but rather comes closer to a *contemptus mundi* that is often alleviated only by humour, sarcasm, resignation and personal defiance. While lacking the "glamour" of Nietzsche, it is telling that Cioran has been able to attract a largely European audience of followers who find in his writing a form of illusion-free and cathartic therapy. In the stasis of his views and the dynamic motion of his explorations Cioran embodies the paradox I have alluded to throughout this work, namely the fusion of classical and Christian modes of thought. If Cioran can indeed be thought of as a 'Pascal who has lost his wager', then the structure of his work mirrors that of the Pascalian universe in being a space whose centre is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere. The essential presence of Christian categories in Cioran's work is perhaps best exemplified in his view of humanity as *damned*. Whether this damnation is due to an excess of consciousness, an overreliance on intellect, or a seemingly insuperable need to subscribe to ideologies or religions, for Cioran

the human being is an essentially tormented creature who seeks, in one fashion or another, salvation. Clearly terms such as damnation and salvation can have no meaning for those thinkers (such as Nussbaum) wholeheartedly committed to an atheistic or secular vision of the species, for whom issues of social amelioration and ethical choice are often central preoccupations, whereas as I have argued from the outset of this work Original Sin is for Cioran the one indispensable heuristic that opens a possible mode of understanding humanity's tormented and bloody history. Rather than see conflict and anguish on both a personal and historical level as contingent Cioran sees it as essential and defining.

The inescapable nature of a humanity divided against itself also defines the nature of the terms of Cioran's relationship with Anglo-American analytical philosophy that I have sought to open in Chapter 2. The area of possible dialogue that we have explored and seems most promising is the purported unity of the rational and ethical subject that is a standard assumption of much mainstream discourse. The importance of emotion, shifting moods, discouragement, and fickle and malleable desires are not typical areas of concern for analytical ethical investigation, one reason perhaps being the sheer difficulty, if not in fact impossibility, of accommodating such facets of human experience into any coherent and programmatic ethical project. As we saw when examining the work of Nussbaum and Hadot, the ethical subject as idealised by much typical writing on the topic is a deracinated, colourless individual, stripped of any serious affective interests and vitality. Cioran's recordings of his own shifting sensibilities and scepticism may indeed be the only way to remain faithful to the vagaries of human experience while remaining within, albeit on the margins, of philosophical exploration. Of core importance also is Cioran's acknowledgement of the importance of vices, and how much they can constitute the inner life of an individual. Whether such themes can be incorporated into more mainstream philosophising remains to

be seen: is there a way to marry the ideal ethical subject with the extremes of alienation and disengagement exemplified by a thinker such as Cioran? Either way, the typical approach of traditional ethical theorising can often seem like a form of deluded wish-fulfilment that ignores the darker elements of the human condition and remains solely an object of theorising that has little relevance beyond the academy. As I hope to have brought out throughout this work, Cioran's fearlessness in exploring his own internal chaos seems a more honest window upon much of the human experience.

In religious terms, Cioran is perhaps best viewed as, paradoxically, a Fideist who lacks faith.

As I have shown in Chapter 3, irrationalism and individualism are the keynotes of his religious explorations. It is only the personal encounter with God, or more often the absence of God, that has real value for Cioran. The existential drama of faith, doubt and despair form a core part of much of his philosophical explorations. In spite of the often sarcastic and cynical tone that imbues his ruminations on God and belief, there is still the very real feeling that for him a godless world is a desert. In this we see reflected his fondness for the Old Testament and its prophets, who warned people of the vanity of life and the world, but were largely ignored. For Cioran, irrespective of the temperature of his faith, disbelief, or scepticism at any particular moment, an ongoing 'dialogue with God' is essential.

However, Cioran's religious thinking occupies, inevitably, a multitude of positions that are often contradictory. The main thrust of his thinking is antinomian: the individual and their position before God is paramount and it is a relationship largely of doubt, despair and anguish. Yet it is not entirely a private and solitary perspective that Cioran holds. Not only is religion a vitalising and animating force for the individual, but for a culture as well. As I

explored in Chapter 6 when comparing Cioran and Santayana, there is a curious lament over the fate of the modern Catholic church, which in Cioran's view has yielded too much of its dogma and past intransigence to the modern world. In particular for the Romanian, the de-emphasising of Original Sin and humanity's flawed nature dilutes the potency of Catholic thought and its ability to stand as a perennial reminder of human weakness and frailty in a world committed to optimism and improvement. At first glance, for the leading heir to the irrationalist tradition of philosophy to be troubled by the *aggiornamento* of Vatican II seems curiously uncharacteristic, yet also exemplifies the 'in between' position Cioran occupies on the cultural and philosophical plain. As an agnostic upholder of Original Sin, to see the only global institution that had held firm to such a concept switch its doctrinal emphases from a world-wary to a world-embracing stance was a source of dismay, as apart from being a distancing from its previously pessimistic anthropology the Church's accommodation to the world must for Cioran add to the overall levelling effect of a monotonous and disenchanted modernity. Cioran becomes a contemporary Luther, raging against the iniquities of men and institutions, yet once the rage has dissipated he finds himself alone, unable to offer a viable alternative.

Nevertheless, as the influence of Christianity in the public domain continues to wane and as knowledge of Christian theology becomes even more of a minority pursuit, it is ironically the putative nihilist and atheist Cioran who may inadvertently act as a conduit of Christian thought in an era which, in Europe at least, becomes even more secular and divorced from traditional religious concerns. Contemporary European thought occupies a twilight hinterland where Christian modes of conceptualisation have apparently been abandoned but one where also their foundational attitudes lie deeply entrenched in much culture and philosophy, a situation further complicated by the fact that the most optimistic of

Enlightenment and indeed post-Cold War thought has been largely discredited by historical events, or at least is now obliged to operate with more circumspection.

Doubtless the irony of being a bearer of Christian thought would delight the agnostic Romanian, who possessed a keen eye for the unpredictable paradoxes of history and thought. Alternatively, there is the possibility that as Christianity recedes from the cultural domain further, the genealogical undercurrents of Cioran's thought become less perceptible and the view of him as a nihilist and atheist will solidify. In this sense when we view Cioran through the lens of Löwith's declaration that 'the modern mind has not made up its mind whether it should be Christian or pagan. It sees with one eye of faith and one of reason. Hence its vision is necessarily dim in comparison with either Greek or biblical thinking',³²¹ it may be that Cioran will be viewed as a herald of neo-paganism. Of course, it may also be that the future mindscape of western culture becomes denuded of all gods, in which case Cioran will be viewed more straightforwardly as a harbinger of nihilism and despair. Such a perspective will quite likely be blind to the fact that Cioran's anthropology has roots in both classical and Christian thought.

If secularisation does eventually triumph and religious categories of thought become more occluded, then Cioran's views on the historical process may become the most important aspect of his work. As I have argued in Chapter 5, as a thinker on history, Cioran's value may be seen in extending the Hegelian line of thinking to conclusions its advocates would doubtless view with horror. If the "end of history" is to be taken in any way seriously, then the primacy of ontological issues such as the nature and purpose of humanity return to the

³²¹ Karl Löwith, *Nature, History and Existentialism: and other essays in the philosophy of history* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1966), 77.

fore. Once the processes of becoming, conflict and evolution cease, then what is a liberated humanity supposed to *do* with its hard-won freedom? While a thinker like Kojève suggests a round of distractions based on art and intellectual pursuits, it can be argued that Cioran is the more realistic thinker in claiming that such a state would quickly prove intolerable for the vast majority of human beings. For the Romanian, there is seemingly no escape from the innate restlessness of the human condition, which will always be seeking and grasping for meaning and novelty.

If history offers no hope of comfort, then Cioran's next port of call is the inner man. As we saw in Chapter 6 when comparing him with Santayana, Cioran's 'soteriology' is a form of uncertain quietism and resignation that appears to be an almost total abdication from the role and burden of being human. As I have argued, while such an imperative may have more force when allied to a set of transcendental beliefs that promise other-worldly salvation, for an agnostic unconvinced of anything Cioran's suggestions may lead to nothing other than a sterile depression. It is here perhaps that we see a node of paralysis that arises from a retention of certain Christian ideals such as self-restraint, quietism, world renunciation and so on whose purposes are lost if the greater transcendental telos toward which such practices are aimed is abandoned. There is also the fact that if we are to hold thinkers in some way as being obliged to embody their beliefs then it is a simple fact that Cioran did not cease writing and expressing himself until almost the very end of his life, continuing his protests against existence until a combination of exhaustion and illness silenced him. A more generous reading of Cioran may elect not to hold him to standards of rigor and consistency that he himself scorned, but ultimately it seems as if the only options available from his perspective are either an uneasy silence or protest. There is no calm acceptance of one's fate.

As explored in the ultimate chapter, the final expedition of Cioran's philosophical quest centres on natality. Cioran's ruminations on birth represent a form of 'ground zero' reflection rarely seen in other thinkers. By dwelling on the sheer mysteriousness and seeming arbitrary nature of natality, Cioran suggests that philosophical discourse would be better served by adopting a more modest tone in its quest toward understanding and comprehension of the human condition. As I hope to have shown, Cioran adds a new dimension to common conceptions of 'inner exploration' by incorporating the dimensions of time and genesis into the equation. In his questioning of the value of existence itself, Cioran pursues thought to its very limit in a manner not commonly seen in more conventional thought.³²² His conclusion that the sheer contingency of being born may lead to a form of inner liberation may or may not convince his audience, depending very much perhaps on the unpredictable moods and concatenation of circumstance that his reader may inhabit at any given time. Either way, by focusing so intensely and relentlessly on the topic of birth, Cioran pushes the strange facticity of our existence back to the forefront of thought.

As I hope to have demonstrated throughout this work, Cioran is more than merely another nihilistic Continental philosopher who trades in pithy but ephemeral aphorisms. While he can certainly be read and appreciated on that level alone, beneath the verbal pyrotechnics lies a living stream of thought that encompasses nearly the entirety of the European philosophical tradition. Cioran's immense erudition and use of historical, philosophical and literary material produces a unique trajectory in western culture and civilisation. Cioran's value is as a philosophical gadfly, one who operates on the margins of thought with a licence

³²² A rare example where Cioran intersects perfectly with a contemporary analytic philosopher is David Benatar's anti-natalist screed *Better Never to Have Been: The Harm of Coming into Existence* (Oxford University Press, 2008).

to roam and criticise as he sees fit, unfettered from normal philosophical or institutional obligations. This role outside the academy may help partially explain his popularity in France and Europe generally, with Cioran as a Nietzsche for the post-Christian age, a critic of all that exists but one who refrains from offering any panaceas. In his role of scourge of ideology and false consolations he becomes a liberator, in that he embodies a voice of protest and dissent that affords a channel for the individual to voice their alienation from the mainstream of philosophical thought. Cioran embodies a form of “rational irrationalism”, a thinker who expresses all that is wrong, deviant and dissatisfying about the human condition, features of life that are often blatantly apparent on the most basic level of observation and lived experience yet rarely find expression or even acknowledgement in the majority of mainstream philosophical discourse.

In addition, Cioran continuously honours the final autonomy of his readers. There is no system, either of metaphysics or ethics or epistemology, that the reader is obliged to accept or reject. While on one level Cioran is the anarchic wrecker of belief and ideologies, on another level he is the direct inheritor of the role of Socratic gadfly. Questions and criticisms predominate over answers and programs. Indeed, that may be Cioran’s greatest strength as a thinker. He is more a therapist than a sage. Venturing into different fields of human thought, he acts as both guide and critic, not only of his subject matter but also of himself. In doing so, Cioran calls into question the self-image of philosophy that has been present since its inception, that of a self-transparent rational quest for understanding of both self and world that will provide answers and solutions. Cioran initiates instead a form of dialogue, both with himself and with the reader. In that sense, he maintains the Socratic imperative of ceaseless questioning and doubting and reconnects with the very origin of western philosophy, except that he comes more to resemble Diogenes than Socrates.

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