

# CIORAN – A PHILOSOPHER OF REDEMPTION. PROCESSION AND CONVERSION IN *LA CHUTE DANS LE TEMPS*

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**Abstract.** The question we want to answer in this paper is the following: is there soteriology, i.e. *doctrine of redemption*, in Cioran's work from his French period? If – as we had the opportunity to show elsewhere – his writings in Romanian indicate a kind of philosophical “therapeutics”, do we have sufficient reasons to think that his works in French was driven towards the formulation of a certain soteriology? Indeed, even at first glance, we have the impression of a change in discourse: his themes, his wordings, his references, the titles of his books, as well as some of his “characters” (God, Adam, the devil, the demiurge, the Man) do transport to a realm of explicit religiosity. Such impression may be misleading unless we immediately temper it with the explanation that it's not only religion that has a soteriological dimension, but also philosophy, namely to a different extent according to historical contexts, authors and so on. Thus, there aren't only religions, but also *philosophies of redemption* – such as the philosophy of Plotinus – which include religious motives and terminologies, although they basically remain unaffected by such homologies.<sup>1</sup> And Cioran is a *philosopher*, even though the existential dimension of his philosophy makes him repudiate the “theoretical”, “objective”, or “impersonal” aspects of philosophy.

**Keywords:** redemption, soteriology, procession, conversion.

## 1. PHILOSOPHERS' DELIVERANCE: SAVING THE MULTIPLE

As a matter of fact, as we shall see in this analysis – which follows one of his most important books of his French period, *La Chute dans le temps* – religion, though maybe preponderant, isn't the only reference framework. Rather, it seems that here as well as in other of his writings, Cioran wants to “test” his theory by passing it through various “mediums”: religious, anthropological, biological,

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<sup>1</sup> See Vasile Muscă, „Plotin și filosofia salvării” (“Plotin and the Philosophy of Redemption”), in Plotin, *Enneade I-II*, bilingual edition, translation and comments by Vasile Rus, Liliana Peculea, Alexander Baumgarten, Gabriel Chindea, București, Editura IRI, 2003.

psychological, and gnoseological. These levels are visited briefly and without any predictable order, yet the difference among them is rather obvious. Highly schematized, Cioran's construct shows its profound affiliation to a long and powerful philosophical tradition in which unity is the supreme value, and the true (sometimes ineffable) reality or substance, while multiplicity – its alterity – has an extremely complex relationship with it, where it may have different, sometimes conflicting values. Thus, the multiple may be sheer illusion (as in Parmenides), a copy or a shadow of the one (as in Plato), an emanation (as in Plotinus), or a mistake of an evil demiurge (as in the Gnostics).

A so-called “principle of individuation” explicates, in Cioran, the transition from unity to multiplicity, having as a result (a negative one, as it is a negation of unity) the “birth”, the awareness, the body, the illness, and the death. Individuation explains everything; the generation and proliferation of animal or human beings are due to it; lives emerge through separation from an anonymous, impersonal and inorganic pool; in its turn, awareness originates in a severance from the “flow of life”, from the spontaneity of naïve living; illness itself is a sort of severance and “individuation” of organs; the body is the materialization of severance par excellence; the will, in all its species, is the agent, the efficient cause of separation, while death is the supreme reflection of severance; this is both because it's only before dying that we become really aware of it as our ontological condition, and because it is its ultimate effect.

Cioran remains intertwined in the tradition when aiming to go beyond “multiplicity” and to restore “primordial” unity. His *method* consists in the careful analysis of the “compounds”, in other words their de-construction and de-composition that may allow us – while in search of true unity – to expose and denounce the “false” unities of the multiplicity. This is because multiplicity enchants us precisely by presenting to us as a unity of the body (as healthy), of life (as immortal), of the will (as inviolable) etc., which shows, as an ancient philosopher may speculate, how much we *naturally* aspire towards unity...

In any case, the “decay”, already announced in his *Précis de décomposition* as fundamental method of ultimate thinking, applies for any “irreducible” up to such elements beyond which nothing cannot be thought anymore: the empty mind, the vacuity itself. They reach an absolute level of thought where thinking is transfigured into a sort of experience of metaphysical unity. When it doesn't have an object anymore, the thought is resorbed into a state of mind or a feeling of undefinable identity. The description and the analyzing of such states play an important role in the writings of Cioran and they must be construed precisely in the spirit of *philosophical apophatism*, whose magisterial representatives were Plotinus and Damascius. Cioran's affinities with Neoplatonism were actually, as we shall see, even deeper. Cioran's skepticism in his French period must be interpreted from the perspective of apophatic thought; doubt – systematic, taken to its ultimate consequences, turn upon itself – has metaphysical stakes.

So, “salvation”, “redemption” or “deliverance” –fundamental terms in Cioran’s writing of his French period – have exclusively philosophical meaning, even though often times – as in the philosophy of Plotinus – references and language are taken from religious discourse. Then, what is the difference between the religious and the “philosophical” “salvation” or “redemption”? When philosophical thought deals with the issue of deliverance, it is precisely the relationship between the One and the multiple that is at stake. Does the preeminence of unity urge the annihilation of multiplicity or, conversely, can it be maintained and recovered (“redeemed”) in its “interiority”? Can these antithetic terms (One and multiple) be accommodated while giving up the logical exercise of thought and while taking it to the speculative and apophatic realm? Indeed, whenever approached, the relationship between One and multiple does push the thought to its extreme, where the principle of noncontradiction is suspended or reformulated; philosophers who did this include Heraclitus, Plato, Plotinus, Hegel, and Kierkegaard.

## 2. TWO PARADIGMS: THE CIRCLE AND THE CHAIN OF BEING

Precisely in this exclusively philosophical sense, the issue of salvation or redemption is appealing to Cioran. It is not the personal relationship between the individual soul and divinity or between its worldly life and the celestial immortality that is at stake, but the way how “individuation” may find its significance in the large to incomprehensible perspective of Life itself. Reconnecting the One with the Multiple, and thus saving the multiple in the unity of the One, presupposes a *return* to the base, a reference to the origin and to being. In such metaphysical insights, regressive by definition, the return (to being, origin, or God) may occur in two manners: either by completely going through a circular route (in which the starting point *isn't the same with the arrival point* even though, *largo sensu*, the two coincide; he who goes through a circle “never arrives to the same spot”), or by *going back*, by *conversion*, by contorting one’s mind and look, by a *reorientation backwards*. In the first type, the principle *is developed* and evolves towards “a larger self” in which the return to the self “includes the path” and in which the “in-itself” is reunited with the “for-itself” in an absolute consciousness. The Hegelian metaphysics is certainly the amplest illustration of this intellection paradigm. From a religious point of view, Christianity “embodies” a similar teleological insight: “redemption” is related to the end of history, and the latter to the fulfillment of all possibilities extant in it, and the return to the “initial point” – the restauration of the will of God – reflects in a synthetic manner the journey covered up to it. God-the-creator is and isn’t the same with God-the-judge; thus, the multiplicity (of historical events, or of individualities) is salvaged in the divine unity and does not vanish in it.

In the second type, returning means *reorientation backwards*, come-back or conversion. The philosophy of Plotinus is the best illustration of this insight precisely because it emphasizes in a most nuanced manner the essence of a paradigm that

defined Plato's school, which was extremely influential for a large part of ancient Greek philosophy<sup>2</sup>. One way or another, the "multiple" *participates* in the one, reflects, and re-produces it. Unity and multiplicity "are mingled" in an indefinite variety of grades and nuances from the closest proximity (Intelligence or Thought) to the farthest remoteness – matter. The Multiple emanates from the One, even though in a certain sense between the One and the Multiple there is absolute, radical difference<sup>3</sup>. Understanding the occurrence and the meaning of this emanation of the multiple from the One is the fundamental theme of Neoplatonism. Thus, between One and Multiple there is a continuous "come-and-go", a procession-conversion, an "up and down" path, an "action-reaction", a pendular oscillatory or undulatory relation whose most important consequence is the *eternity* of the world. As it is a manifestation and an emanation of the principle, the world is just as eternal as its principle. In order for the becoming to be fulfilled "within being", it doesn't need to get through a complete cycle to return to the starting point, because from a certain perspective, between the two there is no catastrophic, separating, "creating" moment. Two emblematic images correspond to these two paradigms, the Circle and the Chain (the great chain of being). As we shall see, Cioran's writings are subsumed to the second paradigm, even though they use images and references from classical texts that illustrate the circular insight on being. While influenced by Bergson in his youth, the Plotinian foundations of intuitionism become manifest in the second part of Cioran's work. As inclined as we might be to include him among Gnostics, the difference to Gnosticism<sup>4</sup> becomes crystal-clear in the following essential points: 1. Cioran ultimately accepts the *necessity* of world existence, while the salvation of multiplicity consists in a movement of conversion rather than its complete abolition (the spirit is captive between *the fall into time* and *the fall from time*); 2. Though the hypothesis of the "evil demiurge" has therapeutic valences, there is an intrinsic connection, an organic intertwining, or a mixture between the One and the multiple (whichever form this couple may take: Life-life, being-existence, eternity-time). 3. Finally, the evil of multiplicity (as the multiplicity itself) seems to be, in Cioran, only the *phenomenon* (or the illusion) made possible by the bad orientation of the human spirit (forwards, to the exterior, towards action); however, this may be corrected by its reorientation (backwards, to the interior, towards contemplation).

<sup>2</sup> For the discussions below, see Arthur O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being: A Study of the History of an Idea*, Harvard University Press, 1957, an absolutely essential work of exceptional value – in documentation and ideas – on the "principle of plenitude".

<sup>3</sup> In the sense that, being situated beyond the Intelligence and the mind, it cannot be contemplated by the mind itself: "One encompasses all, without any distinction" – Emile Brehier, *La philosophie de Plotin*, Paris, Librairie philosophique J. Vrin, 1968, p. 38

<sup>4</sup> According to Lovejoy's distinction, the Gnostics are characterized by otherworldliness, while Neoplatonism – and, I believe, the philosophy of Cioran – is characterized by "this-worldliness". (cf. Lovejoy, *op. cit.*, pp. 30-31).

### 3. THE TRANSCENDENTAL STRUCTURE OF THE “EVIL DEMIURGE”

Actually, in a book published five years earlier, *La Chute dans le temps*, he had detailed the “transcendental” structure of the *Evil demiurge*, the forms, categories, and judgments that make this “phenomenon” possible. He discusses especially the affective dispositions, feelings and states of mind involved in its constitution.

In the first section of the book, “The tree of life”, Cioran states the opposition between knowledge and life, a concept already included in his Romanian books. The two are incompatible, as man is crushed by the impossibility to recover his life by knowledge. Nevertheless, the knowledge of this impossibility and especially its deepening to “its ultimate consequences”, i.e. the dissolution of consciousness, seems to announce a possible exit from this “metaphysical” circle. Yet the restoration of the “pre-being” presupposes the detailed drawing of the genealogy of consciousness (and thus of death), as the reversed navigation of the “procession” and the realization of the “conversion” are inseparable from such knowledge, i.e. from a metaphysical and simultaneously gnoseological map.

The origin of knowledge and consciousness (in religious terms: the original sin) was preceded by a certain *unrest* – an anxiety that makes the first man go beyond his isolation in the infinity of God. Thus, the origin of the original sin is not the knowledge of “good and evil”, but the thing that precedes them – anxiety, unrest – which introduces the “future”, and so time, into the eternity, because the future is the very essence of human temporality. Before the “original sin” there occurs “la chute dans le temps”, the dissatisfaction caused by the “present” of eternity. In writing the “genesis” of consciousness, Cioran has important predecessors. Soren Kierkegaard, in his *Concept of anxiety*<sup>5</sup>, indicates the same origin of the “fall”. Previously Origen, in his work *On the first principles* (II, 9, 2), talks about a certain *satietas* or *kóros*, a kind of boredom or saturation – almost unconceivable in terms of the usual intellect – towards perfection itself<sup>6</sup>. Plato himself, in his *Phaidros* (246 a- 249c), designates as the origin of the fall of souls a certain “weight” in the handling of the “winged” carriage.

Actually, the last section of the book, “Falling from time”, illuminates – this time from the opposite direction, i.e. that of the conversion done to its end – this original point, this beginning of the fall into time. The man liberated from all conditions, attachments, and wishes, the absolute sage, reaches “the eternity below”, that negativity of eternity that may have been felt by the first man or the

<sup>5</sup> For instance, in Chapter 1, very suggestively entitled “Anxiety – a prerequisite of the ancestral sin”, Kierkegaard writes: “the whole actuality of knowledge projects itself in anxiety as the enormous nothing of ignorance”, *The Concept of Anxiety, a Simple Psychologically Orienting Deliberation the Dogmatic Issue o of Hereditary Sin*, Princeton University Press, 1980, translated by Reidar Thomte and Albert B. Anderson p. 44.

<sup>6</sup> In the anathema formulated by Justinian in 543 against Origen and his followers, this idea is actually the first indictment count. Cf. R. Roukema, „L’origine du mal selon Origène”, in *Revue d’histoire et de philosophie religieuses*, 83e année n°4, Octobre – Décembre 2003, p. 417.

first soul “fallen into time”, yet without having (or not yet having) the perspective on the “eternity above”, its perfection. By “falling from time” into the “eternity below”, those who try to go through the falling in the opposite direction remake, in its integrality, exactly the condition of the first man or the first soul, because together with this “unrest” he immediately placed himself outside of “eternity”.

Oddly, the last “station before the resorption into the One beyond the mind is actually the experience of the complete separation from it, the experience of the pure negativity of eternity, which is felt like an absence of time, like non-time. This moment of returning meets and identifies with the very initial moment of the “procession”: the one who falls from time meets, in all the purity of the original unrest, the one who has just fallen into time. They are situated at the absolute beginning of time, where eternity is already lost, and time irrupts exclusively as a negation and a loss of eternity. This last step in the sequence of the “return” is the first in the sequence of the “moving forward”, the first after the fall; it is the first “afterwards”, the absolute “afterwards”. In such a moment that we may experience in deep states of melancholy and boredom of total liberation “without God” we are presented, in total purity, with the very “unmoved mover” of all our actions, projects, and wishes, as this primordial unrest is the essence of time itself. “The last man”, the one fallen from time, is identified with “the first man”, the one fallen *into* time. For both of them, time is irresistibly attractive; it is the Temptation itself; for both of them there is only the negative side of eternity, its unbearableness, and this unbearableness is identical with the irresistible attraction of time.

We may call it “unrest”, “satiety”, “boredom”, “weight” or abandonment of the inorganic, of species, of the “elements” or of “life” itself: the phenomenon described by Cioran is a sort of original phenomenon of both the consciousness and the temporality (as temporality is immanent to the consciousness)<sup>7</sup>. As an original phenomenon, it can be met, if carefully analyzed, in all hypostases of human existence, or at least in the most significant of them; a source of confusion in Cioran is when, while “attacking it” in its religious, anthropological, sociological, biological, or psychological version, he refers to it by using the very denomination used for the ultimate “reference” of such sciences or fields (and often using their specific terminology). In fact, for Cioran, the ultimate reference of these “approaches” – God, Man, society, life of the human psyche or soul – are nothing but impersonations of the *original phenomenon of consciousness*. As he never explicitly announced his philosophical project – a project that subsumes all these particular perspectives – namely the phenomenon of consciousness, Cioran sometimes puts on the clothes of an anthropologist, other times those of a psychologist or a sociologist, and other times even priestly clothes. It must be added that his philosophical project includes a philosophical *therapeutic method* which again,

<sup>7</sup> „Cast by knowledge into time, we were thereby endowed with a destiny. For destiny exists only outside Paradise.” (E. M. Cioran, *The Fall into Time*, translated by Richard Howard, Quadrangle Books, 1970, pp. 35-36)

as it borrows keywords from the field on which he applies his “general theory” of consciousness, may sound, in turn, as a religious (redemption, deliverance, salvation), a psychological (cure), a sociological (the improvement of social life), or a sapience-oriented or spiritualist (resignation, serenity) “solution”<sup>8</sup>. In fact, the philosophical therapeutic aims at the unmounting of the intellectual “mechanism” that is ultimately involved in the consciousness itself; the purpose is to remake the primordial unity of the ineffable One beyond the mind and denying the intellection and any form of knowledge. To look at it like preliminary or anterior to consciousness is just one way of looking at it while keeping it within the terms of consciousness (whose essence, as we have seen, is temporality). In order to suggest the incomprehensibility of this One, Cioran does not hesitate to use all resources of “negation” and paradox available to him; however, we have to understand this is philosophical, not religious apophatism, which was also used by Plotinus or Damascius in the Neoplatonism.

For a better understanding of the therapeutic proposed by Cioran, let us watch him construct his theory on the occurrence of consciousness. Consciousness, an emission of the “initial unrest” and a sensation of “suffocation”<sup>9</sup> or the “incapacity to be happy” by which a primordial unity (named in a variety of ways: “paradise”, “God”, “life”, “species”, “impersonal”, “elements”, “indifference”, “anonymity”, “equilibrium”)<sup>10</sup> was “broken”, shall have as its “internal” law a “principle of partition”<sup>10</sup> that the man, the being that is aware par excellence, will apply everywhere. As the “origin” of consciousness is this primordial sufferance (unrest, suffocation, inappetence, dissatisfaction), absolutely all experiences of the consciousness, positive or negative, will be influenced by it (pleasure, pain, fear, joy, anxiety, but also composure and serenity, wish and renunciation, wrath as well as tranquility). Inasmuch as it still belongs to it, every experience of the consciousness is touched by its fundamental evil: the un-rest that is present, as we have already seen, even when we touch the highest spot of our own interruption, the vacuity of total liberation. So, can we imagine a leap beyond the circle of consciousness, a leap back into the One? When the intellection is corrupt to its core, even when the intellection is the very definition of corruption, how can we imagine a certain counter-act, such counter-experience? Certainly, within logical boundaries, we may say negation is the way to sublimate thinking and ultimately consciousness itself; it’s just that negation is an operation of the same order as affirmation. According to Cioran, superior to the negation is doubt, a negation’s negation, an absolute skepticism oriented towards itself, a skepticism indistinct from the most radical apophatism. Terms such as “the ego of the ego”, “the consciousness of consciousness”, “the liberation from the wish to be liberated”,

<sup>8</sup> Or political (the popular dictatorship or later, during his French period, democracy).

<sup>9</sup> „...only man suffocates there, and is it not this choking sensation which led him to stand apart from the rest of creation, a consenting outcast, a voluntary reject?” (*ibidem*, pp. 37-38)

<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 37

and “the salvation without deliverance” are used by Cioran to “found” an anti-logic or a logic of “decays” whose finality is the reaching of *liberty* and the resorption into the One. The old ideal of reaching the identity between consciousness and life or between subject and object must be a subject matter for meditation at least because such an exercise about the unthinkable, while representing the ultimate limit of intellection, may be useful for the purpose of dismissing it.

If considered in anthropological terms, the “unrest” that generates consciousness and disintegration from the primordial unity appears as “weakness”, “degeneracy”, and an “anomaly” of man; these deficiencies push him outside of animality, so he tries to overcompensate by developing knowledge and acts of will<sup>11</sup>. His weakness and his inability to adapt to nature make him appeal to technology and “fall into the state of a tool”. From an anthropological perspective, “ontological” unrest means *fear*: “The very malaise he suffered in Paradise was perhaps no more than a virtual fear, a rough sketch, a draft of the <soul.>”<sup>12</sup>. And fear is the hidden drive of all living beings, of life itself; it must be specified that, in man, it becomes anxiety and fear of future. As the reaction to fear is either flight or petrification, man will do both to excess, and excess is in turn a reaction to his congenital weakness<sup>13</sup>. The active and contemplative (“redeemed”) hypostases of man are the abnormal and sublimated (and exaggerated) forms of these “natural” reactions to fear. In both versions, man is but “the great runagate of being”, as he runs from his own precarity and... towards it<sup>14</sup>. The solution proposed by Cioran, the therapy indicated by him is nothing less than the “abandonment of man” in both senses of the term: as a self or an individual and as a species. Every monomania and all obsessions maintain and augment the anxiety, and they eventually fuel themselves and provide their own reasons and foundations. Man’s flight of himself can be prevented by forgetting both the man and the self. Proof of this, according to Cioran, is the success of religion, which invented a God in whom man can forget about himself.

From an anthropological point of view, the “severance” from animality is expressed in the separation or “fragmentation” of its organic unity into “faculties”, intellection and will, which are in a permanent conflict, both externally, towards each other, and internally, amongst the deeds of each of them, always trying to “rearticulate” and propitiate them. The dissolution or individuation principle is multiplied to infinity, starting from the mental and physical constitution of man (disease itself is a separation, an autonomation or a segregation of organs) through the knowledge, ideas, theories, and writings produced by man. The conciliations,

<sup>11</sup> „...he has invented and wields with demonic dexterity tools which proclaim the strange supremacy of a defective, a biologically declassée specimen...” (*ibidem*, p. 39)

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 40.

<sup>13</sup> „If he exaggerates everything, if hyperbole is his vital necessity, it is because, unbalanced and unbridled from the first, he cannot fasten upon what is, cannot acknowledge or accede to reality without trying to transform and exhaust it.” (*ibidem*, p. 39)

<sup>14</sup> „that gallop through the centuries which a form of dread has imposed upon us, a fear of which we are, in short, the object and the cause.” (*ibidem*, p. 41)



solutions or mediations obtained can be nothing but illusions or phantasies that can be “exposed” by “meditation”, but most of the times they expose themselves or disappear by themselves under the rush of the endless procession of “false” conflicts and “false” propitiations. The de-composition or des-articulation employed by Cioran in his French work aim at revealing the profound facticity of “articulations” and “combinations”. Man is an articulate being precisely because he originally fell to bits and severed from the primordial unity; thus, every articulation (from language through tools, from religion through philosophy and science) has the “fragmentation” or “individuation” as its essence or principle, both with respect to its constitution and dissolution. Such “procession” can only be stopped by “conversion”, by conscient dis-articulation, by dismemberment, by a series of reductions of illusory “complexities” to the elements they are comprised of, and especially to the individuation principle underlying the existence of separate elements.

These faculties, intellection and will, man could have “turn back” inwardly in order „to recover himself, to re-encounter himself and his timeless depths”<sup>15</sup>. However, he prefers the orientation outwardly and towards history, in a word towards the illusion. The “phenomenal” world is constituted by this projection of intellection and will, but the “noumen”, the thing in itself, cannot be discovered but through their interiorization, by “prospecting” the transcendental of the “amidst” rather than beyond, the inner rather than the outer. By turning back upon itself, the intellection is transfigured into meditation<sup>16</sup>, and will into renunciation.

Highly interesting is that Cioran adds to the doublet “life-Life” or “life-true life” another one: “knowledge-Knowledge” or “knowledge-true knowledge”. The “knowledge” is actually a replica of the initial ignorance and innocence (which is also false, as it was or could have been touched by the original unrest): it is formally defined by a thirst for *multiplication* of ideas, knowledge, by insatiable production, while materially it is defined by language and analysis; the purpose is nothing less than the “filling” of the emptiness that man perceives between him and himself, between and being or substance; however, this interval and this hiatus between “subject” and “object”, between man and the world/life/God is incommensurable, so his effort will be just as inefficient as it is frenzied. Conversely, true knowledge is nonlinguistic and nonanalytical knowledge; it is the silent intuition of the essence: „to know is to know the essential, to engage in it by sight and not by analysis or speech.”<sup>17</sup>.

Man tries to “heal” his detachment from Life, this original trauma, in two ways: by running from the regret and guilt inflicted in him by *beforehand*, in the future, in the act, by worshipping progress, by multiplying words and noises by

<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 45.

<sup>16</sup> „The antinomy is complete between thinking and meditating, between leaping from one problem to the next and delving ever deeper into one and the same problem. By meditation we perceive the inanity of the diverse and the accidental, of the past and the future, only to be engulfed more readily in the limitless moment...” (*ibidem*, p. 46)

<sup>17</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 47.

which he tries to cover and stop hearing his inner groaning or outcry after losing the primordial unity, or by going back and attenuating his volubility up to “dedicating a hymn to the Void”, towards the original trauma and beyond, towards the happy “anteriority” and „priority” of this trauma. Thus, the thinking and the talking will have to be suspended and stopped altogether: „If we could abstain from opinions, we should enter into the *true innocence (my italics)* and, moving backward by leaps and bounds in a salutary regression, be reborn under the Tree of Life.”<sup>18</sup>

Evolution, agitation, movement, and the cult of progress are “euphoric inflection” of the “original disease”<sup>19</sup>; in his historical and temporal dimension, man continues the “Fall” and deepens his break off Life up to the irrevocable. The correct orientation is *backwards* to the possibilities of experiencing the phenomenal world, towards the *virtual*, where temporality resorbs into the eternal now, the silence language, and intellection into the contemplation of vacuity.

However, the first step to be made in this direction – and here, Cioran proves to be extremely modern, if not postmodern – isn’t the deepening of the regret of being a man or the recanting of the species, but simply the “obliteration of Man”. Irrespective of how we may think about the issue of man and humanity, the solutions proposed will be profoundly dependent of this concept of Man, corrupt to the core, the center of the metaphysical and religious world that we install as soon as we utter it. Perfectly consistent with the logic of regression, Cioran proposes this “obliteration of Man” as the sole modality to reclaim the other aspect of being.

#### 4. THE SALVATION OF MAN FROM CIVILIZATION: THE REGRESS

The second section of the book, “Portrait of the civilized man”, puts the phenomenon of consciousness in a “sociological” perspective. The “fallen” man who pushed the separation from life to its ultimate consequences – the existence in an environment completely artificialized, entirely separated from nature and its rhythms, in the so-called “civilization”, characterized by the total dominance of technology – shall fight fiercely against the last uncivilized remains of humanity (the so-called primitives, cannibals, alphabets). The psychological drive to eradicate them is the resentment inspired by their very existence in nature, unaffected by civilization, a sign of intimacy with life that is regretted and simultaneously boycotted by the civilized man. This is precisely because they remind him of his “disease” that he wants to spread everywhere to make them all suffer – the palliative phantasm of every sick person.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 49.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 52.

The work of civilizing such populations – inseparable from mere propaganda for the truth of the ideas of “civilizing heroes” – is actually done for the revenge of the man who feels that he *has betrayed* life (in its essence incomprehensible, fluctuant, unpredictable) by his certitudes. Like a replica of the *embarrassment* of the first man after having bitten the fruit of knowledge, the embarrassment of the “dogmatic” who embraced a cause or a faith is expressed by the unstoppable drive *to dress* the whole world with the clothes of certitude – his or any other person’s. The important thing is that everyone *adheres* to an idea and is clothed in ideas and truths. Unbearable for the civilized man is not the person who adheres to a cause different from his, but rather precisely the indifferent (or, as we shall see, the skeptic) whose fluctuance or lack of adherence reflects the very flow of life, its continuous change and becoming.

It is exactly from this *duration* of life that he wants to divert them, by corrupting them towards the opposite path, that of events and history (the endless struggle of convictions) where the new follower will prove even more enthusiastic than the “apostle”, trying to catch up and outrun.

In his analysis of the relation between *anxiety and civilization*, Cioran has many common perspectives with the psychoanalysis of Freud. As a civilization grows larger and larger, the anxiety of the individual grows too – the same thesis formulated by Freud in his *Civilization and Its Discontents*. Cioran does not refer in first instance to the multiplication of the interdictions and rules of the superego, but to the multiplication of the false, useless, and unnecessary needs. However, this proliferation of “constraints” derives, as we shall see, from a “super-nature” added to the human mind by Christianity.

The “needless” needs that civilization incessantly multiplies deepen the break between man and life – defined by the “natural” needs, “gross but bearable” to which we are adapted “*ex officio*”. Unlike this natural “evil”, *the evil of civilization* is unbearable as we feel it is the result of our choice and the effect of an option. From the anthropological and sociological perspectives, civilization is what the original sin is for theology. The solution is, certainly, the “return” amidst, the reduction to a minimum, reentering the virtuality: “„As for happiness, if this word has a meaning, it consists in the aspiration to the minimum and the ineffectual, in the notion of limitation hypostatized.”<sup>20</sup> It is only by renouncing wishes, our own identity, and by reentering anonymity that we can get our freedom – the ideal of ancient wisemen and philosophers (Cioran quotes here from Epicurus); however, this ideal is outlandish or unattainable for the man of our time, who lives in a civilization created by *Christianity*.

In his criticism of current European civilization, Cioran targets its very foundation: Christianity. The contemporary civilization is a Christian civilization that has remained without an object. Yet it was left with its customs, a certain character or emotional tonus and a specific way of thinking about temporality and

<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 65.

spatiality. The “frenzy”, the emotional inclination of the present man, is a Christian genetic inheritance. Indeed, among religions, Christianity is the one that recommends the excess, the pathos and the mania as moral guidelines of the “new man”. If before and outside of Christianity, the “mania”, the frenzy, the divine inspiration, the mystical crisis, and the religious delirium were ex-centricities tolerated under certain circumstances, but always treated as exceptions, with Christianity they become the rule, and the common believer is required to express his faith in an exclusively passionate manner. Mania or the furor of inspiration are no longer, as in Plato for instance, signs of the privileged states of mind of poets, reciters or prophets, but they are part of the usual “morals” of the Christian. His faith is “insanity” for the wisemen of this world, because to God, worldly wisdom is insanity. There is nothing as estranged from the ideal of serenity and rational indifference, calm and ataraxy, the supreme values of ancient philosophers and sages. However, in our time, the individual, having lost the actual object of the Christian aspiration, has inherited its specific and indeterminate tension, which has become even more excruciating. He is no longer able to conceive of happiness but in terms of extreme passion, ardor, “insanity”, and furor, rather than in terms of serenity, inner peace, and ataraxy. But as there is no god to inspire him or to whom to address his enthusiasm, the present man seeks to effuse his impetus onto mundane objects that cannot fulfill his intentions as they are aimed at a finite object. Thus, the present man is conditioned by a “cultural” or spiritual unconscious to ardently look for the object that cannot be found outside of an initially religious frenzy originally directed towards an infinite and transcendent “object”. The same habit of *transcending* – inoculated by/through Christianity – leads to the loss of the “connection with the earth”<sup>21</sup>. The present man is more and more alienated and severed not only from the “depths of things”, but also from “their very surface”<sup>22</sup>. The transcendence of God is *applied* by the man produced by a Christian civilization as the transcendence of his own world towards the natural world. Thus, he shuts himself down into a completely artificialized sphere, separated from the natural elements, from animals and from his own animality. The spatiality of the present civilization, as derived from Christianity, is one of separation, severance, and ontological difference between man and the rest of the cosmos.

Temporality is also touched by this paradigm of transcendence; its specific mode – the *expectancy* – remains the distinct trait of the fundamental experiences of the present man. Expressed in religious terms as the expectancy of the Second Coming, the end of times or the deliverance, it has become nowadays a state of expectance of an indeterminate event, the news that the present man manically asks for and tries to produce at all costs, even at the expense of the most personal interests.

<sup>21</sup> „No more contact with the ground: all that sinks into it has become alien and incomprehensible to us.” (p.67)

<sup>22</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 67.

In Cioran's criticism of the present civilization (generated by Christianity), we get a better understanding of the profound motivation that drives his criticism of Christianity itself. Christianity is disavowed by Cioran as it fulfills a flawed orientation of the human mind by transforming it into a religious cult. Christianity is the religion of transcendence, the religion of *beyond*, with all the specific modes of this hypostasis: "outside", "exterior", "future", "expectancy", "progress"/ "going forward", "possible".

However, as we have had the opportunity to see up to this point, Cioran belongs to a different paradigm of thought, an emanationist (thus immanentist) metaphysics, whose supreme value is the *amidst* – with its corresponding modes: "interior", "now", "past", „nostalgia", "regression"/ "return", and "virtual". To remake these connections, it is essential to abolish time; this abolition can only be obtained by renouncing every form of possession, be it material or spiritual. It's not only properties, but also the wish to be someone famous hinders deliverance or salvation: "No one liberates himself if he insists upon becoming someone or something. All that we possess or produce, all that is superimposed upon our being or proceeds from it denatures us, smothers us. And our very being-what a mistake, what an injury to have adjoined it to existence, when we might have persevered, intact, in the virtual, the invulnerable!"<sup>23</sup>.

## 5. REDEMPTIVE VALENCES OF DOUBT

The analysis of the current civilization, the subtlety and complexity of which place Cioran amongst the most profound philosophers of culture, is not a purpose in itself. It is integrated in a vaster project about soteriology; of course, it is a philosophical soteriology, in the spirit of Neoplatonic philosophy, especially Plotinus's. We realize this in the third section of the book, "The skeptic and the barbarian", in which the phenomenon of skepticism, a symptom and almost a symbol of a fallen civilization, is interesting almost exclusively because of its soteriological virtues. Often times, Cioran feels the need to underline a definitory significance of "salvation", namely that it does not concern in any way collectivities or communities, but rather only the individual. It isn't without importance that the stringency of salvation or deliverance occurs precisely within the framework of civilizations already consumed, where the connections among people fall apart, and the individual no longer finds himself in the vaster, immediately perceptible "self" that is usually considered by his city, his home, his family, or his vicinity. In such moments, the individual finds himself absolutely alone, really bereft of a world of his own, completely estranged, ex-communicated. His social being remains without content, and the empty space in its turn asks to be filled ("an application for being", as Constantin Noica would call it). Reduced to the ontological dimensions of the

<sup>23</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 69.

animal (the “world-scarce”, according to Heidegger) or even the rock (“worldless”), the individual of disappearing civilizations will try to give himself a world or to find a world for himself, considering that, according to the said German thinker, *Being-in-the-world* is the very essence of human being. He will do this by embracing the faith in a (still) unseen world whose promised coming and light heat the relation between the followers up to fervor. Or he will try to sow in his soul the calm serenity of the wiseman; this amounts to an act of ultimate dignity of the rational man that may make him contemplate greater meaning in the last rays of the sunset. Or he will allow himself the skeptic games, exercising his mind for the sad amusement produced by the show of his own vanity. Finally, he will try to “set the time back” in order to regain the intact virtuality of a being situated before beginnings.

Cioran’s “skepticism” does not belong to the penultimate category we have mentioned, “theoretical” skepticism, as he himself calls it, illustrated in the history of philosophy by Sextus Empiricus or Montaigne, but to a so-called “practical skepticism”<sup>24</sup> in which doubt turns against itself and liberates the mind from its ultimate limits, thus reopening the possibility of making contact with the “self” of Life. This is an “apophatic skepticism”, as we have called it elsewhere, or a “visionary”<sup>25</sup> skepticism that cannot be properly understood unless one is correctly situated in the perspective of the philosophy from which it originates, whose most important traits are, as we have seen, Neoplatonism, Gnosticism, and intuitionism.

Even clearer becomes the classification of Cioran’s skepticism under the category of apophatism when the philosopher tries to define doubt as a form of negation, superior to the usual, which in turn is superior to the affirmation. The spirit has a negative essence because the conversion (the return or regression) to the original unity presupposes the negation of sensorial data, first of all their multiplicity and diversity. His negation is in fact nothing but the negation of a negation as long as “the no having presided over the partition of primordial Unity”<sup>26</sup>. Nevertheless, the usual negation is an “affirmation against the wool” and it negates “in the name of something-something external to our negation”. In contradistinction to it, doubt, “without availing itself of anything which transcends it, draws on its own conflicts, on that war reason declares against itself when, exasperated beyond endurance, it attacks and overthrows its own foundations in order to escape the absurdity of having to affirm or deny anything at all.”<sup>27</sup>. This depiction and the following are almost literal descriptions of apophatism; added to it is an elaboration of a very interesting gnoseological explication of the “apophatic doubt”. How is it possible, Cioran wonders, to go beyond the categories of reason by this internal

<sup>24</sup> “A civilization begins by myth and ends in doubt; a theoretical doubt which, once it turns against itself, becomes quite practical.” (*ibidem*, p. 76).

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Ștefan Afloroaei, in *Fortuity and Destiny (Întâmplare și destin)*, Institutul European, 1993.

<sup>26</sup> Cioran, *op.cit.*, p. 78.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 78.

war within itself? The most important limit of the reason is the *ego* – that assumption that is implicit in all rational acts of the existence of an agent independent from them, a judging *subject* situated outside of its judgments. The ego – this illusion, inherent to reason, is easy to dismantle from the logical point of view, as the ego itself is obviously a construct of reason. Nevertheless, Cioran observes with extraordinary subtlety, even in common acts of thought the *ego* is *forgotten*; it appears only in such moments when we think about thinking; it is a presupposition of a secondary and self-reflexive act of thinking. Thus, Cioran believes, it suffices to contemplate the “spontaneous movement” of the mind – which in the commonest acts of thinking lack the assumption of a *res cogitans* – to be able to “put ourselves on the level of life itself”, so that “we cannot think that we are thinking; once we do so, our ideas oppose each other, neutralize each other within an empty consciousness”<sup>28</sup>.

Doubt is not a simple act of thinking, like for instance affirmation and negation: this is an essential difference from the Cartesian “doubt”. Its origin, the so-called “intolerance for Being”<sup>29</sup>, gives it a right of transcendence over reason itself. This is why such skepticism acts upon the mind as coming from outside of it, as a fatality it cannot influence. If “doubt” were the result of an option, it would become a simple intellectual operation, but as it is not the object of a choice, coming from a much deeper source, one close to *life* itself, it is qualified as metaphysical experience. Through doubt, reason may reach its own dissolution, and the radical skeptic may reach, in a paradoxical manner, a *perception* outside of all mental faculties (and as we have seen, without a subject per se, without an “ego”) and also outside the antinomies and the contradictions made possible and produced by such faculties – starting with the opposition of all oppositions: life and death.

These few pages from the debut of the section “The Skeptic and the barbarian” are some of the most concentrated and difficult in Cioran’s work. They are written with highest gravity by a philosopher preoccupied to understand the manner in which the limits of reason may be overcome – by the metaphysical experience of doubt – towards the *noumen* of the “life in itself”. The phenomenal world is a product of our own mind, and the recovery of “virtuality”, the origin, the pre-being, and the non-birth are reduced to the liberation from the “categories” and the “shackles”<sup>30</sup> of this mind. In its gnoseological sense, individuation refers precisely to the constitution of phenomena (body, life, death, disease, health, good-evil, truth-false, etc.) after applying certain categories, concepts, and forms to the *noumen* of life. Thus, at this level, the recuperation of Life or the origin or the

<sup>28</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 79.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 80 It must be specified that the term “being” takes sometimes varied meanings: sometimes being is what precedes and opposes existence; it is what good is in relation to evil; other times – as in this case – “being” is equivalent to the “existence”. The “intolerance to being” means here the inappetence *to be*, for the manifested, realized, born, apparent/ appeared.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 79.

being, in one word of the state before individuation and unity corresponds to the withdrawal into the *amidst* of these phenomena, into the virtuality of their conditions of possibility, and into the *transcendental*. The absolute suspension of judgment will finally lead to the abolition of the difference between subject and object, perception and act, time and self: “No object, no obstacle or choice to evade or to confront; preserved both from the servitude of perception and from action, the self, triumphing over its functions, shrinks to a point of consciousness projected into the infinite, outside of time.”<sup>31</sup>

The coherence and the radicalism of the skeptic will lead him to disavow the very skepticism, because the instant when, after the universal exercise of doubt, vacuity is installed in consciousness with a dogmatic or doctrinal appearance, this vacuity will become the “subject matter” on which doubt will again be applied and devour itself. The coherent and radical skepticism comes to doubt itself and to negate its own results, because result and doubt are contradictory terms. Doubt is an act in itself, it is “fruitless”, and this is why the radicality of the skeptic is supported, in a paradoxical manner, precisely by the fact that he comes to intendedly embrace the “illusion” and the “fiction”! At this point, irony and self-irony replace the “extremism” involved in any ultimate term, be it even the “vacuity” before being and the non-creating nothingness envisioned by the “liberated” consciousness. Freedom is obtained when one has liberated oneself of the very wish to be free, when you are “redeemed” by the very “redemption” included in the supreme forms of liberation. A radical skeptic will lead his doubt to its last consequences by trying to lose himself in the anonymity of the others, by imitating their lives, and by “modelling the vulgus”.<sup>32</sup> It is only from the perspective of this self-negation of the skeptic – a proof of his consistency and radicality – that we may comprehend his availability to the thing that radically contradicts him: the barbarity. After having annulled his reason, he does the same with his will and even his organs; for this, a solution is the intervention of the “brute”, which is completely alien from the refinements of thought and addicted to the corrupt faith in the future and the possible. That doubt is a *metaphysical experience* is also shown by the fugitive mention of another version of the skeptic: the “heretical” or “capricious” skeptic who, as opposed to the “rigorous” or the „orthodox”<sup>33</sup> skeptic, transfigures the experience of consciousness vacuity into one of divine plenitude. From among such “traitors of skepticism” there occur the “religious minds” who “utilize and exploit doubt, make it a stage, a provisional but indispensable hell in order to embark upon the absolute and take anchor there”<sup>34</sup>.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 82-83

<sup>32</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 87.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 87.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 88.



Indeed, doubt is a metaphysical experience, and it is exactly in this capacity that it makes the object of careful and nuanced analysis. We can see how, in all its senses, doubt *refers to* something original, primordial, and anterior. As we have seen, even its provenience – the inappetence towards being – withdraws it from the range of simple acts and operations of thought and places it in the domain of non-intellectual experiences, thus qualifying it as an instrument of transcendence of reason, intellection, and actually all such mental faculties. Irrespective of whether it reaches the absolute vacuity of the non-phenomenon and the transcendental, or it encounters “Being on the borders of the Void”<sup>35</sup>, or finally, at its end, after a previous withdrawal into the essential, it finds again the apparent world as an endless spectacle of faiths, illusions, and fictions, in all these hypostases *doubt* is a metaphysical experience of regression, inversion, and “conversion”. Three soteriological hypostases of doubt...

## 6. INVOLUTIONISM AND THE FORMULA OF HAPPINESS: A BOULEVARD BUDDHA

As he goes beyond good and evil, the skeptic reaches a state similar to the one that the religious man assigns to paradisiac existence, before the Fall<sup>36</sup>. Actually, indifferent to glory, he even transcends any kind of duality, considering that the wish of assertion and individualization is the psychological drive and the deep motivation of *individuation* – in both the Luciferic and the Adamic versions (the original sin is committed not because of the wish to know, but rather because of the wish to assert oneself, to make a “scandal”). Anthropologically speaking, the separation from animals may also be attributed to the same wish for individualization and self-glorification. However, by dismantling the essential drive of all actions and projects, namely the “wish to be praised”, even by reversing this drive to the *opposite direction*, in the sense of wiping every trace of his existence, the skeptic will „regain, by a leap backward, the moment which preceded the agitation of Becoming”<sup>37</sup>.

The paragraph from which we have just given a quote may be considered the most articulate exposition of what might be called Cioran’s “involutionism”. Thus, the skeptic makes a “movement backwards” by which he reaches “the beginnings of history and even beyond”, he is liberated from the “overwork of the self” in order to “to huddle in the depths of primordial silence, in inarticulate beatitude, in the sweet stupor where all creation once lay, before the din of the Word” due to a need “to hide, to give light the slip, to be last in everything”, a drive “towards modesty” by which he rivals “with moles, accusing them of

<sup>35</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 89.

<sup>36</sup> See the entire section “Is the Devil a Skeptic?”, *op. cit.*, pp. 95–105.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 115.

ostentation”, “a nostalgia of the unrealized and the unnamed” to liquidate “evolution's attainments”<sup>38</sup>. The skeptic aims at “suppressing his own identity, and volatilizing his own ego”, at living “as if he had never lived”; he no longer “stands on any moment and any place” as “to be free is to practice being nothing”<sup>39</sup>.

A veritable case study in the sense of the above is Cioran’s commentary to the *Death of Ivan Illich*, the famous short story written by Leo Tolstoy. The inconspicuous and anonymous Russian clerk derives an identity and substance and actually begins to exist only after having the first signs of his incurable illness, and his existence acquires strength as he comes closer to his own death, in direct proportion to the intensity of his agony. If lucidity is the hallmark of human existence, then a man truly exists only on the brink of death, when his own demise becomes an obsession around which his whole being revolves. The detachment from life reveals the absolute of his individuality to him, which remained permanently from his so-called social, family, and professional life, which by means of an apparent community conceals the fundamental *separation*, intrinsic in the process of individuation, the loneliness as essence of the individual. It also reveals the illusion and the *general* deception of his life up to that point, because, however belated his death may come, almost every man feels in the moment of his agony that he actually didn’t have the chance to really live. This “really” does not have any content, and if the dying man were to be brought back to life, he would be forced, in order to live or even simply to breathe, to recommence the game of appearances and illusions and to indulge in conflicts again, whose irrelevance the angel of death had already made as evident as possible, and in lack of such illusions and conflicts he would have to invent them and to force himself into believing them. Not only the revelation of death, but actually any revelation has as its object the *nothingness* of life and of the world, the non-being hidden from the deceitful spectacle of multiplicity and diversity. This is why such revelations usually happen to dying people and persons who cannot live anymore: they are incompatible with the most common acts of life. This is the “danger of wisdom”: becoming a savage in the contemplation of vacuity, for it’s not just life that is comprised of illusions, but there isn’t *anything* left outside of such illusions either. Melancholia stalks the man who reached this revelation of death that kills life itself, and to get out of its annihilating monotony, the only way is, in psychoanalytical terms, the libidinal reinvestment of the illusion.

So, what is the soteriological redemptive formula proposed by Cioran? Like all redemptive solutions, it is paradoxical, contradictory, and apophatic. As we have seen in the detailed analysis of *La Chute dans le temps*, the “salvation” proposed by Cioran is *contradictio in adjecto*, a *coincidentia oppositorum*: the lucid and bon viveur man, the skeptic who doubts everything, including his own doubt, the liberated man delivered from his own deliverance. If the nothingness

<sup>38</sup> *Ibidem*, p.114.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 115.

unveiled in anxiety was putting Heidegger's *Dasein* before the plenitude of being, if the believer discovers God Himself beyond or amidst the vacuity, in Cioran, unrefutably a vitalist, the awareness of the vacuity of life reveals life as a *surface in itself*, as an apparent world *without any essence whatsoever*, and to repeat Nietzsche's expression, equivalates the being with beings, the existence with the essence, life with the Life.

The conversion, the return to the virtuality of "being", to the pre-birth state, prior to creation, immerses the skeptic into absolute vacuity, into the "vacuity of the void", whose internal logic he pushes to kenosis, the emptying of its own emptiness in a "filling" creation. After reaching this ultimate phase of the "knowledge", the skeptic understands or rather experiences on his own the reasons for which "there is something rather than nothing". He reaches the place where everything started, the initial *no* that the original nothingness, in full consistency, says to itself. The man who wanted to obtain salvation by returning to the primordial and setting back the creation clock reaches the place where he sees *salvation* from the other direction of the redemption path: as a wish for time, history, and conflict. As he tried to go above time, he fell *from* time and reaches the condition *before time*; he entered a state of intolerable perfection in which precisely the reentering in time presents itself as redeeming. Only he who reached such state is able to comprehend the ultimate reasons of the existence of *evil*, which translates in short into the existence itself. Cioran elaborates in a subtle manner a sui-generis theodicy, demonstrating the *necessity* of evil, a necessity that absolves him of his own malice, for if seen from their origin, "the wish", "the wrath", "the hatred", or "the ambition" appear as things indispensable for life and necessary drives for every creation or even act. The complete liberation from such passions amounts to a liberation from life and becoming a ghost. However, *inoculating* them intendedly – knowing that they are mere illusions and that such illusion is the sole substance, that there is nothing beside it, that "a dream of the non-being is the life of the whole world", playing one's part aware that one plays *only* a part, and simultaneously that there are only platforms and roles – is the soteriological formula proposed by Cioran, a philosopher whose ideal was to become a boulevard's awakened, a "boulevard Buddha"!<sup>40</sup>

*Translated by Adrian Oroşanu*

<sup>40</sup> "to feel we exist is to be infatuated with what is manifestly mortal, to worship insignificance, to be perpetually irritated at the heart of inanity, to fly into tantrums in the Void." (*ibidem*, p. 166)