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## Clamours of death



*The storm [Against all odds]*

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# Indirect death: ennui and void

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The questions that Emil Cioran asks time and again could be phrased like: What was God doing before creating the world, time and man? What does God do when he leaves man all alone in the world? What does God do when man turns away from Him who wishes to be worshipped? What about the man who merges with God, the man who has cursed God? And further, what would it be like if God sees how he stands, and commits suicide? What if, all of a sudden, they have just disappeared, both God and the world he created? With respect to God, Cioran puts forward as a starting point for reasoning that He is left with the challenges of skeptical, tireless, scrutinizing, malign interrogation. With respect to man, the philosopher answers that he is left with ennui and void.

**Keywords:** Emil Cioran; indirect death; ennui; void; acedia

**E**mil Cioran is probably the author of the greatest rhetorical excellence of ennui, interpreted as an experience of inner spiritual void.

But was it indeed a mere rhetorical excellence?!

From the notes in his diary, to confessions and to many published texts, it issues that this special type of dissolvent feeling was experienced ever since he was five years old; and then, all through his adolescence, his education in Sibiu, his teaching in Braşov, he was haunted by it so far as Berlin and Leipzig, in Paris, actually throughout his whole life and in all places. Although sometimes associated with anxiety and melancholy, experiencing the depersonalizing ennui is characteristic of a special class, Cioran himself associating it with monastic acedia. Ennui welds to those few fundamental experiences that vertebralize the whole Cioranian work, thus providing it with an attitudinal coherence: ecstasy, (cosmic) loneliness, pride, sloth, the wakefulness of insomnia, the doubt and the concern for sickness and suicide. Of this succession, along with insomnia, this ennui that

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invaded his soul ever since childhood, could be considered like a stigma, a constitutional biopsychological particularity. In provisionally accepting even this hypothesis, it is worth tracing how Cioran managed the stigma in the cultural and spiritual field. Especially since ennui, although apparently the earliest personal experience of his array, is not even mentioned in his first book.

### *Decomposition*

When writing *On the Heights of Despair*, Cioran was utterly fascinated with ecstasy, a state of hyperconsciousness that made him feel like reaching "the ultimate roots of existence." But ecstatic states do not articulate the young Romanian with divinity, like in the case of mystics, but with eternity. This nuance is explicitly commented in *Treaty of Decomposition*, in which he writes:

By what strangeness of fate certain beings, arrived where they could merge into a faith, turn backwards, on a road that leads only to themselves – that is, nowhere. (Cioran 2011: 56)

Thus, in his debut book, the theme of God is only approached tangentially, in the paragraph developing the hypothesis of a Jesus who would dawn upon escaping from the cross. Significantly, it is here that the theme of boredom is first brought forth; but not placed in man, as a personal experience, but rather present in the very supreme being. "I imagine a God who is beyond, bored of these people who only now how to beg, a God sick of the triviality of his creation, disgusted by earth and sky. And I imagine a God dashing into void, like Jesus on the Cross..."

So, the theme of ennui is placed and commented from the very start in the binomial relationship God-man. And so it will remain. But from *The Heights of Despair* it is worth retaining a passage, with an important theme in the dialectics of ennui. We can read: "My inner void will swallow me, I will be swallowed by my own void. To feel collapsing within yourself, in your own nothingness, the risk of thinking of yourself, how you fall into internal chaos..."

A particularly interesting fact is that this internal collapse by no means refers to anguish,

after the pattern already advanced by Heidegger in the twentieth century.

### *Tears and Saints*

The next step can now be taken, moving to Cioran's second book, with a frontal encounter and direct confrontation with God, *Tears and Saints*. This work also represents the reference central text for the theme of ennui, theme that will be subsequently, though only marginally, resumed.

The main reference is to acedia, the spiritual barrenness that monks experience during Sunday afternoons when, tired of all the praying and invoking, they feel they have lost contact with their God. Equally significant is the state of exhaustion, of squeeze and vacuum, subsequent to the plenary experience of ecstasy. Void, gap, nothingness, emptiness, they are words orbiting the phenomenon of ennui, as well as conditions in the possibility of manifesting it. But the ennui here tackled, is a general ethic-ontological condition that does not affect only the confessing author. It affects all the people, peoples, and civilizations. And, eventually, God himself, for Cioran puts it: "All without God is nothingness and God is the supreme nothingness."

In *Tears and Saints*, a subtle and diffuse dialectics comes forth, between being, nothingness, soul, gap, void, man, and God. The ennui of acedia results from the temporary absence of God. But his very presence in the soul of the monarch, of man, again implies a sort of gap:

God lands in the soul's gaps. At the inner desert's horizon is where he peeps. (Cioran 1991: 60)

The argumentation would seem coherent, if we did not find out that not even God is immune to solitude, ennui and nothingness. The creation of the world has no other explanation but the fear of loneliness of a God. Or, the fact that God is bored. Our purpose, as creatures, is to entertain the creator: "Poor jesters of the absolute, we forget that we live tragedies for the ennui of a creator."

In this book of youth, Cioran develops a strange phenomenology according to which, all that is essential is revealed, through anamnesis, from the depths of consciousness. God is our first memory, but also paradise, eternity, the ultimate

roots of existence (revealed by ecstasy), hell and others are discovered in this way. And of course, ennui, situated at the edge of time.

Ennui is the most elementary form of time suspension, in the same way that ecstasy is the last and the most complex. (Cioran 1991: 70)

As it concerns temporality, ennui is not restricted to individuals. It affects peoples, with an existence unfolding in time.

A people starts decaying when it starts getting bored (Cioran 1991: 62). The Romans disappeared from the face of the Earth neither because of barbarian invasions nor due to the Christian virus, but because a much more dreadful inlying virus, rotted their core: ennui. (Cioran 1991: 21)

Ennui does not concern social condition or that of the nation. "Between the earth-smelling Russian ennui and that of English and French salons the differences are smaller than it seems, for in both cases the source is the same: the inadherence of blood to the world."

It is not about discarding ennui, as this is a definitive curse, an anthropological condition. "All in life is to know how to be essentially bored."

Ennui, like ecstasy, is therefore intimately intricated with human temporality: "The emptying of temporality – either in ennui, or in dread – throws us into a vibrating nothingness." Thus, it also involves nothingness. As well as, of course, a God getting bored. And who, according to Cioran, is "pure nothingness." So that, this ennui of temporal margins, will expand his shadow over contemporaneousness.

Modern acedia is no longer the monastic solitude – although we each carry a convent in our souls – but rather the void and the dread of infinity of a fallow God. (Cioran 1991: 119)

Ennui, the feeling experienced by Cioran ever since his early childhood and later accompanying the insomnias of his adolescence, cannot be therefore commented as a reflex of a special biopsychological constitution. It implies God, nothingness and void, circumstantially. As well as the solitude of divinity, only comparable to Cioran's own cosmic solitude, as a partner in the confrontation. The theme of ennui was thus imposed on the author, together with the theme of God. And it will be later resumed, though

indeed less and less frequently, in parallel with the metamorphoses and the nuances performed upon this God throughout his work. But let us contemplate this relationship with God, in *Tears and Saints*, where confrontation is the thing:

It is impossible to love God otherwise than by hating him (Cioran 1991: 122). With God we live in alternating rhythm: we successively share power (Cioran 1991: 170). Each man atones, from birth to death the sin of not being God (Cioran 1991: 169); A mystical and imperialist soul knows no other enemy but God (Cioran 1991: 169); One cannot share power with God. One can replace him, follow him, but not stand by his side (Cioran 1991: 171); I have nothing to share with no one; but with God, for still some time. (Cioran 1991: 173)

And finally, "In its utmost expression sublimity is the replacement of God through man, a continuous usurpation. Whoever has lived to the end the pride of solitude has only one rival left: God."

This solitary and proud God from *Tears and Saints*, who has created the world so as not to get bored, will transform and shade later on in Cioran's French work, as the author becomes more and more interested in historical time. It is required thus, in his work, a manicheian – bogomile differentiation between the existential hypostasis of the "good God" and "the evil demiurge," creator of the world and of its sinful becoming. Through the passing of years, the good God will become, in his writings, more and more ethereal, cluttered with nothingness and void, in the rarefied existential zones of "Deity"; or of Indic vision. As for the promethean demiurge, he will finalize his work, ending man's historical time. In his work of doctrinaire maturity, *The Fall into Time*, Cioran clearly states that the historical time of creation is over, as man has fallen into the evil, cold, and still eternity of absolute ennui. A proof is the example of his existence, proposed as paradigmatic. Which does not alter whatsoever the existence of Deity, as it takes contour in the third book of his doctrinaire trilogy, started with History and utopia: that is in *The Evil Demiurge*.

What is left for the traditional God? He is left with the challenges of skeptical, tireless, scrutinizing, malign interrogation. What was He doing before creating the world, time and man? What does God do when He leaves man alone?

But when man leaves this God, who wishes to be praised and begged by man? What about the man who merges with God? ... the man who cursed God? And further: What would it be like if God understood things well and committed suicide? What if, all of a sudden, they disappeared, both God and the world He created?! It is probably as far as one could go.

It is interesting to follow in the Cioranian scenario the dynamics and the intertwining induced and claimed by ennui, between the existential zone – of man and God – and the “me-ontological” zone, of nonbeing, in the direction opened by Plato in *The Sophist*.

The paradigmatic human ennui, that of acedia, results from the absence of God. From an emptiness, an absence, a void, produced from the absence of the supreme being from the soul of the mortals opened to transcendence. The soul of the monk becomes – as Cioran suggests – dry like the desert, like the wilderness around the convent. It is a spiritual Sahara, without the springs and the flowers of Eden. But with the *Fall into Time*, with the end of historical time and when ennui becomes universal, the soul becomes still and frozen, a real inner Siberia, where you can no longer hope to be a plant, caressed by the angels and by God. The void, the emptiness, the barrenness, the desert, the Sahara, Siberia, are of course metaphors, partially privative, in relation to what existential life is, something good. But their reverse is by no means a dialectics of becoming.

Firstly, in me-ontological order, from all of Cioran's work the opposites are missing, negation and contradiction; and these, with all the actual presence of the demon. The devil works with doubt, not with negation. The dialectical thematics that supports becoming, the illusion of evolution and of progress is thus excluded.

Secondly, from this Cioranian me-ontology, even the radical nothing (“nicht,” “rien”) is missing, confusingly so. The whole issue of the nothing, raised implicitly by the spherical fullness of being by Parmenides, who made possible Leibniz's question (“Why is there something rather than nothing?”), a question ostentatiously brought forth by Heidegger), is simply ignored. In a way, with his ennui, Cioran proposes an alternative to the Heideggerian argument of living the anguish, as an “evidence” of the existential

mixture between being and nothingness. The experience of anguish implies nothingness – as sustained by Heidegger in *What is Metaphysics* –, which existentially precedes the logical relation between affirmation and negation. The thinker from Freiburg, who highlights this essential experience of “mortals,” leaves in obscurity the derivation of the issue of anguish from the theological philosophy of Kierkegaard. Cioran's ennui instead does not ignore God, but challenges Him. In the place of nothingness there is now the void, understood not only as absence of God, as acedia, for even Deity floats in ethereal zones, “filled with void.”

Cioran's indirect metaphysics barely refers to hard nothingness, it rather deals with ethereal nothingness; and thus it leads to the complicated issue of the degrees of being.

With the theme of the degrees of being, Cioran and the ennui he cultivates meet with Noica's “Romanian feeling of being,” in another story.

### Emil Cioran

Born in Rășinari, in Transylvania, with a tendency towards ennui from a tender age – and later towards insomnia and ecstasy –, Emil Cioran has transfigured these curses and gifts of his psycho-physical nature in major human issues, as he became involved in the crepuscular culture of Europe, situated at the end of modernity. In the palephonia of this crepuscule, his voice has a definite place,





Walter Sickert, *Ennui*

necessary and irreplaceable. In Paris, the setting of this drama, the intellectual world was vibrating when he settled there, with the “engagement” of existentialists, personalists, marxists and structuralists. They all considered they had something important to say, as they were nearing the end of the millennium. Cioran was living among them, he used to attend the same coffee shops, but apparently – and even deliberately – he had nothing to say. Nothing (a word that they preferred not to use), but the discrete sign addressed to those willing to understand that a long era of cultural mankind was over. An era considered by a Europe that was structured on the Judeo-Christian ideology assimilating the Greek-Roman civilization, as being the era of historical time.

Thus, it was over with what Europe considered to be the axis of its spiritual culture: historical temporality, open through “incarnation.” Other intellectuals, placed on other ideological orbits, also talked of the end of historicism. But in Paris, center of European culture for a long time, there was a belief, as previously mentioned, in “commitment.” And it is not all about Sartre’s quasi-political slogans. Even Heidegger, the great Heidegger, prudently translated in France, firmly supported the theme of the possible “authenticity” of human intramundane existence. Man gets into a state of anguish – the ultimate existential criteria – because he “cares” about his being-in-the-world. Although this is a being toward death. (*Sein Zum Tode*).

“But what if someone does not care about this existence?” claims the tough challenge of Cioran! “What if you do not care about being-in-the-world?” “What if your credo is detachment and ennui?!” An ennui that might fill even the being of being, “whom some people call God.”

Cioran considers ridiculous any intramundane “engagement,” any pleading for a cause. Ridiculous and harmful.

Can this point of view be ignored from the panorama of the end of culture of European modernity? Can the new world be understood – with its new barbarians and its new gods, a world which we have already entered, according to Cioran, without the special epoché of underground ennui... which he proposes... against Descartes,... against Husserl,... against Heidegger??

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