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E. M. Cioran and the self-image of the modern philosopher in the
broken mirror

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Abstract

The illusion of the author's intentionality "in the carpet," according to Henry James' allegory, is lethal for hermeneutics. Are there cases of authors whose image is discretely hidden in the texture of their work, even when it is philosophical? Critics tried a biographical quest in Cioran's case, in order to explain anti-humanism which was primarily explained due to his modern misanthropy. The representation of the lacunar self in his fragments, between the pride of unitary Creation and existential impasse, is the most visible method of his imagological game. In this article we will investigate the validity of such research starting with the nature of his *Notebooks*. The provocation is that of detecting his reflection in the carpet.

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Spectacular and anti-dogmatic, melancholic and affected, eclectic and heteroclitic, Cioran's *Notebooks*, provoke the reader who is enthusiastic about the encounter with the autobiographical discourse, the same antinomic reading reactions, common paradoxes that we can encounter from his early essays. Cioran's constant readers, annoyed by the emotional equivocal of the apocalyptic writer who proposes these confessions and anathemas, will be interested in articulating progressively two answers to the specific of these *Notebooks* and of his work, in general. First of all, a specialized reader will be interested in identifying an organic epistemology of his thinking and, secondly, he will find the real Cioran, not the playful funambulist writer of his anterior works.

The necrophagous interest of the specialist to fragment the work of a writer, with the purpose of forming a unitary perspective and of finding the true nature/image of the philosopher in his autobiographical writings, is permanently jammed even by the author through a technique called fragmentary writing. Is this technique another

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typical mask for Cioran? Could the fragmentary features of his writings be another representation of the human being torn between the contradiction of his structural misanthropy and creative pride? The style, the author's representation and the result of modern feeling are just a few variants of the same image in the mirror of his text.

Associating the autobiographical image, that of his memory, to that of Cioran in his *Notebooks*, Andrea Rigoni affirms that

“we discover here, better than in other writings, Cioran, the man: at the same time tortured and skeptical, modest and explosive, without an illusion over the world and his own being, even inexorable against his own writings, none of which finds grace in his eyes” [1].

Therefore, the *Notebooks* will prove to be more an exercise of authenticity than one of admiration, a probe of absolute sincerity, without vanity, creative pride, simulated modesty, and assumed characteristics, at least at a rhetorical level. But we need to observe that this ambivalent man, as Rigoni noted, is the man who crashed inside, Papini's finished man, the iconic man in Cioran's work (from 1934 to 1972, the date of his last writings in the *Notebooks*, at least of the most known ones till the publication of those which now belong to the Romanian Academy).

The devastating skepticism, the constitutive atheism, the isolating modesty, the anti-utopic pragmatism and the existential nausea seem only histrionic masks for Cioran, from the moment of his existential rupture, provoked by the first biographical dislocation from Rășinari, the village of his biographical paradise and until the second one, in Paris.

Our taxonomy and doctrinarian identification errors are the result of these repeated fragmentations of the Self, a constant torn, an irrefutable proof of the interne fluctuations and contradictions that follow the one between sense and sensibility. But Cioran's general method seems to be direct confession, without precautions – one that creates a premeditated jam, inducing the desolate feeling of ontological instability – whose formula is that of discourse fragmentation. One of the most fervent Cioran readers, Livius Ciocârlie [2], expresses his deception after reading the *Notebooks* – deception explained through the illusion of the confessions' authenticity, missing the right pieces of Cioran's affective portrait once more. An excerpt from the reading journal of the *Notebooks* is relevant for the hermeneutic anxieties of the specialized reader, generated by the emotional instability and, especially, the writer's histrionism:

“I am starting to read Cioran's *Notebooks* (Gallimard, 1997) with a slightly morbid curiosity and soon disappointed: that of the intimate journal reader. We will not find a Cioran in slippers here. We will find the same Cioran as we do in his books: the histrion of despair and skepticism. Sincerely? I do not even ask that question any more. The problem of sincerity is not relevant in literature. This is a lie in its own nature. It is important what remains from that comedy that we are acting. But also playing that part in an intimate journal is a little too much” [2].

Therefore, the *Notebooks* surprise us, at a first glance, through an autobiographical pact, visible only after the first pages, but not through their emotional authenticity. It is about the betrayal of a genre, a biographical pact and not an intimate one, Cioran's attic being more a universe of butafory in this case, as well. The intensive fragmentarism of the *Notebooks* and the discontinuity of the aphorisms are, at a first glance, the sign of honest confession through the direct, immediate, brut character of interior fluctuation. Cioran's fragmentarism, beyond the possible filiations with postmodern writing, is part of a critical tradition that expresses a real ontological dimension. It comprises an organization of the meaning around the particular, generated by fragmentary reason, contrary to the manner in which tradition operates. Therefore, we discuss two elementary traditions of critical thinking, that require the reorganization and expression of meaning, one of categorial nature and one fragmentary, of expressive nature.

Postmodernity rediscovers the fragmentary tradition, because *the weak, postmodern thinking* [3], if we were to remind Vattimo, is a sophist remake which institutes the fragmentary as cultural unity, the image of a coherent world in its segmentation. Cioran speaks mostly about modern fragmentation, contradictory extremism, which expresses a synthesis of the two traditions in modernity, the method being the result of an aggressive and

dialectic ethos. Cioran's modernity of the partial discourse reveals a cognitive modality and a formula which are spectacular through their destructive rhetoric, meant to avoid philosophical dogmatism. Therefore, fragmentarism surpasses the two traditions to finally rediscover modernity.

At the level of his writings, Cioran admits that fragmentarism is a natural result of a strange existential alchemy, at the same time of banality and paradox. Also, we can deduce at least two sources of this interrupted thinking in Cioran's formation: a reflection of the alterity in his interior universe and the existentialist disintegration of the Self and, secondly, his formation at the school of fragmentary. Cioran's initial development takes place in Sibiu where he came across the readings of the sophist philosophers, and in Bucharest, in the Romanian context of the 30th Generation, which was fueled by the radicalism of the philosopher with no writings, Nae Ionescu.

In his pertinent work, *The 30th Years. The Romanian Extreme Right*, Zigu Ornea [4] reconfirms that in the troubled times of the inter-war period the extremist clashes and the polarization of the Romanian society, Emil Cioran's figure is distinctive. The first exercises of admiration for the lack of unity, therefore of fragmentarism and acute paradoxes take place in Bucharest, where, before constructing his image of a philosopher of despair, in accordance to the Parisian existentialist space, he is a conservative nationalist and afterwards a right side extremist.

"His book from 1963, an exasperated essay of youth, is certainly the most important document of this generation. The aspiration for a Romania in delirium, mystical and megalomaniac, towards its cultural and political imperialism, occupy comfortable spaces here" [4].

Cioran's dream of national unity around the idea of the major historical destiny that the nation should assume, or if not to disappear in the abyss of history, is a reflex of the isolation complex and of the polarization of the Romanian society between two current tendencies in the Romanian inter-war period: traditionalist conservatism and modernist reformatory tendencies. The explosive young writers of this generation, Emil Cioran, Mircea Eliade, Eugen Ionescu, Mircea Vulcănescu or Constantin Noica were marked by this discontinuous thinking at their debut. It is enough to mention two examples, the most well-known, of this fragmentarist generation. In the beginning, Mircea Eliade published divided fragments "which belong especially to the working notebooks" [5]. Eugen Ionescu also made his debut in 1934 with the volume *No* in which we observe the same radicalism as that of his generation, the histrionism, the vanity of geniality and, of course, the obsession with the fragment.

Considering Cioran's first two books, *On the Heights of Despair* (1934) and *The Transfiguration of Romania* (1936), we can deduce at least two fundamental coordinates, two recurrent obsessions – a thematic one and a stylistic one: negation, and the discontinuous character of thinking. He will affirm later on, in *Mon pays* [6], a late reaction to his youth radicalism toward his country – that their devastating insolence was an-historical, justified by the pride and necessity of affirmation and through the fact that yearning after a universal destiny that becomes true is a utopia.

"To make history was the word that came to our lips continuously: it was the main word. We improvised our destiny; we were rebellious against our nothingness. And we were not afraid of the ridiculous. Because our knowledge was insufficient, our experience illusory; but our deception had to be solid, unbreakable. This became our law ...We fell to the level of our country" [6].

The need to curse and destroy is fundamental for this existential generation and, as a primal somatised feeling, hate turned against his own being. Radicalism, sometimes violent in language, determined by the necessity of ethnical spiritual reconfiguration and individual affirmation will find, as favorite form of expression, the broken mirror of their antinomic spirit, fragmentary discourse. They have no time for a coherent epistemology, which does not seem to be in fashion anyway, and they also detest typical modernists and any form of argumentative and categorical tradition. Cioran's option is the syllogism essentialised to paradox, while Ionescu writes plays about breaking from the real world towards an absurd one; Noica is more an essayist than a philosopher, while Eliade will study the history of religions and, therefore, fragments of diversified and heteroclitical religious

existence. The paradox of this generation is that a lack of organic unity of the society in which they were formed is the one that determines their destiny of fragmentary thinking. Their destiny, and especially Cioran's – the one who will have a chosen philosophical orientation - is marked by the fragment.

Cioran's negation is centripetal, evolving towards himself, the writer directly admitting that he has become the centre of his own hatred, as an argument in favor of the impact of the "existentialist inheritance: Heidegger and Kierkegaard" [7]. In the same way, Cioran has always manifested his generalized contempt towards any system of any kind, like a genuine successor of the avant-garde nonconformism.

"I'm horrified of expanding, explaining, commenting, emphasizing; I'm horrified of everything that is a reminder of the philosopher and therefore of the professor. Philosophy: a scattered thinking (like we say about dung: it scatters, it stretches). I only like the collected thinking that is merged into a formula" [8].

This formula, explosive and trenchant, is preferred to the organic and systemic thinking and implicitly to the expression which excessively exposes the modern spirit of a tiring and therefore useless description. As a matter of fact, in his *Treaty of Decomposition* (1949), title which contains precisely this intentional fragmentation of Orpheus, if we were to admit the postmodernists' formula, philosophy is very bluntly associated with prostitution, while the reactionary Cioranian thinking, which will also be admired in Joseph De Maistre [9], seems to be the only one capable of offering an authentic image of a lucid spirit. He will say that "to have no convictions in what regards people and oneself is the teaching of prostitution, an itinerant and lucid academy, located on the outskirts of society, just like philosophy" [10].

Thus, his discourse appears to be a modern reaction to the epistemological authoritarianism of the philosophical tradition, accepting nevertheless a moral authority inherent to the syllogistic writing. This is also shown in his confessions to Laurence Tacou, where Cioran admits to an emblematic formula: "I'm an author of fragments" [11]. He ironically characterizes the French moralist as "someone who reflects on man and writes fragments," referring to tradition, from Chamfort to Pascal. The Cioranian laughter, in association with that of Pascal, is another one of his specific masks, which allows hiding behind the self-reflexive and ironic discourse. The moralist, confesses Cioran to Laurence Tacou,

"is the person who writes fragments and says foolish things. (laughter) I am an author... how can I put this? I am an author of fragments. I've written books that are not fragments, but my genre is rather the fragment, which is also a genre of the lazy people. Because I've noticed that in the beginning, well, the first book I've published in French, *Précis de décomposition (Treaty of Decomposition)*, is not a fragment, but a book. I've written two or three items that are not moralistic books, but as I've grown increasingly disgusted by writing, I've written more and more fragments, and now I can barely write anything else. In a way, this is a sign of tiredness as well" [11].

His genre, his projection in writing, is the fragment – an ontologically undertaken metamorphosis of the being into a text. This genre of the 'lazy people' also reflects the universal nausea, the protest against the absurdity of the world that has lost its coherence and logic, the unbearable paradoxes and tautologies of the being. The fragment as an anti-philosophy and anti system is a conscious limitation of the self, a sign of tiredness, a mark of the fractioned existence. However, we can also identify external reasons for this fragmented thinking, such as the assimilation of the French language and space, which was called his second birth in the French space and language. This (re)birth, no matter how well assumed, could not come to pass as naturally as the Romanian one. It is rather a conscious, therefore rational, systemic and organized birth. The relation between language and thought in French is indisputably different than the one in Romanian. The waiver of cursive writing, of the argumentative and coherent philosophical essay is thus justified by the fact that writing in French, a language assimilated later on, dictates such a fragmentation through the attempt not to distance itself from the initial nature of thinking. Therefore, the French language and the school of French moralists are auxiliary factors determining the Cioranian fragmentary thinking. Another indisputable argument is the fact that this French rebirth of Cioran will mark a definitive evolution of his genre towards syllogism, therefore towards the fragment.

His training, and implicitly the effect of the influences assimilated and surmounted, plays a major role in the transformation of his writing. First, we have the experience of the French moralists, and then, in a useful game of

counterbalance, the discrete influence of his Wittgenstein readings. Writing will become the visible mark of an existential ontology because, in Cioran's words, "what I write is related first and foremost to my experiences, my life, my readings" [11], and on this level, his experiences, life and readings entail a visible discontinuity, contradictory and aporetic, modern by excellence. Any fragment, says Cioran, "is loaded with a world and a truth in itself, and is therefore fragmentary, has to be fragmentary, which can be contradictory with what follows next" [11]. The fertility of the existential paradox is the decline of the fragment, which is also construed as a "series of states of mind or fantasies" [11].

To Cioran, the fragmentary discourse is similar to a fatality, a reflection of the existential limit. He understands that this existential limit of knowledge, of destiny and conscience, imposes a limited writing. We can identify this poetics of limits even in his social proximity, because, he said, "I cannot bear the proximity of man" [8], and his writing reflects the mundane derision and implicitly his harsh misanthropy. Therefore, the syllogisms of bitterness will only be "pieces of sonnets, poetical ideas abnegated by derision" [8]. Not least, the secret formula of his thinking is consonant with poetry, an eternal battle with the limits of his reason, poetry representing a permanent temptation of essentialisation. Even when repudiated, its charm and Adamic temptation continue to draw him.

"Since poetry, which plays it all on candor and affection, is deceitful, Nicole Parfait tells us, Cioran will focus on its opposite: the formula which, in addition to the justifications already given, corresponds to the fragmentary nature of thinking, face to face with the infinity of the field of investigation" [7].

In Cioran's case, it is a process of semiotic optimization by excellence, marking, just like in the hermetic poetry, the limit and, at the same time, the limitless, because the inherent knot is the explosive and spontaneous revelation.

"Control entails limitation" [8], says Cioran, profoundly interested in what lies behind thinking, in the invisible resuscitated by a formula. Cioran's constant challenge is to find and defy through this always incomplete, explosive formula, which operates like poetry, shortcutting the self. He admits that "I am only happy when I've found the formula" [8]. The fragment, just like poetry, admits a necessary multiplication of the spirit taken ill with continuity and the epic superficial discourse. He is horrified by any axiomatic discourse that aims to elucidate the existential reasons which can no longer be clarified. The aporia of modernity, the heteroclit nature of the social spectacle, requires a re-semantics of existence, and the fragmentary discourse is a suitable formula. But his Cioranian re-semantics effort is not exclusively modern, because many times the essayist resembles a disciple of the romantics Fr. Schlegel or Novalis. If Schlegel believed that poetry starts where philosophy stops, Novalis suggested a different Romantic approach to philosophy, regarding it as a poem of intelligence. The poetical functions of the spirit are reflected by excellence in the philosophical discourse and poetry is construed as the finality of any epistemological discourse. For that reason, Cioran's thinking is rather more intuitionist than rationalist, just like poetry. Contrary to the philosophical natures of Hartmann, Comte or Lange, Cioran expresses in his fragments the cognitive force of intuition. That is why he is more similar to thinkers like Nietzsche, Bergson, Dilthey, Heidegger or Wittgenstein.

In fact, we can read in his *Notebooks* more references to Wittgenstein, a possible genealogy of the discontinuous thinking. Should we synthesize these thoughts, we would identify an organic agreement between the fragments. For example, following his conviction that philosophy is a complicated discourse, a reflection of an ill self in an altered world, Cioran understands Wittgenstein's words, "in philosophy, a question is treated like an illness" [8], as a foundation for any philosophical search. He then observes and is tempted by Wittgenstein's "strangeness," because he finds out from Bertrand Russell's letters of Wittgenstein's suicidal tendency which Cioran considers paradoxical, reflecting on the former's logical analyses and noticing that he spoke too much of pain. In addition, the stoicism of Wittgenstein's life can only stir Cioran's admiration – he himself a solitaire of despair and bitterness. The antonymic spirit of the Austrian philosopher is noticed by Cioran in his literary preferences as well, him being paradoxically "very enthusiastic about Tolstoy's moralizing writings," contrary to

his artistic exigencies, in the meaning that Wittgenstein is enthusiastic “about the less deserving part of his work” [8]. But Cioran appreciates both Wittgenstein and his sensitive contradictions between the strangeness of his being, his self-withdrawal and his undefeatable logic. The essence of the Cioranian thinking could be expressed in a Wittgensteinian syllogism: “In order to draw a limit to thinking, we have to be able to think both sides of the limit” [8]. Therefore, writing is a reflection of a genuine problem of the existential limit, a modern ontology of the unwound being which can only live, think and create under the sign of contradiction and to render this creation as a fragment.

Cioran, like Wittgenstein, is aware of the tragic limits of the Self and especially of the anxiety of existential change. The *Notebooks* express an eternal conflict between him and the others, permanently reflecting on the obstacle of proximity and social block. The moralist prefers the limits of his interiority to the vulgar void of the other. The range and limit of the Self are preferred to those of his neighbor. “I could, he says, if absolutely needed, have genuine relations with the Being, but never with the beings” [8]. Thus, he imposes his limited writing, devoid of a visible logic, because the poetics of the Whole resides in the unfinished. In fact, the absolute formula of this genuine truth can be found in his *Notebooks*: “A certain profundity in the unfinished seems to be the essential mark of the modern” [8]. The foundation of his discourse resides therefore in the fragmentary, unfinished Wittgensteinian formula of the modern world. Therefore, we understand that the Cioranian fragmentation is not postmodern, as Ihab Hassan [12] later explains, but comes from the discontinuous thinking of the anxiety of the modern, expression of an ontological limit and not of a genre.

Cioran criticizes Hölderlin’s prolixity and fails to understand why neither Hegel, nor Schopenhauer and not even Nietzsche could limit or at least fraction their discourse. On the contrary, Epicurus and Heraclites seem rescued in Cioran’s opinion by the implacable fatality of time, which only saved fragments of their opera. He also admires the writings of La Rochefoucault for the same reason – that of concision.

The fragment, lacunose, formula, unfinished, interval are the words that draw his interest and stir his appetite for writing. Not least, the absolute model of the lacunose is precisely the divinity that confers him a surprising motivation for his faith, which seems lost many times, because the fragmentary God is a God who wants to be discovered and who, in turn, seems to recuse the tautology:

“I am who I am”... God loves the lacunose. This would be a reason to believe. There is nothing worse than a talkative writing God. Everything is too long. This is the only motto we should have when we start creating” [8].

Cioran’s creation can only be fragmentary, an image of the being who no longer believes in the traditional coherence, in the excessive and boring descriptivism. Cioran’s writing is a reflection of the modern spirit put in difficulty by the feeling of derision. His image is undoubtedly that of the modern philosopher who looks at himself in a broken mirror. His moralist cynicism, practiced in the school of Epicurus or La Rochefoucault, is a mask of the melancholic and timid being – eternal coordinates of poetry. Every time he is tempted by the unlimited nature of philosophy or poetry, his misanthropy, his Sisyphean complex and the acute feeling of derision remind him of the risk inherent to system and harmony. “I have to return to the actual fragment. My spirit is constructed in such a manner that it can neither build, nor overcome a series of sketches,” [8] which is why he appears to be a failed poet.

The fragment is itself an image of the spirit harassed by limits, the obsession of a failed, unfinished life, which hates coherence, continuous beauty, harmony and organic structure because of their limited, finished nature. The Cioranian fragmentarism is again a reflection of the disguised modern ontology. In fact, one of Cioran’s syllogisms that confirm this game rule, even through contradictory, contains the indissoluble essence of this spectacular fragmentarism: “It is part of my destiny to only half-fulfill. Everything in me is truncated: my way of being and my way of writing. A man made of fragments” [8]. The portrait of the philosopher reflected in the broken mirror is a projection of the being into the text, a being of the infinity of the modern anxiety. This is more than a simple imagistic representation of the being – it is a manner of understanding the world also reflected in the broken and fragmented mirror of the text.

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