

**NOTES ON NOTHING:
AN INQUIRY INTO NIHILISM
IN CIORAN’S THOUGHT AND WORKS¹**

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***Abstract:** Cioran is often labeled as a “nihilist”, which is to a great extent the result of his equivocal ties with Friedrich Nietzsche, one of his main youth influences. However, nihilism does not constitute a key notion in Cioran’s writings, and neither does the Romanian-born author of French expression employ it as self-describing category. Instead, he accepts the category of the Skeptic as that which best suits his intellectual stance. We shall argue that, even if it is inevitable to speak of nihilism when it comes to Cioran’s thought and works, it is nevertheless an equivocal concept that must be relativized and held only as a propaedeutic hermeneutical operator that should later be abandoned, as it does not manage to encompass the depth and the complexity of his thought. Where readers and critics would see “nihilist”, Cioran says “skeptic”. Instead of labeling him as a nihilist in the strict sense of the concept, we suggest replacing the concept of nihilism for that of meontology: a theory of nothingness, which does not amount to the same thing as nihilism. Finally, our contention is that Cioran’s philosophical and theological concerns for issues such nothingness and evil does not make him a nihilist as the Nietzschean tradition of philosophy would put it. He is rather a meontological metaphysician and also a heterodox mystic spirit, and yet a tragic character of a kind.*

***Keywords:** Nothingness, Evil, Nihilism, Skepticism, Pessimism, Gnosticism, Atheism, Mysticism, Meontology, Voidness*

Without God, everything is nothingness;
and God? Supreme nothingness. **All gall is divided (1952)**

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What a pity that “nothingness” has been devalued by
an abuse of it made by philosophers unworthy of it!
Drawn and quartered (1979)

Paradoxes and controversies

“Good itself is an evil”, Cioran remarked in an interview.³ The comment— emblematic of his paradoxical thought—allows us to grasp one of his major philosophical obsessions: the very problem of evil. It is an affirmation and a negation all at once: affirmation of the ontological positivity of evil, and negation of the ultimate foundation of being. For its premises and implications, in both ontological and axiological grounds, such affirmation-negation, as outrageous as it may sound, downright illogical as it appears to be, raises a question that reaches far beyond the categorical domain of philosophical pessimism, evoking the a-logical logics of that which in the history of Western thought goes by the name of “nihilism”.

We shall experiment reading Cioran under the sign of nihilism. Even if we acknowledge the risks of such proposition, above all that of incurring, as Simona Modreanu fears, in a post-Nietzschean caricature of the nihilist “seething with ontological malaise”,⁴ we assume that, despite all controversy, actual or possible, the hermeneutical key of nihilism is unavoidable—though not definitive—when it comes to reading Cioran’s texts. We shall argue that, even though it is inevitable to speak of nihilism when it comes to his thought and works, this concept does not stand up amidst his complex, highly paradoxical thought. Now, what nihilism is called into question when speaking of nihilism in Cioran?

Cioran once said to Fernando Savater: “I am not convinced of being a nihilist. I am rather a skeptic who experiments, once in a while, with something other than doubt”.⁵ The author of *Précis de décomposition* (*A short history of decay* for the English edition) had plenty of reasons to reject

³ CIORAN, E.M., Entretien avec Sylvie Jaudeau, in: *Entretiens*, p. 224 (our translation).

⁴ MODREANU, S., *Le Dieu paradoxal de Cioran*, p. 19.

⁵ SAVATER, F., Prefácio, CIORAN, E.M., *Breviario de podredumbre*. Madri: Taurus, 1981, p. 16.

the intentions of linking his thought to the nihilism catalogued by dictionaries and handbooks of Philosophy. It is, according to him, an all too academic jargon, “an empty formula”.⁶ One must never underestimate the “war of words”⁷ by which social actors fight over the power to define and to classify—in a relation of domination and dismissal through language—the other, the different, the antagonist. No concept seems to be more polysemous and more equivocal in its core, while being unequivocally defamatory in its surface, than this one.

The characterization of a Skeptic suits him better. By the way, the concept of skepticism does not lack all relation to that of nihilism. Cioran rejects the latter in favor of the former, in a dodging manoeuvre that evokes both a distinction and a relation of “complicity” between them. Standing as an epistemological obstacle against positive dogmatisms, skeptical doubt would supposedly clear the way to negative, destructive dogmatisms of sorts, leading to a philosophical stance that would not allow building up anything in matters of positive knowledge. On the other hand, one might as well say that skepticism is just as alien, just as hostile to negative

⁶ When Jean-François Duval remarks that the dictionaries often label Cioran as a nihilist, he replies: “Just like another label... This leaves me absolutely indifferent. I am not a nihilist. One might as well say that I am, but that doesn’t mean anything. As far as I am concerned, it’s an empty formula.” CIORAN, E.M., *Entretien avec Jean-François Duval*, in: *Entretiens*, p. 10 (our translation).

⁷ “The detainer of the Word holds the privilege of defining and classifying; the power he exerts through language is a ‘civilized’ extension of physical coercion. ‘To eat or to be eaten, such is the law of the jungle. To define or to be defined, such is the law of men’, according to American psychiatrist Thomas Szasz, and he adds: ‘The struggle for the Word is a matter of life or death. A classic scene in Western movies shows two men in a desperate fight to recover a gun, which is lying on the ground. He who reaches it first shoots and saves his own skin; the other, in his turn, is shot down and dies. In fact, the reward is not a gun, but a label: he who manages to stick it first is the winner of the battle; the other, labeled, comes down to the role of the victim.’ JACCARD, R., *A loucura* [La folie], p. 37 (our translation).

dogmatisms as it is to those of a positive nature.⁸ In any case, if we shall speak of nihilism, Cioran insists in clarifying the quality of the one that corresponds to his position: a contemplative, metaphysical nihilism, by no means engaged with political action.⁹ It could be said that, besides metaphysical, it is a mystical nihilism, having its coronation in the ecstasy of nothingness, or, properly speaking, voidness—*śūnyatā* in Sanskrit, a term that translates, in Zen-Buddhist philosophy, the ultimate, supreme (un)reality beyond the illusory realm of appearances.

The author of *Le mauvais démiurge* (*The new gods* for the English edition) is all too skeptical to be a nihilist, and, yet, all too pessimist to be nothing but a skeptic. Doubt and negation dwell together in his spirit. In fact, Cioran is a spirit divided between contradictory attitudes with no “will to order”, no “thirst for unity”¹⁰ whatsoever, unfit for establishing himself in one or the other attitude, without thereby doing without them, in a perpetual quest for something that is unknowable, unthinkable, ineffable, impossibly affirmable or deniable. Still, there remains the need for problematizing the presence-absence of nihilism(s) in Cioran’s thought and works. No other character more *unheimlich*¹¹ than the Romanian-French author in the intellectual scene of the 20th century. The concept of *Unheimlichkeit* (so

⁸ As for the topic of negative dogmatism, in relation to skepticism (the former historically being a derivation of the latter), cf. HANKINSON, R.J., *The Sceptics. Arguments of the Philosophers*. London/New York: Routledge, 1995.

⁹ “For the Nihilist, in the usual sense, is someone who throws it all down with violence, with ulterior motives that are more or less political, God only knows! As for me, it’s not at all about that. So, it could be said that I am a nihilist in a metaphysical sense.” CIORAN, E.M., Entretien avec Jean-François Duval, *Op. cit.*, p. 43 (our translation).

¹⁰ IDEM, “Dealing with the Mystics”, *The temptation to exist* (“O comércio dos místicos”, in: *A tentação de existir* for the Portuguese edition, p. 119).

¹¹ Adjective with which Nietzsche characterizes nihilism as “the uncanniest of guests”. It is formed by the root word *Heim* (“home”) coupled with the negative prefix *un-*. Due to its semantic density, it can express a range of ideas such as “unfamiliar”, “strange”, “sinister”, “frightening”, “gloomy”, and so on.

dear to Nietzsche and to Freud) could not be more familiar (the contradiction is purposeful) to Cioran: the chiaroscuro, the constitutive duality, the indetermination between identity and otherness, familiarity and strangeness, reliability and danger, presence and absence...

The young Romanian thinker, still prey to the fascination with Nietzsche, would write: "Nihilism: the limit-form of benevolence."¹² What should or could be understood by this? As usual, and this is an essential trait of his style, one that combines critique and artistic creativity, Cioran does not *define* anything whatsoever, he does not operate with concepts, always preserving a margin of indetermination and ambiguity in his discourse that borders silence. In any case, the use of the term "nihilism" is going to change drastically along the transition from his Romanian writings and those in French (when his youth Nietzschean stance is going to make way to an anti-Nietzschean stance). In the beginning, Cioran seems to take the concept "consecrated" by Nietzsche quite seriously, in such a way that is not so much the case when it comes to his writings of the exile. Irony, indifference, scorn: usual attitudes of the author of *Syllogismes de l'amertume* (*All gall is divided* for the English edition) in face of the referred concept. Blending skepticism and cynicism, the French-expression Cioran slides over the term, plays with it, empties it out of gravity, thus suggesting a voluntary displacement from the category of the Nihilist: no matter how much he could possibly wish, he would not know how to be one: "A little more fervor in my nihilism and I might — gainsaying *everything* — shake off my doubts and triumph over them. But I have only the taste of negation, not its *grace*."¹³ Inflation, hypertrophy: wherever one looks, there one finds nihilism–nihilism all over. The only escape from nihilism would be to assume it radically, with all its (in)consequences, and above all with the lucid consciousness of its inexorability; to deepen it and exploit it until its (im)possible depletion, bordering silence, bordering the nothing of being, the nothing of thinking, the nothing of uttering.

¹² CIORAN, E.M., *Le crépuscule des pensées*, in: *Œuvres*, p. 493 (our translation).

¹³ IDEM, *All gall is divided. The aphorism of an iconoclast (Silogismos da amargura*, p. 31 for the Brazilian Portuguese edition).

In his French phase, Cioran will give nihilism a rather anti-Nietzschean inflexion. Furthermore, his thought always combined secular rationality and metaphysico-theological aspirations, atheism and mysticism, skepticism and negative dogmatism. Being that man is a “metaphysical animal” by his very nature, according to Cioran (a stance that draws him close to Schopenhauer), there is no way of thinking beyond all good and evil, and even if one intended so, what one would end up finding “beyond good and evil” is nothing but evil alone, which was expected to be overcome alongside its complementary opposite. Cioran’s personal testimony, faithful and unfaithful to his own epoch, modern and anti-modern (“*a-modern*”¹⁴), will lead him to the postulation of the inexpugnable reality of evil that jeopardizes the human condition and its history. “Universal history: history of Evil”,¹⁵ “we are submerged in evil”,¹⁶ and there is no progress in science and technology that would be able to eradicate this terrible state of things. Cioran problematizes the dualisms deeply rooted in the spirit of Western humanity, and he paradoxically does so by deepening them, and, by doing so, seems to wave towards an unlikely

¹⁴ “A better descriptor of writers such as Baudelaire and Cioran would be *amodern*, a term which suggests that only by passing through the experience of the historical modern—the political, economic, and industrial events of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries—do these authors come to articulate their paradoxical position as prototypically modern writers giving voice to the very kinds of experience they often react against without in any way seeking to return to a putatively ‘better’ earlier period. The fact that their fundamentally ahistorical view of human history as an inevitable series of calamities and cruelties is of course historically inflected, inasmuch as it arises from a particular set of historical circumstances, does not alter their ability (or ours) to enter into the esthetic and metaphysical conclusions to be drawn from their alinear perspective.” ACQUISTO, J., *The fall out of redemption: writing and thinking beyond salvation in Baudelaire, Cioran, Fondane, Agamben, and Nancy*, p. 11.

¹⁵ CIORAN, E.M., “Ennui of conquerors”, *A short history of decay* (“O tédio dos conquistadores”, *Breviário de decomposição*, p. 137 for the Brazilian Portuguese edition)

¹⁶ IDEM, “Mechanism of utopia”, *History and utopia* (“Mecanismos da utopia”, *História e utopia*, p. 96 for the Brazilian Portuguese edition).

possibility not of overcoming them, but of wearing them out. He displaces himself from the axis of Western thought—from Plato to Nietzsche and Heidegger—towards the Eastern world with which he felt a spiritual match (this affinity, beyond all “orientalism”, should not be overlooked). Hence his affinity for some crucial propositions from Eastern wisdom, for instance, the notion of *Wu-wei*:¹⁷ spontaneous, effortless, aimless action.¹⁸

Meontology, Tragic disposition, and metaphysical pessimism: contingency versus universal Fate

¹⁷ “The fact that *wu-wei* is not to be understood as literal ‘non-doing’ but rather refers to the phenomenological state of the actor (who is, in fact, quite active), suggests that we should understand the term metaphorically. In what follows, I will argue that the term ‘wu-wei’ refers to a metaphorically conceived situation where a ‘subject’ is no longer having to exert effort in order to act. As will be discussed in some detail [...], ‘wu-wei’ was adopted as the general technical term for the state of effortless action because it represents most general of a whole set of families of conceptual metaphors that convey a sense of effortlessness and unself-consciousness. These metaphor families include those of ‘following’ (*cong*) or ‘flowing along with’ (*shun*), being physically ‘at ease’ (*an*), enjoying a perfect ‘fit’ (*yi*) with the world, and ‘forgetting’ (*wang*) the self—the last quality also often being expressed literally as unself-consciousness (*buzhi*) or the forgetfulness that comes from strong emotions such as joy (*le*). SLINGERLAND, E., *Effortless action. Wu-wei as a conceptual metaphor and spiritual idea in early China*, p. 10-11.

¹⁸ “Everything that man undertakes ends up turning against him. Every action is a source of misfortune, as acting counters the equilibrium of the world. It is establishing a goal and projecting oneself in becoming. The slightest movement is disastrous. Forces go off that can turn out to be crushing. To live truly is to live aimlessly. This is what Eastern wisdom advocates, having understood the negative effects of action. There is not a single discovery that does not entail disastrous consequences. Man will perish for his genius. Every force he activates harms him. He is an animal that has betrayed, and history is his punishment. All events, since the beginnings of time, reveal the omnipotence of an inexorable law.” CIORAN, E.M., *Entretien avec Sylvie Jaudeau*, *Op. cit.*, p. 223-224 (our translation).

Cioran's underlying fatalism¹⁹ (the intuition of *l'élan vers le pire*²⁰), beyond all skepticism, should not be overlooked. Such fatalistic stance does not forcefully amount to nihilism, even if it is barely dissociable from a certain metaphysical pessimism. That philosophical pessimism is not a synonym for nihilism, this is a premise we take for granted. By the way, distinction should be made between Cioran's pessimism and that of Schopenhauer. Firstly, the author of *Le mauvais démiurge* does not devise any *system* of thought whatsoever, neither does he posit the Will as the essence of the world as representation. Secondly, while Schopenhauer stands unequivocally as an atheist, the same could not be said about Cioran, at least not unequivocally. Cioran's pessimism—a Romanian-bred pessimism—seems to match a heterodox (di)theistic paradigm: the world is not the objectification of a blind Will, but rather the creation of an abominable divinity or, yet, the downward emanation, the degradation or the Fall (*la Chute...*) of this very divinity within its own catastrophic creation.

Cioran's pessimism is one of a gnostic type, and therefore, to put it properly, not a philosophical-metaphysical pessimism but rather a philosophical-theological one (dualistic, ditheistic). By the way, such pessimism seems closer to that of Philipp Mainländer (1841-1876), a philosopher (read by Cioran in his youth) who was directly influenced by Schopenhauer, and the author of a *Philosophy of redemption* (*Die Philosophie der Erlösung*²¹). According to Mainländer (whose magnum

¹⁹ “At the base of my position there is the philosophy of fatalism. My fundamental thesis is that of the impotence of man. He is nothing but the object of History, not its subject.” IDEM, *Entretien avec Fritz J. Raddatz*, *Op. cit.*, p. 167-168 (our translation).

²⁰ In Richard Howard's translation, “the tendency to the worst”. We would rather translate the French noun *élan* (*elã*, in Portuguese) as “impulsion”, “drive”, or even “urge”, as we understand it to have the connotation of a deep, uncontrollable, even destructive movement, close to the German noun *Trieb* (by the way, a key concept in psychoanalysis). IDEM, *The trouble with being born* (*Do inconveniente de ter nascido*, p. p. 12 for the Portuguese edition).

²¹ We resort to the Spanish translation MAINLÄNDER, P., *La filosofía de la redención*. Transl. by Manuel Pérez Cornejo. Madrid: Xorki, 2014.

opus was published years before Nietzsche, who also read Mainländer, published his *Gay Science*), the “death of God” is not the outcome of a historically determined human action, for “we have killed him, you and I!” (*Gay science*, § 125). Rather, Mainländer conceives the “death of God” as a deliberate action of autosuppression, a “suicide” committed by God himself, so that the world, the beings and becoming could come to existence. “God is dead” alright, but we haven’t “killed” Him: He has been “dead” before the very beginning of times, since “He himself freely chose to die, to commit suicide and to dissolve in nothingness, after crossing the calvary of being into becoming.”²² That is to say, God chose, out of his own free will, to renounce his original, stationary unity, shattering Himself so as to set in motion the existence of beings in becoming. God, “by disintegrating, produced being, and being heads towards the ultimate horizon of nothingness; throughout this whole process there is no valid interpretation whatsoever: *it happened*, and that’s it.”²³ From such a perspective, the beings that are generated would be fragmentary chunks or the mortal remains of the self-killed divinity—an idea that seems in tune with Cioran’s notion of “decay” or “decomposition”, a notion that conveys not merely a biological connotation but an ontological one. Both in Mainländer and in Cioran, there is the intuition of a universal fatality, of a negative necessity (as opposed to contingency) that befalls every living being, as well as the very originating, divine unity.²⁴ It is *Heimarmene*, as conceived by the ancient Gnostics: universal, tyrannical Fate.²⁵

²² CORNEJO, M. P., “Introducción”, in: MAINLÄNDER, P., *Filosofía de la redención*, p. 16 (our translation).

²³ IDEM, *Ibid.*, p. 16 (our translation).

²⁴ Concerning the “neo-gnostic” character of Mainländer’s philosophy of redemption, we recommend the introduction to the Spanish edition of *Die Philosophie der Erlösung*, by Manuel Pérez Cornejo.

²⁵ “The Archons collectively rule over the world, and each individually in his sphere is a warder of the cosmic prison. Their tyrannical world-rule is called heimarmene, universal Fate, a concept taken over from astrology but now tinged with the gnostic anti-cosmic spirit. In its physical aspect this rule is the law of nature; in its psychical aspect, which includes for instance the institution and enforcement of the Mosaic Law, it aims at the enslavement

Even if we do not reject Nietzsche's definition of nihilism ("all higher values devalue themselves"), we do not take it as a definitive contention. Besides, it is necessary to distinguish between nihilism—as a symptom of cultural decadence and spiritual infirmity—and that which should be understood as a theory of nothing, or *meontology*.²⁶ Based on this distinction, it would be an anachronism to label Gorgias (author of a treatise *On the non-existent*) a "nihilist" for arguing that, if anything exists, it cannot be known, and, even if it could, it would still not be possible to express it in language. Furthermore, the disposition to ask questions of a metaphysical nature such as "why is there anything rather than nothing?", and even to be tormented by it, does not necessarily amount to making profession of nihilist faith. It is true that nihilism as diagnosed and problematized by Nietzsche has no *raison d'être* unless in relation to the metaphysical problem of nothingness. Nonetheless, we contend that not all thinking of nothingness amounts to strict nihilism. Cioran admits that he has "an obsession with nothingness [*néant*], or rather of the void [*vide*]"²⁷. Is this alone a decisive reason to characterize him as a nihilist? It doesn't seem so. In fact, the Romanian author could as well be included in a marginal tradition of thought that does not date back to Parmenides and his paradigm of Being as necessary and always identical to itself. Rather, he would fall within a lineage of thinkers, poets, mystics and other misfits whose common ground is not Parmenides's ontology, but rather a meontological outlook that posits nothingness as the abyssal, unfathomable foundation of being. It

of man. As guardian of his sphere, each Archon bars the passage to the souls that seek to ascend after death, in order to prevent their escape from the world and their return to God." JONAS, H., *The gnostic religion: the message from the alien God and the beginnings of Christianity*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2001, p. 43.

²⁶ Jarlee Salviano's argument seems to apply just as well to Cioran: "If we consider the concept of nihilism as a theory of Nothing, we shall see that there is in fact a nihilism in Schopenhauer, one that he sketches in the last lines of his masterpiece, *The world as will and representation*." SALVIANO, J. O. S., *Labirintos do nada: a crítica de Nietzsche ao niilismo de Schopenhauer*. São Paulo: Edusp, p. 12 (our translation).

²⁷ CIORAN, E.M., *Entretien avec Jean-François Duval*, *Op. cit.*, 43.

is therefore not an ontology of necessity and of identity whatsoever, but instead a paradoxical ontology of contingency as differential difference and radical liberty—liberty of being to be or not to be, or even to be and not to be all at once. In his *Istoria della Nulla*²⁸ [History of Nothingness], Italian philosopher Sergio Givone links meontology to a tradition of thought that dates back to pre-Socratic thinkers such as Heraclitus and Anaximander, and then unfolds through the Tragic poets, neo-Platonists such as Plotinus and Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, Christian mystics such as Meister Eckhart, John of the Cross and Jakob Böhme, artists such as Albert Dürer and William Hogarth, poets such as Giacomo Leopardi and Charles Baudelaire (we would also include Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa, absent from Givone's inquiry), and finally philosophers such as Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and Heidegger—all of which can be said to flow, in a lesser or a greater degree, in the genesis of Cioran's thought. As for Buddhism, namely the Madhyamika school— whose founder, Nagarjuna (circa 250 CE), was highly appreciated by Cioran—, it could as well be thought of, despite all contextual specificity, as a strain of Eastern meontology.

There still remains a problem to be dealt with: how to reconcile the antithetic concepts of necessity and contingency in one and the same thought? Cioran's metaphysical pessimism evokes the idea of a universal Fate to which all beings are subjected. On the other hand, his meontological stance would demand that we admit the postulation of a radical, foundational contingency due to which all things are possible, even the impossible. Even though such complex philosophical question does not constitute a major concern in this inquiry, some remarks are necessary about it. Necessity and contingency are not forcefully irreconcilable. In fact, we are inclined to think that they actually must be conceived together in a dialectical way. The problem concerning both can also be formulated by replacing contingency by the concept of freedom (a problem the Stoics, for instance, had to deal with, inasmuch as they also posited the existence of a universal Fate, *Heimarmene*, though not in the Gnostic fashion, but rather as a good, providential necessity). Now, Cioran (like Nietzsche and

²⁸ GIVONE, S., *Historia de la nada*. Transl. by Alejo González & Demian Orosz. Buenos Aires: Adriana Hidalgo, 2001.

Schopenhauer) is a thinker who radically problematizes the idea of free-will, subjecting it to the notion of determination (biological but, ultimately, also cosmic). Having said that, the unlikely connection between necessity and contingency, when it comes to mentological thinking and also Gnosticism, draws us closer to the pre-philosophical Tragic mindset of the ancient Greeks.

Clément Rosset is an author that might help us clarify such connection. According to him, we can as well think of a coincidence between necessity (fate) and contingency (liberty), hence the double paradox of a contingency in necessity and a necessity in contingency. Such (Tragic) standpoint is straightforwardly opposed to the dualism of “worlds” (*Zwei-Welten Theorie*, according to Wolfgang Müller-Lauter), namely the Platonic metaphysics. The Tragic conception of reality, according to Rosset, takes it to be an “idiotic” reality, that is to say, a singular being-non-being that dually unfolds in consciousness, splitting itself into that which is and that which we expect, hope, imagine it to be. Thus, just as reality confuses itself with itself, the same goes for the notions of destiny and chance (*hasard* in French). Rosset links this mode of thinking to the oracular literature of the ancient Greeks (for instance, Sophocles’ *Œdipus*). Let us quote Rosset in some extension:

The trickery of destiny, just like that of the reasoned prediction, is to pilfer the double of the singular. One morning, it is announced on the radio that the president is very sick; when, at night, the president’s death is announced, it comes as a surprise (then, this was it, A was precisely A). By the way, it is due to this ever-surprising nature of events that the notion of destiny, suggested by the oracles, acquires a real, universal meaning. For it is indeed destiny that it’s about, ultimately, in the oracular legends, but in a deeper sense than the immediately apparent. There is indeed something that exists and is called destiny: it refers not to the inevitable nature of what happens, but to its unpredictable character. There is, actually, a destiny regardless of any necessity and predictability whatsoever, regardless therefore of any oracular manifestation, even if, in a sense, the oracle announces it in its own way; it is the destiny of man just like that of every existing thing. The signification of such apparently paradoxical destiny, inasmuch as it is alien to the notion of necessity, which nonetheless seems to contribute to what is essential about it, if not its unique basis, is linked to an exactly opposite notion: the certainty of unpredictability. But it is precisely about this certainty that the oracular literature speaks in cryptic

terms. We will always be certain of being surprised: we can always, certainly, expect to never be able to expect anything.²⁹

Nihilism, Gnosticism, and a-theism

According to Hans Jonas, ancient Gnosticism—a universe of eclectic thought and heterodox spirituality highly esteemed by Cioran—holds an elective existential affinity with modern nihilism. This is not the same as to say they amount to one and the same thing. It is necessary to make a due conceptual mediation so as to elicit the connection between these two phenomena. In his philosophical-existential analysis of the ancient Gnostic phenomenon, Jonas sketches a hermeneutic parallel between the mindsets and existential attitudes of each, as distant in time and space as they may be. Firstly, what enables him to propose such synchronic parallel is the common data, within their respective historical contexts, of a crisis both cultural and spiritual, the climate of anguish and anxiety which marks both the Hellenistic world and late Modernity. Nevertheless, if such a state of things should be reduced to nothing but the result of contingent historical factors, it would not be possible to acknowledge in Pascal's writings, as Jonas does, maybe the earliest expressions of the feeling of dereliction and disorientation that would later characterize the spirit of modern nihilism, and which also characterizes the Hellenistic era within which the Gnostic religion came to flourish.

According to Jonas, the originality of Pascal, anticipating modern nihilism, is that of exposing “man's loneliness in the physical universe of modern cosmology. ‘Cast into the infinite immensity of spaces of which I am ignorant, and which know me not, I am frightened’.”³⁰ What is at stake is the downfall of the worldview of a universe created by a benevolent, providential God whose cosmic design contemplate an ultimate purpose which beings (blissfully) partake in (despite their trials and sufferings, or precisely by virtue of them), and the rise of a new—mechanistic—cosmological paradigm —Copernican—from which such design and its ultimate providence are removed. Hence the perceived insignificance of

²⁹ ROSSET, C., *O real e seu duplo*, p. 52 (our translation).

³⁰ JONAS, H., *Op. cit.*, p. 322.

man amidst the infinite space, in the vastness of a universe that turns out to be indifferent, if not hostile, to his human presence and aspirations, the helpless human finitude and contingency inserted in a worldly, absurd existence lacking purpose, the solitude of the consciously existent being within a spatio-temporal reality deprived of all meaning. What disappears in this new worldview is the evidence of a universal, necessary purpose that would bind together the whole and its parts, the cosmos and man as a microcosm. All things become contingent, nothing is necessary—let alone the conscious animal, tormented by his fragile, meaningless cosmic condition. “The utter contingency of our existence in the scheme deprives that scheme of any human sense as a possible frame of reference for the understanding of ourselves.”³¹ Man no longer feels naturally at home in a world that has become indifferent or even hostile to his presence—all too human, all too conscious, all too meaningless. That is the Pascalian prefiguration of the nihilism that Nietzsche would later diagnose and problematize (no wonder Nietzsche was so interested in Pascal). Nihilism was already at the door. Now, the most serious consequence of this paradigm shift has to do with the sphere of values which man, as a metaphysical animal in need of meaning, seems unable to do without. This novel state of things means that, no longer possessing any reference of limits whatsoever, the physical universe—henceforth sheer geometry, pure *res extensa*—will also be deprived of an intrinsic hierarchy and, therefore, of a natural system of objective values which man can rely on. He then finds out that there are no objectively given truths or values whatsoever: all ultimate truth is a chimaera or a matter of *flatus vocis*, all value is relative and ultimately fictional and, if necessary, all this must be humanly forged, knowingly invented out of nothing, as none of that has an ontological support beyond the realm of that which is thought, wished, and produced by man himself.³²

³¹ IDEM, *Op. cit.*, p. 340.

³² “A universe without an intrinsic hierarchy of being, as the Copernican universe is, leaves values ontologically unsupported, and the self is thrown back entirely upon itself in its quest for meaning and value. Meaning is no longer found but is ‘conferred.’ Values are no longer beheld in the vision of

The comparative analysis carried out by Jonas helps us understand, furthermore, the pertinence of the question of atheism within the domain of Gnosticism, whose existential attitude and mindset is interpreted by the German philosopher as a nihilist one *avant la lettre*. As he remarks, Pascal's universe is, despite everything, still a universe created by God, and if man already finds himself "bereft of all mundane props", he can still "stretch his heart out toward the transmundane God".³³ But this God shall become ever more transmundane and therefore ever more transcendent, until it becomes absolutely estranged and out of reach, practically inexistent: it is thus "the alien God". God withdraws himself, so to speak, from the order of the cosmos, thus becoming an *ágnostos theós* whose divine quality is not at all discernible in the visible evidence of his creation. Of all the attributes that were usually ascribed to him—goodness, justice, providence, omniscience, omnipotence—only the last one will still be acknowledgeable: an absurd, oppressive display of power.³⁴ Exiled in an infinite distance from the cosmos he begot, it won't be long until God comes to be perceived as an absent, tyrannical divinity.

Now, in what sense could it be said that Gnosticism amounts to atheism? In the sense that, broadly speaking, the Gnostics postulate a more or less radical theological dualist—a ditheism—due to which distinction is made between the creating God—Pascal's God, the evil demiurge according to Cioran, an ignorant, boastful sub-divinity, being himself generated and a degenerate God—and the true God beyond or above the demiurge, the "Father", the good, unbegotten, though inefficient, impotent God with no

objective reality, but are posited as feats of valuation. As functions of the will, ends are solely my own creation." IDEM, *Op. cit.*, p. 323.

³³ IDEM, *Op. cit.*, p. 324.

³⁴ "The universe does not reveal the creator's purpose by the pattern of its order, nor his goodness by the abundance of created things, nor his wisdom by their fitness, nor his perfection by the beauty of the whole—but reveals solely his power by its magnitude, its spatial and temporal immensity. For extension, or the quantitative, is the one essential attribute left to the world, and therefore, if the world has anything at all to tell of the divine, it does so through this property: and what magnitude can tell of is power." IDEM, *Op. cit.*, p. 324.

complicity with Creation whatsoever, conceived as the totality of evil. Therefore, if it is reasonable to speak, between quote marks, of a Gnostic atheism, it must be clarified that it is not the same as modern–Darwinian, scientific, materialistic–atheism, not an atheism of immanence, but rather an anarchical, spiritualistic, radically mystical, ditheistic a-theism, one that posits the infinite transcendence of the true–though absolutely alien–God, as distinct from the fallen demiurge. If there is any sense in predicating atheism to Cioran’s thought, it seems to be within this very perspective.

Now, in what sense could it be said that Gnosticism is a “nihilism” *avant la lettre*? In the sense that, lacking all evident, objective reference to a supreme good and to an ultimate purpose of becoming, the universe conceived as a demonic, demiurgic creation leads to the impracticability of all ontological valuation. To Nietzsche, European nihilism means that all higher values have been devalued by means of a historical weariness of these very values (natural and human sciences play a major role in the process). Within Gnosticism, on the other hand, nihilism means rather that the cosmos as a whole lacks all value inasmuch as it is the accidental, evil creation of a hasty, incompetent divinity, to say the least (hence the typically anti-cosmic stance of the Gnostics). Nietzsche posits nihilism in order to overcome it by an effort of the will to power within worldly becoming, so as to redirect all higher value from a hereafter heavenly world back to this this world here and its worldly life, to existence in its temporal immanence. The Gnostics—just like Schopenhauer, Mainländer and Cioran, even if the latter declares an upset passion for the world and an unjustifiable “temptation to exist”—deem the world, down to its core, as something that is downright condemned by evil and deprived of all positive value in itself, the very life we live here being a poisoned gift (it is curious to notice that the German noun *Gift* means “poison”). Having been “made” as it was, and being as it is, the world we live in—and to whose demonic structure we are subjected both physically and psychically—is “submerged in evil” (*History and utopia*), and even the celestial realms—the planetary system, ruled by the Archons—are meant (according to the ancient Gnostics, but not to Cioran, who comes across as an agnostic with respect to this kind of speculation) to ensure the imprisonment of man—body and soul—within his woeful worldly

existence, and the return of his spirit (the “divine spark” dwelling deeply inside it) to the divine realm of light known as the Pleroma.

Just as the ancient Gnostics display a fierce anti-cosmic attitude, they also display a hostile attitude towards becoming and the existence of time, conceived as the very duration of evil. Thus, ancient Gnosticism may be deemed both “acosmistic” and “achronistic”, as the Gnostics reject both the fitness of this world and the reality of becoming, the latter being effective (*wirklich* in German, another way to say “real”) only when it comes to the physical and the psychical orders (which Gnostics do not acknowledge as their own true nature), but not to the spiritual or pneumatic order (which does not absolutely belong to the world). According to Henri-Charles Puech (whose classes in Collège de France were attended by Cioran), whereas Pagans hold a cyclical conception of time and Christians a linear one, Gnostics break away from both of these worldviews and claim a conception of time as a “broken” or “spoilt” duration.³⁵ The resemblance of this conception and Cioran’s own vision of time is indeed remarkable. The problem of time and becoming is so crucial to the author of *The fall into time* that it is barely separable from his thinking about existence itself. It would be enough here to mention the feeling of estrangement from the world he insistently claims, his self-characterization as a “metaphysical exile”³⁶ and, most importantly, the account (at the end of *The fall into time*)

³⁵ “The attitude of the Gnostic in relation to time confuses itself, in fact, with his overall attitude with respect to the human condition down here, and, therefore, with respect to the world as a whole, to the history of this world, to the becoming that unfolds within it, to the drama that takes place in it.” When it comes to approaching the Gnostic conception of time, Puech goes on to say that “the contention takes place between three opposing conceptions, by which time may be respectively represented in the first case by a circle, in the second case by a straight line and, finally, in the third case by a broken line [*ligne brisée*].” PUECH, H.-C., *En quête de la Gnose*, vol. I (La Gnose et le temps et autres essais), p. 217.

³⁶ “All my life I have lived with the feeling that I have been kept from my true place. If the expression ‘metaphysical exile’ had no meaning, my existence alone would afford it one.” CIORAN, E.M., *The trouble with being born (Do inconveniente de ter nascido*, p. 75 for the Portuguese edition)

of his own alleged experience of falling *out of time* and into a negative, ruined kind of eternity.³⁷

All in all, Gnosticism may be said to be a form of nihilism *avant la lettre*, perhaps the most merciless of them all, inasmuch as for the Gnostics the totality of Creation is reduced, alongside its very Creator, to nothing of value, nothing of purpose, and nothing of being.

Nothingness and evil

The nodal point intertwining nihilism (as meontology rather than historic-cultural logics of decadence) and ancient Gnosticism is the question of evil as linked to the issue of nothingness. The problem of evil is originally a metaphysical-theological one, secularly inherited by philosophical Modernity. What is meant to be understood by “evil”, after all? What do we refer to when deploying such term? Rather than defining it, we prefer to follow Susan Neiman’s recommendation: if it’s theoretically impossible to define an intrinsic property of evil, it is nevertheless possible to trace “what evil does to us. If designating something as evil is a way of marking the fact that it shatters our trust in the world, it’s that effect, more than the cause”, that should be taken into consideration.³⁸ God is long “dead”, and theology has been overcome, as it seems, by modern science. Still, human suffering and pain, both physical and psychological, remain actual, even more acutely than ever before, since we can no longer—in a disenchanted, absurd world—rely on the traditional system of values with which man intended to explain and justify the horror of indiscriminate suffering, above all that of children and other inculpable if not absolutely innocent beings. Without God, theodicy no longer has any *raison d’être*. Furthermore, even if it’s no longer reasonable (unless one is a believer) to say that tsunamis and earthquakes happen to be divine punishments for our sins and misdeeds, we still have to deal with the persistence of evil as an effect of human action. Genocides and other crimes against humanity have

³⁷ IDEM, *The fall into time (La chute dans le temps, Œuvres*, p. 1152 for the French edition).

³⁸ NEIMAN, S., *Evil in modern thought: an alternative history of philosophy*, p. 9

concrete responsible agents who might as well be identified and punished; the same does not apply to natural disasters. The mystery of iniquity, according to Saint Paul, does not become less unsettling after the failure of theodicy, on the contrary: in fact, theodicy no longer viable, unviable also becomes all anthropodicy. Thus, the modern distinction between natural evils and moral ones seems to become effective only to be once again called into question, this time in an alarming way: human evil as a specific case of natural evil, since man seems incapable of possessing what it takes to definitively eradicate evil from his worldly existence, be it for a volitional matter, be it for a matter of intelligence, or maybe both. Man would then come across as a “virus”, an ineradicable “cancer” of nature, “a blot on the creation” (*ce point noir de la création*).³⁹ Hence Sartre’s reproach of the allegory of the “plague” employed by Camus to characterize the totalitarian regimes of the 20th century and their agents.⁴⁰

Now, what connection may be established between the notion of nothingness and that of evil? Could it be said that nothingness is itself an evil? Could it be said that evil amounts to nothing? It would be a hasty, simplistic attitude to thus approach the question. First, both terms have in common the fact of being indefinable, and ultimately incomprehensible under the light of sufficient reason. As Parmenides stated at the dawn of Philosophy, non-being is not and it’s not possible for it to be. It could be said at most that non-being is only thinkable in relation to being, therefore as a relative negation of what is, given that it’s impossible for what is to be

³⁹ CIORAN, E.M., *The new gods (Le mauvais démiurge, Œuvres*, p. 1152 for the French edition).

⁴⁰ According to Susan Neiman, “Sartre’s description was exact. As political analysis Camus’s metaphor borders on the willfully irresponsible. To fight particular evils effectively, you need to understand them. To view Nazism as comparable to microbes is to obscure understanding. Camus’s essays reveal even more of the truth in Sartre’s charges. Camus’s discussion of moral and natural evils was the result, however, not of conceptual confusion but of self-conscious assertion. Both moral and natural evils are special cases of something worse: the metaphysical evil built into the human condition. Camus rejected the description of metaphysical evil as abstract and harmless finitude.” 294

not. But absolute non-being (nothingness) is, strictly speaking, unthinkable, deprived of all intelligibility and reality. But then again, when it comes to Cioran's thought we are not within the territory of Parmenides's ontology, but (as said before) instead in the paradoxical field of meontology, in such a way that it's fairly reasonable—despite all logics of identity, necessity and non-contradiction—to think and speak of nothing despite all logics of non-contradiction.⁴¹

In Cioran's thought, nothingness constitutes the ultimate (un)reality of existence, the unfounded foundation of everything that is. Between Bergson and Schopenhauer, two philosophers who played a major role in his intellectual formation, the Romanian-born French writer would draw closer to Schopenhauer while turning his back at the author of *Creative evolution* (1907). Like Schopenhauer, Cioran contemplates the possibility of grasping nothing not only as a *nihil privativum* (*rien* in French, *nimic* in Romanian), but also as a *nihil negativum* (*néant* in French and in Romanian, *nimicnicie* also in the latter), and this is on the basis of a inversion in standpoint followed by a shift of signs by means of which it would then be possible to conceive of being as that which is not and nothing as that which is. Schopenhauer thus explains such an inversion:

People (namely Kant) have ascribed this quality only to the *nihil privativum*, which is indicated by a '–' in contrast to a '+', where the '–' can be made into a '+' by looking at things from the opposite perspective; they oppose the *nihil privativum* to the *nihil negativum*, which would be nothing in every respect, and is illustrated with the example of a logical contradiction that cancels itself out. But considered more closely, an absolute nothing, a true *nihil negativum* is not even conceivable; instead, everything of this sort, when regarded from a higher standpoint or subsumed under a broader concept, is always just another *nihil privativum*. Every nothing is a nothing only in relation to something else and presupposes this relation, and thus presupposes the 'something else'. Even

⁴¹ According to Joan M. Marín, “Cioran's discourse is evidently anti-Parmenidic inasmuch as, to the Romanian author, existence in general lacks the attributes of being (unity, incorruptibility, that is, eternity, etc.), whereas nothingness not only is—and we can speak of it—and we may as well unveil it as one of the essential attributes of existence.” MARÍN, J. M., *Ciorán o el laberinto de la fatalidad*, 2001, p. 15-16 (our translation).

a logical contradiction is only a relative nothing. It is not a thought of reason, but it is not for that matter an absolute nothing. It is a compound of words, an example of the unthinkable that logic needs in order to establish the laws of thought. Thus, if we need an example for this purpose, we will keep hold of nonsense as the positive we are looking for and pass over sense as the negative.⁴²

That is the endpoint of the mystical insight that perforates, so to speak, the “veil of Maya” of the world as representation, thus allowing contemplating it in its very “essence”, that is to say, beyond the opposition between subject and object, beyond the natural determinations of individuation. Furthermore, even if it is not possible to posit a straightforward, univocal connection between nothingness and evil, it is necessary to stress the inexpugnable, paradoxical relation between these two notions, and the fact that whenever the problem concerning one of them is raised, the problem concerning the other one is also raised. This is especially true within the context of Gnosticism, whose set of doctrines and systems, as heterogeneous as they may be, seem to encompass both a (ditheist) meonto-theology and an etiology of evil. Due to its infinitesimal transcendence, the supreme God will be identified with absolute Nothingness. And if this God, the only one to which the principle of a good in itself could be unequivocally ascribed, does not hold any active relation of complicity with the world whatsoever, then we shall deal with the hypothesis of a world that is in such a way it comes across as stained with the impurity of its own demiurge (Greek word for “artisan” or “handcrafter”). From a given standpoint (that of the world as representation, of sufficient reason), God is identified with pure Nothingness, an unreality, a chimaera; from the opposite standpoint (that of the mystical insight, beyond the limits of individuation and of representation), God could on the other hand be deemed that which is, the supreme Being, whereas its creation-creature would conversely be deemed that which is not.⁴³ The correlation between God and Nothing, parallel to that between Evil and

⁴² SCHOPENHAUER, A., *The world as will and representation*, IV, § 71, p. 484.

⁴³ CIORAN, E. M., *The fall into time (La chute dans le temps, Œuvres*, p. 1076 for the French edition).

Nothingness, so familiar to the Gnostic mind as it is, already appears in the writings of a young Cioran, namely in *Lacrimi și sfinți* [Tears and saints]: “All nihilists have wrestled with God. One more proof of his kinship with nothingness. After you have trampled everything under foot, his is the last bastion of nothingness left.”⁴⁴ At a later time, in his French phase, the same motif will reappear in a criticism of the secularizing tendency of modern thought and spirit:

Knowing no more, with regard to religious experience, than the qualms of erudition, the moderns *weigh* the Absolute, study its varieties, and save their thrills for myths—those intoxications of an historical consciousness. Having ceased praying, we find fault with prayer. No more exclamations; nothing but theories. Religion boycotts faith. In the past, with love or hatred, we ventured into God, Who, from the inexhaustible Nothing He once was, is now—to the great despair of mystics and atheists—no more than *a problem*.⁴⁵

One can as well discern throughout Cioran’s assystematic writings both a theory of nothing (meontology) and a metaphysical philosophy of evil, which, if combined, amount to a ditheistic meonto-theology—thus corroborating the thesis of the inseparability of the two questions, that of nothingness and that of evil. “Perpetuating the tradition of the evil demiurge”, the Romanian author of French expression asserts both the worldly sovereignty of evil and the ultimate reality of nothingness when it comes to reflecting upon human existence (and existence as such). In his diatribe against French, reactionary Catholic Joseph de Maistre (whom Cioran nevertheless admired for his virulent style of writing), Cioran contends that

as constitutive of being as Good, and quite as real, Evil is nature, an essential ingredient of existence and anything but an accessory phenomenon, and that the problems Evil raises become insoluble as soon as we refuse to introduce it into the composition of the divine substance. Just as sickness is not an absence of health but a reality as positive and as lasting as health, in the same way Evil is worth as much as Good, even

⁴⁴ IDEM, *Des larmes et des saints*, in : *Op. cit.*, p. 306.

⁴⁵ IDEM, *The aphorisms of an iconoclast (Silogismos da amargura*, p. 74 for the Brazilian Portuguese edition).

exceeds it in indestructibility and plenitude. Good and Evil principles coexist and mingle in God, as they coexist and mingle in the world. The notion of God's culpability is not a gratuitous one, but necessary and perfectly compatible with the notion of His omnipotence: only such idea confers some intelligibility on the historical process, on all it contains that is monstrous, mad, and absurd. To attribute goodness and purity to the creator of becoming is to abandon all comprehension of the majority of events, especially the most important one: the Creation.⁴⁶

Let us not be naïve by assuming that Cioran's self-proclaimed lucidity conceals some kind of unconfessed faith, a hope for a supernatural providence that could work a miracle in order to rectify the crookedness of Creation. "Only impurity is a sign of reality"⁴⁷ and such condition is coextensive with the very principle from which this world stems. Cioran is a metaphysical thinker inasmuch as he deems metaphysical thinking to be essential when it comes to making some sense of a world (and a human condition) as absurd as he deems our own. It is indeed a metaphysical (or theological) anthropology that is in question here. To reflect upon God, and to admit of the hypothesis of His absolute impurity, is nothing but an essential way to reflect upon the world and our worldly human condition. That is why the demiurge of the Gnostics is to him "the most *useful* god who ever was."⁴⁸

Now, returning to the question of meontology, nothingness is a more complex matter than evil and the discourse about it much more equivocal, since the nothingness conceived by Cioran does not necessarily have the sinister connotation which is usually attributed to it in the context of European nihilism. By this term, the author of *Le mauvais demiurge* refers to absolute negativity of the European nihilistic experience no more than he refers to the positive, luminous experience of voidness (*śūnyatā*), according to Buddhist wisdom (namely that of the Madhyamika school). Whereas

⁴⁶ IDEM, *Anathemas and admirations (Exercícios de admiração)*, p. 23-24 for the Brazilian Portuguese edition).

⁴⁷ IDEM, *A short history of decay (Breviário de decomposição)*, p. 36 for the Brazilian Portuguese edition).

⁴⁸ IDEM, *The new gods (Le mauvais demiurge, Œuvres)*, p. 1171 for the French edition)

nihilistic nothingness “resembles ennui”, constituting a factor of disturbance of the spirit, nothingness conceived as *śūnyatā* would be on its turn “something positive”, like “plenitude in absence”:

All properties of being are dropped out. Then, instead of a feeling of absence, and therefore of emptiness, there is the feeling of a plenitude in absence. It is thus the void as a means to salvation, so to speak. [...] It is not at all a negative experience. [...] You triumph over the world: henceforth, nothing is. To us, who have lived, who live in Western culture, this outrageous way of way of thinking is labeled nihilism. Mas it is not a matter of nihilism, for its goal, anyway, its culmination is a sort of empty ecstasy, without all content, therefore the perfect joy.⁴⁹

In conclusion

It seems to us, for several reasons we have tried to elicit, a preposterous idea to read Cioran through Nietzschean lenses. Their respective modern experiences depart from separate points, they meet at a certain point, and are finally separated again. The Romanian author does not fail to acknowledge Nietzsche’s tremendous importance for the history of European (and universal) thought, and also for himself. In any case, it doesn’t seem licit to say that Cioran is a Nietzschean or a Schopenhauerian or a Pascalian thinker—Cioran is rather Cioranian, or not even that. A Gnostic and an a-gnostic, a mystic and a skeptic, a tragic pessimist who comes across as unclassifiable within one or another of these categories. The greatest lesson he takes from Nietzsche has to do with the maxim of dedicating oneself to developing one’s own style based on one’s own intuitions, one’s own “obsessions”. Besides, even if Nietzsche accuses all asceticism of nihilism, be it Christian, Gnostic or Buddhist, point is that Cioran does not necessarily follow Nietzsche down that road. In fact, the author of *The temptation to exist* acknowledges the pertinence of both Nietzsche’s *amor fati* and Schopenhauer’s negation of the will, welcoming them altogether, with the condition of keeping alive in his spirit the insoluble contradiction between lucidity and instinct. Hence the fundamental duality of which he speaks in *Précis de décomposition*: “We can live the way the others do and yet conceal a ‘no’ greater than the world:

⁴⁹ IDEM, Entretien avec Léo Gillet, *Op. cit.*, p. 71 (our translation).

that is melancholy's infinity..."⁵⁰ For "each desire humiliates the sum of our truths and forces us to reconsider our negations. We endure a practical defeat; yet our principles remain unshakable... We hoped to be no longer children of this world, and here we are subject to the appetites like equivocal ascetics, masters of time and grafted to our glands."⁵¹

Between Nietzsche and the mystics, be they Christian, Gnostic, or Buddhist, Cioran sticks with the latter—a matter of physiology and temperament. "I have spent part of my life reading the mystics, maybe because I could find in them a confirmation of my own experience [...] The mystic, that is to say, ecstasy. All in all, I had four of them, during my period of intense disturbance. These are experiences that one can go through with or without faith."⁵² A reader of Rudolf Otto's *West-Östliche Mystik* [Mysticism East and West], Cioran reiterates the author's thesis according to which Western and Eastern mysticisms "develop independent of one another, and they end up touching the greatest metaphysical problems. There are sometimes analogies even in language. [...] Thanks to mysticism the Western world rejoins the Eastern world."⁵³ Ultimately, it seems to us an implied refutation of Nietzsche when Cioran contends that "it is a mistake to suppose that mysticism derives from a softening of the instincts, from a compromised vitality. A Luis of Leon, a John of the Cross crowned an age of great enterprises and were necessarily contemporaries of the Conquest. Far from being defectives, they fought for their faith, attacked God head on, and appropriated heaven for themselves".⁵⁴

Let us now return to the previously quoted aphorism, taken from *Amurgul gândurilor* [The twilight of thought]: "Nihilism: the limit form of benevolence." We may now try to grasp what is meant by such a laconic

⁵⁰ IDEM, *A short history of decay* (*Breviário de decomposição*, p. 85 for the Brazilian Portuguese edition).

⁵¹ IDEM, *Ibid.*, p. 97.

⁵² IDEM, Entretien avec Sylvie Jaudeau, *Op. cit.*, p. 218-219 (our translation).

⁵³ IDEM, Entretien avec Léo Gillet, *Op. cit.*, p. 16-17 (our translation).

⁵⁴ IDEM, *The temptation to exist* (*A tentação de existir*, p. 120-121 for the Portuguese edition).

assertion. What is in question is neither an active nor a passive nihilism properly speaking, but rather that which lucidity, as experienced and conceived by Cioran, is going to engender progressively: the consciousness of evil and, beyond that, the revelation of voidness (“nothingness”) as the ultimate unreality of existence. At the end of his conversation with Fernando Savater, before saying farewell to his Spanish friend, Cioran asks him to tell his readers back in Spain: “Don’t you forget to tell them that I am nothing but an outsider, a marginal type who writes to awake. Repeat it: my books are supposed to awake.”⁵⁵ The “limit form of benevolence” consists, thus, in awaking (*éveiller*) to the worst (*le pire*), which, once transfigured, hardly distinguishes itself from the best: *pessimum-optimum*. Just like the negative experience of nothingness as something sinister in the European context of nihilism is so akin, despite all cultural specificities, to the positive, luminous experience of voidness in the East. The limit form of benevolence consists, ultimately, in leading to the consciousness of the fact that “we are submerged in evil” (History and utopia), and of the supreme reality of “nothingness that contemplates itself indefinitely.”⁵⁶

In conclusion, is it licit to assert that Cioran is a nihilist? Yes and no. Yes, for historical, cultural reasons (external context); no, for metaphysical, spiritual matters (internal context), due to the specificity and complexity of his unclassifiable thought. As he once said, the characterization of a skeptic suits him better. Nihilism does not represent to him a doctrine or a faith whatsoever. It is above all a historically determined, cultural-spiritual fact (strictly European), an all too Western problem, the aporetic situation of our post-metaphysical, post-Christian civilization—which certifies the enormous importance of Nietzsche’s genealogy of morals. The relative pertinence of the concept of nihilism in Cioran’s thought must be acknowledged, as, despite him being deeply appealed towards the spirit of the East, Cioran doesn’t fail to admit that he is, all in all, irreducibly Western, and thus infirmed by centuries of Platonic metaphysics and Christian morals (all the more himself, the son of an Orthodox priest). Nihilism in Cioran’s works is like Wittgenstein’s ladder: it may be handy as a propaedeutic concept

⁵⁵ IDEM, Entretien avec Fernando Savater, *Op. cit.*, p. 30 (our translation).

⁵⁶ IDEM, *Cahiers : 1957-1972*, p. 194 (our translation).

which, after having travelled over the innumerable layers of this thought, should be left aside. For, as Philippe Tiffreau puts it, “Cioran is an anarchist at the edges, a nihilist in the middle, and a mystic at heart.”⁵⁷ Furthermore, the label of nihilism, more than explaining and yielding sense, often serves solely to defame and dismiss a given voice in the public debate, which is all the more so after Nietzsche’s intervention in the history of Western thought. “The reproach of nihilism features nowadays among the most popular ones, and everyone directs it against their enemies as they wish. Everyone is likely to be right.”⁵⁸ We suggest reading Cioran in his own terms, disarming oneself of all preconception. We suggest auscultating his thought and listening to the musicality that emanates from it, so as not to incur in the mistake of reducing him to one or another attitude that makes his polyphonic thought and also not to turn him into a post-Nietzschean caricature, as Simona Modreanu warns us not to do. More than a nihilist, Cioran is a mystical thinker (a highly heterodox one), and, still, an incorrigible skeptic. We shall finish by letting him speak for himself:

We are far from literature: but far only in appearance. These are only words, sins of the Word. I recommended to you the dignity of skepticism: here I am prowling around the Absolute. A technique of contradiction? Recall, instead, Flaubert’s words: “I am a mystic and I believe in nothing.” I see it as the adage of our age, of an age infinitely intense, and without substance. There exists a voluptuousness which is all our own: the voluptuousness of conflict *as such*. Convulsive minds, fanatics of the improbable, drawn between dogma and aporia, we are as ready to leap into God *out of rage* as we are resolved not to vegetate in Him.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ TIFFREAU, P., *Cioran ou la dissection du gouffre*. Paris: Henri Veyrier, 1991, p. 28.

⁵⁸ JÜNGER, E., *Sobre la línea*. Transl. by José Luis Molinuevo. Barcelona: Paidós, 2010, p. 69 (our translation).

⁵⁹ CIORAN, E.M., *The temptation to exist (A tentação de existir*, p. 89 for the Portuguese edition).

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