

**ON THE POWER OF FRUSTRATION:
CIORAN'S NIETZSCHE RECEPTION IN HIS SYLLOGISMS OF
BITTERNESS**

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*Abstract: One essential but nevertheless difficult and controversially discussed idea in Nietzsche's philosophy is the eternal return of the same, as it is rather alluded than explained in several of his writings such as *Also Sprach Zarathustra* (1883–1885) and *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft* (1882–1887). In any case, it is a paradoxical and even contradictory concept, which on the one hand can be read as a cosmological rather fatalist repetition of the same events in an eternal vicious circle of permanently evolving and collapsing universes similar to cosmogonic ideas from ancient Hindu and Buddhist philosophy¹ as well as significant currents of contemporary speculation on the nature of the universe as they are most prominently popularized in science-fiction media such as the movie *K-PAX* directed by Iain Softley (2001). On the other hand Nietzsche's writings give also evidence that he understands the eternal return in a rather Kantian way too as an teleological process of development giving mankind the chance to evolve to something better; a higher developed species of human culminating in the appearance of the superhuman.*

Keywords: Cioran, Nietzsche, philosophy

“To be, or not to be”² has not only been the hall marking question of William Shakespeare's (1564–1616) Hamlet, it also marks a crucial bone of content in modern critical philosophy. Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) would have probably answered this question with: “To be, of cause!” Emil M. Cioran (1911–1995), in contrast, would have most likely replied: “Not to

¹ Heinrich Robert Zimmer: *Indische Mythen und Symbole: Schlüssel zur Formenwelt des Göttlichen*, 7. Aufl. München 2000, S. 18–24; Luis Gnozález-Reimann: *The Mahābhārata and the Yugas: India's Great Epic Poem And the Hindu System of World Ages*, New York [u. a.] 2002, 18–29; Marty Glass, *Yuga: An Anatomy of our Fate*, Hillsdale, NY 2004, S. 23; Joseph Selbi/Davis Steinmetz, *Die Yugas: Wie der Zyklus der Weltzeitalter das Menschheitsschicksal bestimmt - UT2: Nach den Lehren von Sri Yukteswar und Paramahansa Yogananda*, München 2012.

² William Shakespeare: *Hamlet (The Tragicall Historie of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, 1601/2)*, Act 3, Scene 1, line 56, see: Sparknotes, https://www.sparknotes.com/nofear/shakespeare/hamlet/page_138/ (20.05.2020)

be!” Even so Cioran, especially in his younger years, found inspirations in Nietzsche's ideas, he turned more distant when he grew older. In many points, Cioran's latter thoughts couldn't be more different to Nietzsche's life-affirming conceptions such as the *Wille zur Macht* (*will for power*) or the *Übermensch* (*superhuman*).³

This more than ambiguous relationship has already become the subject of significant international researches brilliantly summarized in Willi G. Regier's article *Ciorans Nietzsche* from 2005.⁴ Regier started with a quote from Susan Sonntag (1933–2004), in which she sarcastically asked: “*An interesting question: why does a subtle, powerful mind [like Cioran] consent to say, what has, for the most part, already been said?*”⁵ In contrast to such an attitude, I argue in this article, that Cioran's reception of Nietzsche is a striking and original critique of some of the latter's main ideas like the *Übermensch* (*superhuman*) and *Die ewige Wiederkehr des Gleichen* (*eternal return of the same*), which I will exemplify on ideas mainly – even so not exclusively – taken from Cioran's *Syllogisms of bitterness* (1952).

One essential but nevertheless difficult and controversially discussed idea in Nietzsche's philosophy is the *eternal return of the same*, as it is rather alluded than explained in several of his writings such as *Also Sprach Zarathustra* (1883–1885) and *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft* (1882–1887).⁶ In any case, it is a paradoxical and even contradictory concept, which on the one hand can be read as a cosmological rather fatalist repetition of the same events in an eternal vicious circle of permanently evolving and collapsing universes similar to cosmogonic ideas from ancient Hindu and Buddhist philosophy⁷ as well as significant currents of contemporary speculation on

³ Friedrich Nietzsche: *Also sprach Zarathustra, Ein Buch für Alle und Keinen*, Vorrede 4, Chemnitz 1883-1885, entnommen see: Zeno.org Meine Bibliothek, <http://www.zeno.org/Philosophie/M/Nietzsche,+Friedrich/Also+sprach+Zarathustra/Zarathustras+Vorrede> (05.02.2019).

⁴ Willi G. Regier, “Ciorans Nietzsche”, *French Forum* Vol. 30, No. 3 (Fall 2005), pp. 75-90,

⁵ Susan Sonntag, Thinking Against Oneself”, in: *Under the sign of Saturn*, New York 1975, 84, quote from: Regier: *Cioran's Nietzsche*, 2005, 75.

⁶ See Friedrich Nietzsche: *Also sprach Zarathustra, Ein Buch für Alle und Keinen*, Vorrede Chemnitz 1883-1885, entnommen aus: Zeno.org: <http://www.zeno.org/Philosophie/M/Nietzsche,+Friedrich/Also+sprach+Zarathustra/Zarathustras+Vorrede> (05.02.2020).

⁷ Heinrich Robert Zimmer: *Indische Mythen und Symbole: Schlüssel zur Formenwelt des*

the nature of the universe as they are most prominently popularized in science-fiction media such as the movie *K-PAX* directed by Iain Softley (2001).⁸ On the other hand Nietzsche's writings give also evidence that he understands the eternal return in a rather Kantian way too as an teleological process of development giving mankind the chance to evolve to something better, a higher developed species of human culminating in the appearance of the superhuman.

Similar to the *eternal return of the same*, Nietzsche's *superhuman* is a rather ambiguous, elusive concept too, which is mentioned in various writings, above all in his *Zarathustra*. Here the *superhuman* shall appear as a great and strong individual after the death of god to overcome the present human condition being considered as weak and fallible by Nietzsche.⁹ One typical human flaw, which should especially be overcome, is the classical morality mainly depending on the idea of compassion, as it has been developed in the tradition of the Christian religion. Nietzsche's superhuman in contrast is an absolute man of power, who can not be dominated by religion, ethics and morality, but he is an autonomous force and has the absolute *will for power* which turns him into the ruler of the weak masses.¹⁰ Thereby, the superhuman incorporates Nietzsche's demand for the *Umwertung aller Werte* (*revaluation of all values and norms*) as a symbol of revolution and revolt against the devout, Christian, bourgeois social order which has been dominant in the late 19th century.¹¹

One crucial question is here, if and how the concept of the *superhuman* is in line with the two interpretations of the *eternal return of the same*. In any case, both interpretations are even hard to fuse with each other, as the

Göttlichen, 7. Aufl. München 2000, S. 18–24; Luis Gnozález-Reimann: *The Mahābhārata and the Yugas: India's Great Epic Poem And the Hindu System of World Ages*, New York [u. a.] 2002, 18–29; Marty Glass, *Yuga: An Anatomy of our Fate*, Hillsdale, NY 2004, S. 23; Joseph Selbi/Davis Steinmetz, *Die Yugas: Wie der Zyklus der Weltzeitalter das Menschheitsschicksal bestimmt - UT2: Nach den Lehren von Sri Yukteswar und Paramahansa Yogananda*, München 2012.

⁸ See: *K-PAX* on imdb, <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0272152/> (14.05.2020)

⁹ See Friedrich Nietzsche: *Also sprach Zarathustra, Ein Buch für Alle und Keinen*, Vorrede 4, Chemnitz 1883-1885, entnommen aus: Zeno.org Meine Bibliothek, <http://www.zeno.org/Philosophie/M/Nietzsche,+Friedrich/Also+sprach+Zarathustra/Zarathustras+Vorrede> (05.02.2020).

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ The „Umwertung aller Werte“ marks an important idea in Nietzsche's writings. Especially in *Der Antichrist* (1894), *Götzendämmerung* (1898), and *Ecce Homo* (1908)

cosmological one, insisting on the consequent repetition of the same events, denies the evolution to a superhuman which is implied in the second interpretation. In fact, this contradiction can partly be resolved by taking into consideration some special features of the German language, in which the philologist Nietzsche wrote his original texts. In German (different to most of the other languages) there are two words for ‘the same’. The one is the ‘das Selbe/dasselbe’ stating an identity of an object. ‘Das Gleiche’ in contrast describes a similarity in the meaning of something of the same type or something lookalike: For example: ‘Ich trage dasselbe Kleid wie gestern’ (I wear the same dress as yesterday) means, I talk about exactly the same dress I have worn on to consecutive days. To the contrary: ‘Ich trage das gleiche Kleid wie du’ (I wear the same dress as you) means, I wear a dress that looks like yours or we both wear the same model but not exactly the same object. In the original texts, when Nietzsche as well as the German Nietzsche scholars talk about the eternal return of the same, they exclusively use the phrase *Die ewige Wiederkehr des Gleichen*¹² rather implying a huge similarity of historical events than their identity. This alludes to a reading not in terms of an absolute repetition of exact the same but a more moderate one also giving room for changes, progress and the evolution into something better such as the *superhuman*.

Not so for Cioran. It is my theory, that the idea of the *eternal return of the same* is a concept uniting and dividing the philosophy of Nietzsche and Cioran at the same time. Even so the latter refers to first, he transformed his ideas in something different: Cioran published his syllogisms in 1952 in French, a language which doesn't know the German distinction of ‘the same’ in terms of ‘das Gleiche’ und ‘das Selbe’. The French term is always ‘le meme’. In Romanian (Cioran's mother tongue) such a distinction isn't common neither and ‘la fel’ marks the only phrase to describe ‘the same’. Even so, I haven't found the literal phrase ‘*eternal return of the same*’ in Cioran's texts, I argue, that the idea of such a return of the same rather in the reading of ‘das Selbe’, which widely excludes Nietzsche's progress-optimistic idea of the evolution into a better version of humankind, plays also an important role in the thinking of Cioran especially in his *Syllogisms of Bitterness*: In the chapter *Der Gauner und der Abgrund (Villian and the Abyss)* he states: “*My cosmogony adds an endless number of points of elipse*

¹² Friedrich Nietzsche: *Also sprach Zarathustra, Ein Buch für Alle und Keinen*, Vorrede 4, Chemnitz 1883-1885, entnommen aus: Zeno.org Meine Bibliothek, auf: <http://www.zeno.org/Philosophie/M/Nietzsche,+Friedrich/Also+sprach+Zarathustra/Zarathustras+Vorrede> (05.02.2020).

to the original chaos”¹³ and in the chapter *Zeit und Anemie (Time and Anemia)* “Our discomfort continues the mystery beginning with the smile of the mummies”¹⁴. Cioran argues here in terms of cosmological and ontological philosophy declaring – similarly to old Indian philosophy¹⁵ – chaos, emptiness and discomfort to basic principles of existences deeply inscribed into the fabric of the universe. These discomforts have bothered our cultural and biological ancestors – who are mummies now – as well as they bother us today. The future offers no escape from this sorrows neither, as Cioran states: “Only dread, the dark utopia, provides us with true precognition of the future”¹⁶. This pessimistic view of the eternal continuum of an ancient as well as present and future woe as a basic and inevitable principle of human existence is also implied on human history which becomes especially obvious in the chapter *Okzident (Occident)*. Thereby, Cioran mentions the continent’s bloody past, when Europe colonized the world not as a heroic masterpiece of history, but as the root already foreshadowing its demise disguised in the attitude of power and victory. Against this backdrop, he states: “The Occident is looking in vain for an agony which is up to it’s past”¹⁷. If Spain, Germany, France, Denmark etc., Cioran gets even with many countries of Europe. All of them had their leaders, their culture, there thinkers, their art. All of them made promises of a better future, a stronger country, a better type of humankind. And all these promises remained unfulfilled in the very end. Back in the 19th century, for Cioran, occidental history, neither with its evolving technology nor with its highly intellectualized philosophy have managed to provide any real progress as he argues in the chapter *Im Sog der Geschichte (In the Wake of History)*: “A civilization which has been a lucky anomaly in its beginnings

¹³ Original quote from the German translation: „Die Kosmogonie fügt dem Ursprünglichen Chaos eine endlose Zahl von Auslassungspunkten an.“ Emil M. Cioran; *Syllogismen der Bitterkeit*, Frankfurt am Main, 1980, 25. (All translations into English in the main text by Kerstin Borchhardt)

¹⁴ Original quote from the German translation: “Unser Mißvergnügen setzt das Mysterium fort, das im Lächeln der Mumien anhebt.“ Cioran; *Syllogismen der Bitterkeit*, 1980, 30

¹⁵ Heinrich Robert Zimmer, *Indische Mythen und Symbole: Schlüssel zur Formenwelt des Göttlichen*, 7. Aufl. München 2000, 18–24, Luis Gnozález-Reimann, *The Mahābhārata and the Yugas: India's great epic poem and the Hindu system of world ages*, New York [u. a.] 2002, 18–29, Marty Glass, *Yuga: An Anatomy of our Fate*, New York 2004, 23.

¹⁶ Original quote from the German translation: “Einzig das Grauen, diese schwarze Utopieliefert uns eine genaue Vorhersage der Zukunft“, Cioran; *Syllogismen der Bitterkeit*, 1980, 30.

¹⁷ Original quote from the German translation: “Vergeblich sucht der Okzident sich einer Form der Agonie, die seiner Vergangenheit würdig wäre.“. *ibid.* 36.

*withers at the end of its way of regularities, infects in a straight line random nations and revels in its defeat only orbiting around its own problems*¹⁸ Cioran concludes this disappointment and bitterness with the words: “*The Occident? A possibility without future*”¹⁹, and: “*If Noah was prophet he would have scuttled the arc*”²⁰ For Cioran all great historical events are nothing but tumors of time,²¹ which must inevitably end in the cancerous death of history itself. This idea of the unavoidable movement not in shape of a progress but rather as something running out in death ends is even emphasized in the syllogistic form, Cioran chose for his pessimistic thoughts in his *Syllogisms of Bitterness*. This becomes obvious due to the fact that a syllogism is a special type of conclusion resulting from a logical deduction which marks literally the end of this deductive process also stressing the idea of the death end of the process of human history as – at least for Cioran – the only logical conclusion resulting from philosophical speculation.

This is not a pleasant conclusion but rather a frustrating, metaphorically spoken a bitter one. On the one hand, bitter in contrast to sweet describes an unpleasant sensory perception of taste, many people rather try to evade, as it often causes disgust and sometimes even vomiting. On the other hand, bitter can allude to the idea of cure too, as many medical herbs have a rather bitter taste especially due to the ingredients causing the curing effects. Such an irony is stated in the German proverb becoming famous through the movie *Die Feuerzangenbowle* (1944) by Helmut Weiss: “...*Medizin. Sie muss bitter schmecken, sonst nützt sie nichts.*”²² (Medicine must have a bitter taste, otherwise it would be useless) in the meaning of ‘Nothing comes without a price’. Expanded to a metaphorical emotional dimension and not least to Cioran's pessimistic philosophy bitterness also describes an ambiguous feeling in terms of a frustration caused by the experience of disappointment but also including a curing and creative element. This is even proven by the fact, that Cioran, as the prophet of bitterness, didn't just

¹⁸ Original quote from the German translation: “*Eine Zivilisation, die zuerst eine glückliche Anomalie gewesen war, verdorrt am Ende ihrer Laufbahn in der Regelmäßigkeit, setzt sich in gerader Linie über beliebige Nationen fort, wälzt sich in der Niederlage und macht ihr Schicksal zum alleinigen Problem.*“ Ibid. 80.

¹⁹ Original quote from the German translation: “*Der Okzident? Eine Möglichkeit ohne Zukunft.*“, ibid. 40.

²⁰ Original quote from the German translation: “*Wenn Noah die Gabe gehabt hätte in der Zukunft zu lesen, hätte er ohne Zweifel die Arche versenkt.*“ ibid, 74.

²¹ See ibid.

²² See <https://www.filmzitate.de/zitate/Die-Feuerzangenbowle-1944x0> (24.05.2020).

sit around drowning in self-compassion, despair and apathy, to the contrary he was a troubled and active mind as well as a restless writer producing several books. Many of them might appear pessimistic but also offer a grain of optimism in terms of an original critique of occidental humanist philosophy and a cure for a naive cultural optimism especially in terms of Nietzsche's difficult idea of the *superhuman* contextualized to the idea of the *eternal return of the same*. Nietzsche talked about the hope for a *superhuman* up to come. Cioran in contrast, reveled in the bitterness resulting from the disappointment of this hope remaining unfulfilled or even unfulfillable. For the latter in the wage of the *eternal return of the same*, as it reveals itself in the succession of disasters during mankind's history, there is no chance of real evolutionary progress and no way out of mankind's miserable condition. In his work *Vom Nachteil geboren zu sein* (*The Trouble with Being Born: Thoughts and Aphorisms* 1973) he commented on Nietzsche: "He [Nietzsche] only observed humans from far away. If he would have approached them more closely, he could never have conspire nor praised the idea of the *superhuman*".²³ And in the *Syllogisms of Bitterness* Cioran argued even more drastically: "For us the idea of the *superhuman* is nothing than a figment anymore"²⁴, because Nietzsche's "Idolization of power"²⁵ has to cause "a wrong image of life and history"²⁶.

For Cioran the teleological conception of the *superhuman* totally failed the human nature itself when Nietzsche believed that this nature – being according to Cioran already rotten from the soil – could ever be improved. Given to the condition of this irreversibly flawed human nature and the process of continued political and social catastrophe each supposed *superhuman* eventually revealed him/herself just as another tyrant, dictator and slaughterer, rather being an ogre than a hero and in any case perpetuating the miseries mankind had to face through all of its history.²⁷

²³ Original quote from the German translation: „Er hat die Menschen nur aus der Ferne beobachtet. Hätte er sie aus der Nähe betrachtet, so hätte er niemals den Übermenschen aushecken noch preisen können.“; Emil M. Cioran, *Vom Nachteil geboren zu sein; Gedanken und Aphorismen*, Frankfurt am Main, 1979, 71/72.

²⁴ Original quote from the German translation: "Die Idee des Übermenschen erscheint uns nur noch als ein Hirngespinnst.“, *ibid.* 26/27.

²⁵ Original quote from the German translation: „Vergötzung der Kraft“, *ibid.* 26.

²⁶ Original quote from the German translation: „ein Falsches Bild des Lebens und der Geschichte“, *ibid.*

²⁷ Cioran even speaks of a „bestialische Übermenschlichkeit“ (bestial superhuman condition) of history when conquerors subdued and slaughtered weaker tribes and civilizations. See *ibid.* 80.

Today decades after Cioran's lifetime, such progress-pessimistic ideas on the future of the human species are also common and popular in huge parts of societies and important currents of contemporary philosophy worldwide. Many of them argue strongly against transhumanist ideas speculating on creating a real *superhuman* by the means of human enhancement in the age of cybertechnologies and genetic engineering.²⁸ When similar to Cioran, such progress critical thinkers look back on a history full of violence, tyranny and genocides, which prove that mankind has never been able to use its powers and technologies in a non-abusive and non-destructive way, they also evaluate speculations on the enhancement of humankind not in terms of utopian dreams but rather dystopian nightmares.²⁹ In such a reading the idea of the *superhuman* is rather connected to a dangerous experiment running out of control than to a redeeming messiah or the next step of human evolution.

Against this backdrop, as also alluded in Sontags *Under the Sign of the Saturn*³⁰ (1975) Cioran's creative bitterness nourished by the power of disappointment, has not been a nerdy and depressive solitaire in history of philosophy, but an important and indispensable link in the chain of the tradition of critical philosophy from Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860) and Friedrich Nietzsche to the contemporary *antinatalism* of Julio Cabrera (born 1944), and Michael Onfray³¹ (born 1959) as well as the posthumanism related ideas of David Roden and Donna J. Haraway (born 1944).³² While the antinatalist philosophers are widely in line with Cioran's pessimism and argue for the idea that life is mainly suffering, which is why non-existence – especially the non-existence of the human species as one of the main causes of suffering on planet earth – should be preferred to existence, the

²⁸ Stefan Lorenz: *Transhumanismus: „die gefährlichste Idee der Welt“!?*, Freiburg [u.a.] 2016.

²⁹ See Wolf Scheller, *Zum hundertsten Todestag des Philosophen, Der „Fall Nietzsche“ – ein deutsches Verhängnis?*, in: *Die politische Meinung*, Nr. 369/August 2000, 91–95, 94 https://www.kas.de/c/document_library/get_file?uuid=554292c5-ed73-cf8f-93cf-4c7db3fe3466&groupId=252038 (05.02.2020).

³⁰ Susan Sontag, ‘Thinking Against Oneself’, in: *Under the sign of Saturn*, New York 1975, 84.

³¹ See the website of Michael Onfray <https://michelonfray.com/> (22.05.2020); Julio Cabrera: *Projeto de ética negativa*, São Paulo 1989.

³² See David Roden: *Posthuman Life: Philosophy at the Edge of the Human*, Abingdon 2014; Donna J. Haraway: *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, Duke University Press 2016.

posthumanist and postnature philosophers do not share Cioran's pessimism as they seek for a way of a better coexistence of the human and the non-human.³³ Nevertheless, they share Cioran's drive of abandoning the ideas of human superlatives in terms of bringers of a new age, such as heroes, messiahs and other *superhuman*, in favor of embracing the cultural abject in shape of the strange, the uncanny, the germinal – in short the base level of existence and the untouched otherness often rejected in traditional philosophy – to rethink the possibilities of ongoing life.³⁴

Anyway, besides all of their differences, all these philosophers dare to request and defy long lasting humanist commodities of thinking in terms of reason, optimism, procreation, redemption and moral, which (without any doubt) might be useful and even necessary to a certain account, but all too often fail the complexity and reality of our postmodern world. All these critical philosophers and especially Cioran offer their own kind of curing bitterness and 'optimistic' pessimism which might sometimes be unpleasant, but also provides the intellectual soil for critical reflections on cultural naivety and intellectual narrowmindedness.

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³³See *ibid.*, 59–98.

³⁴ *Ibid.*