

FROM A PROHIBITION OF IMAGES TO THE ABYSS OF NOTHINGNESS. CIORAN AND ROSENZWEIG ON HOPE

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Abstract. This article examines the concept of ‘hope’. It departs from Rosenzweig’s intuition that hope “is ever childlike”. It will appear that this childlikeness applies in more than only one way. Among other things, it creates a permanent starting point for our entire thinking and acting. Next, the article discusses the concept of ‘despair’. This concept is central to the writings of Emil Cioran (1911-1995). It is of note that despair while being a paralysing force, is not a principle for Cioran. This would have been impossible since despair can do no more than obscure hope, not eradicate it (which would be a condition for despair to be raised as a principle). At the end, and in line with some curious historical remarks and references in both Rosenzweig and Cioran, the article hypothesises about ‘Russians’ and ‘Jews’ as bearers and keepers of hope.

Keywords: Rosenzweig; Cioran; hope; Russian orthodoxy; messianism; youth experience.

INTRODUCTION

“It is only hope that is ever childlike (*kindlich*)”, Franz Rosenzweig (1886-1929) writes in his *Star of Redemption*.¹ A little earlier, he had called *love* “quite feminine” and *faith* “very masculine”. (Faith, hope, and love are associated by Paul in the *Epistle to the Corinthians* (XIII, 13), love being the highest of the three according to the Christian apostle.) Whereas some readers today may feel uneasy about Rosenzweig’s gendered approach of love and faith, no one can feel annoyed about how hope is qualified (“It is only hope that is ever childlike”), for we have all been *children*. What is more, even though children need to grow up and become ‘adults,’ childhood – or rather, *being-a-child* – will always have something of an ideal to be reached. It

¹ Franz Rosenzweig, *Star of Redemption*, trans. by William W. Hallo, New York/Chicago/San Francisco, Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1971, p. 284 (orig.: *Der Stern der Erlösung*, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1990/1921, p. 316).

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represents spontaneity, submission, confidence (if not even ‘faith’). It stands for the clean slate with which we would like to start each day again. It may even be paradigmatic for the phenomenological stance, which needs to free itself from presuppositions and interpretations as much as possible. When Freud argues that money does not make us happy as it is not a child wish, he implicitly points at the only things which can truly satisfy: cherishing, love, acceptance, warmth. Other than adults, children are honest about this.

Hope is childlike since it constantly searches for an original position: a habitat of cherishing, love, etc. Hope explores these either because it has consciously experienced them or because it is somehow – just like a child – implicitly familiar with them. Simultaneous with its conception, and thus before becoming conscious of self and world, the child has been warmly received; a difficult pregnancy or rejection at birth does not seem to alter this. Prior even to tragedies of juvenile trauma, the arch-original experience of a child will always be its being-received or -welcomed – albeit that the contrasting ‘thrownness’ (*Geworfenheit*, *être-jeté au monde*) of birth can make it hard to cling to this primordial experience.

In this article, I will examine the concept of ‘hope’. I will depart from Rosenzweig’s intuition that hope “is ever childlike”. It will appear that this childlikeness applies in more than only one way. Among other things, it creates a permanent starting point for our entire thinking and acting. Next, I will discuss the concept of ‘despair’. This concept is central to the writings of Emil Cioran (1911-1995). It is of note that despair while being a paralysing force, is not a *principle* for Cioran. This would have been impossible since despair can do no more than obscure hope, not eradicate it (which would be a condition for despair to be raised as a *principle*). At the end, and in line with some curious *historical* remarks and references in both Rosenzweig and Cioran, I will hypothesise about ‘Russians’ and ‘Jews’ as bearers and keepers of hope.

HOPE

What is ‘hope’ essentially: a concept, a principle, or an experience? It must at least be *conceptual*, if only in part. In *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, Kant showed this by rooting hope in reason itself. He argued that leading a life in respect of the moral law will automatically involve the agent expecting a kingdom of ends (*Reich der Zwecke*). The latter will endow our moral life with reality character: possibility will become actuality. Living a life according to the categorical imperative would be pointless, Kant continues, if it had not always already been accompanied by the hope that such a life has meaning and holds a promise.

It is true, indeed, that the man who, through a sufficiently long course of life, has observed the efficacy of these principles of goodness, from the time of their adoption, in his conduct, that is, in the steady improvement of his way of life, can still only conjecture [*nur vermutungsweise zu schliessen Anlass findet*] from this that there has been a fundamental improvement in his inner disposition.

Yet he has reasonable grounds for hope as well [*kann doch auch vernünftigerweise hoffen*]. Since such improvements, if only their underlying principle is good, ever increase his *strength* [*die Kraft... vergrößern*] for future advances, he can hope that he will never forsake this course during his life on earth but will press on with ever-increasing courage.

Nay, more: if after this life another life awaits him, he may hope to continue to follow this course still – though to all appearances under other conditions – in accordance with the very same principle [*nach eben demselben Prinzip*], and to approach ever nearer to, though he can never reach, the goal of perfection.²

Morality generates hope. One might even contend that hope will become susceptible to phenomenology, for that matter. I agree with Kant on this, but I would like to underline that hope as a concept cannot fail to become experience on Kant's account. Hope as a *mere* intellectual concept or conviction is senseless; experience will 'contradict' it. Whether or not intentionally, Kant shows that hope is nourished by experience: "the man who, through a sufficiently long course of life, has observed the efficacy of these principles of goodness," "such improvements [...] ever increase his *strength*," "will press on with ever-increasing courage," etc.

Hope, therefore, transcends the level of the purely conceptual. Yet, it would be too simplistic to equate hope with concrete and tangible *experience*. For that would be the opposite position and equally one-sided. The adage 'acting with the courage of despair' implies that hope and despair are closely related and simultaneously manifest. Under such circumstances, hope will be accompanied by just as many 'expressions' of its vanity. Acting implies hope, but hope does not automatically coincide with the assurance of immediate success.

Hope holds the middle between concept or conviction on the one hand and experience or persuasion on the other. When it is tilted towards either, this will be more *de facto* than *de jure*. One might surmise that hope transcends any dualistic anthropology which divides human nature over feeling and thinking. This is at least what I am arguing here. 'Hope' is not a human faculty that corresponds to a particular physical or metaphysical organ. Instead, it opens the human faculties as such, irrespectively.³ It does not matter how these faculties are classified or ranked. Hope is associated with openness and susceptibility to fulfilment. Our thinking, perceiving, and feeling consist of a *susceptibility* to thoughts, perceptions, and feelings; these will never fully be our *products*. One could even say that our phenomenal openness to what presents itself is analogous to the openness in which we once have been received ourselves, *in statu nascendi*. Once born, neither are we the complete accomplishment

² Imm. Kant, *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, trans. by Theodore M. Greene & Hoyt H. Hudson (*Die Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der bloßen Vernunft* II.1). Also cf. the introduction: "Yet an end does arise out of morality; for how the question, What is to result from this right conduct of ours? is to be answered, and towards what, as an end – even granted it may not be wholly subject to our control – we might direct our actions and abstentions so as at least to be in harmony with that end: these cannot possibly be matters of indifference to reason [*denn es kann der Vernunft doch unmöglich gleichgültig sein*]." *Ibid.*

³ Cf. M. Heidegger's notion of *Weltoffenheit*, 'openness to the world' in *Sein und Zeit*.

of the expectations that accompanied our conception (for we do not cease developing ourselves, we are never finished), nor do the thoughts, perceptions, and feelings that we receive fully saturate our expectant openness towards them.⁴ What is more, one can rightfully ask if openness and receptivity can ever be fully ‘replenished,’ in other words, if hope can ever be definitively fulfilled.

I argue that this is impossible. Hope is a phenomenon that defies phenomenology; it hopes for the impossible: its fulfilment. But the impossibility of fulfilment, I contend, does not imply the ultimate vanity of our desire (as Freud or Lacan would have it). It rather entails the permanence of our openness, which can never be saturated, filled or fulfilled. Saturating openness would annul it, and therefore, would negate hope. As a paradoxical consequence, any fulfilment of hope would be concurrent with the end of the being that hopes: the human being. If true, the human fate would hardly differ from the male tarantula, which is devoured after mating.

Do our openness and the corresponding unfulfillable nature of hope imply that humans are infinite – since insatiable – beings? At first sight, this seems to hold, although it would be more adequate to contend that the degree to which our openness (and so our hope) is fulfilled rather *produces* than presupposes the alleged infinity. For it would seem to contradict our ‘conception’ if the latter were re-projected in retrospect into the infinite past – as if we were ‘born’ *before* we were born. This would in fact, only annihilate hope, as an infinite being cannot hope (nor would it have to). Rather than attributing hope’s infinity and unfulfillable nature to an infinite human mind, my suggestion is as follows: the *way* in which hope is fulfilled will, on the one hand, *be* infinite itself, and on the other hand, *make* infinite. “Out of the chalice of this realm of spirits / Spumes forth [*schäumt*] for him – his infinitude”, as Hegel quotes Schiller. For whomever drinks from the chalice of conception or birth, the infinity of hope spumes forth. Having-been-conceived bears receptivity, susceptibility, or hope. The inexhaustibility *of* hope means that susceptibility *to* it will never be exhausted and that each allegedly ‘fulfilled’ hope disseminates specimens of prospective fulfilment – and therefore, of enduring hope.

DESPAIR

Despair is neither hope’s opposite nor its refutation. The desperate will always be permeated by hope, witness expressions such as ‘he desperately fought for his life.’ Other than ‘hope,’ despair cannot become a principle. Between 1938 and 1947, Ernst Bloch wrote *The Principle of Hope* – a title that might indicate that there is no such a thing as a principle of despair. ‘Principally,’ despair cannot become a principle, for that would cancel any new activity or action. A principle gives direction and orientation; despair can only offer these by immediately (and paradoxically) being inverted into its other, i.e., hope. Despair solely regards the *way* in which hope is fulfilled. It is wholly

⁴ Cf. Jean-Luc Marion’s notion of *le phénomène saturé*.

subjective, whereas hope ultimately transcends the subject. Despair parasites on hope while presenting itself as its refutation.

Meanwhile, it can do no more than thwart the openness entailed by hope. Despair relies on restricted awareness, hope, on the expansion of consciousness. Materialistic reductionism depends on limited awareness by definition. Insofar as moral agency (in whichever form) implies hope, materialism cannot lead to any other morality than an internally inconsistent one.⁵

The first publication of Emil Cioran is entitled *Pe culmile Disperări* [*On the Heights of Despair*].⁶ Cioran wrote it at the age of 22 when he was a disillusioned, depressed youngster. However, the text does not make a case for despair, nor is it an attempt to raise despair as a principle. Cioran only intends to show that anything we wish to set our hope onto is bound to deceive us. “Let us live in the ecstasy of infinity, let us love that which is boundless, let us destroy forms and institute the only cult without forms: the cult of infinity.”⁷ A little earlier, he had written that infinity leads to nothing, for it is provisional. ‘Everything’ is too little when compared to infinity.⁸ Rather than a philosophy of despair, Cioran’s thinking is radically *quietist*. In the preface to the French translation, Cioran writes that working on this book was to him “a sort of liberation,” “a wholesome explosion.”⁹ Climbing the heights of despair only affects those forms of hope which are anchored in a particular content. Hope itself cannot be affected, not only because it is more vital than a disillusioned, depressed youngster can ever imagine, but also because it will always resurface when despair has demolished hope’s nascent constructs. “There cannot be a relative rebellion in the face of injustice,” Cioran states. “There can only be eternal rebellion, because human poverty is eternal.”¹⁰ If human poverty is eternal, then so is hope, I am inclined to add. Without hope, there neither would nor could be an eternal rebellion.

While Rosenzweig connects hope with being-a-child and *die Gabe des Vertrauens* (“the gift of trust,” p. 316/p. 284), Cioran remarkably connects his feelings of despair with the alienation of childhood. Thereby, he opens up *thinking* to *experience*, whether or not intentionally. He frequently refers to his earliest disillusionments; for example, when, at the age of 10, his father took him on a horse carriage to high school in Sibiu, a 12 kilometer trip from his beloved birthplace Rășinari: “I cried, I cried the whole time, because I had the presentiment that paradise was finite [*que le paradis était fini*].”¹¹ Note that the term *fini* is ambiguous here, for it can be

⁵ The German philosopher Carl du Prel (1833-1899) writes “dass auf dem Boden des Materialismus die Nächstenliebe unlogisch bleibt, dass sie zwar als ererbte Anlage vorhanden, aber auf diesem Boden keine Steigerung schöpfen kann, daher im Verlaufe der Generationen notwendig verkümmern müsste, wie sie denn in unseren Tagen schon stark verkümmert ist.” *Die monistische Seelenlehre*, Leipzig: Günther, 1888, p. 309.

⁶ Bucharest 1934. French trans. *Sur les cimes du désespoir*, in Cioran, *Œuvres*, Paris, Gallimard, 1995. English trans. by Ilinca Zarifopol-Johnston, Chicago/London, University of Chicago Press, 1990.

⁷ Cioran, 1995, p. 87.

⁸ *Ibidem.*, p. 85.

⁹ *Ibidem.*, p. 17.

¹⁰ *Ibidem.*, p. 83.

¹¹ *Ibidem.*, p. 1747. Letter to Michael Jakob from 1988. (My trans.)

interpreted both as an adjective and as a past participle. On the first reading, the sentence means that ‘paradise has come to an end,’ but on the second reading, it suggests that ‘paradise is finite’. According to the argument I have tried to develop above, one could argue that the ‘finitude’ of paradise equally discloses it. An infinite paradise would also be a hopeless paradise.

In another fragment, from 1984, we read the following: “In my youth, everything which was not intense seemed completely nothing [*nul*] to me. It was no coincidence if my first book was an explosion. Nothingness [*le néant*] was inside me, and I felt no need to search it elsewhere. As a child, its presentiment had already occurred to me, throughout boredom [*ennui*], the bringer of abysmal discoveries. I could have cited exactly the moment when I had the sensation of emptiness [*vide*], the impression of being ejected from time. I have never stopped experiencing emptiness; it has become an almost daily encounter to me.”¹² And still in 1988, evoking once more his youth, he writes: “I am not a nihilist, although nihilism has always seduced me. I was still very young, almost a child, when I had the feeling of nothingness [*le sentiment du rien*], following an illumination that I cannot define here. Rejection has always been more powerful in me than enthusiasm [*emballement*]. Being animated both by the temptation of the absolute and by the persistent feeling of the void [*le sentiment persistant de la vacuité*], how I could have ‘hoped’ [*comment aurais-je pu ‘espérer’?*]”¹³ The latter question is obviously ‘rhetorical’. Still, if it were taken as a ‘real’ question, one would be inclined to answer: the paralysing borderline experience itself, the wavering between extremes, prevents the subject of this experience from ‘associating’ with hope. Had Cioran yielded to either of the extremes – albeit even the *sentiment persistant de la vacuité* –, hope would have been given a chance, if only for the reason that the ‘absolute’ and the ‘void’ are perhaps not mutually exclusive but mutually implicative.¹⁴ This is at least an idea that is oddly shared both by existentialist philosophers (Kierkegaard, Sartre) and mystical traditions.

Cioran’s despair remarkably illustrates that hope cannot be *anchored* in a concrete entity – even though it is frequently associated. Cioran equally demonstrates that he is not alien to the idea of fulfilment, his philosophical discovery being rather that it can be *taken* from us. To use Freudian terminology: ‘castration anxiety’ had inexorably pushed him into regression and melancholy – thereby letting him take ‘castration’ for granted. The daily experience of the void (*vide*, *vacuité*) had exempted him from being complacent with any substitute; poetry and music can at best keep the void at a distance. (“As long as one frequents poetry, one does not put the inner void at risk [*vide intérieur*]. [...] Just as with music, one touches upon something essential

¹² *Ibidem.*, p. 1765. To Gerd Bergfleth. (My trans.)

¹³ *Ibidem.*, p. 1766. To Sylvie Jaudeau. (My trans.)

¹⁴ Interestingly, one of Cioran’s earliest testimonies of inner ‘progress’ is a book written during the Second World War, *Indreptar Patimas* (*Bréviaire des vaincus*). In light of my argument here, its title is as telling as it is promising. Also cf. “un vide qui dispense sa plénitude ne contient-il pas plus de réalité que n’en possède l’histoire dans son ensemble?” *Histoire et utopie*, in Cioran, 1995, p. 1061.

which satisfies one [*qui vous comble*, ‘which fills one’]: a sort of grace, of supernatural complicity with the undefinable.”¹⁵ Ultimately, both music and poetry are only temporary placeholders. A more radical attitude is required. “[I]t is not when things leave us,” Cioran writes in *History and Utopia*, “it is when we leave them that we accede to an inner nakedness, to that extremity where we no longer affiliate ourselves with this world or with ourselves, and where victory signifies resignation [*se démettre*], serene self-renunciation without regrets and above all without melancholy.”¹⁶

The radical self-surrender that Cioran describes here can be found in several mystical traditions, however different: the hesychasm in Gregory of Palamas, abandonment in Eckhart or Ruusbroek, or *wu wei* in Daoism. Only radical self-surrender allows for reaching an inner depth that endlessly transcends each utopia or finite ideal. “No paradise,” Cioran concludes *History and Utopia*, “unless deep within our being, and somehow in the very heart of the self, the self’s self”.¹⁷ Note that this quotation equally testifies to finitude *rather* than a termination of paradise.

Born and raised in the mystical tradition of Eastern Orthodox Christianity, Cioran may have discovered throughout his own life that his innate depression and the concomitant pessimist views which make up for his work, had no other fate than invigorating inner self-surrender. In one of his last texts, ‘Absage an das Bild’ (‘refusal of the image’), Cioran reinterprets his work from the motif of the *oratio ignita* (‘the prayer of fire’)¹⁸; this prayer can only be prayed if one is so immersed by a brilliant yet transcendent light that each word escapes – even the word ‘God’.¹⁹

EASTERN HOPE

It would be misleading not to take Cioran’s despair seriously enough and all too easily integrate it into rhetoric of hope. Cioran’s work explicitly shows that disillusionment coincides with the loss of childhood and youth. The horse cart which brought him from his birth village to the Sibiu high school dispossessed him of *die Gabe des Vertrauens* (‘the gift of faith’). Together with the childlike hope, he lost the ‘faith’ and the ‘love’²⁰ which, according to Rosenzweig, coalesce in and are supported by hope.²¹

¹⁵ *Ibidem.*, p. 1773. To Sylvie Jaudeau. (My trans.)

¹⁶ *History and Utopia*, trans. Richard Howard. New York: Arcade Publishing, 1987; origin. Cioran, 1995, p. 1031. Also cf. “Etre l’âme du vide et le cœur du néant!,” *Bréviaire des vaincus*, in: Cioran, 1995, p. 571.

¹⁷ Cioran, 1995, p. 1061.

¹⁸ This term originates in the 4th/5th century ‘Romanian’ theologian John Cassian. Cioran does not mention his name here.

¹⁹ ‘Absage an das Bild’, transl. from the French by Horst Schumacher, in: Gerd-Klaus Kaltenbrunner (Hsg.), *Die Suche nach dem anderen Zustand. Wiederkehr der Mystik?*, München: Herder, 1976, pp. 142-144.

²⁰ “moi qui n’ai jamais été tenté par la foi” (Cioran, 1995, p. 1754) of “Heureux en amour, Adam nous eût épargné l’histoire” (ibid., 794).

²¹ “In die Hoffnung fügen sich die alten Kräfte, fügen sich Glaube und Liebe ein. Vom Kindersinn der Hoffnung her kriegen sie neue Kraft, dass sie wieder jung werden wie die Adler.” (Rosenzweig, 1990, p. 316)

On the other hand, “[h]ope is given to man only if he has it,” Rosenzweig argues.²² This means that each given hope *strengthens* hope already existent.

It is of note that Rosenzweig attributes this function primarily to *Eastern Orthodoxy*, which, so he claims, has finally been acknowledged by Western Christianity: “The Russian Church proved to be the soil which nourished [*Nährboden*] a limitless force of hope.”²³ Moreover, he ascribes it to a development that he believes is just as essential as the acceptance of the Russian Church: the liberation of the Jews and their integration in the Christian world of Western Europe. “Here hope, however,” Rosenzweig continues, “the elemental force of the new world of completion, flows directly from the eternal people of hope, divinely childlike by nature [*gotteskindliche*], toward the Christian peoples more experienced in love and faith than in hope. [...] For hope, which love would like to forget and faith believes it can dispense with, lives as a matter of blood-inheritance [*blutmässig*] only in Jewish blood.”²⁴ When we realise that Rosenzweig writes this in times at which Jews from Eastern Europe (*Ostjuden*), persecuted and expelled after pogroms, provided secularised Western Europe with a new spiritual *elan* the conclusion seems obvious: the spiritual renewal which rediscovered Russian Orthodoxy can bring is closely associated with the newly disclosed Jewish culture. For, Rosenzweig writes, the Jewish people are “the eternal people of hope, divinely childlike by nature [*gotteskindliche*].” As such, perhaps even unintentionally (this is at least how I interpret the words “as a matter of blood-inheritance,” *blutmässig*), the Jewish people bring hope and inspiration – rather than a new church, he adds.²⁵

It is of note that Cioran, a thinker of despair, ultimately sides with Rosenzweig on this point. In a letter of 1992 to the Serbian author and journalist Branka Bogavac, he writes that the Russians are “a great people [...] especially on the field of religion. It is essential,” he adds, “that the Russian religious foundation does not disappear.” “It is possible,” Cioran continues, “that the form of orthodoxy today will not be the same anymore as before, but it is excluded that the Russian religious foundation will evaporate. [...] The great Russian authors are all characterised by a religious taint. But the others, too, when they were truly atheist at all, it was in virtue of their involuntary religiosity.”²⁶

It is even more noteworthy to read that, according to another letter written in 1984 to the Italian artist Lea Vergine²⁷, Jews have always shown great interest in Cioran’s work. “I have always known many extremely interesting Jews,” Cioran writes, “they are the most intelligent, unpredictable persons, the most generous in human relations. When I

²² Rosenzweig, 1971, p. 284 (origin., p. 316).

²³ Rosenzweig, 1971, p. 285 (origin., p. 317).

²⁴ *Ibidem*.

²⁵ When Levinas calls Judaism “a religion for the adult”, also in light of the “complete abandonment [*déréliction totale*]” which the Jews went through during the Hitler regime, and their “condition inférieure à celle des choses,” he seems to neglect, rightly or wrongly, the perspective of hope, in favour of ethics. Also remarkable is his claim that “le judaïsme se sent extrêmement proche de l’Occident, je veux dire de la philosophie.” ‘Une religion des adultes,’ in *Difficile liberté*, Paris: A. Michel, 1976 (1963), pp. 25, 29.

²⁶ Cioran, 1995, p. 1779f. (My trans.)

²⁷ Lea Vergine has died only recently (October 2020), one day after her husband, from COVID-19.

came to France, the only ones interested in me and asked me how I made a living were Jews. I lived together with Jewish-Hungarian refugees in 1937.”²⁸

What would, in Rosenzweig’s or Cioran’s logic, Russian Orthodoxy and Judaism have in common? I surmise that it is a notion of the mystical meaning of the *prohibition of images* (“You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God,” *Exodus* 20, 4f). A confrontation between Rosenzweig and Cioran shows that hope is connected to the observance of the prohibition of images.

At the same time, the preservation of hope should equally withstand the *loss* of its primal basic structures (one’s birth ground, the protection of the maternal uterus). These basic structures have germinated hope but should be protected from regression behind these same structures into the abyss of nothingness. Cioran pioneered when endeavouring on the heights of despair, thereby losing his childhood’s existential meaning. Innumerable meetings during his lifetime, not in the least with Jews and Russians, made him exclaim, in a letter to the Jewish-Mexican poet Esther Seligson: “Human beings frighten me, but I am no misanthropist.”²⁹ And in a conversation with the journalist Sylvie Jaudeau: “I am not a nihilist, even though the negation has always tempted me.”³⁰

Hope oscillates between a prohibition of images and the abyss of nothingness.

²⁸ Cioran, 1995, p. 1755 (My trans.)

²⁹ Cioran, 1995, p. 1761 (My trans.)

³⁰ Cioran, 1995, p. 1766 (My trans.)