

# EMIL CIORAN ON THE DILEMMAATIC OTHERNESS

Ileana TĂNASE

”Valahia” University of Târgoviște  
ileanatanase153@yahoo.com

## **Abstract:**

Defined as “man’s fatal passion”, *otherness* represented for Cioran the corollary of a philosophy of “infinite possibilities”, born of an irrepressible longing to depart. This form of inner freedom, transmuted into the impossibility of settling, turned, in his view, from a spiritual symbol into a condition of human nature. Yet, by choosing the alternative of *otherness* over the *something* of his origins, Emil Cioran ends by asking himself, rhetorically, what good the change had done him: had he remained in his native village, would he not have grasped life’s essential truth just as well, perhaps even better, than amid the tumult of technicist blessings offered by a civilisation that estranges man from primordial wisdom?

## **Keywords:**

Something, otherness, alternative, change, return.

The indefinability of *otherness* paradoxically grafts itself, at times, onto the concreteness of a particular *something*. In Cioran’s case, that *something* signifies his given origin, his roots; yet from early on he experienced a thirst for *otherness* as a mode of living the distant, projecting it into the dream of change, of wandering, a dream which, once fulfilled, would engender a fundamental dilemma: did the obsession with choosing *otherness* over *something* not imply that the alternatives confronting him were destined, in the end, to converge upon the same disquieting conclusion?

To live the distant is to live in exile – spatial or temporal. Emil Cioran endured both, driven by the passion of pride and an immeasurable vanity that forbade him the conviction of belonging to any one place or time. Even in choosing France as the geography of his exile, Cioran obstinately denied any repatriation as spatial fixation. In *Amurgul gândurilor* (‘The Twilight of Thoughts’) he states explicitly:

“*Inner depatriation is the absolute climate for rootless thoughts. You do not attain the majestic futility of the spirit so*

*long as you have a place in the world. One always thinks from the lack of a homeland. Without borders, the spirit has nowhere to confine you. That is why the thinker is an emigrant in life.”<sup>1</sup>*

The inception of this “inner depatriation” occurred in Cioran’s life journey with his departure for Sibiu – a rupture from an ancient, somewhat primitive world (as childhood in Răşinari would later reveal itself to him). Though still in his own country, he felt somehow abroad, living in Sibiu between two civilisations, a condition owed largely to his frequenting of the German-language library. Thus, when he later arrived in Berlin on a Humboldt scholarship, his perceptions were far from those of a wholly new world. And when, abandoning Berlin for a month to visit Paris, he experienced – premonitory – the “revelation of falling into the future”, the young Cioran began to be consumed by an obsession with France, and above all with its capital, which he could reach only through another scholarship, this time from the French Institute in Bucharest, in exchange for a promised doctoral thesis in philosophy. In Paris, immediately after the war (1944), he specialised in Old Romanian literature, consulting primarily religious writings at the Romanian Church library. Yet realising he no longer wished to return to Romania and that such specialisation would serve him no purpose, he became aware that he must sever ties with the past, a rupture that demanded renunciation of his mother tongue. He could not continue in Romanian while his aspirations moved toward a new vision: writing in French.

The change came with unusual rapidity while translating Mallarmé, when confronted with the direct “clash” between the poetic resources of two distinct languages (though of common origin), he endured the painful experience of transposition with its inherent semantic losses. At that moment, assailed by the lucidity of imminent identity loss, he understood that liberation from the past presupposed, above all, the leap of detachment from his former language:

*“For if language is the limit that confers identity within the order of spirit, abandoning a language means giving oneself another limit (finis), another de-finition; in short, changer*

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<sup>1</sup> E. Cioran, 1991, *Amurgul gîndurilor*, Bucureşti: Humanitas, p. 193.

*d'identité. The phenomenon is so abrupt that it amounts to a death and reincarnation in another linguistic body.”<sup>2</sup>*

Yet comparing the two idioms did not bring only disadvantages; Cioran repeatedly rediscovered a Romanian of inimitable poeticity:

*“Our language is the most poetic of all I know or intuit. What luck – and yet what misfortune. A people condemned to isolation.”<sup>3</sup>*

*“Our language is among the most expressive. I was deeply moved the other day when I came across **Căci te priveam cu ochi păgâni** (‘For I would gaze at you with pagan eyes’ – T.N.) – **păgâni** is haunting and has force only in Romanian. What absurdity to write in these ‘civilised’, conventional languages.”<sup>4</sup>*

The “confrontation” between two languages conceals, in equal measure, a clash between two worlds: distancing oneself from the initial geographical space lends one’s gaze a sharper comprehensiveness through the aspiration towards objectivity. This is not the case with Emil Cioran, who, both during his years in Romania and after leaving it, continued to perceive his country in a single light: that of “historical misfortune”.

Ten years after his arrival in Paris (1947), Cioran submitted to Gallimard the manuscript of his first book in French, *Précis de décomposition*. This came after his last Romanian work, *Îndreptar pătimăș*, written between 1940 and 1944 (the previous five had been composed and published in Romania).<sup>5</sup>

By then, he had acquired the necessary ease in writing French, after years of labouring, like no one else, in its mysteries. His definition of French as “a mixture of straitjacket and salon” said everything about his mastery of it: to reach the “salon”, that is, the refinement of an elevated spirit, he first

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<sup>2</sup> Gabriel Liiceanu, 1995, *Itinerariile unei vieți: E. M. Cioran*, București, Humanitas, p. 40.

<sup>3</sup> E. Cioran, 1995, *Scrisori către cei de-acasă* (Letter to Aurel Cioran, 27 November 1976), București, Humanitas, French translation by Tania Radu.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, Letter to Aurel Cioran, 23 February 1979.

<sup>5</sup> These are, in chronological order, *Pe culmile disperării* (București, Fundația pentru literatură și artă, 1934), *Schimbarea la față a României* (București, Editura Vremea, 1936), *Cartea amăgirilor* (București, Editura Cugetarea, 1936), *Lacrimi și sfinti* (tipăritură privată, 1937), *Amurgul gîndurilor* (Sibiu: Editura „Dacia traiană”, 1940).

had to pass through the stage of the “straitjacket”, the disciplining of new configurations of thought and expression in a language “for jurists and logicians”, as he himself called it. Regarding his first French book, Cioran confessed:

*“The **Précis** was an explosion. Writing it, I felt as though I were freeing myself from a crushing weight under which I could not have endured much longer; I needed to breathe, I needed to explode. I felt the need for a decisive reckoning, not so much with men as with existence itself: I would have liked to summon it to a fair fight, if only to see who would triumph. To be honest, I was almost certain I would prevail, that it was impossible for existence to triumph. To corner it, to press it against the wall, to reduce it to nothingness with the aid of frenzied reasoning and accents recalling Macbeth and Kirilov – that was my ambition, my aim, my dream, the programme of every moment.”<sup>6</sup>*

The competition awarding the best French manuscript by a foreigner ended with the resounding success of Emil Cioran’s writing, greeted with praise by illustrious voices of the time (André Maurois, Claude Mauriac, Jules Romains, among others), as well as by the press, which dedicated laudatory pages through Maurice Nadeau’s pen:

*“Here, then, is the one we were waiting for: the prophet of concentrationary times and of collective suicide, the one whose coming all the philosophers of nothingness and absurdity were preparing, the true bearer of the evil tidings. Let us salute him and look closer: he will bear witness for our age.”<sup>7</sup>*

Nadeau distilled the essence of a newly discovered talent, confessing that it shocked by the intensity of the cry of a suffering being seemingly beyond “the great commonplaces of despair”. In truth, Cioran was resuming the frenzy of reckoning from his first Romanian book, *Pe culmile disperării* (*On the Heights of Despair*), a fact underscored by the philosopher’s own penetrating spirit:

*“My way of seeing things has not fundamentally changed; what has undoubtedly changed is the **tone**. Rarely*

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<sup>6</sup> E. Cioran, 2003, *Exerciții de admirătie*, translated by Emanoil Marcu, București: Humanitas, p. 202.

<sup>7</sup> M. Nadeau, in : *Combat*, 29 septembrie 1949.

*does the substance of a thought truly alter; what metamorphoses is the turn of phrase, the façade, the rhythm.”<sup>8</sup>*

Cioran's voluptuousness for contradiction manifested itself in daily life as well: all the stir surrounding the *Précis*<sup>9</sup> and the works that followed brought him substantial prizes – Rivarol, Sainte-Beuve, Combat, Nimier – which, with the exception of the first, he refused. His explanation was in perfect accord not only with the philosophy emanating from his writings but also with the way he chose to live: “*You cannot write a book like **The Trouble with Being Born** and then accept a literary prize.*”<sup>10</sup>

To his refusal to bow before any cliché was added his reluctance to be understood “too soon” by a public too close to him. In this respect as well, Cioran cultivated *distance*, preferring rather the favourable reception of his books by readers in Spain, Italy, Germany, Japan or America than by the French public.

Living *the distant* placed him outside any precise space and outside any given time. His unwillingness to fix himself upon a firm coordinate became a cardinal rule. The “need” or “longing to depart” would become the corollary of a philosophy circumscribed by a single word: *Otherness*.

“*And this Otherness is man's fatal passion.*”<sup>11</sup>

By choosing the paradigm of *Otherness*, the thinker advocates a philosophy of “infinite possibility”, interpretable as the impossibility of settling:

*“There is no place under the sun to hold me, nor shadow to shelter me, for space becomes vaporous in the surge of wanderings and insatiable flight. To remain somewhere, to have your ‘place’ in the world, you must have accomplished the miracle of finding yourself at some point in space, unbent by bitterness. When you find yourself in one place, you do nothing but think of another, so that nostalgia organically*

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<sup>8</sup> E. Cioran, *Exerciții de admirare*, ed. cit., p. 201.

<sup>9</sup> *Syllogismes de l'amertume* (1952), *La tentation d'exister* (1956), *Histoire et utopie* (1960), *La chute dans le temps* (1964), *Le mauvais Démurge* (1969), *De l'inconvénient d'être né* (1973), *Ecartellement* (1979), *Exercices d'admiration* (1985), *Aveux et anathèmes* (1987).

<sup>10</sup> E. Cioran apud Gabriel Liiceanu 1995, *op. cit.*, p. 56.

<sup>11</sup> E. Cioran, 1991, *Amurgul gîndurilor*, București, Ed. Humanitas, p. 111.

*takes shape as a vegetative function. The desire for otherness, from spiritual symbol, becomes nature.”<sup>12</sup>*

The “nature” Cioran speaks of here signifies the human condition – contradictory in its restlessness – a conclusion he reaches after first projecting, into the flight of time, a flight from self:

*“As a child, you could not keep still. You roamed the fields. You longed to be outside, far from home, far from your own. You blinked playfully toward the edge of the sky and rounded the heavens to the measure of nostalgic yearnings. Leaping from childhood into philosophy, the years magnified your horror of settling. Thoughts took the world by storm. The need to wander entered into notions.”<sup>13</sup>*

This *longing* or *need to wander* tormented Cioran even when he seemed closest to having settled forever in the place once imagined as the ideal of permanence: Paris. Yet, in the meantime, the ideal Paris had given way to a metropolis in twilight, in the decline of a civilisation that had once meant everything to him. And thus, through the longing to wander, *the distant* assailed him anew. Dissatisfied with the futility of fate, of which he felt himself the “defeated master”, he was lured by the phantoms of his earliest years: a return in time projected fragments of his first steps, when, with the ardour of youth, he aspired to conquer the world:

*“Caesar? Don Quixote? Which of them, in my arrogance, did I wish to choose as a model? It does not matter. The fact is that, one day, from some distant land, I set out to conquer the world, all the perplexities of the world...”<sup>14</sup>*

That Cioran, upon leaving for Paris, startled the cultural world with the delirium of lucidity with which he cried out his metaphysical anxieties is already a matter of record. But in Paris, that same lucidity would lead him to reconsider the values of existence, which he would detach from any contact with contingency:

*“Today I believe it would have been far better for me had I remained a shepherd’s helper in the small village I come*

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 104.

<sup>14</sup> E. Cioran, *Silogismele amărăciunii*, Bucureşti: Humanitas.

*from. I would have understood the essential just as well as now. I would have been closer to the truth there [...] It would have been better to live among animals, with simple people, shepherds, in particular. When I go to utterly primitive places, when I speak with utterly simple people, I always have the impression that truth resides in these people [...] Culture, civilisation are not necessary for what is essential. To understand nature and life, you do not need to be cultivated.”<sup>15</sup>*

In one of his letters to his brother Aurel, as early as the 1970's, the writer had a premonition concerning the authenticity of existential truth, which he elevates to the rank of *ultimate truth* in our lives:

*“The more primitive you are, the closer you are to the primordial wisdom that civilisations have lost. [...] Any shepherd from our land is more of a philosopher than any intellectual here.”<sup>16</sup>*

After seeking and finding his adopted country, Emil Cioran chose to return – though only as an ideal projection – to his origins, to that place where man, untouched by the appearances of technicist blessings of civilisation, stands face to face with his own image and surrenders to disarming sincerity. But to accept the way back, it was inevitable that he first “go astray” (a phrase designating a reality so dear to him), for only thus could he compare and choose.

The alternative of *otherness* proved absolutely necessary for him to traverse the reverse path and end by asking himself, bewildered and resigned: *Pourquoi avoir quitté Coasta Boacii?*

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<sup>15</sup> E. Cioran, 1993, *Con vorbiri cu Cioran*, Bucureşti: Humanitas, p. 154.

<sup>16</sup> E. Cioran, 1995, *Scrisori către cei de-acasă* (Letter to Aurel Cioran, 6 April, 1972), Bucureşti: Humanitas.

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