

# THE CATEGORY OF THE RELIGIOUS IN CIORAN'S DISCOURSE

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**Abstract:** *We aim at demonstrating the hermeneutic plausibility of reading Cioran as a heterodox religious thinker, a hypothesis that sits comfortably well alongside the assumption of him being a secular spirit—one with a concern for religious matters and an appeal for some ever-problematic transcendence. As the author puts it himself, all he ever thought and wrote stems from one and only feeling of existence, a feeling we shall qualify as being of a religious nature. Thus, we aim at analyzing such religious feeling of existence, demonstrating its manifold expressions throughout the works of Cioran, both Romanian and French. In a second moment, we shall confront the underlying connection between the category of the religious and that of the mystic in Cioran's works, so as to show that they actually coincide in a deep, essential level of understanding. We shall further develop, in subsequent essays, the thesis of Cioran as a sui generis gnostic type of thinker: a modern-day Gnostic without any pretension to salvation whatsoever. If Cioran's viewpoint with regard to the divine realm of a good, alien God (Hans Jonas) draws him close to an agnostic stance, his recurring statements about the world as a demiurgic Creation “submerged in evil” (History and utopia) could not be more unequivocally gnostic. Beyond all skepticism, even though it cannot be overlooked, Cioran is a radically dualistic, metaphysical and religious thinker concerned with the problems of evil and nothingness when it comes to reflecting upon human existence and condition.*

**Keywords:** *Religious, Mystic, God, Absolute, Evil, Demiurge, Gnosticism, Dualism, Atheism, Redemption*

*\*I would not want to live in a world drained of all religious feeling. I am not thinking of faith but of that inner vibration which, independent of any belief in particular, projects you into, and sometimes above God...What cannot be translated into mystical language does not deserve to be experienced.*

**Cioran, Drawn and quartered**

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This is a preliminary, propaedeutic analysis with the purpose of sustaining the hermeneutical plausibility of depicting Emil Cioran as a *sui generis* gnostic type of thinker. The author of *Le mauvais démiurge* might seem to be a-gnostic about the divine realm of salvation according to the Gnostics, but he conveys an unequivocally gnostic discourse of the world as an evil, demiurgic creation. The religious (and metaphysical) dimension of Cioran's thought must not be underestimated, and should be taken seriously. Against these ideological readings of his works, we would like to start by quoting the following remark by Cioran: "the individual who becomes a-religious by decision is a being which becomes sterile. Moreover, what is most obnoxious is that such decision is always accompanied by an exaggerated, unpleasant pride. These are individuals who have an inner emptiness."<sup>2</sup>

Cioran as a religious thinker: this characterization, as odd or unlikely as it may seem, is perfectly consonant with his works and life, and it needs to be elicited so as to dissipate any misleading connotations or misinterpretation. All the more so in the face of the tendency to interpret Cioran as unequivocally atheist, a materialist (in the Democritian sense), a pure skeptic or tragic thinker, a mere epigone of Nietzsche with no call for transcendence whatsoever, with no will to redemption even if this very redemption turns out to be out of reach—impossible. As Sylvie Jaudeau puts it, to regard Cioran as "a mere Cynic hovering over reality with a disabused, indifferent look, or a skeptic of sovereign indifference, means denying the profound and always active drive of a metaphysical disquiet that no nihilism could suppress."<sup>3</sup>

The characterization of Cioran as a gnostic-breed religious thinker does not amount to any reductionism or stereotypification whatsoever. Neither does it mean that Cioran is thus withdrawn from the circumscription of the philosophical. His unsystematic thought combines a variety of stances of thought and styles of discourse: from philosophy to mythology, from poetry to mysticism, from theology to history. In other words, to posit that the author of *Le mauvais démiurge* (*The new gods*, in the English translation) is a gnostic thinker does not mean excluding other forms of thought that could eventually be, or are actually, ascribed to him. This is

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<sup>2</sup> CIORAN, E.M., *Entretiens*. Paris: Gallimard, 1995, p. 264 (our translation).

<sup>3</sup> JAUDEAU, Sylvie, *Cioran ou le dernier homme*. Paris: José Corti, 1990, p. 116 (our translation).

because the gnostic phenomenon flourished amidst the eclectic ambience of the Hellenistic world, thus being receptive to a large variety of ideas and mindsets.<sup>4</sup> The religious taken into account herein does not amount to religion in a conventional, institutional sense, neither in a sense that could be opposed to categories commonly seen as antithetic to that of the religious: the secular, the skeptical, the atheistic (depending on the conception of a-theism in question). On the contrary: it sits comfortably well alongside these categories, inasmuch as it is constituted upon the sign of *heterodoxy*. At the same time, Gnosticism is understood to advocate knowledge over sheer faith. To the Gnostic, there is no external authority in matters of the spiritual but his own personal inner experience, beyond all established dogma. To say that Cioran is a heterodox religious thinker does not mean opposing (rigid oppositions and binary logics are hardly applicable to his thought), but rather displacing him from the axis of all orthodoxy: it means affirming his radical divergence from established religion, be it Catholic, Orthodox or Protestant, all of which share the same basic premises<sup>5</sup>. As Patrice Bollon puts it in the very title of his critical biography: *Cioran, l'hérétique* ("Cioran, the heretic").

Cioran is a religious thinker in a rather unorthodox way, inasmuch as he believes that thinking and knowing must serve a practical purpose of paramount importance, namely the deliverance or redemption (*délivrance* in French, rather than *salut*) of the subject from the suffering in a world "submerged in evil" (*History and utopia*). Hence the metaphysical pessimism that draws him close to Schopenhauer while moving him away from Nietzsche, both of which are some of his most decisive philosophical influences (if this Schopenhauerian inclination is not so much the case when it comes to Cioran's youth works, it is certainly so concerning his French *œuvres*). Redemption, or the need for some transcendence, if any. If this

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<sup>4</sup> FIORILLO, Marília, *O Deus exilado: breve história de uma heresia*. Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 2008, p. 76; JONAS, Hans, *The gnostic religion: the message from the alien god and the beginnings of Christianity*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2001, p. 24-267.

<sup>5</sup> "Contemporary Christianity, diverse and complex as we find it, actually may show more unanimity than the Christian churches of the first and second centuries. For nearly all Christians since that time, Catholics, Protestants, or Orthodox, have shared three basic premises. First, they accept the canon of the New Testament; second, they confess the apostolic creed; and third, they affirm specific forms of church institution." PAGELS, Elaine, *The Gnostic Gospels*, p. xxii-xxiii.

amounts to a *sui generis* asceticism, it is nonetheless not a question of salvation in the traditional, Christian-theological sense, inasmuch as Cioran breaks away from the linear conception of time to which the notion of a *post-mortem* salvation could apply, as linked to the belief in a temporal, linear progression towards the end of times and a supposed final Day of Reckoning. Either “salvation” is to take place *hic et nunc*, or else there is no salvation whatsoever (hence the author’s irreducible skepticism). Cioran’s stance with a view to some possible redemption draws close to a conception that is halfway between Gnostic and Buddhist spirituality.<sup>6</sup> In fact, as we shall see, the author posits an elective affinity between these two spiritual traditions. This becomes particularly clear in *The new gods*, namely in the chapter titled “Paleontology”, in which he combines a Gnostic conception of inner illumination with the Buddhist aspiration after voidness or emptiness (*śūnyatā* in Sanskrit). By the way, one of the entries in his *Cahiers* [Notebooks] reads as follows: “I am a Bogomil and a Buddhist. This is the least that emerges from *The new gods*.”<sup>7</sup>

Cioran says in one of his interviews: “My attitude towards religion remains the same today as before, a mix of contradictory attitudes.”<sup>8</sup> In fact, nothing is more ambivalent, more equivocal than the relations held by this son of a priest with established (“static”, as Bergson would put it<sup>9</sup>) religion, Christianity or any other. His contradictory, agonistic rapport with the biblical God dates back to his childhood in the Transylvanian village of Rășinari, where he was born, when, before the meals, the little boy would

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<sup>6</sup> Authors such as the German historian Edward Conze (1904-1979) also endorse this parallel: “The number of parallels could easily be multiplied if one were to take into account the kindred literature of Hellenism, of Gnosticism, of Neo-Platonism. We find everywhere in the Mediterranean world at that period a fusion between the idea of wisdom and the idea of the *magna mater*, resulting in a new deity who is modelled on *Ishthar*, *Isis* and *Athene*, and who is placed by the side of the supreme male being. A study of the more philosophical authors—like *Philon* or *Proclus*—reveals a profusion of verbal coincidences with the *Prajñāpāramitā* texts. Here Sophia as the *oikía* (house) of the wise, there the *Prajñāpāramitā* as their *vihāra* (dwelling). The epithet *ψωσψόρος* (light-bringer) corresponds to *āloka-karī*, *ἀχράντος* (immaculate) to *anupalīptā*; etc., etc.” CONZE, E., *Thirty years of Buddhist studies. Selected essays*, p. 209.

<sup>7</sup> CIORAN, E.M., *Cahiers : 1957-1972*, p. 683 (our translation).

<sup>8</sup> IDEM, *Entretiens*, p. 131 (our translation).

<sup>9</sup> BERGSON, H., *The two sources of morality and religion*, p. 102.

run away from the table to avoid listening to his father's prayers. Quite a sensitive child he was, precociously touched by the theological problem of *Unde malum?* (Theodicy), that is to say, the problem of evil and suffering in relation to the belief in a benevolent, omnipotent God (*Entretiens*). Cioran experienced from an early age the tragic feeling of an absurd existence troubled by meaningless, innocent suffering and the (un)attainability of faith in a world in which nothing is more called for than faith itself, any faith whatsoever: "A religious appeal, in fact more mystical than religious, has always existed in me. It is impossible to me to have faith, just as it is impossible to me not to think of it. [...] All my life I have been torn apart between the necessity of faith and the impossibility of it." (*Entretiens*)

Our hermeneutic purpose thus defined (presenting Cioran as a religious Cioran), we shall address the relation between the category of the religious and that of the mystical. We shall also address the relation between faith (*pistis*) and knowledge as *gnosis* in order to demonstrate that Cioran does not oppose them as they are usually opposed on theological grounds. His struggle with faith is no less agonistic than his struggle with knowledge. Cioran problematizes one and the other as a means to salvation, a negative stance (towards both) that, as we shall argue, does not hinder us from affiliating him with gnostic spirituality and its peculiar existential attitude (JONAS 2001). The essential in ascribing to Cioran a Gnostic-Bogomil affiliation is not so much the putative belief in salvation through knowledge (*gnosis*) of man's true origin in some ultra-transcendent divine realm of pure light (the Pleroma), but rather the immanent consciousness of the ineradicable woe in a world condemned by evil.

Even though he insists in claiming not to be capable of attaining faith, for lacking the "organ" that would correspond to its function (hence the physiological significance of his thought), Cioran nonetheless holds that faith "goes deeper in things than speculation".<sup>10</sup> The same applies, as it would seem, to *gnosis*, if it is reasonable to argue that *pistis* and *gnosis* are not discretely separated from one another. Just as the former can be conceived as a mode of "knowing", the latter could be said to carry a faith-like element, in the sense that the Gnostic *adheres*, beyond the limits of natural reason, to something that would be deeply experienced in the life of the soul and therefore "known" in a non-rational way. Just as *gnosis* is a key term in Paul's writings<sup>11</sup> (and Cioran displays significant affinities with a

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<sup>10</sup> CIORAN, E.M., *Entretiens*, p. 204 (our translation).

<sup>11</sup> Cf. PAGELS, Elaine, *The gnostic Paul: gnostic exegesis of the Pauline letters*. Minnesota: Fortress Press, 1975.

Gnostic teacher who claimed direct heritage from Saint Paul, Marcion of Sinope), one might as well say that Gnostics are “believers” in a broad sense of the term, in the sense of being religiously concerned with salvation. They may be said to believe in something that does not necessarily coincide with or reiterates the tenets of Biblical tradition stemming from the Old Testament and culminating in the Christian Scriptures. But then again, nothing is more problematic than stating that Cioran is indeed a believer, whether this is meant to be taken in an orthodox or heterodox sense. We are dealing here with a thinker from whom skepticism cannot be withdrawn. In any case, we intend to demonstrate that Cioran’s skeptical unbelievership is altogether compatible with the postulation of a Gnostic type of religious mentality. Last but not least, emphasis should be given to the fact that what enables us to characterize Cioran as a Gnostic type of thinker is not some knowledge of (ultra)divine realities but knowledge about *this world*; hence the importance of addressing the relation between Gnosticism and agnosticism, on the one hand, and *gnosis* and *skepsis* on the other.

Some further clarifications are called for in order to elicit the category of the religious that is in question herein, a category which (as said before) is primarily deployed in terms of an existential attitude and feeling rather than a mental object of analysis. The religious implied in Cioran’s discourse holds an anthropological significance rather than a theological one, if the latter is to be regarded from an orthodox stance. At the same time, it should be remarked that such a distinction does not ultimately stand in a broader, non-orthodox sense of the theological. In fact, Cioran blends theological and secular existential thinking in such a way that most contemporary thinkers would abhor (hence some of his book titles, to begin with). According to him, man, human nature and condition cannot be properly understood other than in relation to some transcendence of any sort, or else, in a rather religious terminology: in relation to God. As Schopenhauer, Cioran conceives man as a “metaphysical animal” with a need for transcendence beyond the illusory, miserable realm of phenomena (the demiurgic world), difference lying in the nature of what they glimpse beyond the “veil of Maya”. Cioran is not concerned about building any metaphysics of the Will, even though human will is a crucial philosophical issue in his thought. In brief, what these two thinkers have in common is the fierce metaphysical pessimism, even if Cioran –in this aspect more akin to Nietzsche– would never dare to devise a *system* of thought.

Cioran’s understanding of human nature and condition comes to light as he writes, in *A short history of decay*, that “whereas all beings have their *place* in nature, man remains a metaphysically straying creature, lost in

Life, a stranger to the Creation”; light can also be cast about it from his exegesis of Adam’s original sin in *The fall into time*; or in *History and utopia*: “We are born to exist, not to know; to be, not to assert ourselves. Knowledge, having irritated and stimulated our appetite for power, will lead us inexorably to our ruin. It is Genesis, not our dreams and our systems, that has perceived our condition.” Besides allowing to grasp Cioran’s blend of anthropological and theological thinking, this last passage is important when it comes to understanding the peculiar nature of the knowledge that the author aspires to, a highly important question when it comes to eliciting the doubly heterodox character of his gnostic stance. Now, when he states that “we are not born to know”, and that “knowledge [...] will lead us inexorably to our ruin”, he is referring to analytical, conceptual, scientific knowledge, as distinct from a religious, mystical knowledge that has nothing to do, or very little, with sufficient reason: it consists, properly speaking, in a *non-knowledge*, a negative knowledge that “takes for its content its own absence” of knowledge (*The new gods*). This type of knowledge, as unlikely as it may seem, could be thought of as a mode of knowing in terms of *gnosis* (as distinct from *episteme*), all the more if we can admit of it as being related to the intuitive vision or insight of nothingness as the ultimate reality and unfathomable foundation of being. Cioran often identifies God and Nothingness in such a way that makes it impossible to regard him as an atheist no more than a mystic. Cioran’s atheism is not a secular, materialistic one, but rather one of a religious, mystical kind. Last but not least, the aforementioned passage in *History and utopia* helps us understand the intertwining between the physiological and the theological in his discourse, parallel to that of the secular-existential and the religious-mystical. Hence the following entry in his *Notebooks*: “Whenever I talk about my troubles of all sorts to someone more or less well-versed in psychoanalysis, the explanation they give always sounds unsatisfying to me, perhaps even null. It simply does not ‘fly’. In fact, I only believe in biological or theological explanations of psychic phenomena. Biochemistry on the one hand, God and the Devil on the other.”<sup>12</sup>

Cioran is a sentimental type, and more: as Ion Vartic puts it, *sentimental and naïve* altogether.<sup>13</sup> Sentimental, for he is nostalgic about a lost unity in which the self lived in a harmonic symbiosis with the whole, a state Cioran knows has long been left behind, irreversibly; naïve, as although falling into time and entering the world of civilization, there still

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<sup>12</sup> CIORAN, E.M., *Cahiers : 1957-1972*, p. 124 (our translation).

<sup>13</sup> VARTIC, I., *Cioran, naïv și sentimental*. Bucuresti: Polirom, 2011.

remains in him, irreducibly, a residual memory of an undivided condition prior to the *Fall into time* and its subsequent dualities –hence the torn consciousness between incompatible orders. In the present (fallen) human condition, this original state of undivisiveness is perceived as nothing but nothingness, to which the naïve-sentimental type longs for while at the same time being tormented by it. Finally, it can be said that Cioran’s thought is both atheistic *and* religious, skeptical *and* metaphysical, tragic *and* mystical, and so on. What he attempts to communicate throughout his books is more a matter of *feeling* than a matter of rational content. It is an intuition based on a *religious feeling of existence*. As Cioran himself puts it, “the mind *in itself* can only be *superficial*, its nature being uniquely concerned with the arrangement of conceptual events and not with their implications in the spheres they *signify*.” (*A short history of decay*) The spheres of significance, that is to say, the domain of sentiments. Having said this, we shall now analyze the religious sentiment of existence according to Cioran.

### **The religious feeling of existence: boredom, anxiety, dissatisfaction, and nostalgia**

In his interview with Gerd Bergfleth, Cioran remarks that every single book he wrote, in Romanian or in French, stems from “one and only outlook on life, one and only feeling of being, if you will. They express the reaction of a pestiferous individual that nothing could bind again to his fellow men. This vision has never abandoned me. What has changed is my way of translating it.”<sup>14</sup> A single sentiment, a single vision; a multiplicity of forms to express it, ranging from the spouting lyricism of *On the heights of despair* to the aphoristic laconism of French books such as *Gnomes and apothegms* and *The trouble with being born*. It takes eliciting what this feeling is about, its content and nature, based on how Cioran “translates” the *vision* that accompanies it.

This single instantaneous vision frames a horizon of thought that corresponds to the invisible, vertical geography of the soul in which the religious feeling of existence sprouts. It gives rise to a cross-border duality perceived between the finite and the infinite, temporal existence and timelessness, immanence and transcendence, being and nothing. That which stands out in the remark made to Gerd Bergfleth is an implied *duality* that generates concrete antinomies, separateness and solitude: the condition of being here and there, nowhere, homeless (*heimatlos*) cast away from everything and everyone; the feeling of not belonging, estrangement, and “metaphysical exile”.

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<sup>14</sup> CIORAN, E.M., *Entretiens*, p. 150 (our translation).



This fear of being bored *even in God...*(*Tears and saints*) *L'ennui* [boredom], of which Pascal is one of the first philosophical proponents, stands out in Cioran's discourse, both Romanian and French, as one of the key terms when it comes to express the religious feeling of the existence subjected to consciousness of the self and the self's temporal, finite condition. Cioran claims to have experienced this feeling from an early age: he was five when, a summer afternoon, everything around him suddenly "vanished, emptied out of meaning, everything froze: a sort of unbearable anguish. Not being able to word what was going on, I realized the existence of time. I could never forget that experience. I refer to the essential emptiness, which amounts to an extraordinary awareness of the self's solitude."<sup>15</sup> Thus, it is in boredom that everything begins – the progressive awakening of the "eye of understanding" (*The new gods*). Such mode of feeling must not be regarded as the result of a lack of activities or the disappointed reaction to a film or a book; it is not a provisional, temporary state, but instead a permanent, constitutive disposition that is ultimately confused with, and inseparable from, the very existence of the bored subject. Boredom is the modern version – the legitimate inheritor of the medieval *acedia* experienced by monks in their monastic life. Boredom engenders the inability to fully adhere to the world and particularly to existence subjected to the consciousness of time; no greater conflict than that between boredom and time itself – its passing, its duration, its inexorability. Boredom freezes time, and ultimately "kills" it. Despite its being harmful to life, Cioran acknowledges enormous "metaphysical virtues" to boredom, as it promotes not only the glimpse but also the *experience* of emptiness and nothingness. "It was boredom [*ennui*] that made me glimpse the realm of the essential", he tells Sylvie Jaudeau.<sup>16</sup> Because boredom transfigures, or rather disfigures our habitual perception of time – time as an incessant, positive flow of instants towards difference and novelty, towards the "future" –, making it crumble apart before our very eyes. In boredom, time freezes over, it petrifies, becoming "sealed off" and "out of reach": "dead time", a "negative, *wrong* eternity" (*The fall into time*). It is then a sterile, meaningless, negative duration, *le temps qui ne passe pas, le temps de la (seconde) chute* [time that does not pass, the time of the second fall], namely "the fall *out* of time". Boredom promotes disillusion, the revelation of time and our temporal, finite condition; it brings about a "dislocation of time":

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<sup>15</sup> IDEM, *Ibid.*, p. 122 (our translation).

<sup>16</sup> IDEM, *Ibid.*, p. 221 (our translation).

The moments follow each other; nothing lends them the illusion of a content or the appearance of a meaning; they pass; their course is not ours; we contemplate that passage, prisoners of a stupid perception. The heart's void confronting time's: two mirrors, reflecting each other's absence, one and the same image of nullity. . . . As though by the effect of a dreamy idiocy, everything is leveled: no more peaks, no more plunges. . . . Where to locate the poetry of lies, the goad of an enigma? (*A short history of decay*)

The same motif of "The fall out of time" (the last essay in *The fall into time*) is already present in *A short history of decay*; the metaphysical virtues of boredom, which reveals the essential emptiness of existence and the inseparability of life and illusion:

Ennui shows us an eternity which is not the transcendence of time, but its wreck; it is the infinity of souls that have rotted for lack of superstitions, a banal absolute where nothing any longer keeps things from turning in circles, in search of their own Fall.

Life creates itself in delirium and is undone in ennui. (*A short history of decay*)

*Ennui* is an incipient, germinal sadness, a factor of languor and listlessness, resulting in prostration and vertigo. It is the foreboding of an unheard-of horror, the presentiment of the Worst (*le pire*), which is identified with the Essential. "A quiet, monotonous vertigo", as we read in an interview with Fernando Savater; "boredom is the revelation of universal insignificance, the certainty, raised to a stupor or to a supreme clairvoyance, that one cannot, should not do anything in this world or in any other, that nothing exists in the world that could suit us or satisfy us."<sup>17</sup> Like rust acting on metal, boredom acts on the soul, corroding it. The discovery of boredom by the little Cioran amounts to the precocious loss of innocence, to the dramatic deterioration of the naivety of being inserted in the harmonic flux of life. "The man who knows nothing of ennui is still in the world's childhood, when the ages were waiting to be born; he remains closed off from that tired time which outlives itself, which laughs at its dimensions, and succumbs on the threshold of its own..." (*A short history of decay*). Last but not least, the Romanian author of French expression claims an elective affinity with Charles Baudelaire when the latter says: "As a small child, I felt in my heart two contradictory feelings, the horror of life and the ecstasy of life." (*Mon coeur mis à nu*) In an entry from his *Notebooks* dating from

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<sup>17</sup> IDEM, *Ibid.*, p. 29 (our translation).

1966, Cioran paraphrases the author of *The flowers of evil*: In me, ‘the horror and the ecstasy of life’ are absolutely *simultaneous*, an experience of every moment.”<sup>18</sup> Thus, while Baudelaire seems to state the diachronic contradiction between the horror and the ecstasy of life, Cioran goes beyond to claim their experienced *simultaneity*: as contradictory as they may seem, they are nonetheless one and the same feeling – the ecstasy of horror and the horror of ecstasy on the heights of despair, a luminous, joyful despair of he who falls upwards, as “God is an abyss seen from below.” (*The twilight of thought*)

Anxiety is a key feature of the religious feeling of existence according to Cioran. It goes hand in hand with dissatisfaction, which, like boredom, is not a matter of being dissatisfied with this and that, having particular and perfectly determinable objects as its cause, but rather an overwhelming inability to be satisfied whatsoever, a dissatisfaction that not even infinity could appease. Cioran defines anxiety as the “fanaticism of the worst” (*Syllogisms of bitterness*). The Anxious not only eagerly expects for the worst, thus suffering by anticipation: he rushes towards death. Now, can it be said that death is the worst there can be? Yes, and no. On one end of a lifespan, there is the “trouble with being born”, the foremost of falls; on the other end, at some undetermined, unpredictable point in the future, the certainty of our final demise. But, can death be said to actually be a bad thing, since existence in this world of suffering and meaninglessness cannot be deluded by the lucid consciousness (a consequent pessimist cannot complain that life is short)? No, for “evil, the real evil, is behind, not ahead of us” (*The trouble with being born*). It is thus that the Anxious, the lucid man *par excellence*, conceives the paradox and the problem of existence: “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.” (*The trouble with being born*)

Cioran’s early intuition, as postulated in his very first book, about the immanence of death in life, hence the fundamental *impurity* of life and its putative “demonism”, goes hand in hand with the axio-ontological inversion, so familiar to the gnostic mentality, life and death, good and evil. This dualistic view, one that posits a structural distinction between the sensible, material reality of the body, and the spiritual, supersensible reality of the soul, implying contempt for the former (seen as a “prison” or a “tomb” of the latter), dates back at least as far as to Plato’s Socrates: “We

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<sup>18</sup> IDEM, *Cahiers : 1957-1972*, p. 383 (our translation).

read in the Gorgias: « I should not be surprised, you know, if Euripedes was right when he said, ‘Who knows, if life be death, and death be life? » [...] Until we have a body we are dead, because we are fundamentally our soul, and the soul, until it is in a body, is as in a tomb, and hence mortified; our death (with the body) is life, because, leaving the body, frees the soul from a prison.”<sup>19</sup> In fact, this is not the traditional Greek –Homeric– conception of the connection between body and soul. Distinction should be made between Greek solar (Olympian) and chthonic divinities: whilst the former are home bred gods, the latter were “imported” from elsewhere in the ancient world, amidst the commercial and cultural exchanges between the West and the East. It could even be said that the notion of an immortal soul is a novelty to the Greeks borrowed from Eastern cultures, namely the Thracians and the Dacians, who worshipped a god of immortality and eternal health named Zalmoxis. These peoples believed that, when they died, they returned to their spiritual origin in Zalmoxis. Cioran knew all this very well, and could help stressing, with a certain pride, that Dionysus came from Thracia (*Entretiens*). In fact, he claims kinship with the Thracians, as well as with the Bogomils, a gnostic sect that inhabited the region between Romania and Bulgaria from the 10<sup>th</sup> to the 13<sup>th</sup> century: “Thracians and Bogomils – I cannot forget that I have haunted the same whereabouts as they, nor that the former wept over the newborn and the latter, in order to justify God, held Satan responsible for the infamy of Creation.” (*The trouble with being born*) Finally, anxiety, like boredom, expresses a kind of inadaptability to time and existence itself, the inability to inhabit the present in a straightforward, untroubled way.

Dissatisfaction is another key feature implicated in the phenomenology of the religious feeling of existence. Nothing more paradoxical than this dissatisfaction, satisfied with itself as it seems to be. A passionate, infatuated dissatisfaction which turns the impossibility of adhering to existence into a condition of possibility, the very reason to exist (hence the “temptation to exist”). Without it, the Dissatisfied, who coincides with the Anxious, would fall into total idleness, and vegetate, lacking all occupation, all reason to live. He calls for dissatisfaction as a fulfilling element of his very being. Thus, it is not the sign of a lack or deprivation, but the expression of an interior overflow, of abundance of life due to the excess of spiritual tension. As a mysterious existential disease, it is “an activity, the most intense a man can indulge in, in a frenetic and... stationary movement, the richest expenditure of energy *without gesture*, the

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<sup>19</sup> REALE, Giovanni. *A history of ancient philosophy*, vol. II, p. 157.

hostile and impassioned expectation of an irreparable lightning bolt.” (*A short history of decay*) To the religious type, always anxious and dissatisfied, and above all lucid, life is too much and too little all at once. This contradiction is at the heart of his existence: “Sincere is he who admits what he lacks. Cioran was the first to walk up the ramp and declare: I lack everything –and for the same reason, everything is too much for me.”<sup>20</sup>

Clément Rosset makes a very interesting observation about this:

The paradox of existence—its horror, Cioran would add, with reason—is, then, all at once, that of *being something and not amounting to anything*. Being too much to be considered nothing, but too little to be taken into account, existence manifests itself only as a trace that cannot be dosed, as chemists say when they state that an element is present in the solution they analyze, but in such amount all too little to be *observable*. It’s what happens with every existing thing: unobservable, for too small, just like a shadow that would conform to no body whatsoever. The order of time and death, which turns all reality into a stillborn reality, and all present into an already posthumous time, is the most immediately visible, painful aspect of this incurable misery of existence, of its incommensurable ‘littleness’.<sup>21</sup>

Dissatisfaction, just like anxiety, is the result of a clash between a mystical soul and a skeptical spirit, of a being in lack of some transcendent redemption while tempted by the demon of lucidity. Cioran’s agonistic, hopeless religiousness, one that fits in a gnostic typology, leans toward *negation* as the ultimate existential attitude in the face of a world in which “nothing is in its place, beginning with this world.” (*A short history of decay*) Hence Cioran’s proximity to Schopenhauer to the detriment of Nietzsche, whose influence on the author of *Précis de décomposition* [*A short history of decay*] is not as preponderant as on the author of *Pe culmile disperării* [*On the heights of despair*]. Hence Cioran’s unorthodox mysticism, to say the least: his downright heretic stance concerning God and Creation as a whole. All salvation out of reach, even refused in the name of lucidity, there is no “effective antidote to the disease of being what one is”

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<sup>20</sup> SLOTERDIJK, Peter. “Cioran ou l’excès de la parole sincère”, in: TACOU, Laurence (ed.). *Cahier L’Herne Cioran*. Paris: Éditions de l’Herne, 2009, p. 232 (our translation).

<sup>21</sup> ROSSET, Clément. “O descontentamento de Cioran” [Le mecontentement de Cioran], in: *Alegria: a força maior* [La force majeure], p. 96-97 (our translation).

(*A short history of decay*), except for *frivolity*, but frivolity is very hard to achieve and to maintain. Eventually, the religious type ends up being dragged once again to the depths of the soul, and melancholy sets in, alongside nostalgia –nostalgia of nothing determined, of something vague:

Every profound dissatisfaction is of a religious nature: our failures derive from our incapacity to conceive of paradise and to aspire to it, as our discomforts from the fragility of our relations with the absolute. “I am an incomplete religious animal, I suffer all ills doubly”—an adage of the Fall which man keeps repeating to comfort himself. Failing to do so, he appeals to ethics, decides to follow, at the risk of ridicule, edifying advice: “*Resolve* to be melancholy no longer,” ethics replies. And man strives to enter the universe of Good, of Well-Being, of Hope. . . . But his efforts are ineffectual and *against nature*: melancholy harks back to the root of our ruin . . . melancholy is the poetry of original sin. . . (*A short history of decay*)

Sentimental and naïve (Vartic), Cioran is a nostalgic spirit. Nostalgia, just like *ennui*, is a fundamental feature in the complex of his religious feeling of existence. In the Romanian language, it is expressed by a vocable which, though being hardly translatable to most languages, corresponds to the Portuguese “saudade”: it’s the *dor* (by coincidence, a word that spells exactly as “pain” in Portuguese), a key element in the phylogenetic constitution of the Romanian soul. Cioran’s irreducible romanianness must by no means be underestimated, not even under his French persona: E.M. Cioran. *Dor* cannot be fully grasped if one does not take into account its inseparability from the Romanian landscape: the “undulatory space”<sup>22</sup> according to Lucian Blaga, alternating between highlands and lowlands, hills and plains. Romanian peculiar *forma mentis* – its spiritual horizon– is built upon this “matrix-space”<sup>23</sup> of heterogeneous landscapes. This matrix-space is built in Cioran himself, no matter how estranged from his *Heimat*, *heimatlos*. Romania’s undulatory landscape sets an alternation between openness and closure, the infinite and the finite, limit and limitlessness, horizon and a-horizon. Hence the nostalgia, this “*disease of the distant*” (*A short history of decay*) that could hardly be conveyed by any language. *Dor* is constituted in the tension between the originary, harmonic continuity of nature and spirit, and the subsequent consciousness

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<sup>22</sup> BLAGA, Lucian, “Spațiul mioritic”, *Trilogia culturii*. București: Humanitas, 2011, p. 423.

<sup>23</sup> IDEM, *Ibid.*, p. 163.

of a cleavage or rupture of that very continuity.<sup>24</sup> Existence is thus torn apart between here and elsewhere. *Dor* expresses not only the yearning for a particular place, a defined geography coordinate (in Cioran’s case, Răşinari), but also *–a fortiori–* the yearning for nowhere, for the very absence of all spatio-temporal determination: a yearning for nothing –hence the “apotheosis of the vague” (*A short history of decay*). Thus, it is mainly a metaphysical or *–a fortiori–* a religious nostalgia: for an ever absent, inaccessible absolute. “Nostalgia –balm and poison of my days. I literally dissolve elsewhere. God only knows what paradise I sigh after. There is in me the melody, the rhythm of the *Excluded*, and I spend my time humming my disarray and my exile down here.” (*Cahiers*)

Nostalgia as *dor* is closely related to another essential term for the understanding of the Romanian spiritual-cultural specificity–Romanianess. In this case, a preposition: *întru*. If it reminds us of the Portuguese preposition “entre” [between], it nonetheless possesses a remarkable semantic density that allows it to express much more than the intermediary position of something or someone between two separate points. *Întru* condenses a whole way of being that is typical of the Romanian spirit. Also hardly translatable to other languages, this preposition “marks at once a position and a direction: one *is* at/in something (a horizon, a system) while at the same time moving *towards* something.”<sup>25</sup> The Romanians dwell in their landscape while moving towards it at the same time. It is the condition of being-across, here and elsewhere, motionless and in motion. Concerning the nostalgic aspect of this interim condition, as implicated in Cioran’s religious feeling of existence, “Apotheosis of the vague” is an important text: “We cannot overemphasize the historical consequences of certain inner approximations. Now, nostalgia is one of these; it keeps us from resting in existence or in the absolute; it forces us to drift in the indistinct, to lose our foundations, to live *uncovered* in time.” (*A short history of decay*) Finally, the paradoxical valence of *întru* is further elicited by the following passage on the subject of death: “And it is still another indication of the double reality of death—its equivocal character, the paradox inherent in the manner we experience it—that it presents itself to us as a *limit* and at the same time

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<sup>24</sup> COTOFLEAC, Vasilica, “Dimensiones espirituales”, in: *A parte rei. Revista de filosofía*. Madrid: 2005, n° 40, p. 1-2. <http://serbal.pntic.mec.es/~cmunoz11/vasilica40.pdf>

<sup>25</sup> STĂNIŞOR, Mihaela-Genţiana. “Pequeña introducción a la rumanidad”, in: HERRERA A., Maria Liliana. *En torno a Cioran. Nuevos ensayos y perspectivas*. Pereira: Editorial UTP, 2014, p. 308 (our translation).

as a *datum*. We rush toward it, and yet we are already there.” (*The temptation to exist*)

### **The religious and/is the mystic**

Polysemy is a major trait in Cioran’s discourse. Many of the key words he deploys may have two or more different meanings and connotations. The category of the religious is one of them. On the one hand, it may convey a negatively intended sense, analogous to what Bergson defines as static religion and its closed morality: established, institutional religion with its fixed dogma and practices. It is not in this sense that the category of the religious can be ascribed to Cioran. On the other hand, it can convey a broader sense, one that draws close anthropological and theological domains of thinking. While the former carries an institutional, systematic, static sense, the latter carries an organic, dynamic, ecstatic sense. It is this sense that Cioran can be said to stand as a religious thinker, and moreover, that the referred category can be applied to state that man himself is a religious animal by nature. It is also in this sense that, distancing itself from the static sense of institutional religion, the category of the religious draws close to that of the mystic. In fact, they are often interchangeable, as suggested by the comment made by Cioran in the interview we have previously quoted: “A religious appeal, in fact more mystical than religious, has always existed in me.” Having said this, from now on we shall deploy the category of the religious and that of the mystic indistinctly. He hope it be clear that when Cioran says “religious”, he is actually meaning the mystic.

What is to be understood, in general terms, by “mystic” and its corresponding noun, “mysticism”? Etymologically, they derive from the ancient Greek verb *myien*, meaning the action of closing and reopening of the eye (but also the other organs of the senses). It is related to the archaic notion of mystery (*mysterion* in Greek), which indicates both a hidden, mysterious dimension of being, and the notion of an ascetic initiation, reserved to a few, into that same dimension.<sup>26</sup> Thus, the mystery in question is something that reveals itself and conceals itself alternately, evoking a dialectics between light and darkness. This becomes clear in the correlative verbs *reveal* (to “veil again”, re-veal) and *disclose* (to “open”, to “expose”, dis-close). As important as it is, the etymological sense is not sufficient when it comes to eliciting the particular signification of the mystic that is in

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<sup>26</sup> RASCHIETTI, Matteo. *Mestre Eckhart: um mestre que falava do ponto de vista da eternidade*. São Paulo: Paulus, 2013, p. 28-29.



question here. The mysticism in question in the context of our reflection on Cioran is far from being bounded to the Greek universe, while reaching out to the later cultural-historical context of Christianity, and even beyond it. We can as well anticipate that Cioran's conception of the mystic experience is that of the revelation of God as absolute Nothingness. Even if Cioran makes use of irony when referring to the notion of mystery,<sup>27</sup> this is a key anthropological operator in his thought. There is a great amount of mystery to human existence, and man –the knowing animal– is irreducibly surrounded, irreducibly filled by mystery, which defies and problematizes his aspiration for absolute knowledge.

We shall resort to Bernard McGinn's definition of mysticism, adapting it to the peculiar case of Cioran's experience, in order to clarify as much as possible what we mean herein by the mystic as related to the religious. We cannot fully rely on McGinn's definition inasmuch as it conveys a rather orthodox conception of mysticism that is not the case for Cioran. According to the American historian, "mysticism deals primarily with the consciousness of an immediate/direct experience of God's presence."<sup>28</sup> As we have previously remarked, Cioran's experience and thought does not fit into an orthodox theological framework. Instead, his view is radically dualistic, of a gnostic kind, one that distinguishes the evil god and creator of this world –*le mauvais demiurge*– and the infinitely transcendent good god that has no complicity with Creation whatsoever. While the former –an active, productive, ham-fisted subdivinity– is perfectly "knowable" –visible<sup>29</sup>– through/in his very Creation, con-fusing itself with it–as the demiurge falls along with creation, creation being his

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<sup>27</sup> "Mystery – a word we use to deceive others, to convince them we are 'deeper' than they are." (*All Gall is divided*)

<sup>28</sup> THOMAS, Ericjon. *Point of origin: the evolution of religious consciousness and its ultimate expression*. Bloomington: XLibris, 2012, p. 99.

<sup>29</sup> "I like Donald Akenson's cheerful remark 'I cannot believe that any sane person has ever liked Yahweh.' But as Akenson adds, that is irrelevant, since Yahweh is reality. I would go a touch further and identify Yahweh with Freud's 'reality-testing,' which is akin to the Lucretian sense of the way things are. As the reality principle, Yahweh is irrefutable." BLOOM, H., *Jesus and Yahweh: the names divine*. New York: Riverhead books, 2005 p. 174; "I need the *evil* demiurge as an indispensable *working hypothesis*. To do without would amount to understanding nothing of the *visible* world." CIORAN, E.M., *Cahiers : 1957-1972*, p. 549 (our translation).

fall or descent into becoming–, the latter turns out to be an absent, inefficacious, ultimately inexistent God (*Deus absconditus, agnostos Théos*<sup>30</sup>), at least from the perspective of the creature estranged from all divine reality by force of the demiurge and his powers.

Having said all this, we shall first replace “God” by “the absolute” (a more abstract, impersonal concept) when it comes to eliciting the conception of mysticism in Cioran. Secondly, the very concept of the absolute, as opposed to the relative domain of existence and becoming (the world), must also be problematized, if not withdrawn, at least in its conventional philosophical sense, marked as it by the notion of unequivocal fullness and positivity. Both “God” and “the absolute” feature extensively and intensively in Cioran’s discourse, but neither convey the traditional meaning usually ascribed to them. By “God”, the author means either the evil demiurge or the absent, practically non-existent good God; by “the absolute”, he means nothingness or –*a fortiori*– emptiness/voidness, a notion he borrows from Eastern Buddhist thought (*śūnyatā*). In fact, as Patrice Bollon puts it, Cioran’s mysticism is a *mystique sans absolu*<sup>31</sup> [mysticism without absolute]; Cioran himself describes it this way: “The inner desert is not always bound to sterility. Lucidity, because of the emptiness it enables to hint at, converts itself into knowledge. It is thus mysticism without absolute.”<sup>32</sup>

We shall also resort to Carl Jung’s *Psychological types* to further define Cioran’s own type of mysticism and the specific nature of the mystical experience he claims to have had. In his 1920 essay, attempting to reconcile Alfred Adler’s and Freud’s psychological theories, Jung distinguishes between introvert and extrovert types of personality, a distinction that is also applicable to the analysis of the varieties of mystical experiences. Firstly, either attitude or character must be conceived of on the grounds a subject-object dialectical relation. This relation, “considered biologically, is always a *relation of adaptation*, since every relation between subject and object presupposes mutually modifying effects from either

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<sup>30</sup> We borrow the concept from NORDEN, E., *Agnostos Theos: Untersuchungen zur Formengeschichte religiöser Rede*, 2nd ed. Leipzig and Berlin, 1923.

<sup>31</sup> BOLLON, Patrice, *Cioran, l’hérétique*. Paris: Gallimard, 1997, p. 189.

<sup>32</sup> CIORAN, E.M., *Entrevistas com Sylvie Jaudeau*. Porto Alegre: Sulina, 2001, p. 18 (our translation).

side.”<sup>33</sup> Now, “when the orientation to the object and to objective facts is so predominant that the most frequent and essential decisions and actions are determined, not by subjective values but by objective relations, one speaks of an extraverted attitude”.<sup>34</sup> On the other hand, “whenever the chief value is given to the subjective process, that other kind of thinking arises which stands opposed to extraverted thinking, namely, that purely subjective orientation of thought which I have termed introverted.”<sup>35</sup>

In other words, while the extrovert type adapts to objective facts in a predominantly rational and categorical fashion, prioritizing outer experience and holding objectivity as the ultimate value, the introvert type on the other hand adapts to objective facts in a rather intuitive, sentimental way, prioritizing inner experience and holding his own subjectivity as the ultimate value. This does not mean that the extrovert type does not have subjective values on the other hand, but these are not so determinant to him as the external objective conditions.<sup>36</sup> In any case, such distinction should not be approached as if it was an absolute one, but rather as a *complementary* opposition of subjective tendencies that could as well be found more or less present in one and the same individual.<sup>37</sup>

If we are to posit one of these two typological tendencies as the predominant feature of Cioran’s personality, it is without a doubt the

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<sup>33</sup> JUNG, Carl Gustav, *The psychological types*, X (General description of the types). Translated by H. Godwin Baynes. London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1923, p. 414.

<sup>34</sup> IDEM, *Ibid.*, p. 417.

<sup>35</sup> IDEM, *Ibid.*, p. 432.

<sup>36</sup> IDEM, *Ibid.*, p. 417.

<sup>37</sup> “Everyone is, admittedly, orientated by the data with which the outer world provides him ; yet we see that this may be the case in a way that is only relatively decisive. Because it is cold out of doors, one man is persuaded to wear his overcoat, another from a desire to become hardened finds this unnecessary; one man admires the new tenor because all the world admires him, another withholds his approbation not because he dislikes him but because in his view the subject of general admiration is not thereby proved to be admirable; one submits to a given state of affairs because his experience argues nothing else to be possible, another is convinced that, although it has repeated itself a thousand times in the same way, the thousand and first will be different. The former is orientated by the objective data; the latter reserves a view, which is, as it were, interposed between himself and the objective fact.” IDEM, *Ibid.*, 417-418.

introverted stance. This is what we come to conclude from his considerations about the depths of the soul as opposed to the superficiality of the spirit,<sup>38</sup> and it is what becomes particularly clear in his first book, *On the heights of despair*, in which he praises the subjective value of lyricism.<sup>39</sup> Still, no individual consciousness could be exclusively introvert and completely alien to the objective world, its facts and moral values. Once again, it is a matter of acknowledging the *predominance* of one tendency over the other. Cioran is a naïve type, and his rationality is a sentimental one. As such, he has—as previously remarked—a thing for subjective states such as boredom, melancholy, and nostalgia (traits, as it seems, of the introvert type). Having said this, let us not rely too much on this psychological typology for, even though it comes in handy when it comes to eliciting the religious character of Cioran, at the same time it is often the normative tool used by psychoanalysis and psychiatry to label and stigmatize mystical experiences and their very subjects in terms of hysteria, psychosis, schizophrenia, etc. As we have already remarked, Cioran mistrusts such clinical approaches, considering them all too reductionistic and insufficient when it comes to understanding man’s deep, complex nature. Another entry in his *Cahiers* is highly relevant in order to stress his mystical stance:

To have *visions*—how would a psychiatrist, a *pauvre type*, be able to understand such a phenomenon?

At twenty-five, during my insomniac period, I could grasp whatever “supernatural” phenomenon, and this was by means of pure introspection, since I felt it in my very self; I deemed myself capable of not only feeling it and imagining it, but even of *producing* it. Despite not being a believer, therefore without the aid of faith, I could put myself in the shoes of the wildest, most fervent among the

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<sup>38</sup> Cf. *A short history of decay* (“The abstract venom”, “Interjective thought”).

<sup>39</sup> ““Why can't we stay closed up inside ourselves? Why do we chase after expression and form, trying to deliver ourselves of our precious contents or ‘meanings,’ desperately attempting to organize what is after all a rebellious and chaotic process? [...] The vulgar interpretation of universality calls it a phenomenon of quantitative expansion rather than a qualitatively rich containment. Such an interpretation sees lyricism as a peripheral and inferior phenomenon, the product of spiritual inconsistency, failing to notice that the lyrical resources of subjectivity show remarkable freshness and depth.” (*On the heights of despair*)

mystics. I knew exactly what the state of grace meant, and I ascended to it without resorting to God, simply by abandoning myself to my impulses and fevers, to my sleepless nights mainly.<sup>40</sup>

As said before, this same typology has been widely employed in the field of mysticism studies. Before approaching the subject, mention should be made to the fact that there is an endless ongoing debate among scholars concerning the plausibility of positing a universal core element to the various types of mysticisms and mystical experiences across different cultures and their languages. The contention among scholars is whether there would be an underlying, universal core that would be common to all mystical experiences, or if they would be necessarily and fundamentally determined by, and constructed within, their particular socio-cultural, linguistic contexts, down to the core (there would be therefore no “core” at all).<sup>41</sup> The former epistemological stance is that of essentialists and perennialists, a position that could as well be dealt with by a phenomenology of religion such as Rudolf Otto’s, while the latter is the position held by relativists and contextualists, whose tendency is to assume that all human religious experience and phenomena amount to social-religious *constructs*. As far as our inquiry into Cioran’s thought is concerned, we do not intend to partake in such epistemological controversy, and this is for the following reasons: despite all skepticism, Cioran himself seems to assume quite a ‘perennialist’ point of view, so to speak,<sup>42</sup> when it

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<sup>40</sup> CIORAN, E.M., *Cahiers : 1957-1972*, p. 877 (our translation).

<sup>41</sup> “Throughout the twentieth century, the concept of mysticism continued to be a problematic concern and a deeply contested theory. The idealized view of mysticism as a universal phenomenon constructed around an ahistorical ‘core experience’ has been severely challenged by contextual theories that view mysticism as inescapably conditional, relative, and socially constructed. For contextualists, all accounts of mystical experience are shaped in fundamental ways by the language, tradition, and sociocultural context of the mystic and further embedded in interpretations that reflect his or her time, place, and worldview. Thus there are multiple “mysticisms,” all context dependent, and no universal core mysticism.” IRWIN, Lee, “Mystical knowledge”, in CATTOI, Thomas; MOREMAN, MOREMAN, Christopher M. (eds.), *Death, dying and mysticism: the ecstasy of the end*. New York: Palgrave/MacMillan, 2015, p. 159.

<sup>42</sup> Even if it is possible to detect some points of connection between Cioran’s thought and perennialist thought (cf. “The décor of knowledge”, in *A short history of decay*), we do not mean to say that Cioran is actually a

comes to approaching the subject of mysticism, while at the same time acknowledging contextual determinations to it.<sup>43</sup> An enthusiastic reader of Rudolf Otto's *West-Östliche Mystik* (*Mysticism East and West*, in the English translation), Cioran admits of the hypothesis of an essential connection or unity across different traditions of mysticism, particularly between Western-Christian and Eastern-Buddhist mysticism (Otto's focus in the referred book).<sup>44</sup> It is certain that all experience, religious or secular,

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perennialist. Perennial philosophy, also known as Perennialism, is a universalist-essentialist current of thought which dates back to Renaissance philosophers such as Marcilio Ficino and Pico della Mirandola, and then to neo-platonic philosopher Plotinus, whose notion of the One can be deemed the metaphysical basis of perennial philosophy. Renaissance philosophy and culture do not play a major role in Cioran's intellectual formation (he barely mentions these authors). Nor is Plotinus a major influence in his thought, on the contrary: based on Cioran's considerations in "Odissey of rancor", one can easily grasp to what extent the Romanian author draws himself distant from the neo-platonic philosopher, stating that "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." (*History and utopia*) Besides, Perennialism historically maintains close ties with Theosophy, a spiritualist doctrine Cioran regarded as all too esoteric, besides being the basis of a contemporary phenomenon that could not disgust him more: *new age* spirituality. Concerning his critique of theosophy as linked to New Age culture, cf. "Thinking against oneself", in *The temptation to exist*. Lastly, if on the one hand Cioran dismisses Academia for the perceived tendency to turn the activity of thinking into a professional labor detached from ordinary, everyday life (*bios*), on the other hand he also dismisses –as a skeptic– non-academic fields of thought such as Theosophy, for their dogmatic (esoteric) stance towards knowledge.

<sup>43</sup> Hence Cioran's argument on the simultaneity of flourishing mysticism and historical periods of tension and anxiety, such as late Antiquity (Hellenistic period), the late Medieval times and late Modernity. Cf. "Genealogy of fanaticism" (*A short history of decay*), "Dealing with the Mystics" (*The temptation to exist*).

<sup>44</sup> "I recommend a book that could not be more extraordinary: a book by Rudolf Otto which was published in 1927, I guess. [...] Why is this book truly interesting? It shows the parallels. The very idea according to which

amounts to the *interpretation* of that very experience. What is there *outside* each particular culture, if anything? Is it possible to trespass the limits of any hermeneutic circle? It is undeniable that every language, as abstract as it may be, is always deeply rooted in a particular native tongue. Nonetheless, one might as argue that Silence is ultimately the *lingua franca* across different mysticisms, the very destiny of all mystical experience, the final point of encounter at which all mystics arrive. Cioran—the very object of this study—was no more interested in such polemics. Furthermore, we shall depart from a phenomenological standpoint in order to approach the subject of mysticism in his works and life; having said this, we affirm the legitimate possibility of making philosophical sense out of the category of the mystic.

Now, we have said before that it is more reasonable to postulate the coexistence of both introvert and extrovert tendencies in one and the same subject, rather than affirming the exclusive presence of one or the other. Apart from psychoanalysis, this typological distinction is also applied to the different expressions of mystical experience.<sup>45</sup> Here, too, we shall posit the

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there can be an influence, that is impossible, but it shows, by means of quotations, a certain parallel: how both mysticisms [Western-Christian and Eastern-Buddhist] evolve independently from one another, and end up approaching the greatest metaphysical issues. Sometimes there are analogies even in terms of language. It is impressive to see this, in fact. I don't know why this book has been forgotten. It's a great book that clarifies the problem of mysticism in an extraordinary way. [...] What is interesting is that across these two civilizations, as different as they are, mystical experience is formulated almost in the same terms, for, at the bottom, if we think of ecstasy, both in the East and in the West, it doesn't matter, there are some heights that force language." CIORAN, E.M., *Entretien avec Léo Gillet*, in: *Entretiens*, p. 80-81 (our translation).

<sup>45</sup> "Mystical experiences tend to happen in two main ways: an introvert experience, achieved through inner realization or an extrovert experience, outside the self, of merging with the universe. The immanent experience is within, a personal relation with God or Allah, who is closer than the jugular vein according to the Qur'an. Within other religious traditions this might be interpreted as Christ within or the realization of the Buddha nature. The extrovert experience is a sense of the individual merging into unity with the transcendent, whether this is viewed as the Godhead, understood as the absorption into the impersonal Brahman, or as attaining the Buddhist state of Nirvana. These states can lead from one to the other and indeed it is often held that the immanent is a stage on the path to the transcendent

complementary coexistence between the two types, and the predominance of one over the other. Being so, we cannot but state that Cioran's predominant tendency is that of the introvert type, as it becomes clear from texts such as *On the heights of despair, A short history of decay*<sup>46</sup> and *The new gods*<sup>47</sup>, to cite a few. His mystical drive is mostly an introspective one, even if expressions of an extrovert tendency can also be found, in a lesser degree, throughout his writings, namely in his remarks on the joyful experience of finding oneself amidst wild nature, be it in the fields or up in the mountains, or even at seashore.<sup>48</sup> We shall later approach, in due depth, Cioran's own experience and conception of the mystical experience as an introvert one; as for now, we would like to prove, by quoting some passages, that the extrovert type is not at all excluded from his experience and thought. Thus, in *The trouble with being born*, one reads: "Walking in a forest between two hedges of ferns transfigured by autumn—that is a triumph. What are ovations and applause beside it?" (*The trouble with being born*); and, in his *Notebooks*, the following entry: "Insomnia in the countryside: once, about five o'clock in the morning, I got out of bed to contemplate the garden. A vision of Eden, supernatural light. Faraway, four oak trees stretching up towards God." (*Cahiers*) Authors such as Walter T. Stace, for instance, argue that far from being set in a mutually excluding opposition, the introvert and the extrovert types of mysticism are rather different stages on the same path towards transcendence. According to Marianne Rankin, "these states can lead from one path to the other and indeed it is often held that the immanent is a stage on the path to

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experience." RANKIN, Marianne, *An introduction to religious & spiritual experience*. London: Continuum, 2008, p. 171.

<sup>46</sup> "Yet the eyes' function is not to see but to weep ; and really to *see* we must close them: that is the condition of ecstasy, of the revealing vision, whereas perception is exhausted in the horror of the *déjà vu*, of an irreparable recognition scene which occurred at the beginning..." ("Lypemania", in *A short history of decay*)

<sup>47</sup> "Every profound religious experience begins precisely where the realm of the Demiurge ends. It has only him to deal with, it denounces him, it is his negation. So much does he obsess us, he and the world, that there is no way of escaping either, in order to unite, in an outburst of annihilation, with the uncreated and to dissolve within it." ("The demiurge", in *The new gods*)

<sup>48</sup> Cf. "Nihilisme et nature", in CIORAN, E.M., *Solitude et destin*. Paris : Gallimard (coll. « Arcades »), 2004.



transcendent experience.”<sup>49</sup> Just as we do not intend to deem the introvert and the extrovert tendencies as mutually excluding, neither do we intend to postulate a strict opposition of immanence and transcendence, in such a way that the former would be reduced to an inferior state and a dependent, transitional stage towards the ultimate goal of the latter; rather, we find it reasonable to think of them as dialectically mingled with one another, in such a way that it would be possible to contemplate the notion of a transcendence within immanence or, to put it in other words, an inward, introvert transcendence. As far as our reading goes, we are convinced that such perspective is perfectly aligned with Cioran’s conception of the mystical experience.

“The deepest subjective experiences”, writes the young author of *On the heights of despair*, “are also the most universal, because through them one reaches the original source of life”. The same idea is found in the *Cahiers*: “The only way to rejoin the other in profundity is to look after yourself and no one but yourself, of that which is deepest in oneself.”<sup>50</sup> Therefore, the deepest religious experiences, subjective experiences that take place inwardly, are in a sense the only ones that may bring about universality amidst the brightest of darkneses and the most resonant of silences. The way in is, in a certain sense, the very way out—hence transcendence within immanence.

Now, let us explore some further aspects of the category of the religious as it manifests in Cioran’s thought and discourse. These further considerations will hopefully cast some more light on the intrinsic relation between the category of the religious and that of the mystic. They aim at showing that the religious and the mystic cannot be conceived of separately in a deep, essential level of understanding, and, what is more, that there is essentially no difference between them beyond the static, institutional framework of religion.

### **The religious as inadherence to the world: intensity, vibration, and the passion for the absolute**

Now, let us see in what way Cioran conceives of both categories – the religious and the mystic– and homologizes them in an essential level of comprehension. Either of them are understood in terms of *intensity*: as the outcome of a state of extreme subjective tension, of “inner turmoil and struggle”, a “fertile effervescence” caused by a “growth of spiritual

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<sup>49</sup> RANKIN, Marianne, *Op. cit.*, p. 171.

<sup>50</sup> CIORAN, E.M., *Cahiers : 1957-1972*, p. 285 (our translation).

experience”, leading to an ecstatic paroxysm. Thus, “a sensation of actuality and spiritual content would be born, like the rise of a wave or a musical phrase”; becoming full of oneself “in the sense of enrichment”, the individual would then be “tormented by a sense of inner infinity” and “live so intensely” that he would feel he could “die of life” (*On the heights of despair*). What is implied in Cioran’s view on the subject of mysticism, which he regards—beyond all religio-dogmatic determination— as no less anthropological (and physiological) than theological, is the idea that each and every person, just for the fact of being human (man is a metaphysical and religious animal), is ultimately susceptible to mystical states of being (even an atheistic unbeliever). It is, first and foremost, a matter of intensified bodily experience leading to a sensation of unbearable paroxysm, not a matter of religious faith or divine grace. Therefore, the presence of God (McGinn) and the very faith in God are not mandatory conditions of its possibility; these features cannot but determine one particular form of the religious-mystic among others. Cioran claims the possibility of an ecstasy of the Skeptic, no less profound, no less genuine than that of the Believer: “A metaphysical existential feeling is by definition ecstatic, and all metaphysical systems have roots in forms of ecstasy. There are many other forms of ecstasy which, given a certain spiritual or temperamental configuration, do not necessarily lead to transcendence. Why shouldn't there be an ecstasy of pure existence?” (*On the heights of despair*) It is the elitist notion of something reserved to a selected few that is problematized here, unless we are talking about an elitism of *troubled physiology*—the elitism of being “sick”. What distinguishes the mystic from the non-mystic would then be the tendency to experience extremely troubled states of being and the willingness to take these dramatic states to their ultimate consequences. The following aphorism from *Amurgul gândurilor* [The twilight of thought] is worth quoting in full extension:

The religious is not a matter of content, but of *intensity*. God is determined as the very moment of our frenzies, and the world we live in seldom becomes the object of the religious sensibility, for the fact that one can only think of it during *neutral* instants. Without “fever”, one does not surpass the field of perception—which is the same as to say that one *sees* nothing. The eyes do not serve God but when they no longer can distinguish the objects; the absolute fears individuation.

The intensification of any sensation is a sign of religiosity. A disgust, taken to its highest peak, unveils Evil before us (the negative path towards God). Vice is closer to the absolute than an immaculate

instinct, for we can only partake in the divine as long as we abandon our natural state.

Spectator of his own passions, a lucid man measures his “fevers” at every step, perpetually bent over their traces, in the equivocal abandonment to the inventions of sadness. In lucidity, knowledge is a homage to physiology. The more we get to *know* ourselves, the more we submit to the demands of a hygiene that seeks to attain an organic transparency. Thanks to so much purity, we see through our very selves: one ends up, watching the spectacle of oneself. (*Amurgul gândurilor*)

The category of the mystic can be thus defined and “measured”, just like that of the religious: it is a matter of *intensity*, rather than one of content. What brings us closer to God or the Absolute is “fever”, not prayer itself; prayer brings us closer to God inasmuch as it is a *feverish* one, just as a high “fever” with no prayer might as well launch us *above* God. Once again, this elicits the *physiological* valence of Cioran’s thought. Just as the notion of intensity allows us to posit an identity between both categories, the religious and the mystic, it also enables us to make distinctions between them. Intensity operates an upward/downward transition (depending on the perspective) between the religious and the mystic. The higher the intensity, the higher is one led towards God or the Absolute, and sometimes *beyond* it; tension turns into *vibration*, and the “quiet, monotonous vertigo” of *ennui* becomes the vertiginous, empty plenitude of ecstasy. Rise and fall, ascent and descent, or vice-versa. The stance of Cioran’s discourse on the mystical is one of the aftermath, of the fall into “normality” as he puts it himself. It is the end of the “fever”, and the return to *ennui*. It is as if the return to ordinary existence was so overwhelming that the mystic would feel rejected by God and ejected from the world all at once. “The fall corresponds to a decrease of inner intensity, to a return to normality. It is really a fall. The beatitude of ecstasy is almost unbearable. One has the impression that everything is solved and that becoming has no longer a meaning whatsoever. [...] The mystic feels abandoned, rejected by God, threatened by spiritual aridity. He then falls into boredom, *acedia*, this evil of the solitaries which carries an almost demonic aspect. The danger for them is not the devil, but emptiness.”<sup>51</sup> The intensity Cioran refers to, and which turns into a kind of mystical vibration (a harmonic state of being in which “everything is solved”), is at the root of an *inadherence* to the world. Having experienced such ecstatic moments, having reached the heights of

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<sup>51</sup> CIORAN, E.M., *Entrevistas com Sylvie Jaudeau*, p. 18 (our translation).

despair, he must forcefully return to an ordinary existence he can no longer feel as if he belonged to. Such detachment from the world and from being as being makes him experience a duality between a state of present non-existence and a state of full existence that is virtually past or yet to come. “Not even God could tell where I am situated in matters not of faith, but of religion. I adhere so little to this world that it is impossible for me to consider myself an unbeliever! Due to this inadherence I belong to the ‘religious’ (to put it as Kierkegaard).”<sup>52</sup>

Man is a religious animal to Cioran, just as, according to Schopenhauer, man is a metaphysical animal by nature. Both thinkers engage in ascetic concerns, although the stress in Cioran’s discourse leans towards the religious rather than the metaphysical inasmuch as it is not up to philosophy or science –positive knowledge in any case– to fulfill man’s innermost aspirations and deliver him from the suffering and the anguish implicated in his worldly existence. In fact, what is at the bottom of the religious nature of man is the mystical: man is, properly speaking, a mysterious being surrounded by and filled with mystery (a “deep”, dual being) –a mystical animal so to speak– even though the paradox of his condition is that he is often “blind” regarding his own mystic nature and condition. For man is a being of/in denial, this very denial being both what dooms him and that which he depends on in order to carry on in his worldly, temporal existence. “Each man develops at the expense of his depths, each man is a mystic who denies himself: the earth is inhabited by various forms of grace *manqué*, by trampled mysteries.” (*A short history of decay*)

To Cioran, knowledge is the cause of the fall into time and into self-consciousness that generates duality and antinomies. What man lacks and needs is not so truth, if any, but breathing and meaning, a meaning he can count on without coming to question its objective value –hence Cioran’s contention with Nietzsche, as the latter purports nothing but the creation of man-made values, something that, to Cioran, does not stand up to lucidity. Moreover, as lucidity makes it impossible to believe in the effectiveness of any meaning or value whatsoever, just as it hinders the actual possibility of all redemption, therefore the case of man is one of insurmountable *aporia*. Man is a religious animal inasmuch as that which is in question is not the affirmation or the negation of life as the immediate need for deliverance from self-consciousness (more than the thorn, “the dagger in the flesh”). Cioran conceives of man as a “sick animal”, not so much like Nietzsche but rather like Miguel de Unamuno. The German philosopher seems to identify

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<sup>52</sup> IDEM, *Cahiers : 1957-1972*, p. 247 (our translation).

the cause of this condition in culture and civilization (platonic metaphysics, Christianity, etc.), whereas Cioran seems to regard man as a sick animal due to the very fact that he is imbued with a consciousness that turns out to be *contra natura* and therefore harmful to its bearer. *Consciousness is a disease*, as puts it Joshua Foa Dienstag in his comparative analysis of Cioran and Unamuno.<sup>53</sup>

We hope to have demonstrated that, being a gnostic type of thinker, Cioran is not properly a philosopher, that is to say, an unequivocally secular thinker, an existentialist or a tragic (the latter category being nonetheless applicable to his thought, in such a way that does not exclude or contradict the actuality of his religious character, inasmuch as it is a tragic religiosity). Like Shestov, one of the philosophers he cherished most, Cioran is a *sui generis*, heterodox religious thinker. His putative a-theism, if any, is not a rationalistic one, let alone a materialistic one. It is rather a gnostic-like, radically dualistic a-theism, one that postulates the immanence of the evil god of this world and the ultra-transcendence of the good God, the latter amounting to pure nothingness from the perspective of natural, sufficient reason. Furthermore, he does not posit reason as man's fundamental attribute, but rather affectivity (*pathos*), the absolute being a matter of feeling, not of reasoning (a premise he shares with Romanian logician Stéphane Lupasco). The religious feeling of existence is at the root of his thought and discourse, just as it is at the heart of human existence in general, according to him. Man, according to Cioran, is a religious, mystical animal (more than just metaphysical), as his self-conscious condition calls for some kind of salvation or redemption from subjective suffering and objective evil (the world itself). Just as his anthropological thought posits the notion of a religious feeling of existence, it also posits the notion of a religious, intuitive knowledge as distinct from rational, analytical, conceptual knowledge. The religious knowledge according to Cioran shall be the subject of a further essay.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> DIENSTAG, Joshua Foa, *Pessimism: philosophy, ethic, spirit*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006, p. 118.

<sup>54</sup> As for this matter, we shall depart from an article written in his youth period and included in the *Solitude et destin* volume: "La structure de la connaissance religieuse" [The structure of the religious knowledge]. We aim at showing that this very conception of a non-analytical, religious type of knowledge matches the same-mystical-conception of knowledge conveyed throughout his entire works, both in Romanian and in French (namely in

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