

CIORAN AND THE “EPISTOLARY MANIA”

ION DUR, GABRIEL HASMAȚUCHI

Abstract. Besides his philosophical essays, Emil Cioran also maintained a vast correspondence. He sent and received numerous letters; from his parents and his brother Aurel, as well as from various personalities, friends and romantic interests. These represent a part of the philosopher’s personality which deserves to be organically integrated in the *corpus* of Cioran’s work and writings. Most of Cioran’s letters are inevitably literary; they preserve a productive ambiguity and express attitudes and feelings belonging to both the *organic man* and the thinker who brushed against life. The letters thus appear as notes the philosopher sent from the *underground* of his being. The present text analyses two fragments of correspondence: with Alina Diaconu (1985–1989), a journalist and writer of Romanian origin settled in Argentina; and (in German) with the editor and philosopher Wolfgang Kraus (1971–1990).

Keywords: metaphorical truth, the thinker who brushed against life, organic man, letters in German, productive ambiguity.

START-UP FRAMES

The multi-storeyed underground. We would like, first of all, to dwell on a thought that we suspect the reader might consider vital, namely the question: what has Cioran, or the existence of the philosopher, got to do with the underground, with the subterranean, such as is found in Sibiu (ideally they should have been the underground passages in Rășinari, unless this is what they really are?!). It is not a direct connection, but an intermediate, even allusive one; allusion being, according to Aristotle, a form of metaphor.

But let us be reasonable: not only does a city or a village have a subterranean element, seen or only imagined, but man also has an *underground* that extends to

Ion Dur ✉

Doctoral School of Philosophy from North University Centre of Baia Mare
e-mail: iondur@yahoo.com

Gabriel Hasmațuchi ✉

“Lucian Blaga” University of Sibiu
e-mail: hasmatuchi@yahoo.co.uk

his deepest self, that self of which St. Augustine spoke so knowingly. There is in us something a little deeper than ourselves, said the philosopher.

However, we established a small system of communicating vessels between the underground of the city where the teenager Cioran lived (the burg of Sibiu), with its narratives and mythology, and the existential creed of the *thinker* (the thinker, says Cioran, unlike the philosopher, *brushes against existence*). The son of a priest, he lived his childhood in the village of Rășinari in Sibiu County, with the already famous Coasta Boacii hill, a place where he played with his companions; a topos that crept into the subconscious of his being, into its *underground*. Later, he explored Sibiu, which also has its strategic-historical subterraneans; after which he lived as a student in Bucharest, a city about whose magic his generational colleague, Mircea Eliade, wrote admirably. Exile followed, represented as his second country and not his homeland; because we have, according to Eminescu¹, only one homeland, a word that comes from *patres*, that is, parents. He lived the rest of his life in France, in Paris, as a permanent tenant and as a kind of “domestic Anchorite” (Vasile Băncilă²). He apparently led a city life, but remained, deep down, a peasant from Rășinari; an imperial peasant, if we may borrow Dan Botta’s formula.

So, Cioran lived and worked for a long time in an attic in Odeon Square, a kind of *upstairs underground*. It is in this cell that the *notes from the underground*, the French works of the philosopher, took shape. Whatever is said, Emil Cioran remains, for the Romanian and French contexts, one of the most subtle *seismographs of the underground of the human being*.

We arrive, with this necessary detour, at another meaning of the Cioranian underground, perhaps the most authentic, the one that also translates the nuances of a *metaphorical truth*, namely the *underground of the organic man*; revealed, for example, by the philosopher’s last sentimental correspondence. *That* love affair, in which his partner was a philosophy teacher from Cologne, Friedgard Thoma. She was thirty-five years old, while Cioran was seventy: twice her age.

*

The phrase *epistolary mania* belongs to the thinker Cioran. It can refer to different personalities, and can also be discovered in the folds of Cioranian writings, where the author *communicates* much more *about himself* than he does in his aphoristic fragments. In the correspondence of the man who wrote *The Transfiguration of Romania* (1936), we decipher several layers of meaning of the epistolary self, all set against the background of a productive ambiguity specific to this kind of literature.

¹ Romanian poet, writer and publicist (1850–1889) influenced by German philosophy, French and Italian culture; considered to be the most valuable Romanian creator of the 19th century.

² Romanian philosopher, pedagogue and essayist (1897–1979) shunned by the totalitarian regime but reclaimed after 1989 by Romanian philosophy.

Cioran’s correspondence is an organic part of his *works* and of *his writings*, as his letters are, for the most part, literature. Umberto Eco remarked somewhere that almost everything an author writes – assuming, of course, that it comes from his own authentic self – is literature, except for shopping or grocery lists. But even these lists of products or things that will be purchased can have, as the critic Eugen Negrici says, *involuntary expressiveness*. Understood thus as literature, a large proportion of Cioran’s correspondence can also be analysed through the grid offered by Dominique Maingueneau, as expressing certain similarities with La Bruyère’s moral enouncements or Sartre’s characteristic inner discourse³.

Cioran entertained a rich and varied correspondence, his *epistolary mania* reflected in tens and hundreds of letters made available mostly through the efforts of publisher Marin Diaconu⁴, even if with volumes III and IV of the Romanian *Pleiades* we do not yet have the entire correspondence sent and received by Cioran. Correspondence is important because, as critics say, in it the degree of *authenticity* is very high, as it is the place where the life of the person who composes the letters finds refuge. Cioran also observes that the truth about an author can be found in his correspondence rather than in his work. Writing to others or, to use a more appropriate word, writing to *the Other*, Cioran writes *about* himself and *for* himself. With not entirely censored affectivity and with a sincerity as authentic as possible, Cioran communicates and *self-communicates*, in order to remind us of the doubly reflexive nature of language, as Tudor Vianu⁵ saw it. The Cioranian *vocabulary* of the letters – and not its *lexical* particularities – reveal a type of acutely subjective *situational discourse*; most of the correspondence has at its centre the ego of the emitter and only rarely that of the receiver (with the exception of letters to family members in Romania), a generally *monologal*, carefully *contextualized discourse*⁶, a clear X-ray of his intellectual biography or the destiny of his books.

Other necessary specifications for these starting frames: the productive ambiguity cultivated by many of his epistles, but also the mask their author often wears. Nietzsche says somewhere that the mask protects a man only if he’s weak; the strong don’t need such a travesty, because they are immediately recognized. Where will we recognise, however, Cioran? Probably in both poses. The second is illustrated by his gnomic work, where the artist Cioran hides until he gets to style. But the literary man – and Cioran can’t be anything else – is the “fundamental actor”⁷, and as for any actor, the mask is indispensable. As regards the first

³ See Dominique Maingueneau, Gilles Philippe, *Exercices de linguistique pour le texte littéraire*, Paris, Armand Colin, 2005, pp. 1–7, 74–87.

⁴ See Cioran, *Opere [Works]*, vol. III and IV, Bucharest, Romanian Academy and National Foundation for Science and Art, 2017, pp. 405–1039 (vol. III), 1415–1564 (vol. IV); volumes are added to the work *Scrisori către cei de-acasă [Letters to the folks back home]*, Bucharest, Humanitas, 1995.

⁵ Romanian critic, literary historian, esthetician and essayist (1898–1964) of mainly German cultural formation.

⁶ For underlined text, see the distinctions offered by Dominique Maingueneau in *Les termes clés de l’analyse du discours*, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, février 1996, pp. 22, 48, 57, 78–79, 85–87.

⁷ See Friedrich Nietzsche, *Le gai savoir*, Paris, Éditions Gallimard, 1950, pp. 327–329 et *passim*.

condition, that of a *weak* Cioran, it is the one portrayed by the world of letters, where the author of the texts abruptly expresses the fact that he *suffered from life* (Nietzsche) and that, even in *writing* letters, he cannot give up the game of disguise.

The *Correspondence* of Cioran can be perceived, among others, as being (also) the expression of an *ambiguous I*, always tempted by the mysterious breastplate of accenting. Being another “*symbol of identification*”, as it was understood in the assembly of masks, the one worn by the Cioranian epistolary self has, however, the predominant function of disclosure, and only occasionally the meaning of protecting true identities, hidden pathways towards an authentic self, or of disguising the true meaning expressed by gestures and words.

I wear a mask, therefore I am: here is Cioran’s postulate, not just as metaphysical thinker or writer, but also of one who had the “epistolary mania”, the mask being a kind of doppelgänger – proteiform in its states – haunting the work / writings and, as we assume, the correspondence too.

Philosophically speaking, in the productive ambiguity, correspondence of Cioran hides a “cunning of the self” (“*une ruse du moi*”), in order to “sacrifice the empirical self to preserve the transcendental or formal Self”⁸. Let’s not forget that it is the correspondence of both a writer and a philosopher.

CHRONICLE OF A FRIENDSHIP

Between 1985 and 1989, as well as at the time of the erotic episode with the German Friedgard Thoma⁹, Cioran corresponds with Alina Diaconu, a Romanian settled in Argentina¹⁰. The latter’s letters are included in a volume along with other texts: interviews with the philosopher, articles about his works, meetings and telephone conversations, a note about Simone, “my partner in my bicycle travels”, dreams about Cioran, dedications written in books and attempts to translate excerpts from the essayist’s writings.

For those who thoroughly studied Cioran’s work, including the interviews he gave on various occasions and to various interlocutors, Alina Diaconu’s book does not reveal many new things, with some small exceptions – mostly in the form of ideas. And maybe some accents, from *flat* to *natural*, that Cioran puts on his own ideas. Besides that, the same gestures of being paradoxical, catastrophic, against the current, iconoclastic; the desire to amaze by simulating deep banality, indifference or frankness; all, Cioranian hypostases already (well) known. For example, the United States is a “country that has a history but no past”; or, in fifty years (the claim is from 1990) Notre-Dame Cathedral will become a mosque; or that, if you are depressed,

⁸ See Maurice Blanchot, *L’Écriture du désastre*, Paris, Éditions Gallimard, 1980, p. 26.

⁹ See Friedgard Thoma, *Pentru nimic în lume. O iubire a lui Cioran [Not for anything in the world. A love of Cioran’s]*, EST, 2005.

¹⁰ See Alina Diaconu, *Dragă Cioran. Cronica unei prietenii [Dear Cioran. Chronicle of a friendship]*, Bucharest, Romanian Cultural Institute, 2019; we will quote further from the volume, without any other reference.

you can find solace by visiting, and sitting for half an hour, in a cemetery; or that it is impossible (!) for Nazism to reappear; or that shepherds, more precisely: shepherds in the Carpathians, impressed him much more than university teachers in Germany; or that he would like to be the hagiographer of beggars; or that he is horrified by anyone's "complete works" (he admits that *he* wrote only five or six books); or that the philosopher is a constipated fellow who builds a world, but is not in the middle of life, while *the thinker brushes against existence*; or that he supports suicide in writing, as a philosophical solution, but he denies it orally (he writes one thing and says another), life being tolerable precisely because of the idea of suicide, etc.

But the epistles of Alina Diaconu, compared to those of the German Friedgard Thoma, are of a completely different nature and bear a different stylistic mark. They breathe epistolary civility, balance, cultural depth. Cioran is interviewed for Brazilian readers; the philosopher finds out that Alina has won a scholarship; he is sincerely happy and advises her to avoid "university environments – in America and everywhere. As a writer, it is more profitable to talk to a chauffeur than to a university teacher" (July 13, 1985).

In another letter, from Nov. 29, 1985, Cioran affectionately confides in her: "After all, you are right to consider me a sentimentalist. So I am one, of course, since I love everything that is great, I like Patagonia, I like Hungarian music and fado" (fádo is a genre of Portuguese folk song). And he retorts, thinking of his recipient's scholarship: "I remember you got a scholarship to I don't know which university. Whatever it is, don't take it seriously, because there is no greater danger for a writer than attending this kind of institution."

That he was no longer, at his age, *as virile as a bachelor* can be inferred from a confession made on another occasion:

Lately I had some health problems. I'm better now, but the result of the trials I went through will disappoint you: I decided to stop talking about myself, to give up interviews, in short, to learn modesty. This does not mean, however, that I would not be very happy to see you again, but without "dialogue", without heated discussions, without a specific purpose. [...]

To write a book about Patagonia. It is a subject that obsesses me and that I find much more interesting than the Balkans and their representatives. (March 16, 1986)

In the same lightning-letter, he thanks Alina Diaconu for sending him a poem by Borges dedicated to Susana Soca, a Uruguayan poet (1906–1959), stating that "it might have been worth more, but it's not that bad anyway". Cioran understood little Spanish, Eugen Ionescu – almost none at all; which is why he recommends that his correspondent write – if she wants to – a novel, but in another language, because it would be a shame "to dedicate such a creation to two ignorant and weakened old men".

The paradoxical disinterest shown in the *public takeover* of his books was common practice for Cioran. Probably referring to *Aveux et anathèmes* (1987), he writes to his correspondent: "My last book is a *best-seller* due to television

(obviously, I did not participate in any of the shows). I consider this ‘success’ a real defeat, the most painful in my life. Old age is a series of surprises, that is, of so many humiliations” (March 31, 1987).

In letters spanning over two years, he tells Alina Diaconu about the surprising appearance in Romania of a volume of translations from his French volumes¹¹, and also mentions “an excellent brochure by Mariana Șora” about his work (January 20, 1989). It was the year of the Romanian Revolution, and Cioran seems to sense the shock waves that announced a political earthquake of great proportions. He is aware of everything that is happening in his “native hell” and, congratulating her on living on the other side of the world, he considers that “to the drama of existence is added the drama of belonging to the most unhappy of peoples. And there is nothing more humiliating than hearing some people – (and this happens frequently, Romania has been for a while now ... fashionable!) – talking to you with pity and slight contempt about an ethnic group that endures everything without complaining” (April 2, 1989).

But immediately after *the explosion of the Romanian polenta* (December 1989), Cioran showed a little more enthusiasm in his appreciation of the Romanians. It was decidedly not the Hungarians who made the Revolution in Romania: “The Revolution was floating in the air. It would have broken out anyway, even if later. For the Romanians, however, it was humiliating to see that the Hungarians were the only ones who revolted. And this humiliation triggered the insurrection, which rehabilitated them in their own eyes and in the eyes of the whole world”. And he has serious reservations about the remnants of Communism: “There is no doubt that the years of slavery lived by Romanians left strong traces – both for good and for bad. I mean that, from now on, *their frivolity will have another dimension*” (this is not Cioran’s emphasis).

LETTERS IN THE LANGUAGE OF GOETHE

Biographical and ideological context. Beyond Cioran’s correspondence either with the folks back home¹² or with various friends or love interests, conducted mostly in Romanian but also in French, therefore beyond these hundreds of epistles there are also several dozen letters in German sent to the publisher and philosopher Wolfgang Kraus, between 1971 and 1990¹³.

¹¹ See: E.M. Cioran, *Eseuri [Essays]*, anthology, translation and foreword by Modest Morariu, Bucharest, Cartea Românească, 1988.

¹² See Cioran, *Scrisori către cei de-acasă [Letters to the folks back home]*, texts established and transcribed by Gabriel Liiceanu and Theodor Enescu, translations from French by Tania Radu, edition, notes and indexes by Dan C. Mihăilescu, Bucharest, Humanitas, 1995.

¹³ Cioran, *Scrisori către Wolfgang Kraus. 1971–1990 [Letters to Wolfgang Kraus. 1971–1990]*, translation from German, edition and notes by George Guțu, Bucharest, Humanitas, 2009; we will quote from the volume, by indicating the year and the page in parentheses.

What is the specificity of this unique segment of correspondence translated in Romanian more than a decade ago? It is, first of all, an exercise made by Cioran in Goethe’s language, the idiom he spoke as a child and in which he learned when he was a student at the Gheorghe Lazăr High School in Sibiu. It is reasonable German, despite the fact that the language of letters he sent, including those to philosophy teacher Friedgard Thoma, proves that the epistle-writer fails to avoid *asperities* and *linguistic distortions*, thus writing in “somewhat poor German”; this can be also inferred from letters sent to W. Kraus, where Cioran confesses his knowledge of German is, at best, *fragmented*. We will say that in the volume we are commenting on, there are 158 letters sent by Cioran, two belonging to Simone Boué and five epistles-copies of W. Kraus, to which are added many pages from the latter’s diary (1971–1998).

In the wake of historical events in these time segments, Cioran’s correspondence inevitably refers to his biography – including his intellectual one – to his relationship with his family in socialist Romania and with prominent personalities, such as: Mircea Eliade, Constantin Noica, Wolf von Aichelburg, Julien Green, Paul Celan, Elias Canetti, to name just a few. And we have already formulated the main Cioranian attitudes, harsh or with occasional *flats* – reactions that are familiar to us from other hypostases of the philosopher. Even if they are well-known positions, they are not at all redundant, as the translator of the letters thinks; on the contrary, they come to strengthen the meanings and significance of Cioran’s ideas, thus becoming attitudinal constants.

However, Cioran’s letters to W. Kraus excel in their dose of lucidity, in their attempt to objectify reflections through intercultural messages, while allowing for somewhat cunning reactions from a *steppenwolf*, a spirit predisposed, more than once, to inexorable caustic retorts. Cioran regrets that he is not able to write literature, a novel for example, “the best possible way to hide, to be able to say *everything* in an impersonal way” (with the writer remaining, however, like God, *selfish*); while the essay represents “more or less a confession, an attitude, even a program” (1972, p. 26). But even when it comes to the essay, he revolts against the canon: “I gave up writing another essay, according to all the rules, about Beckett” (1974, p. 84). Moreover, prone to pessimism, as sometimes his friend W. Kraus is too, he lacks a certain “form of wisdom”, not knowing how to wear the “mask of objectivity and impartiality” (1974, p. 87).

The repeated refusals of various awards offered by cultural structures in America or Europe are also reflected in the epistles, frankly repudiating, for example, the attitude of Gabriel Marcel, an author who “harvested almost all the awards in France and abroad. Waiting to be glorified seems embarrassing and degrading to me – especially for a philosopher” (1977, p. 142). He also has a negative remark for Jean-François Revel, because he published a letter addressed to him without asking for his consent. A political commentator for the weekly publication *L’Express*, the philosopher had printed a study that had caused a *great uproar* in France – this was *La Tentation totalitaire* (Paris, 1975).

*

At the beginning of the eighth decade of the last century, Cioran felt, in his words “tired of culture, even if I am the son of a people without culture” (1971, p. 21; but also, a people of *shepherds*, as he states elsewhere). He was also reluctant towards any possible public readings from his works, an initiative advanced by the Austrian Society for Literature “too late for a sexagenarian” (1971, p. 20). All of which makes Cioran consider himself, spiritually, “closer to Austria than to France”, especially because the French “only know from the outside what inner suffering means”; and things were happening in a Central and Western Europe where Balkanization was “in full swing” (1972, p. 28), the causes of such a slippage being found within the peoples of the Balkans themselves – “the heirs of the disintegration of the Byzantine state” and those who generated, in the Western European space, “the new Byzantium” (1972, p. 30).

Cioran wanted not only to think freely, but also to live freely. Thus, he recognizes himself in the description of the Alexandrians and sceptics. His loneliness in the tumult of Paris no longer seems paradoxical to us today; neither is his isolation from the Romanian diaspora or from those who, visiting France, wanted to talk to him, or his renunciation of the Romanian language – even if, in the philosopher’s attic den, debates about the mother tongue sometimes took place (for example the word “matracucă – old hag” was invoked and analysed one evening by Cioran and his close friends; and his spiritual idol, Eminescu, like Blaga, continued to be read in the original). “My fellow citizens”, the philosopher exhorts, “have become a nightmare for me. They all come here. I am exhausted in unnecessary conversations, in unbridled things and in anger towards myself. What a waste of time!” (1972, p. 36).

Later, as if resigned, he intended to recommend the writer Ștefan Bănulescu to Kraus, for a scholarship in Berlin (“I don’t know his work, but it is said that he is good”; “Eliade supports him, but I am no longer able to read novels, even if they are excellent”, 1980, p. 196). And this after, years ago, he had confessed angrily: “I ended up not desiring any conversation!” (1974, p. 90; yet he does not really avoid discussions with *others*, who are not Romanian). Even the death of his parents arouses an abnormal reaction, the philosopher ironically describing their passage into eternity as “a solution, the only one they still had” (1975, p. 97) in a Romania “Turkish-ed” and defeated by Communism. A Romania about which he says, a year later, that it had become a “vulgar hell”, after being merely “vulgar” (1976, p. 118; the expressions are certainly derived from *vulgus*).

He seems to find marriage in itself equally abnormal: “Marriage is almost always an adventure that takes you to the hospital” (1976, p. 124). Cioran displays all the prejudices of the poisonous family: “To tell you the truth, I always believed that my family was degenerate, from both parents’ sides, and that it was not worth perpetuating. That was also my brother’s opinion¹⁴. Only my sister thought otherwise.

¹⁴Aurel Cioran, his brother, married but had no descendants.

Her son committed suicide, as she indirectly did too, smoking a hundred cigarettes a day" (1976, pp. 132–133). He also recommends that even W. Kraus should be reluctant to the idea of marriage: "Especially for a writer, the wedding ring is a symbol of prison, of closed space, of lack of perspective and also of a crazy 'sacrificial spirit'" (1977, p. 140).

Cioran's separation from the anatomy and physiology of the Romanian space is not falsified or rhetorically-falsified, but undoubtedly sincere: "It's a strange experience to live without your mother tongue. But I am determined to assume the final consequences of uprooting"; there is, here, either an essential truth or a superficial allegation because, says Cioran himself, "a certain superficiality is necessary, especially when you want to express the essential and nothing more than the essential" (1973, pp. 51, 53). Which is not the case with the truly valuable books, the ones you open in the most difficult moments of your life (1973, see pg. 54).

*

We are dealing with a slightly nostalgic Cioran when we take into consideration his visit, in the four days spent in London, to the Highgate Cemetery, wherein lies "*the most important* tomb of the modern era", that of Karl Marx. In addition, faced with the radical attitude of young people in Turkey, he believes that "corruption is better than terror. Unfortunately, 'history' and 'wisdom' are antinomic notions" (1973, p. 63).

This fragile resignification of his past world would not be complete in the absence of the philosopher's opinion about Jews and their destiny: "*Zionism* is a wonderful idea. But for the happiness of all, especially the Jews, it would have been better if it had remained just an idea. *Israel* woke the Arabs from their historical slumber. An error with serious consequences" (1973, p. 66). However, he appreciated, especially in the American space, the fact that the Jews "represent a real blessing in the realm of the spirit" (1977, p. 147). We are not dealing here with racism or xenophobia, but perhaps with just simple observations, an "objective, almost scientific ill-humour", as in the case of "those hate-filled groups of blacks" (1976, p. 129) that he encounters on the beach in Dieppe, where he always goes with Simone (but not to Vendée, where she goes alone), enduring all the shortcomings of the summer resort: uninvited neighbours plus a nearby "funeral home, where coffins are made from morning to evening! Everything is provided for. I don't have to be afraid of the future ..." (1977, p. 142). Through this, he credits Pascal with saying, totally justified, that all the misfortunes befalling us are due to the fact that we leave our home...

In many letters Cioran's political opinions predominate, as if he is always under the narcosis of history: "Illusion reigns in the West, although now some of the young philosophers want to break away from utopia. But it's too late. Last night, *around midnight*, a young writer from Berlin, whom I met twice in Paris, phoned me to say: 'Next year you will have the Communists here ...'. Was he drunk? Anyway, a clue!" (1977, p. 140). He generally pays attention to political

life in France, but also to the changes that are taking place in the Western European space.

Plagued by Balkan indolence. With such feelings, Cioran tries to stay away from everyday events, wherever they may come from. He refuses to read newspapers for weeks – “out of cowardice”, as he rhetorically says – even if he meets a few journalists: for example, he spends a whole day with Leonhard Reinisch, a Bavarian journalist who had interviewed him in 1976. But the world is evolving in a depressing way: “I’m tired of seeing so many catastrophes I’ve predicted come true” in a society that feels the need for a Talleyrand, “a fascinating personality, a brilliant crook” (1972, p. 30). This is the letter in which he describes, as a “political study”, the chapter “The New Gods” in *Le Mauvais Démon* (1969); monotheism being seen here more as a pretext for his attacks in the essay – a work that W. Kraus later tried to edit in German. The volume will be translated by François Bondy and Elmar Tophoven, under the title: *The failed creation (Die verfehlte Schöpfung)*; the phrase “The Evil Demiurge” becomes the first chapter) and will be printed in 1973 at the Europa Publishing House in Vienna.

The creative Cioran accuses, in his well-known rhetorical key and in certain moments, a lack of desire “to be active as an author received superficially, according to the Parisian *typique*” by the French press; he either says he accepts the printing of a new book for “confirmation” or he asks himself, in Sibylline manner: “What’s the use of another book?”; repeating old causes, he states even now that he is “tired, exhausted, emptied inside: every night I go out into the city, and these exhausting invitations have turned me into a ghost” (1979, p. 180).

But if the press becomes undesirable for Cioran (except for the *International Herald Tribune*, a newspaper “with preconceived notions” or *The New York Review of Books*, which he regularly reads), he is willing, instead, to speak on the phone, late at night, with an acquaintance from Italy – about what, one might wonder?! – in connection with the fall of the Roman Empire, incited by Edward Gibbon’s famous work (*History of the Decline and the Fall of the Roman Empire*, 1776–1788). Or he agrees to read Elias Canetti’s essay, *Masse und Macht* (1962); an author also translated in socialist Romania and winner, in 1981, of the Nobel Prize for literature. He browses through Canetti’s *Der Andere Prozess. Kafka Briefe an Felice*. He reads a good book on the philosophy of the Cathars, on the pretext that “heretics have dared to express the hidden thoughts of the Church” (1975, p. 115).

Cioran’s Balkan disillusionment knows no bounds, he suffers from “political lucidity”, a “not too widespread disease” (1973, p. 45), and the circle of intellectuals or the specific spectacle of the contemporary world both incite and displease him. He can no longer speak to a Frenchman without being controlled by anger. The history of intellectuality has given him examples of traitors and martyrs, “people you cannot rely on” (1973, p. 42). He offers opinions about Golda Meir, “a super-intelligent lady”, or judgments that refer to the political games in France.

In the latter sense, in order to spite the French, he ends up hoping for "a victory of the Popular Front" (1973, p. 43), a marginal political force¹⁵. Louis Pauwels, a French writer and journalist (co-author of the controversial book *Le matin des magiciens*), is nothing more than a "sentimental swindler" whom he despises. The world "would have looked different if Marx had been a kind of Luther," and "Rome would have had a *red Pope*" (1972, p. 31; but these are actually Kraus's ideas). In another context, two years later, somehow stressed by a problem with his house from which he was pressured to move, he puts the sign of equality between the presidential elections in France and "the effect of vomitives", and declares: "a smell of stupidity and idiocy floats in the air" (1974, p. 82).

Solzhenitsyn's bookish presence in the West generated an aggressive controversy in the French press (due to an article in *L'Humanité*), the Communists and their supporters accusing the Russian author of anti-Soviet propaganda with the intention of obstructing Western détente policy. Attracted more by the Russian past than by the Soviet present, two days before this press scandal, Cioran dared to make predictions, stating that Solzhenitsyn "will be abandoned – when? – by the Western Left" for multiple reasons, among which: "He doesn't know the conditions here, because otherwise he wouldn't have said a word about Watergate or Vlasov's army. He will never be forgiven for attacking the last God, Lenin" (1974, p. 73). We would have expected him to appreciate Solzhenitsyn's work, not his political recklessness. Cioran himself seems less inspired when, aroused by the political situation in France, he states: "Fortunately, totalitarianism has nothing fascinating about it. At least for us"; even if he has *correct* opinions too: "In times of crisis, the downside of democracy becomes apparent" (1974, p. 80).

*

Cioran's life is a sinusoid. Rhetorically, he does not read any books at any given time ("no Romanian book"), except one that deals with *the habits of moles*, and his thoughts are "inevitably of an *underground* nature" (1972, p. 34; could the philosopher allude to ... the mole-man?!). It is a pose, of course, because one cannot imagine a *thinker* like him could live without sharing his time, perhaps impartially, between reading and writing; these being inscribed in the metabolism of the creator visited by grace from Above. It is true that at some point, due to problems with his eyesight, he intends to read less and even write less, avoiding the position of an "author" from whose works someone concocts "chosen writings": "The disadvantage of being human should not be amplified by graphomania. Fortunately, I gave up my mother tongue. Writing in French is for me an inconvenience that I cannot easily overcome" (1975, p. 96).

¹⁵ The President of France was at the time Georges Pompidou, the successor of Charles de Gaulle. In the midst of reforms, the energy crisis broke out and a blockage occurred. As if to be congruent with his youth, Cioran opted, sneering and reactionary, for an extreme Right-wing political party, founded in 1972.

Withdrawing from public life but being a “sociable being who rejects any form of society”, Cioran is content with his status as a *private thinker*, as Kierkegaard called the Biblical Job. He chose to live in Paris, considered “my *first* home”, a place where “you are alone, but never lonely. Every day a meeting, in other words, a discussion” (1975, p. 95). But the total separation from the past obsesses him: “Speaking Romanian means a deadly literary danger for me. I do not know anyone who has broken so completely with his mother tongue as I did” (1975, p. 111).

But Cioran seems to be neither a *domestic Anchorite*, nor a “house-person, a henpecked hero” (allusion to the *balanced* Simone Boué?!) despite the fact that he withdrew from most literary circles, forced to resignation (a “matter of honour”); he sporadically listens to French and German radio stations; discusses for a few hours about Saint-Simon with Ernst Jünger, an author appreciated more in France than in Germany; he visits art exhibitions, but not the Louvre (he hates museums), where he is only interested in the Egyptian collection; sometimes he also participates in public meetings, for example a *magnificent reception* where Eugen Ionesco and Raymond Aron were also present (there were 18 people in total!); the latter (received neutrally by Cioran) lectured at the Collège de France on an interesting topic: “the decadence of Western Europe seen from a sociological perspective”, without flattering the youth and attacking Left-wing radicals, reasons for which his lectures were mostly appreciated by older people (1976, p. 117). Cioran himself was attracted by the theme of decadence, folded on the pre-revolutionary interval of France, with allusions to the current situation of the country: “This arrogant bourgeoisie will not escape its own destiny. It is unfortunate that we should all fall with it” (1976, p. 121). Cioran also feels enthusiastic about meeting Octavio Paz or an American biochemist of Austrian origin, born in Bucovina, Erwin Chargaff, an author with literary interests but also with contributions to DNA sequencing. This summary of Cioran’s satisfactions must also include the short daily walks the philosopher takes in the Luxembourg Garden, very close to the attic where he lives (here he always meets somebody, an indispensable episode of the “Parisian comedy”, 1976, p. 133).

The fate of books. Cioran is interested, as we have seen, in the internationalization of his work. We mention some of his books that circulated in other cultures. Paul Celan translated into German the *Précis de décomposition* in 1953 (in Hamburg) and in 1978 (in Stuttgart); also in German was printed *Le Chute dans le temps* (translated by Franz von Kurt Leonhard), followed by *De l’inconvénient d’être né*; in 1968 (in Chicago), the essay *La Tentation d’exister* was published in English (translated by Richard Howard, introduction: Susan Sontag), with the Spanish version printed in 1973; also in Spain, in 1974, was published *Le Mauvais Démon*, a book that will be confiscated and banned (the only book to suffer such a fate in recent years), in a culture in which “Lenin’s and Mao’s books are bestsellers” (1974, p. 87); later, Cioran’s essays on Joseph de Maistre and Valéry will be marketed by Suhrkamp (1980).

Cioran's correspondence with Wolfgang Kraus is thus predominantly egocentric (the latter's letters are missing, apart from the five copies already mentioned), although often Cioran's epistolary discourse appears to us as centred on the image of *the Other*. But the philosopher speaks about himself in various registers. He is not interested in authors such as R. Aron, whose volume on decadent Europe he did not read ("he wrote too much journalism, as a result of which he often became incapable of being concise", 1979, p. 170) and he has certain reserves concerning Althusser, J.P. Sartre ("promoters of totalitarianism", 1980, p. 185) or Robert Musil (who seems "too boring, too sprawling, not too succinct, too reflective", 1980, pp. 188–189).

Cioran queries Kraus about the translation of his own books, informs him about his trips to spa resorts (Dieppe, Switzerland, Greece, Spain, etc.), exposes his physical suffering caused by colds, the neuritis that he endured for decades, antibiotics he had taken, the arthritis he inherits, various ailments caused by stomach hyperacidity; conditions for which he administers Trevidal or Gelusil Lac (the latter for the stomach, intestines, bile). There are episodes that make the philosopher seem more human, more fragile than we imagined, but they do not prevent him from also being mocking and self-ironic. The essay *The inconvenience of being born* is a "stillborn book", because the main idea and even the title "lead to a dead end"; what remains of this work is the judgment *on the futility of revolutions*; it is a *typical French book*, "gloomy, too frivolous to be translated" (1973, p. 64); and if we already knew that writing was, for Cioran, a strategy to postpone suicide, now we find another option: "For me, writing means getting rid of obsessions. Therapy first. *Truth* comes after that" (1973, p. 67).

Wolfgang Kraus, in turn, sends Cioran excerpts from his essays on the relationship between *culture* and *power*, on Austria or the rehabilitation of the individual (pages received with a protocollary aura), on nihilism, or simply consults him about various books which Europa Publishing House wanted to print (Julien Green, Roger Caillois, etc.) under the direct supervision of Cioran.

The Austrian philosopher offers Cioran a *faithful* reading, perceiving his attitude as situated "in the midst of the contradiction of knowing a man who can live neither conscious of unlimited doubt, nor with the emotional impulse of faith" (1973, p. 46). A Cioran well identified in the heresy he experienced through reservations about an in-depth study of the *New Testament*, and this, confesses the one who wrote *Le Mauvais D miurge*, due to the fact that "the Buddhist treatment I have been following for so many years has turned me away from Christianity"; instead, he remained "faithful to Pyrrhon, and I still consider him the greatest sage revealed by the non-Asian universe. He himself was in India with Alexander, and that explains everything. I'm glad", ended the message to W. Kraus, "that you're interested in scepticism. What spice for a gospel reader!" (1974, p. 81). He advises him to overcome the "crisis of demystification" and to read in this regard *To himself* by Marcus Aurelius; and he draws attention to a passage that ended an essay by

Raymond Aron: “Our future depends on God and the oil-producing countries” (1974, p. 93). And when his friend has certain experiences in Germany, he does not refrain from characterizing this decadent Western space as “the space of a tourist nation” (1977, p. 145), a country “that will be destroyed by welfare and political balance. Only Africa and probably Asia have a future. How can a hyper-refined civilization (it is said that 5% of English people are gay) compete biologically with slaves like the Chinese or with primitive, natural peoples?” (1978, p. 151).

As we have already pointed out, Cioran confesses, not infrequently, about the various ailments he suffers from, disease in any form being for him something that *humiliates his body*. He faces, for example, a pain in the right side of his chest, has three sets of X-rays without the doctors discovering the cause, only to finally find out that the culprit was ... a screwdriver with which he had worked for many hours in his attic, the effort being far too great for him (“I worked like crazy for several days”, 1977, p. 149).

Thinking about the Book of Job. After a while, in January 1980, Cioran rereads the Old Testament, remembering the impact the Book of Job and King Solomon had on his youth. An opportunity to invoke Simone Weil and her criticism of God (in this part of the Bible) and the covenant with the Jews; a Creator whose “incredible challenge” and “sublime release” he enthusiastically admires. Then he adds: “An obtuse religion could not become a universal religion, but through its strong national imprint it separated the Jews from other peoples and thus *saved* them, not spiritually, but historically, as a people” (1980, p. 181). And the Gnostic heretic Marcion, perhaps the most vehement in his exhortations against Yahweh, represented, for Cioran, the nucleus that generated *Le Mauvais Démon*.

These are religious surges emanating from the son of an Orthodox priest who, on Good Friday in 1980, goes out into the city and enters the church in Saint-Sulpice Square; it was lighted, but *no one inside, not a single believer*. However, here is a Cioran who opposes religion because it, he considers, “no longer has any vital force”; Christianity *is tired*, faith has no chance. He is ambiguous and paradoxical: “I am religious and non-religious at the same time” (1980, p. 186). This is the period when Cioran was worried about the depressive state in which his brother (Aurel) was in Sibiu, a situation generated mainly by a police interrogation (they had the same political options, leaning towards the Right); “they wanted to recruit him as an agent (they tried for twenty years!), and he refused, of course” (1980, p. 189).

Thinking of the atmosphere of justice, in early 1981, he reminds W. Kraus that he had reread countless times *The Brothers Karamazov*, being impressed by the “Legend of the Great Inquisitor” (“terribly profound”); the model for the inquisitor being Pobedonoztsev, the General Prosecutor of the Holy Synod, and for Alyosha – the philosopher Vladimir Soloviev, both friends of Dostoevsky.

New intellectuals ("Baudrillard and the others") are not exempt from Cioran's *à rebours* attitude either, because their reaction was so predictable. After being followers of China during the cultural revolution (of "organized terror" in the name of utopia), they suddenly found themselves completely disappointed with the pro-Western orientation of the Beijing regime. "For them", Cioran added, "Stalin was a demigod or even a god only because he was an executioner with ideological pretensions. Fanaticism and intolerance exert an irresistible influence on the descendants of the Jacobins" (1980, p. 195).

The beginning of twilight: "I am no longer myself". Despite confessing that he became more conservative over time, we find Cioran in Switzerland (August 1981, April 1982, 1983) where he meets Wolf Aichelburg (who had permanently left Romania); he visits Denmark (February 1982), Italy (September 1982) and Spain (1983), splendid places that captivate him with their *unbearable charm*. However, he refuses an invitation to Berlin, a culturally important city, the reason being trivial and well-known: "I want to live in seclusion" (1982, p. 212); as he gives up going to Madrid, this time due to a severe flu.

However, his conservative attitude is reflected in both writing and reading; he reads and writes less and less, becoming, as he says, lazier even when it comes to epistles; he gets lost in various conversations (which "can destroy you"); he comes home at around three or four in the morning; he finds refuge in music, "a passion of the unwilling", and would like to be in Venice, "to immerse myself with the city" (1982, pp. 215, 217); he complains of cursed signs of old age, suffers from memory loss, is afraid of becoming a "cultural rag"; has freed himself from the "disease of writing books" and is interested in "Europe's gravediggers": Metternich, Napoleon, Hitler; the latter "destroyed the nation and created the premise for the establishment of a slave republic in the Soviet world empire" (1983, pp. 222–224).

Here is the image of a Cioran "confused by age", whose will deserts him through a paralyzing effect. "I lack the power to write not only my letters but also my books" (1985, p. 228). He publishes, however, at the end of this last year, *Aveux et anathème*, a kind of second volume of *De l'inconvénient d'être né*. At the same time, he says that he wants to go to Athens, to the French Institute – an opportunity to see Greece and Italy.

After 1985, his letters become increasingly rare, two or three a year and only one in 1990. He still reads a lot, even if he has poor eyesight (the ophthalmologist tells him that he has cataracts in both eyes, which will be subsequently operated); he has not abandoned his curiosity, which amazes him and still confirms his vitality; but he wants to give up writing books: "I really don't feel like attacking God, the world, or ... myself anymore" (1987, p. 233); "I no longer write, I no longer have any project and I want to withdraw completely from the literary hype" (1988, p. 237).

The involution of Cioran's health shows even more ominous signs: "Something broke in me. Finally, I bear the consequences of my conception of the world" (1987, p. 234); which he repeats later: "In a sense, I can say that I am no longer myself". A lasting crisis seems inevitable to him: "I became my own student. You cannot deny everything indefinitely. What good is it to slander the universe? I cannot convert to anything, and yet I do not consider my life a failure" (1988, p. 238). Even Mircea Eliade's death does not affect him as much as he would have thought, and that's because they had less and less in common as time went by.

He is as attentive as possible to the spectacle of politics, the Eastern European states being then encompassed by the ideological current maintained by Gorbachev, a character who *can be lost* if he is *sincere* and *can be victorious* if he plays the role of a *semi-cynic*. He believes that Russia still has a destiny in regard to the West, although he is worried about its future: "The Russians have a talent for freedom, and Westerners are too tired to defend it. In Paris there is talk of the REVOLUTION, although almost everyone knows that this event was a real hell" (June 28, 1989, p. 239).

As for Romania, in 1987 it had become a kind of "Uganda of Europe", because "the newspapers speak with revolt about South Africa, whose natives, meanwhile, are envied by our compatriots" (p. 235; *apartheid* generated the indignation of the civilized world). At the end of 1987, Noica passed into eternity, an additional reason for the few lines of a sketchy portrait: "A very complex personality, he spent six years in prison and then had an almost favourable relationship with the present-day government. This can only happen in the Balkans. In any case, he was a very talented occurrence in the heart of Romanian hell, and an incurable optimist" (Jan. 17, 1988, p. 237). He casts anathema on Romania, shortly before the Revolution, seeing it as "from all points of view, the last country in Europe. A tragic shame" (Nov. 18, 1989); after the waves of joy generated by the Romanian Revolution of December 1989, but also after the disaster caused by the miners, Cioran is once again overwhelmed by disappointment: "The events in Romania excited me at the beginning, but not anymore. Everything failed in this country. That is its only originality" (Oct. 27, 1990).

*

Simone Boué's two letters, written in English, are very sad. She tells Wolfgang Kraus, belatedly, that Cioran "is no longer able to write to you" (March 2, 1994, p. 245), and briefly describes his tragic condition in the hospital, where she goes every day to take him for a walk through the small park that surrounds the building. The Alzheimer's that Cioran is suffering from wreaks havoc on his mind, any contact with the world and with himself becoming insignificant or completely vanishes. He is not even aware of the death of Eugen Ionesco (1994), a friend who nevertheless had phoned him up to twelve times a day, offering consolation and comfort.

In the letter sent after Cioran's death, along with thanks to his friends Wolfgang and Trude, Simone Boué confesses that the philosopher's illness seemed revolting, and his eternal resting place is a "little tomb he chose, in the *cimetière de Montparnasse* – one of the places where he most liked to wander" (July 7, 1995, p. 246). She then recalls an evocation on Belgian television, an interview given by Cioran in 1972; a dialogue in which "he was so brilliant, so extraordinary, so wholly himself", that after seeing it she told herself: "No, no, he's not dead."

*

Of Kraus's dozens of probably long letters we have only five, a fact which places the volume we are commenting on somehow at a disadvantage. The dialogue, the lines would have been different; we would have formed a different image related to the originality of the epistles, to the circulation of ideas between the sender and the recipient, had more of these letters survived. Cioran's Austrian friend is a talkative spirit, but we also have to take into account the density of his writing. He pertinently comments on Cioranian excerpts from the translations he is delighted to take care of, offers balanced critical judgments, reveals his own essayistic victories, and subtly and charmingly characterizes the tourist places he visits (Egypt, for example).

W. Kraus does something similar in his diary pages (1971–1998), where the portrait of the man and philosopher Cioran prevails; a portrait built from deep observations of the fascinating Cioranian nature, of the gestures made and the ideas expounded by the thinker. He gives us, for example, his impressions of a meeting (28.2.1974, French Cultural Institute) attended by, among others: Julien Green, Raymond Aron, E.M. Cioran. There would be "visible and external" contradictions between the former and the latter; if Green conveys "the impression of an ambassador's wise brother", Cioran, on the other hand, plays the role of "an ambitious man freshly arrived from the countryside, an emaciated medieval monk, all skin and bones". In reality, the picture should be upside down: "Green could be the sceptic; Cioran, the believer" (p. 262; we do not comment on the hypotheses). Or he catches, on another occasion, the Cioranian verve of unfinished sentences, the multiple and expressive movements of the hand and head, the rolled eyes, the leitmotif "everything is the same", the phrases he pronounces jerkily: "totally absurd!", "indescribable!", "absolutely impossible!". Then he adds: "A lot of black humour and sincere horror" (1974, p. 263).

Beyond his glosses on texts written by Cioran, W. Kraus's notes abound in emphasizing original ideas spoken or written by the philosopher, refined or funny remarks given on various occasions, including telephone conversations. In addition, Cioran the man appears to us differently in flesh and blood, filled with vitality and humour, sometimes extremely pragmatic, almost totally different from the way we perceived him from his aphoristic fragments. In everyday life it seems to him that "he is that type man you can rely on, a most helpful man" (1974, p. 264), even if he is the author who has intellectually transposed "the total nihilism of the Orient".

A Cioran who prepares dinner “with devotion”, or, despite his pessimism, is willing to spend 5,000 francs for a dental bridge (which “will last long after his death”; 1977, p. 266).

We are struck, therefore, by the image of a truly uncompromising philosopher with an encouraging laugh, who exudes joy of living and gratitude; by the “satisfaction of a happy man” alongside Simone who “balances everything”; a housekeeper who descends and ascends, without complaining, “seven flights of stairs at least four times a day with shopping bags, often very heavy, sometimes with travel suitcases” (1984, p. 272; these efforts keep him forever young).

There are, in Kraus’s notations, some severe allegations against Cioran’s work. He believes, for example, that the philosopher “fails to exceed the level of some variants of the *Précis de décomposition* – some of which are very good (*Le Mauvais Démon, Histoire et utopie*)” (1985, p. 273). Even if he deciphers it faithfully, he does not refrain from observing: “Thinking outside of conventions. But no trace of evolution, a lot of thoughts over which other thoughts pile up”; and a little further: “Tough opposition to my will, my thinking, my aspirations. Still, friendship. The withdrawal of these bridges seems to me extremely dangerous – not for him, but for those who follow him” (1986, p. 277).

The paragraph entitled “The Temptation to Exist”, from the similarly named book (1956), is understood by Kraus as “overcoming a severe psychic crisis, as a kind of verbalized attack of madness”; the publication of the essay seems to him an unforgivable mistake, just as he thinks that the philosopher misread Marcus Aurelius; and his attacks on the Apostle Paul are seen as “attempts at parricide (priest, priest’s family)”; blasphemy was thus transformed by Cioran into a “tiring, performance sport” (1994, pp. 285, 286).

However, W. Kraus also makes ethereal concessions to Cioran: “In reality, I think that Cioran is a believer, convinced of the possibility of divine clemency and goodness” (1988, p. 279). He is “a monk who has strayed into our epoch from the wilderness of Egypt”; he searches for God, “but God eludes him because of his exaggerated expectations. A gnostic lacking in modesty, humility, gratitude – which, however, does not apply his private life” (1993, p. 280). Later, in 1994, when visiting him in hospital, he thinks that such a “schizoid existence” is enigmatic: a “mind so sharp, this good, kind, helpful man – but who wrote about the opposite of all that is good” (p. 281).

*

In 1996, W. Kraus received from the Sibiu writer Joachim Wittstok the video of Liiceanu’s film about Cioran in Paris (58 minutes, part I). He found it “pathetic, full of clichés and completely unilateral, without any nuances (Romanian Television)”; a “somewhat crude, banal, primitive film with fashionable aspects, a failure – nothing can be seen in it from Cioran’s genius”. Liiceanu “does not seem to have known him, and did not read him properly. No bit of irony, no self-irony, no *witz*,

no humour, no trace of his stoic philosophical charm in which Marcus Aurelius combines with Nestroy and Raimund – who will transmit the real memory of Cioran? Certainly not this simple, noisy film” (see pp. 289–291; the latter two authors are Austrian playwrights, representatives of the Viennese popular theatre).

And because Wolfgang Kraus invokes the *real* image of Cioran, we reproduce a longer quote from March 1974:

Cioran reminds me of an Anabaptist; a thin peasant’s face with large, blue, bright eyes, weather-worn, bony, his arm movements like the spin of a cloak. A restless gait, with great strides; a kind of jerky, hurried speech, as if it were difficult for it to keep up with the stream of his thoughts; the words roll, overlap, giving voice to incisive and precise formulations. A man of absolute goodness. (p. 263)