



BRILL

# Cioran and Time

## *Falling from Nietzsche*

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### Abstract

This contribution endeavors to excavate Cioran's metaphysics of time as emerging from a critique of Nietzsche's view(s) of eternal return. Thereby, I argue against reducing Cioran to a self-contradictory and destructive thinker with stylistic qualities but on the margins of philosophical debates, particularly those on the question of time. To retrieve Cioran's understanding of time, my innovative method is to assemble his disordered aphorisms under a Nietzschean angle in order to unearth Cioran's intimate spiritual journey on the question of time. I conclude that if Cioran's coherence has eluded scholarly investigation it is because his identified stance is intricately intertwined with his secretive and agnostic theological quest. To develop a better understanding of Cioran's metaphysics, I introduce and advocate for a "wandering paradigm" in order to deconstruct what I refer to as the "sedentary paradigm" derived from the nihilist or Nietzschean interpretation.

### Keywords

time – Cioran – Nietzsche – eternal return – fall from time – eternity – mourning

Emil Cioran (1911–1995) still tends to be considered more a writer and an essayist, than a philosopher with an identifiable ontology or metaphysic. Scholars and Cioran himself describe most of his aphoristic thought as paradoxical, self-

contradictory, and anti-systematic. As a result, academic circles positioned his thought at the margins of serious discussions within the continental tradition of philosophy. However, I argue that Cioran's treatment of the problem of time epitomizes that this interpretation is rooted in significant misunderstandings.

It is even more imperative to study Cioran's understanding of the problem of time considering that it has been the main blind spot of Cioranian studies for years: as blatant examples, the six-volume study *Cioran, archives paradoxales* [Cioran, paradoxical archives],<sup>1</sup> which gather about 117 articles,<sup>2</sup> does not offer any in-depth analysis of his conception of time. The same can be said of the 544-page compilation of articles in *Cahiers de l'Herne*.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, towards the end of his life, Cioran emphasized that his exploration of time in *The Fall of Time* (1964) has been both the most misinterpreted and the most overlooked of his insights, a judgment that my reflection aims to corroborate. He went on to assert that he considers this sole theme – the fall from time – as the core of all that he ever wrote.<sup>4</sup>

Given that various authors shape how Cioran addresses the question of time – Bergson, Heidegger, Valéry, Augustine, the Gnostics, Pascal, Joubert, etc. – why should we consider the author of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* central for entering Cioran's views on time? Cioran was a German speaker and deeply acquainted with Nietzsche's works in general and the doctrine of eternal return in particular, as early as 1964 and likely prior to that.<sup>5</sup> Although he makes an art of concealing any external influence on his work, Cioran's admiration for Nietzsche sometimes shines through behind his lines: acknowledging his "bril-

1 All French translations are my own – original French text provided in footnotes. I have preserved the italics used as markers of emphasis, as they appear in Cioran's and Nietzsche's original editions.

2 Aurélien Demars and al., eds., *Cioran, archives paradoxales; Nouvelles approches critiques*, vol. 1–VI, Rencontres (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2015–2022). Except disseminated comments and the five-pages brief article of Mircea Lăzărescu, "Cioran, le temps et le scepticisme," in *Cioran, archives paradoxales; Nouvelles approches critiques*, ed. Aurélien Demars and al., vol. 1, Rencontres (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2015), 117–123.

3 Laurence Tacou and Vincent Piednoir, eds., *Cahier Emil Cioran* (Paris: L'Herne, 2009). A selection of articles from this volume are re-edited in Yves-Jean Harder, ed., *Emil Cioran; Les cahiers de l'Herne*, Champs (Paris: Flammarion, 2015). Jean-Claude Guerrini discusses some political implications of Cioran's temporality in Jean-Claude Guerrini, "Visions du temps; Cioran analyste de la réaction, de l'utopie et du progrès," *Mots, Les langages du politique* 68 (2002): 27–43.

4 Emil Cioran and Sylvie Jaudeau, "Entretien avec Sylvie Jaudeau," in *Entretiens*, Arcades (Paris: Gallimard, 1995), 233.

5 The first mention might be in November 1964 in his personal diary: Emil Cioran, *Cahiers 1957–1972*, Blanche (Paris: Gallimard, 1997), 244. He also mentioned it while in vacation at Ibiza in August 1966, in his personal diary published in Emil Cioran, *Cahier de Talamanca*, Le Petit Mercure (Paris: Gallimard, 2000), 27.

liance,<sup>6</sup> confessing he feels close to him,<sup>7</sup> or that he was the only philosopher able to make a poem.<sup>8</sup> While most later statements vehemently reject him,<sup>9</sup> I perceive this denial as a testament to Nietzsche's importance for Cioran: "We measure his [Nietzsche's] fecundity by the possibilities he offers us to continually disavow him without exhausting him."<sup>10</sup> In my perspective, Cioran has been in fact an absolute disciple of Nietzsche, to the extent he used to signify years and his own birth as "After-Nietzsche" and used Nietzsche's birth (1844) as the zero-year of a new era.<sup>11</sup> The manifold parallels between how Nietzsche and Cioran apprehend philosophy are a tangible reflection of this veiled admiration: their distinctive writing style and the recourse to philosophical aphorisms; their rejection of systematicity in philosophy; their criticism of Christianity and modernity, as well as humanism, classical philosophy, and rationality; how they regard the philosopher as a psychologist; the genealogical method; their penchant for a poetical tone; their charges targeting institutionalized philosophy, and so on.

However, from a theoretical perspective, Nietzschean scholars massively dispel that resemblance by reducing Cioran to a figure of "flat nihilism," a post-modern deconstructionist inapt to express positive truths and doomed to bitterness. The error here is considering that intellectual discipleship has to be one of agreement. In contrast, as Pascal was at once Cartesian and anti-Cartesian, I regard Cioran as both Nietzschean and anti-Nietzschean. His thought proceeds both forward and backward to Nietzsche.<sup>12</sup> His perspective on time appears

6 "... *brio* ..." Cioran, *Cahiers 1957–1972*, 325.

7 *Ibid.*, 295.

8 *Ibid.*, 367. Refer also to Emil Cioran, *Syllogismes de l'amertume* in *Œuvres*, Quarto (Paris: Gallimard, 1995), 749.

9 For example, he highlights the contrast between the "the lyricism of exaltation" of Nietzsche, and "the prose of resignation" of Marcus Aurelius, and his preference for "the tired emperor" over the "dazzling prophet." "*Aucune hésitation de ma part entre le lyrisme de la frénésie et la prose de l'acceptation: je trouve plus de réconfort auprès d'un empereur fatigué que d'un prophète fulgurant.*" Emil Cioran, *De l'inconvénient d'être né* in *Œuvres*, Quarto (Paris: Gallimard, 1995), 1324. The main theme in all Cioran's writing is the "ingenuousness" of Nietzsche. Cioran, *Cahiers 1957–1972*, 324–325; 445; 527; 659; 910; Cioran, *De l'inconvénient d'être né*, 1323. For another sort of references, see a critique of Nietzsche's judgment on Bacon in Emil Cioran, *Écartèlement* in *Œuvres*, Quarto (Paris: Gallimard, 1995), 1491.

10 "*Nous mesurons sa fécondité aux possibilités qu'il nous offre de le renier continuellement sans l'épuiser.*" Cioran, *Syllogismes de l'amertume*, 761.

11 Peter Sloterdijk, "Cioran ou l'excès de la parole sincère," in *Emil Cioran*, ed. Yves-Jean Harder, Champs (Paris: Flammarion, 2015), 144. Cioran recognizes this youthful passion for Nietzsche in various passages of his personal diary. See, Cioran, *Cahiers 1957–1972*, 760.

12 Here, I draw on a concept from early Christian literature, see Margaret M. Mitchell, *Paul*,

as a continual disavowal of Nietzsche's own conception of temporality (forward), and yet, they both enunciate that their utmost thoughts are related to time, plus they both meditate on temporality through the examination of repetition (backward). Why in those circumstances not draw upon Nietzsche's conception of time to retrieve the inner coherence of Cioran's philosophical musings? Besides, Cioran's scholars may emulate how Nietzsche's scholarship has managed to incorporate his fragmented thought, poetical inclinations, and provocative statements into philosophical discussions.

Nietzsche's doctrine of eternal return has two main forms: a sapiential exercise (akin to Stoics' exercises), and a cosmological doctrine (comparable again to the Stoics' alternance of regeneration/*παλιγγενεσία* and conflagration/*ἐκπύρωσις*).

First, as exhibited in *The Gay Science* § 341, the eternal return is the hypothesis that we will live our life again and again, that we will reexperience each event of our existence perpetually and without any newness. How do we react to that perspective? If this supposition tetanizes me and crushes me under its weight, it reveals that I do not really love my life. If not, it proves that I have accepted existence as it is, I have said "yes" to life, and I can bear "its heaviest weight."<sup>13</sup> Second, as displayed in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* and in Nietzsche's *Posthumous Fragments*, the eternal return is the cosmological doctrine connected to that hypothesis: the world has no beginning and no end,<sup>14</sup> it "lacks the capacity for eternal novelty,"<sup>15</sup> and it cannot reach a state of equilibrium.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, "the great dice game of existence" reproduces the same finite set of combinations again and again in an infinite time.<sup>17</sup> Contrary to a persistent dichotomy in scholarship, these two conceptions are not opposed.<sup>18</sup> Without going into details about Nietzsche's exegesis, I read the first version of eternal recurrence in *Gay Science* § 341 (in contrast to Loeb<sup>19</sup>) and in *Thus*

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*the Corinthians and the Birth of Christian Hermeneutics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 105.

13 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science; With a Prelude in German Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs*, ed. Bernard Williams, trans. Josephine Nauckhoff and Adrián del Caro, Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 194–195, § 341.

14 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Random House, 1967), 550; § 1067 (1885).

15 *Ibid.*, 547; § 1062 (1887).

16 *Ibid.*, 547; § 1064 (1885).

17 *Ibid.*, 549, § 1066 (March–June 1888).

18 For further insights on that, see Paul S. Loeb, "Finding the *Übermensch* in Nietzsche's Genealogy of Morality," *The Journal of Nietzsche Studies* 101, no. 30 (2005): 85.

19 Loeb argues that Nietzsche's rhetorical devices, such as *Zarathustra's* dwarf or the demon

*Spoke Zarathustra*, and the second in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* and *Posthumous fragments*. The continuity of Nietzsche's work cannot be overlooked since fragments as early as 1873 contain the intuition of eternal recurrence.<sup>20</sup>

This article's purpose is not to refine the complicated interpretation of Nietzsche's understanding of eternal return, but to unfold for the first time the complexity of Cioran's view of time as emerging through a rejection of Nietzsche's doctrine of eternal return. Through the gate of Nietzsche, I aim to bring Cioran into the contemporary discussion on time from which he is – possibly from his own responsibility<sup>21</sup> – excluded although he deeply engages its key figures: Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Bergson. Cioran's anti-systematic stance betrays itself by reprocessing some aspects of the theories he negates. Properly ordered, the partial and contradictory truths of his aphorisms suddenly give rise to a coherence that equals his authenticity.

My singular method indeed involves the careful assembly of Cioran's seemingly dispersed aphorisms weaving them together to reconstruct the coherence – if any – underlying his thought. The recurring motifs, anecdotes, and arguments that resurface throughout his writings, once assembled unveil the coherent tapestry of his reflection and invite a fresh perspective on his intellectual and spiritual journey.

Although I will refer to some of Cioran's private notes (1957–1972), my argument mainly focuses on three texts that, at the twilight of his life, Cioran characterizes as the *condensé* of all his thoughts: *Syllogismes de l'amertume* [*Syllogisms of Acrimony*] (1952), *De l'inconvénient d'être né* [*The Inconvenience of Being Born*] (1973), and the last section of *La chute dans le temps* [*The Fall into Time*] (1964). After addressing Cioran's objections based on the inward

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of *Gay Science*, cannot be used to argue that Nietzsche is not giving his most important insights about reality. Cf. *Ibid.*, 85. I fully agree concerning the book *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* – to the extent it is a book – which has such a distinctive status in Nietzsche's works, while I consider that it is different for *Gay Science's* demon. The demon has a strong connotation within the history of philosophy, for instance with the “*genium malignum*” in Descartes's first *Meditationes*: where he lies and deceives, and nevertheless can help us to discern the truth. René Descartes, *Meditationes de prima philosophia; Méditations métaphysiques*, trans. by Duc de Luynes (Paris: Vrin, 1978), 23.

20 See, for example, Joshua Rayman analysis of an early fragment of 1873, so-called *Zeitatomlehre* (“Time-Atom Theory”), in Joshua Rayman, “Nietzsche's Early and Late Conceptions of Time and Eternal Recurrence,” *History and Theory* 61, no. 1 (2022): 43–70.

21 I mean here that it often seems that Cioran shapes his thought to escape being involved in academic discussions. His arguments are obscured through the use of aphorisms which constitutes only a series of concise conclusions about an inaccessible line of reasoning. As explained in Emil Cioran and Jean-François Duval, “Entretien avec Jean-François Duval,” in *Entretiens* (Paris: Gallimard, 1995), 41.

experience of time (part I), and those which address time from an external perspective (part II), I will characterize the resolution he offers in contrast to Nietzsche's eternal return (part III), and the difficulties it entails (part IV).

## 1 Objecting to the Eternal Return as a Sapiential Hypothesis

Zarathustra professes the doctrine of eternal return after an internal struggle in which his courage prevails over the “dizziness at the abyss.”<sup>22</sup> In Cioran, the philosophical inquiry always commences with an interiorization where the most abyssal thoughts are faced: “I prow around the depths, drawing out a few vertigos from them.”<sup>23</sup> Interrogating the mystery of time in such a way, by *palpating* the abyss,<sup>24</sup> is preferable to the secure and impertinent position of the philosopher in front of the enigmas of time.<sup>25</sup> Thinking time – and not thinking about time – grows into an obsession: “As far as it can be remembered, my great illness has always been extreme attention to time, an object of dread and torture for me ... Time holds me.”<sup>26</sup> By installing him in the haughty stance of a scholar of loss, Cioran recognizes that this voluntary choice on his part betrays “a snobbism of the irretrievable.”<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, in a personal note for the year Eve 1960, the exploration of time turns into a vocation: “I should spend my life alone, and reflect unceasingly on time.”<sup>28</sup> A similar process of interiorization is at stake in how Zarathustra apprehends time. Paraphrasing *Genealogy of Morality's* comment on the “Vision and the Riddle” chapter in *Zarathustra*,<sup>29</sup> Loeb explains that the

22 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, ed. Adrián del Caro and Robert B. Pippin, trans. Adrián del Caro, Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 125, part 3, “On the Vision and the Riddle,” § 1.

23 “... je rôde autour des profondeurs, leur soutire quelques vertiges ...” Cioran, *Syllogismes de l'amertume*, 754.

24 “... on palpe l'abîme ...” Cioran, *De l'inconvénient d'être né*, 1387.

25 Cioran, *Syllogismes de l'amertume*, 757.

26 “D'aussi loin qu'il me souviennne, ma grande maladie a toujours été une excessive attention au temps, objet de hantise et de torture pour moi ... Le temps me tient.” Cioran, *Cahiers 1957–1972*, 100.

27 “L'intérêt que nous portons au Temps émane d'un snobisme de l'irréparable.” Cioran, *Syllogismes de l'amertume*, 765.

28 “31 décembre 1959 Minuit. Je devrais passer ma vie seul, et songer sans relâche au Temps.” Cioran, *Cahiers 1957–1972*, 41.

29 See, Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, ed. Keith Pearson-Ansell, trans. Carol Diethe, Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 66–67, § 24-§ 25.

solitude-enabled sinking, burrowing, diving into reality refers to Zarathustra's descent into his own depths (his subconscious) so as to bring up to the light (his consciousness) his most abysmal thought, his deepest instinctive wisdom about the true nature of reality: the eternal recurrence of the same.<sup>30</sup>

*Zarathustra*, part. 3, "On Involuntary Bliss," "The Convalescent" 1

In both Cioran and Nietzsche, contemplating the abysses of time goes hand in hand with the yearning for some eternity. Nietzsche posits that the depths of the instant proclaim the eternal: "All eternity was needed to produce this one event – and in this single moment of affirmation all eternity was called good, redeemed, justified, and affirmed."<sup>31</sup> As a result, the eternal return equals the longing for eternity: "Oh how then could I not lust for eternity and for the nuptial ring of rings – the ring of recurrence! ... For I love you, oh eternity!"<sup>32</sup> The same yearning pervades the whole of Cioran's works who confesses as soon as 1941–1944: "If the extinguished things knew how much I loved them, they would acquire a soul for the only purpose of mourning me ... Why does not [the heart] arrange things in a perfumed immutability?"<sup>33</sup> The "yes to life" is not consecutive to the meditation on time like in Nietzsche,<sup>34</sup> rather it precedes the reflection on time and turns it into a nostalgia of eternity through the experience of the ephemeral. However, the *Fall into Time* argues that this experience is uncommon to humans: at the fall, mankind chose to consume the fruit from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil rather than the Tree of Life, in his perspective it means that humanity preferred knowledge over everlasting life.<sup>35</sup> Cioran reads this as compelling testimony that humanity lacks a genuine vocation for eternity.<sup>36</sup> Hence, he depicts the human condition as being unceasingly deprived of eternity. Furthermore, given this fundamental

30 Loeb, "Finding the *Übermensch* in Nietzsche's Genealogy of Morality," 82.

31 Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, 532–533, §1032 (1883–1885).

32 Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 184, III, "The Seven Seals," 1.

33 "Si les choses éteintes savaient combien j'ai aimé cette vie, elles acquerraient une âme à seule fin de me pleurer. Pourquoi [le cœur] n'agence-t-il pas les choses dans une immuabilité parfumée?" Emil Cioran, *Le bréviaire des vaincus* in *Œuvres*, Quarto (Paris: Gallimard, 1995), 527.

34 On the Nietzschean conception of affirmation (*Bejahung*) and eternal recurrence as the "supreme formula of affirmation," see: Paul S. Loeb, "Time, Power, and Superhumanity," *Journal of Nietzsche Studies* 21 (2001): 27. See also James I. Porter, "Nietzsche's Highest Value (Affirmation of Life) and its Limits," *Nietzsche-Studien* 44, no. 1 (2015): 67–77.

35 Emil Cioran, *La chute dans le temps* in *Œuvres*, Quarto (Paris: Gallimard, 1995), 1071–1074.

36 *Ibid.*, 1073.

antagonism between eternity and knowledge, the latter cannot serve as a conduit toward the first: only practical, tenuous events may open the door to the “inconceivable” eternity.<sup>37</sup>

In Cioran, I argue that this process of interiorization to scrutinize time yields two major conclusions that, for him, disqualify the sapiential-hypothetical rendition of Nietzsche’s eternal return. The first is ennui, which he experiences as a fundamental and metaphysical boredom that resists any distraction. The events succeed each other without bringing anything new, they are similar to the point of being indistinguishable. As a result, time itself is disjoined from its content, namely the events that accumulate in a meaningless indistinction. For Cioran, ennui guides us towards “the root of time,”<sup>38</sup> by pointing out a pure time, “a decanted time, liberated of events, of beings and things.”<sup>39</sup> Although intrinsically paradoxical, the experience of ennui is a crucifixion:<sup>40</sup> therefore, Cioran fails Nietzsche’s challenge of the eternal return by being crushed by the (either possible or actual) repetition of life, by finding no meaning in it. Moreover, the sensation of repetition exerts an implacable force that deprives everything of meaning: Cioran draws the anecdote of a man, observing a scene of a movie being filmed in a Parisian street, who is scandalized by how many times the same sequence is filmed, and refilmed again and again. Elsewhere, he insists that the repetition of billions of human existences divests our very existence of their meaning, each of us is nothing more than a banal and unremarkable exemplar,<sup>41</sup> “to exist is plagiarism.”<sup>42</sup> Yet, ennui discloses some positive truths: it “levels the enigmas,”<sup>43</sup> promotes the soul and might even be responsible for it,<sup>44</sup> and thus, ennui paradoxically turns into “a nourishing void.”<sup>45</sup> The voice of Nietzsche’s demon in *Gay Science* § 341 is ennui in Cioran. It does not preach the plenitude of a time eternally reoccurring, but the detachment of the pure time from the events that adorn it. Ultimately, what prevails is the

37 Cioran, *Syllogismes de l’amertume*, 790.

38 “... vers les racines du temps.” Ibid., 764.

39 “Le temps pur, le temps décanté, libéré d’événements, d’êtres et de choses ...” Cioran, *De l’inconvénient d’être né*, 1295.

40 Especially, the ennui of the insomniac: Ibid., 1279; Cioran, *Cahiers 1957–1972*, 805. Some personal notes in his diary from 1968 seem to indicate that Cioran draws on Simone Weil on this topic, see Ibid., 610.

41 Cioran, *De l’inconvénient d’être né*, 1344.

42 “Exister est un plagiat.” Cioran, *Écartèlement*, 1448.

43 “L’Ennui nivelle les énigmes.” Cioran, *Syllogismes de l’amertume*, 756.

44 “Le fauteuil, ce grand responsable, ce promoteur de notre ‘âme.’” Ibid., 766. Here, he simply argues that ennui leaves room for “interior life” that provides more consistency to the soul. His reflection on ennui is indeed part of his critique of a society of agitation.

45 “... vide nourricier ...” Ibid., 768.



unreality of everything vis-à-vis the abysses of this pure temporality, which is the ontological pinnacle.

The second conclusion of Cioran is that time unfolds death. At first, Cioran in his quest for the most intense and pure time realizes that facing the imminence of death purifies our relationship with time. Time manifests its core meaning through its acquaintance with death: "Ponder on those who no longer have much time left, who know that all is abolished for them, except the time in which the thought of their end unfolds. Engage that time. Write for *gladiators* ..."46 He puts himself in this situation through the artifact of what he called the possibility of suicide, that is the unrealized consideration of suicide: each instant can be my last if I decided so, thus, each instant harbors the possibility of death. In his dramatic, laconic expression: "Each day is a Rubicon River in which I aspire to drown myself."47 The physiological sensation of the corpse "that is taking shape within us"48 reinforces that palpable presence of death. Conversely, the predicament of death lies in time, the anxiety arouses from the very hour of our demise rather than its vague certainty.49

In addition to this consideration of death in human terms, I posit that Cioranian time perpetrates death by tirelessly piling up the cadavers of irretrievable instants: "This very second has vanished forever, lost into the anonymous mass of the irrevocable. It will never return ... Everything is unique – and insignificant."50 When he introspects on the roots of time, Cioran does not discover Nietzsche's recurring affirmation of life but the macabre destruction of instants, of all instants. Cioran reformulates the Augustinian insights on the evasive nature of the present with a morbid connotation. This description of the flow of time leads him to affirm the ultimate unreality of all things: all that we hold as being and unique immediately swallows unto the past so that everything is both being and already non-being.51 Cioran's time shares an intrinsic irreversibility with death itself. *What once was* has nothing to do with *what will*

46 "Réfléchir à ceux qui n'en ont plus pour longtemps, qui savent que tout est aboli pour eux, sauf le temps où se déroule la pensée de leur fin. S'adresser à ce temps là. Écrire pour des gladiateurs ..." Cioran, *De l'inconvénient d'être né*, 1328–1329.

47 "Chaque jour est un Rubicon où j'aspire à me noyer." Cioran, *Syllogismes de l'amertume*, 808.

48 "... celui [le cadavre] qui se prépare en nous ..." Cioran, *De l'inconvénient d'être né*, 777.

49 Ibid., 1345.

50 "Cette seconde-ci a disparu pour toujours, elle s'est perdue dans la masse anonyme de l'irrévocable. Elle ne reviendra jamais ... Tout est unique – et insignifiant." Ibid., 1294. He accounts for a similar experience at Gare du Nord in Paris, in Cioran, *Cahiers 1957–1972*, 244. See also on "le caractère transitoire de tout (the transitory characteristic of all)," Cioran, *De l'inconvénient d'être né*, 1369.

51 Cioran, *De l'inconvénient d'être né*, 1271.

*be*, for the definitive wall of *being* stands between them: things that *have been* carry the indelible mark – or scar – of being.<sup>52</sup> Cioran points out the stark contrast between his perspective and a (“childish”<sup>53</sup>) Nietzschean understanding of eternal return in which no genuine loss can be experienced.

Consequent to this unceasing swallowing of things into void, I discern an emphasis on mourning stemming from the remembrance human beings have of the things that *have been*. Neglecting the Tree of Life, human beings coveted knowledge and are continuously paying the price for it. The weight of life abides in our inability to forget enough.<sup>54</sup> For Cioran, the intimate experience of time results in the ecstatic<sup>55</sup> discovery of the irretrievable rather than a Nietzschean recurrence. Through ennui, he takes an initial step toward a different temporality, and through death in time, toward the inconsistency of things.

## 2 Objecting to the Eternal Return from an External Perspective

Having examined how Cioran might respond through an introspective inquiry on time and eternal return (by observing the self-time relationship), what does he allege from the perspective of an external analysis of time? I.e., how time and eternal return can be assessed from the external observation of the world? I mentioned that Nietzsche’s external judgment on time is that, given the non-equilibrium of the world, the finitude of possible states in the world makes necessary the recurrence of the same states of affairs after a certain period. Cioran’s insistence on the irretrievable denies any genuine repetition of history. Then, what recurs and feeds the abyssal sensation of ennui? The human illusions. Nietzsche’s argument on the space of possible events in the world (*Möglichkeitsraum*) is literally transposed by Cioran to the ideas/ideals that agitate human beings over time, civilization after civilization:

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52 Ibid., 1329.

53 “13 décembre 1968 – Dire que, dans l’infini du temps, il n’y aura jamais un autre 13 décembre identique à celui-ci. L’Éternel Retour est un enfantillage. Tout est unique et perdu à jamais.” “December 13th, 1968 – To think that, in the infinity of time, there will never be another December 13th *identical* to this one. The Eternal Return is a childish game. Everything is *unique* and eternally lost.” Cioran, *Cahiers 1957–1972*, 650.

54 For the contraposition of that idea, that is the relief of our lack of memory, see Cioran, *De l’inconvénient d’être né*, 1294.

55 Cioran depicts his understanding of time through ennui as the most extraordinary inner experience of his young life. Ibid., 1336–1337.

Strictly speaking, history does not repeat itself, but, since the illusions that human beings are capable of are limited in number, they continually return under another disguise, giving to a super-decrepit muck an appearance of novelty and a tragic veneer.<sup>56</sup>

The ideals that motivate our actions are limited (finite), but not the actual instantiations of those ideas in a specific culture and time. With this doctrine, Cioran ingeniously combines the two somewhat opposite movements each of which I have previously assembled and reconstructed (Part 1): on one hand, the repetition of illusions accounts for the profound ennui that seizes him while contemplating the banality of human history; on the other hand, it preserves the uniqueness of historical events that grants his mourning for the irretrievability of each singular moment of history. However, how can he relegate all human motives to uninventive illusions? I identify three primary argumentative patterns in his writings:

- (i) He adapts a sort of Humean-empiricist line of reasoning into his theory of ideas. All great ideas from ancient times have been exhausted and sound ludicrous to our modern sensibilities: how can we suppose a better future for our present most solid doctrines? He explains that Romans withdrawing their legions on the eve of their empire may have ignored the lessons of civilizational twilights, but “such is not our case”:<sup>57</sup> we are informed that doctrines, to the extent they depend on the culture in which they were born, must die. Cioran’s treatment of the history of metaphysical concepts exemplifies this point. The “soul” has its epoch and then dies, the same for “substance,” then, “matter” and “energy” became popular, as now “nothingness” is in vogue, but we cannot ignore they possessed only a limited life expectancy.<sup>58</sup>
- (ii) Illusions far from fading in silence, have the propensity to cause disasters because, unlike events, they do not know how to die.<sup>59</sup> Here, the paradigmatic illustration is the Second World War intensified by his buried past as a far-right activist in Romania (in the 30s).<sup>60</sup> Melancholically reflect-

56 *“L’histoire, à proprement parler, ne se répète pas, mais, comme les illusions dont l’homme est capable sont limitées en nombre, elles reviennent toujours sous un autre déguisement, donnant ainsi à une saloperie archidécépète un air de nouveauté et un vernis tragique.”* Ibid., 1356.

57 Cioran, *Syllogismes de l’amertume*, 773.

58 Among many others, refer to Ibid., 755.

59 Cioran, *De l’inconvénient d’être né*, 1351.

60 It is regrettable that most of Cioran’s experts nowadays still contribute to burying this “infamous past,” as eloquently expressed by Marta Petreu. Marta Petreu, *An Infamous Past*;

ing on the Berlin salons of the Romantic era, Cioran contemplates figures such as Henriette Hertz (1846–1913) and Rachel Levin (1771–1833) – both Jewish women – and then he realizes that, in his own century, they would have perished in some gas chamber.<sup>61</sup> Cioran observes the same harmful and delusional consequences concerning philosophical doctrines, speaking about Nietzsche he writes: “The ‘generous’ philosopher forgets that from a system only survived the damaging truths.”<sup>62</sup>

- (iii) There is no need to refute all assertions one by one since there are no long and organized “hierarchical chains of perplexities.”<sup>63</sup> It is only necessary to point out the impossibility of correctly responding to certain basic fundamental problems, on which all others depend. One such problem is death which supplants all others.<sup>64</sup> In that regard, he writes elsewhere that God was the most suitable “solution” that human being ever invented: therefore, being God-disillusioned – as Cioran undoubtedly is – entails the denial of all second-rate and inferior illusions.<sup>65</sup>

Cioran is aware that this universal disillusion raises many challenges: first, this radical skepticism itself is an illusion; second, the denial of one truth involves the illusory belief in its contrary; third, this diminishes the tension between

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*E.M. Cioran and the Rise of Fascism in Romania*, trans. Bogdan Aldea (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2005). To provide the reader with a necessary context: Cioran became suddenly an enthusiast for Hitler in late October / early November 1933 (22 years old); and had involvement with the far-right Romanian Christian movement named “The Iron Guard” (not a member but a supporter). Various statements in his writings and personal notes connote his far-right leanings, which can be found until January 1941. During the war, Cioran resided in France and was dismissed from the diplomatic position he had previously held. He maintained political silence but once went (with Eugène Ionesco) to a Gestapo office to intervene for the liberation of their friend, the Jewish, French, and Romanian philosopher Benjamin Fondane (1898–1944) held in Drancy, and who ultimately perished in Auschwitz-Birkenau.

61 Cioran, *De l'inconvénient d'être né*, 1351.

62 “Le philosophe ‘généreux’ oublie à ses dépens que d’un système seules survivent les vérités nuisibles.” Cioran, *Syllogismes de l’amertume*, 761. It is obviously not the case that “system” may characterize Nietzsche’s thought. Here, I think that Cioran considers systematic any thought that aims to build a coherent worldview through the use of specific technical terms that receive a specific sense within that worldview: *der Wille zur Macht* [Will to Power], *Ewige Wiederkunft* [Eternal Recurrence], *Le Grand Style* [The Grand Style], *Übermensch* [Overhuman], for the most famous. Perhaps, Cioran is simply not thinking about Nietzsche here, though all the context of this section suggests that. In that case, Hegel’s systematicity and its impact on the German early twentieth century may also be the subject of this aphorism.

63 *Ibid.*, 757.

64 *Ibid.*, 757.

65 Cioran, *De l'inconvénient d'être né*, 1340.

an assertion and its contrary, a dichotomic stance which Cioran sought to preserve during his whole life. To address this, he adopts a perspectivism wherein his acrimonious negation coexists with the embracing of all doctrines since the truths are not even worth being destroyed.<sup>66</sup>

Therefore, after the transposition of Nietzsche's argument to the finitude of illusions, Cioran delves into idiomatic Nietzschean themes: the charge against the illusion of progress within a linear time and other ideals,<sup>67</sup> a perspectivism conveyed through an aphoristic discourse and a way for the philosopher of "being several."<sup>68</sup> However, between the lines, Cioran considers the exaltation of Nietzsche inspiring, and yet it is a mere instance of the recurrence of human illusions for ideas that cannot save us.<sup>69</sup> Besides, for Cioran, the infinity of time hypothesized by Nietzsche negates any meaning to the world, since, following a Platonic vein, meaning for humans resides only within the graspable finitude.<sup>70</sup>

Then, while the repetition of events leads the world to attain its perfection in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*,<sup>71</sup> the repetition of irretrievable acts based on a repetitive finite set of illusions generates chaos in Cioran. While, in Nietzsche, all the events of the world – goods and evil alike – are embraced into the perfection of eternal recurrence,<sup>72</sup> the Cioranian undermining of all human intentions engulfs all events into the absurd. More precisely, this meaninglessness of world history emerges from the tension between the appearance of meaning at a local level and the absence of meaning at a global level. From a human-scale

66 "A positive mind gone awry, the Demolisher believes, in their naivety, that the truth are worth the effort of being destroyed." / *"Esprit positif qui a mal tourné, le Démolisseur croit, dans sa candeur, que les vérités valent la peine d'être détruites."* Cioran, *Sylogismes de l'amertume*, 779.

67 See for example as a good summary: *"Toward a critique of the big words.* – I am full of suspicion and malice against what they call 'ideals': this is my pessimism, to have recognized how the 'higher feelings' are a source of misfortune and man's loss of value. One is deceived every time one expects 'progress' from an ideal; every time so far the victory of the ideal has meant a retrograde movement. Christianity, the revolution, the abolition of slavery, equal rights, philanthropy, love of peace, justice, truth: all these big words have value only in a fight, as flags." Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, 50, § 80, (Nov. 1887–March 1888).

68 Cioran uses the expression for Nietzsche in Cioran, *De l'inconvénient d'être né*, 761.

69 Cioran, *Cahiers 1957–1972*, 107.

70 Emil Cioran, *Sur les cimes du désespoir* in *Œuvres*, Quarto (Paris: Gallimard, 1995), 85.

71 "Just now my world became perfect, midnight is also noon." Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 263; IV, "The Sleepwalker Song," 10.

72 I diverge from the interpretation of Luc Ferry who suggests that the Nietzschean concept of the eternal return of things may be interpreted as a selective recurrence of the moments of our life that we prefer. See Luc Ferry, *Qu'est-ce qu'une vie réussie?* (Paris: Grasset & Fasquelle, 2002), chap. 1.

perspective, meaning seems plausible, Cioran mourns the irretrievable and even acknowledges the historical value of certain events: the Spanish mystics, the French literary eighteenth century, the late antique pagans, etc. But the larger perspective, be it eschatological or civilizational, deprives these moments of all meaning, at least in theory even if our heart continues to sorrow over the carnage of time upon what is most precious.

Civilizational time disproves our everyday experience of the possibility for meaning: first, because this long time has cruelly failed to preserve the precious; second, because all salient aspects of human history originate in a nation-scale misunderstanding about the same illusion that captivates individual humans. It is my contention that Cioran apprehends civilizations/nations/peoples with the psychological tools developed for the individual man. To him, each emerging people (*peuple*) believes in one insight and strives to embody it as do an idealistic young person (e.g. Myceneans' pursuit of glory in war, Egyptians' obsession for the colossal, etc.). Once this people/nation has materialized this insight in their actions (often for the worse), it has no more reason to claim historicity and becomes a mere figure of deceit (e.g. the European countries in his view). A Cioranian account would portray the absurdity of history as a random group of people: the old, senile, deceived, and often full of remorse from their evil past represent the old countries (for him Europe); while the young, impatient of entering history, naively think they have a special mission (his native Romania). However, all make no sense as a group, they lack a shared direction, and they have been sentenced by time to the same inexorable death. Once again, death permeates history as extensively as our gaze encompasses it, just as death dwells in the ephemeral nature of each instant. All the civilizational endeavors of peoples reflect their overlooking of their ineluctable future, just as individual human beings cultivate the amnesia of their own death.

Isolated philosophical or literary works proceed from the same misunderstanding that guides history. Authors, thinkers attempt to thwart the destructive course of time, in vain, since their primary matter – words – are “the very symbol of caducity.”<sup>73</sup> Cioran experienced that in his flesh since he envisaged committing suicide after publishing his first book,<sup>74</sup> and again after the second.<sup>75</sup>

73 Cioran, *De l'inconvénient d'être né*, 1291.

74 *Pe culmile Disperării*, translated in French by Cioran as “*Sur les cimes du désespoir*” [On the Heights of Despair]. Written in 1933 (he was 22), published in 1934.

75 This explains his comment that “a book is a postpone suicide” / “*Un livre est un suicide différé.*” Cioran, *De l'inconvénient d'être né*, 1332.

The ultimate revelation that follows the observation of the external flow of time is, consecutively to the universal ailment of illusion, a disillusionment of the same cosmological scale for every people, country, and individual person. As Cioran puts it: "Whoever has not seen a brothel at five in the morning ignores the weariness toward which our planet is heading."<sup>76</sup>

### 3 Cioran's Resolution of the Problem of Time

What is left when all illusions crumble? If all nations/peoples may realize together the fatuity of having illusions, all human history will disintegrate for it holds only by the bound of our *préjugés*.<sup>77</sup> If Noah has foreseen the deception coming for us, he would have preferred to scuttle the arch.<sup>78</sup> Hopefully, only individuals may attain this state of absolute disillusion. Cioran insists: "Free is the man who has discerned the inanity of all points of views; but freed is the man who has drawn from it all the consequences."<sup>79</sup> Now that one is no more duped by the essence of time, the next step is to quit it. The door to escape is not above like mystics claimed, but below. Since all of us have fallen into time after the original sin,<sup>80</sup> we may still possess some latent inclination within us to fall. Therefore, it may be still in our power to reiterate our primordial plunge by falling from time.

Cioran's various descriptions of how we have been thrown into time are nourished by various philosophical sources. The first type of these is those that remain unmentioned: Heidegger *Sein und Zeit* and the "thrownness (*Geworfenheit*)"<sup>81</sup> of being into time that may stem from a precedent when Nietzsche wrote in 1884: "We suffered youth itself like a serious sickness. That is due to the time into which we have been thrown (*Geworfen*)."<sup>82</sup> The second type is those that are explicitly mentioned: the Qabbālā (*Zohar*) with its doctrine of the pre-existence of souls before they enter in time, but also Plotinus and Por-

76 "Qui n'a vu un bordel à cinq heures du matin ne peut se figurer vers quelles lassitudes s'achemine notre planète." Cioran, *Syllogismes de l'amertume*, 804.

77 Cioran, *De l'inconvénient d'être né*, 1389.

78 Cioran, *Syllogismes de l'amertume*, 800.

79 Cioran, *De l'inconvénient d'être né*, 1280.

80 According to *The Fall into Time*, temporality was acquired like death consecutively to original sin. Cioran, *La chute dans le temps* in *Œuvres*, 1073 and following.

81 See Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1962), 219–224, § 38; and also, § 29; § 31; § 58; § 68b.

82 Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, 40, § 57 (1884). Nietzsche certainly does not assume all the conceptual connotations that Heidegger gives to the expression.

phyry.<sup>83</sup> Cioran says with irony that his own soul might have been reluctant to incarnate.<sup>84</sup> Thinking about the timelessness before our birth is more relevant than pondering the one after our death since the latter can only be thought of in relation to the temporality of our past existence.<sup>85</sup> Not desiring death (as in suicidal thoughts) but refusing (in vain) our birth reflects the genuine nostalgia of time before time. Cioran adopts the opposite movement to the one that consists in integrating time in order to fall from time, exactly as in Eden humanity once fell from eternity. This second fall from a second illusionary place, as was the first for Cioran's perspective as a non-believer, is a genuine "metaphysical exile."<sup>86</sup> The condition of metec (μέτεκος) that he assumes his whole life transposed his individual crisis to a cosmological scale.<sup>87</sup>

However, Cioran delineates two practical roads to quit time from below. The first that he never implements personally is the road of oblivion. Primarily, it means forgetting time itself by envisioning a world unshaped by time, analogous to the Romanian churches which never have clocks.<sup>88</sup> Furthermore, it encompasses oblivion in general: the *eternity from below* is rightfully qualified as "immemorial" for it lies beyond memory.<sup>89</sup> Plants, trees, never left their Edenic condition for they have no memory, they ignore the homicidal nature of time.<sup>90</sup> Indeed, another reason to favor oblivion is that remembrance colludes with the destructive nature of time by pointing out the past being of irretrievable realities.

Under the lines, extolling oblivion carries significant mental and even conceptual connotations, for the problem is still that human beings prefer the

83 Cioran, *De l'inconvénient d'être né*, 1366. For the mention of the *Zohar*, see *Ibid.*, 1355. For Porphyry and Plotinus, the main mentions of this theme are in Cioran's personal diary. Cioran, *Cahiers 1957–1972*, 342.

84 Cioran, *De l'inconvénient d'être né*, 1366.

85 There may be an Oriental influence underlying these considerations. Without much precision, Cioran mentions how often he reads the expression "the abyss of birth" into his Buddhist readings. *Ibid.*, 1290.

86 "Toute ma vie j'aurai vécu avec le sentiment d'avoir été éloigné de mon véritable lieu. Si l'expression 'exil métaphysique' n'avait aucun sens, mon existence à elle seule lui en prêterait un." / "All my life I lived with the feeling of being exiled of my true place. If the expression 'metaphysical exile' has no meaning, my sole existence would provide it one." *Ibid.*, 1320. This passage can be understood in relationship with Plotinus since I found that the original draft of this text, in 1966, in Cioran's diary includes such reference. See Cioran, *Cahiers 1957–1972*, 342.

87 Cioran, *De l'inconvénient d'être né*, 1280; Cioran, *Syllogismes de l'amertume*, 769.

88 Cioran, *Cahiers 1957–1972*, 93–94.

89 *Ibid.*, 962.

90 Cioran, *Syllogismes de l'amertume*, 788.



Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil over the Tree of Life. At the beginning of his philosophical itinerary, the 20-year-old Cioran realized that his most sophisticated German philosophical readings offered him no solace when the temptation of suicide seized him: this made him intimately aware that no salvation can be found in intellectual knowledge. Cioran criticizes the deepening of ideas, or the pursuit of knowledge, and praises those who have the judgment to understand “the convenience of remaining superficial.”<sup>91</sup> Moreover, since memory binds us to remorse and to our past errors, oblivion becomes a gateway to return to a state before original sin and recovering “innocence, the perfect condition.”<sup>92</sup> In Cioran’s agnostic spirituality,<sup>93</sup> oblivion is the mercy of the godless.

The Genesis trees are opposed and cannot be both tasted: “Time is not made to be known but to be lived.” Living time for a human being means, as Heidegger writes, following the clock of time which is the alternation of day and night.<sup>94</sup> Cioran explores this topic with loquacity – by his standards – since he draws from his core personal experience of insomnia. He reflects on how the meaning of time changes for the insomniac who is deprived of the diurnal clock: in the darkness, the sleepless has either to face the pure passage of time or to be forced to meditate on pernicious, anxious truths.<sup>95</sup> Besides, insomnia is a state of awareness that stands in contrast to the so-called oblivion of sleep. Unable to silence the restless agitation of their memory, the insomniac tastes every night the consequences of original sin. Given how Cioran considers our deaths to reflect the inclinations of our life, it is intriguing to observe that he succumbed to the tragic oblivion of Alzheimer’s disease.

91 “... le privilège d’être encore superficiels.” Ibid., 789. Among others, refer to Ibid., 758.

92 “L’innocence, état parfait, ...” Cioran, *De l’inconvénient d’être né*, 1334. See also Ibid., 1357.

93 Cioran can be described either as a “non-believer (*incroyant*)” (a word he uses consistently), or an “agnostic,” but not strictly speaking as an “atheist.” He considers militant or “aggressive atheism” as nefarious as religious fanaticism. Cioran, *Cahiers 1957–1972*, 680. Moreover, he carefully refuses to be categorized as actively *for* or *against* God, since such labels would end his metaphysical exile by circumscribing his spiritual wandering within a caricatural pattern. To this extent, “agnostic” seems more adequate: “*Il n’est pas facile d’écrire sur Dieu quand on n’est ni croyant ni athée: et c’est sans doute notre drame de ne plus pouvoir être l’un ni l’autre.*” / “It is not easy to write about God when one is neither a believer nor an atheist: and it is undoubtedly our tragedy to no longer be able to be either.” Cioran, Ibid., 226. Regarding religious truth, he ultimately wants to stand as an irreducible “partisan of Vagueness (*partisan du Vague*),” a “maniac of the Maybe (*forcené du Peut-être*).” Cioran, *Syllogismes de l’amertume*, 778. See also, *Cahiers 1957–1972*, 159.

94 Martin Heidegger, *The Concept of Time*, trans. William McNeill (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 15–15E.

95 Cioran, *De l’inconvénient d’être né*, 1281.

In addition to this unreachable state of oblivion and innocence, I identify a second method to fall below time in Cioran, which he may have implemented with some degree of success: promoting potency over act. I propose an interpretation through an Aristotelian scheme, though Cioran would have certainly dismissed this categorization.<sup>96</sup> Actuation binds us to existence and to our presence in time. Leaving the virtual multiplicity of potency to enter act was an ontological degradation for Cioran: “The conveniences of a state of eternal virtuality seem so considerable that, when I begin to tally them, I am astonished that the transition to being ever occurred.”<sup>97</sup> Cioran’s charges against being, which produces ultimately terrors,<sup>98</sup> his yearning for “inventing something better than being,”<sup>99</sup> finds its resolution in the promotion of a process of *disactuation*.

First, this stepping back from being-in-act consists in refusing to act within history, “to educate oneself to leave no trace.”<sup>100</sup> Cioran’s consistent refusals of prestigious literary honors, interviews, and invitations on television, whatever their real motivation was, illustrate his intimate belief that: “We discover a flavor in life, only if we discard the obligation of having a destiny.”<sup>101</sup> He not only praises inaction but also celebrates failure and the squandering of opportunities that may offer us a means to evade the cruel face-to-face with time and the irretrievable.<sup>102</sup> Time surrenders itself to those who manage to waste it.<sup>103</sup> How ideal and philosophical can seem this refusal of playing the game of career, ambition, and above all history itself, Cioran admits that the intimate fear of suffering drives our preference for potency and our “strive to abolish reality.”<sup>104</sup>

96 Despite many pejorative comments on the Stagirite in his books, two neutral references to the Greek philosopher can be found in his personal diary, in Cioran, *Cahiers 1957–1972*, 197; 873.

97 “*Les avantages d’un état d’éternelle virtualité me paraissent si considérables, que, lorsque je me mets à les dénombrer, je n’en reviens pas que le passage à l’être ait pu s’opérer jamais.*” Cioran, *De l’inconvénient d’être né*, 1342.

98 *Ibid.*, 1341.

99 “*Tâchons d’inventer quelque chose de mieux que l’être.*” *Ibid.*, 1341.

100 “*S’éduquer à ne pas laisser de traces ...*” *Ibid.*, 1333.

101 “*On ne découvre une saveur aux jours que lorsqu’on se dérobe à l’obligation d’avoir un destin.*” Cioran, *Syllogismes de l’amertume*, 780.

102 Among others, refer to Cioran, *De l’inconvénient d’être né*, 1319.

103 “*Only the one who knows how to waste it approaches the essence of Time. The man of no use. Postponing the encounter with the irretrievable.*”/“*N’approche de l’essence du Temps que celui qui sait le gâcher. L’homme de nulle utilité. Différer la rencontre avec l’irréparable.*” Cioran, *Cahiers 1957–1972*, 82.

104 “*... nous nous évertuons à abolir la réalité.*” Cioran, *Syllogismes de l’amertume*, 810.

Second, *disactuation* consists in being detached from the necessity of our own existence by adopting the perspective of “the never-born.”<sup>105</sup> Through birth, human beings have been imprisoned in time,<sup>106</sup> their anxious thoughts adhere to the flow of time and orient toward the future, i.e. death.<sup>107</sup> We suffer from our thoughts because they are intricately bound to time and to being. If one reverses the movement of one’s thoughts until they reach “the primitive edge”<sup>108</sup> of birth, those thoughts will decay as they become closer to non-being and distance themselves from the grip of death that invigorates them. Moreover, crossing this ultimate border would install one into another paradise filled with the infinite possibilities of non-being, peopled not by saints but by the indecisive. This otherworldliness parallels the one described when one crosses the threshold of death: by God, love, and good acts, one raises above time and enters eternity; conversely, by solitude, ennui, and inaction, one raises below time, and enters another eternity in which he “basks.”<sup>109</sup> At first glance, both seem to be equivalent liberations for Cioran. Before assessing that in further detail (Part IV), I will highlight the pervasiveness of the emphasis on potency in Cioran by providing two additional examples.

Suicide in Cioran holds a status identical to the version of the eternal return as a sapiential hypothesis (while his description of the *eternity from below* aligns more with the cosmological doctrine). The possibility of suicide redeems a meaningless existence by grounding its contingency: “Without the *idea* of suicide, I would have ever killed myself.”<sup>110</sup> One’s ability to face the perspective of suicide grants that one can bear the transience and gratuity of his own life: the Heideggerian mystery of Being reduced to my own concrete life. This status of suicide as an open possibility was already in Nietzsche’s aphorism: “The thought of suicide is a strong means of comfort: it helps get us through many an evil night.”<sup>111</sup> Like Cioran, Zarathustra also describes suicide as an idea

105 “... *le jamais-né.*” Cioran, *De l’inconvénient d’être né*, 1280.

106 *Ibid.*, 1400.

107 An aphorism summarizes this in *Ibid.*, 1280.

108 “... *frontière primitive ...*” *Ibid.*, 1280.

109 “... *prélasser ...*” *Ibid.*, 1276.

110 “... *sans l’idée du suicide, je me serais tué depuis toujours.*” Cioran, *Syllogismes de l’amertume*, 775. In the French, Cioran employs an ambiguous use of “*depuis toujours*” to deviate from the expected “*déjà*.” In this context, it suggests that from his very birth, he would never have accepted life (i.e., commit suicide, “*je me serais tué*”) and this refusal would have persisted continuously until the present day (which would be impossible if he had committed suicide).

111 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil; Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, ed. Rolf-Peter Horstmann and Judith Norman, trans. Judith Norman, Cambridge Texts in The History of Philosophy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 70; §157.

that challenges and unveils one's true beliefs through the metaphor of a boat waiting for us on the shore as the possibility to leave this world:

There sits the skiff – over there perhaps is the entryway to the great nothing. But who wants to board this “perhaps”? None of you wants to board the death skiff! Then why do you want to be world-weary!<sup>112</sup>

For Cioran, I suspect that persisting without motive in an absurd life rounds off its absurdity.<sup>113</sup> He also considers that one needs at least the remnant of belief to die, “the others, having no reason to live, why should they have a reason to die?”<sup>114</sup> In summary, the perspective of suicide as a sapiential hypothesis in Cioran illustrates an important application of his encouragement to return to potency, through his appropriation of Nietzschean motives.

Cioran's call for potency is finally exemplified – with ambiguities – by his perspective on writing. In his anti-intellectuality, he appreciates the dichotomy between the unreality of writing activity versus actual existence with a preference for the latter: some have an oeuvre, others have a life.<sup>115</sup> Furthermore, a perspectivist oeuvre instantiates what it means to exist in potency. This can be compared to how Kierkegaard's numerous pseudonymous works. Each fictional pseudo-narrator that Kierkegaard invents multiplies the existential angles from which he addresses the world.<sup>116</sup> Through their book, thinkers adopt stances that they are unable to consistently take in their life: “The substance of an *œuvre* is the impossible – what we could not have attained, all what has not been provided to us: it is the sum of all the things that have been denied to us.”<sup>117</sup> Writing can also express the refusal to adhere to consistency since some authors – like God with Creation for Cioran – possess the genius to make an oeuvre that disproves themselves.<sup>118</sup>

112 Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 165–166; III, “On Old and New Tablets,” § 17.

113 Because “There is no position more false than having understood and remaining alive.”/“*Il n'est pas de position plus fausse que d'avoir compris et de rester encore en vie.*” Cioran, *De l'inconvénient d'être né*, 1391.

114 “*Les autres, n'ayant aucune raison de vivre, pourquoi en auraient-ils de mourir ?*” Cioran, *Syllogismes de l'amertume*, 783–784.

115 Speaking for example of Nenea (who I supposed is a Romanian friend of Cioran who lived in Germany), in Cioran, *Cahiers 1957–1972*, 859–860.

116 Victor Eremita, Judge William, Johannes de Silentio, Constantine Constantius, Nicolaus Notabene, Johannes Climacus, etc.

117 “*La substance d'une œuvre c'est l'impossible – ce que nous n'avons pu atteindre, ce qui ne pouvait pas nous être donné: c'est la somme de toutes les choses qui nous furent refusées.*” Cioran, *De l'inconvénient d'être né*, 1329.

118 Cioran, *Syllogismes de l'amertume*, 790.

#### 4 The Wrong Door: Problems in Cioran's Solution

Cioran's pursuit of a Godless form of eternity through his fall from time gives rise to inextricable paradoxes that he may not have initially anticipated but indirectly acknowledges.

The first fissures in Cioran's method of escaping time reside in the doubts that underpin his insights, as they age, fade, and are themselves time-dependent. Adolescent, all existential problems were salient for him, but decades after decades, he became accustomed to their terrors, and a "bourgeois of the Abyss."<sup>119</sup> With years, Cioran's radical skepticism wanes because it lacks new illusions against which to rebel: "We are seized by such vertigo that we would give our life in exchange for a prejudice."<sup>120</sup> Moreover, maybe noticing his own hidden imperishable certitudes, such as the ones that concern time that I reconstructed in this study, he states that the only essential things in the world were born out of doubt.<sup>121</sup> The denials stemming from his skepticism, as well as all negations, suffer from these internal contradictions to the extent that he tersely asserts: "There is no negator who is not thirsty for some catastrophic yes."<sup>122</sup>

The second difficulty carries greater theoretical implications. At the climax of the eternal return, Zarathustra's fragmented self is reunified since all dispersed parts of his life are unified by "his future completed self."<sup>123</sup> This unified self is also assertive since the *Übermensch* affirms life.<sup>124</sup> In other words, it seems that eternal return does not dissolve the self. However, Nietzsche does not describe his own self but Zarathustra's, and refuses to teach eternal recurrence in his own voice.<sup>125</sup> Instead, he is doing art, and "art affirms,"<sup>126</sup> albeit not in the first person. In contrast, Cioran's doctrine on time initially offers the liberation of *le moi* [the Ego/the self]. In 1938, he wrote that temporality should "relieve us from the burden of individuation" to the extent we come

119 "... on s'embourgeoise dans l'Abîme." Cioran, *De l'inconvénient d'être né*, 813.

120 "... on est pris d'un tel vertige qu'on donnerait sa vie en échange d'un préjugé." *Ibid.*, 811.

121 *Ibid.*, 1279.

122 "*Il n'est pas de négateur qui ne soit assoiffé de quelque catastrophique oui.*" *Ibid.*, 1343.

123 See the precise explanations of Loeb on this process, in Loeb, "Time, Power, and Superhumanity," 34.

124 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Nachgelassene Fragmente 1882–1884*, vol. 10 of *Sämtliche Werke. Kritische Studienausgabe.*, ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1999), 81 (chap. 4).

125 Cf. Loeb, "Finding the *Übermensch* in Nietzsche's Genealogy of Morality," 74.

126 Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, 435.

to perceive time as a movement toward non-being.<sup>127</sup> Cioran indeed consistently depicts the self as a burden, we have to drag it, much like our body.<sup>128</sup> He endeavors to combat the illusions that encompass the self, even recognizing that his own view of suicide may emerge from a dupery of the self: “The least subjection, even to the desire to die, unmasks our loyalty to the imposture of ‘the self.’”<sup>129</sup> Cioran may also extend his exploration of oblivion to “the self” as he quotes the *Imitation of Jesus Christ* and tends to adopt the Christian despising of the self.<sup>130</sup> However, Cioran appears to fall short of achieving his endeavors to expose the facticity of the self. It seems more attainable to fall from time than to lose one’s self. Only a positive experience can make someone forget oneself, like being in Paradise for instance.<sup>131</sup> The suffering, the desolated, or the solitary person suffers with their selves, which are their sole companion of affliction. He even adds that Adam may have left Eden out of fear of losing his self.<sup>132</sup> Cioran finally relinquishes his desire to sap the self and, in his yearning for the time before birth, envisions a non-born self, “a self anterior to the self.”<sup>133</sup>

The third difficulty that jeopardizes Cioran’s theory is even more Nietzschean: music. It disintegrates the void of the experience of ennui in which Cioran is separated from a time that does not pass: “There is no true music that does not make us *palpate* the passage of time.”<sup>134</sup> Music, which is time put in sounds, brings us back into its very essence. For an hour, it “stifles” the twofold impossibility into which the meditation of time has installed him: the impossibility to die and to live.<sup>135</sup> Although music cannot be timeless, it manages to evoke eternity better than anything: “What is the point of frequenting Plato, when a saxophone can just as easily make us descry another world?”<sup>136</sup> Music resorts to sensibility to circumvent all the theoretical dead ends that

127 “... nous décharger du fardeau de l’individuation.” Emil Cioran, *Le crépuscule des pensées* in *Œuvres*, Quarto (Paris: Gallimard, 1995), 471; 472.

128 Cioran, *De l’inconvénient d’être né*, 1327.

129 “Le moindre assujettissement, fût-ce au désir de mourir, démasque notre fidélité à l’imposture du ‘moi.’” Cioran, *Syllogismes de l’amertume*, 781.

130 Cioran, *De l’inconvénient d’être né*, 1288.

131 *Ibid.*, 1329.

132 *Ibid.*, 1329.

133 “... un moi antérieur au moi ...” *Ibid.*, 1284.

134 “Point de musique véritable qui ne nous fasse palper le temps.” Cioran, *Syllogismes de l’amertume*, 798.

135 *Ibid.*, 797.

136 “À quoi bon fréquenter Platon, quand un saxophone peut aussi bien nous faire entrevoir un autre monde?” *Ibid.*, 797.

Cioran erects against eternity in God and plenitude in the present. It even manages to reconcile temporality with the eternal: “Only an organ makes us understand how eternity can *evolve*.”<sup>137</sup> Music brings eternity to the present, which philosophy fails to do.<sup>138</sup> Nietzsche would criticize Cioran’s views of music as “musical pessimism.”<sup>139</sup> However, if Cioran considers music as the basis for a metaphysics of tears,<sup>140</sup> this is not because it expresses despair, rather because it makes tangible an inaccessible absolute. It reopens a door closed by skepticism and sealed by ennui.

This leads us to the fourth difficulty, that is the most poignant and perhaps the climax of Cioran spiritual journey. As a preliminary remark, I argue that Cioran realizes that when he describes a radical, solitary ennui out of time, out of space, he is modeling an artifact of God’s very condition.<sup>141</sup> In various circumstances, he describes God as bored in our soul,<sup>142</sup> as the model of the “stateless” to imitate,<sup>143</sup> or as a figure of the “dispossessed.”<sup>144</sup> This may echo this Nietzsche’s buried insight:

The sole way of maintaining a meaning for the concept “God” would be: God *not* as the driving force, but God as a maximal state, as an epoch – a point in the evolution of the will to power by means of which further evolution just as much as previous evolution up to him could be explained.<sup>145</sup>

Cioran uses the literary tricks of applying to God some idiomatic expressions proper to Satan: “To sell one’s soul to God.”<sup>146</sup> He indeed attempts to account for the fact that God is still there, as the supreme interlocutor, who mysteriously manages to resist the storms of doubts and absurdity. It may be hard to find an author who insulted God as much as Cioran. However, his fall for time culminates in a strange identification with the Supreme Being, who is, in fact, the Solitary, the *ápatris/ἀπατρεις*, the timeless, and the one who eternally regrets his own creation – the Divine committed himself<sup>147</sup> to time and he paid the

137 “*L’orgue seul nous fait comprendre comment l’éternité peut évoluer.*” Ibid., 786.

138 Ibid., 798.

139 Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, 442.

140 Cioran, *Syllogismes de l’amertume*, 798.

141 As a striking example, refer to Cioran, *De l’inconvénient d’être né*, 1343.

142 Cioran, *Syllogismes de l’amertume*, 791.

143 Ibid., 812.

144 Ibid., 1274.

145 Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, 340; § 639 (Spring-Fall 1887).

146 Cioran, *De l’inconvénient d’être né*, 1325.

147 I am using masculine pronouns to translate Cioran’s French masculine pronoun for God and his perception of God.

price for it. For Cioran, God is the sole interlocutor that remains in the utmost solitude and, as Jacob, he can only wrestle with the Divine.

Things get worse when Cioran realizes that he is situating himself as an anti-God. For example, he acknowledges that returning to pure potency by going against actuation is de-creation: the only way for human beings to distinguish themselves from God.<sup>148</sup> Finally, Cioran's spiritual journey takes a tragic turn when he comes to the realization that the alternative form of eternity that he yearns for turns into an experience of Hell itself. As he feels he managed to fall from time and reach a Godless eternity, Cioran plunges into greater despair: the timeless *eternity from below*, this Godless eternity which is pure potency and perpetual non-actualization is the genuine Hell. There is even no coming back to hope for even if the *eternity from below* would be unreachable, we will be in Hell in time, for "is this [Hell] not the place where we are sentenced to time for eternity?"<sup>149</sup> As he discovers the infernal nature of this alternative eternity, at the very end of *The Fall from Time*, Cioran regrets having compared time with Hell for the genuine Hell is this strange eternity he fell into.<sup>150</sup> In time, we regret having lost the Edenic eternity; in the *eternity from below*, we regret having lost time. The feeling of nostalgia for an uppermost form of time is similar to what Adam and Eve experienced. As he feels that time is no longer his condition, he writes:

I did not write with my blood, I wrote with all the tears I have not shed. Even if I were a logician, I would still be elegiac. The exclusion of Paradise, I experience it every day with the same passion and the same regret that the first banned.<sup>151</sup>

This is the ultimate outcome of all his quest on time. Humans cannot inhabit time so everything they accomplish reflects their struggle to escape from it. If

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148 Cioran, *De l'inconvénient d'être né*, 1273. This notion of "décréation" has priorly been elaborated by Simone Weil, in Simone Weil, *La Pesanteur et la Grâce*, ed. Gustave Thibon, Agora (Paris: Pocket, 1991), 81–91 (a book originally published in 1947). I suspect Cioran read her and drew from some other of her expressions. I found various other parallels to support that, for example between Ibid., 98 and Cioran, *De l'inconvénient d'être né*, 1336, but Cioran mentions he is drawing on Giță. See also the Cioranian themes in Weil, *La Pesanteur et la Grâce*, 148–149.

149 "... n'est-ce point le lieu où l'on est condamné au temps pour l'éternité?" Cioran, *La chute dans le temps* in *Œuvres*, 1092.

150 Ibid., 1155.

151 "L'exclusion du Paradis, je la vis chaque jour, avec la même passion et le même regret que le premier banni." Cioran, *Cahiers 1957–1972*, 683.



they contemplate their own depths to the extreme, they will fall even lower, on the other side of eternity. Fatally, they cannot abscond their condition of existential wanderers having no time to inhabit and no illusions to worship. They can only mourn for the dwelling they lost since they do not even have the consolation of obliterating their deprivation for the sublime. At this stage, and solely at this stage, his writings emerge as fragmented saccadic laments. These are only the final words of a coherent spiritual journey. This mourning for an inaccessible eternity and unattainable time offers glimpses of some tenuous lights, allowing for an ultimate aphorism that may capture Cioran's final view of time: "We are all at the depths of a hell, of which each instant is a miracle."<sup>152</sup>

## 5 Conclusion

Cioran's incoherent assertions and universal dissension do not stem from a thinker who denies any reasoning before they even begin. His radical and self-contradictory insights are the scattered remnants of great doctrines he was once enticed to embrace. I argue that his assertion "I shattered my idols to yield into their debris" applies to eternity and time. He broke the Christian affirmation of eternity and cannot refrain from its nostalgia. He shattered the Buddhist understanding of presence and continues regretting the possibility of dwelling in each instant.<sup>153</sup> He dismantled Nietzsche's promise of eternal return and can only consider himself out of the confines of linear time.

Moreover, I contend that Cioran's most incoherent assertions follow and reveal an authentic spiritual journey that is worth telling for it explains his attitude of an existential wanderer. The wanderer is not simply someone walking nowhere: they have once attempted a journey, hoped for something, and have been disappointed. Contrary to this wandering paradigm, Cioran is described by most of the secondary literature as a sedentary nihilist endeavoring to demonstrate nothingness: by Nietzschean critics to refute his thought as the incomplete figure of the Lion who criticizes everything and never reaches genuine acceptance; by Cioranian nihilists to be faithful to their interpretation of his writings as a conglomerate of metaphysical dead ends or an ode to the absurd.

152 This is the last word of his book *Pensées étranglées* [Choked Thoughts]: "*Nous sommes tous au fond d'un enfer dont chaque instant est un miracle.*" The "dont" [of which] intriguingly suggests that this Hell is a form of temporality. Emil Cioran, *Pensées étranglées*, Folio Sagesses (Paris: Gallimard, 2013), 86.

153 "*J'ai brisé mes idoles pour sacrifier à leurs débris.*" Cioran, *Syllogismes de l'amertume*, 787.

Yet and still, as it is instantiated in his fall from time, Cioran has an identified doctrine that lies behind this fragmented appearance: humans are banned from the realm of the sublime and are doomed to be existential vagabonds. Returning more closely to our topic, a conclusion might be that Cioran is also a wanderer of his original dwelling: that is Nietzsche's doctrine which steadfastly represents the native and "naïve"<sup>154</sup> intellectual country. Cioran thinks forward and backward to Nietzsche. "Backward" because the problem of time in Cioran is consistently formulated in Nietzschean terms through the experience of repetition, the link between meaning and time, the evasion from linear time, and the relationship with divinity. "Forward" because my reconstruction of Cioran also suggests that his intellectual and spiritual trajectory is opposed to Nietzsche's: the climax of *Ecce homo* is Cioran intellectual dawn; Cioran's silence on the eve of his life may reflect the quiet young Nietzsche, who considered everything surrounding him to be too insignificant to be told;<sup>155</sup> the end is the beginning and there is no coming back.

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154 Detailed references are in 3n9 of this article.

155 Teodor de Wyzewa, "La jeunesse de Frédéric Nietzsche," *Revue des deux mondes* 133, no. 4 (1896): 691.

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