

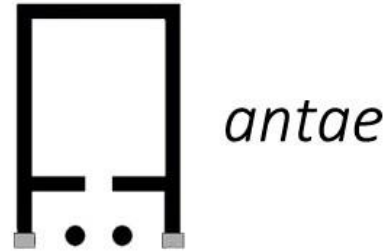
Cioran's 'grain of ataraxy': Boredom, Nothingness, and Quietism

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Cioran's 'grain of ataraxy': Boredom, Nothingness, and Quietism

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There is an end of making up one's mind, like a pound of tea, an end of patting the butter of consciousness into opinions. The real consciousness is the chaos, a grey commotion of mind, with no premises or conclusions or problems or solutions or cases or judgments.

—SAMUEL BECKETT

This paper is an attempt to make sense of the work of someone who, despite having published fifteen books, claimed that he was not a writer. What Emil Cioran might have meant by this is that he was rather someone whose mind 'advances with the patience to go in circles, in other words, to deepen', so that his work is more often than not variations of the same written theme.¹ This is something which is also true of his writings on boredom, which are never specifically about boredom; instead, boredom is a refraction of or something that refracts (among other things) nothingness, God, silence, mysticism, suffering, death, quietism, and vice-versa. Attempting to work through Cioran's writings on boredom will therefore necessitate tackling some perhaps unfamiliar ground in comparison to more usual studies on boredom. There are also two overriding difficulties in approaching a writer like Cioran which need to be outlined from the start: context and temperament.

Within the broad context of Western philosophy, Cioran is somewhat difficult to place. What can be said with some surety though is that he is the anti-systematic *par excellence*. His contribution to philosophy, such as it is, is inscribed by a refusal to participate in any philosophical system-building: 'I have invented nothing, I have merely been the secretary of my sensations.'² In the context of an increasingly politicised and institutionalised humanities, researching someone like Cioran is, in the long-run, counterproductive by default. That is to say, this is not only recondite subject matter, but a specialisation in highly unfashionable, non-ameliorative, anti-humanist worldviews.

The second difficulty—temperament—is easier to understand. Cioran stopped writing in his late seventies because he did not want 'to slander the universe anymore', having done it 'long enough'.³ Almost the entirety of Cioran's œuvre is written in this mode of slander, albeit one that is ironically truth-revealing and disabusing. His writing is suffused with paradoxical black humour, intense (self-)excoriation, anti-natalist avowals, and bilious jeremiads. Although accurate, Susan Sontag's description of Cioran as an inheritor of a 'personal (even autobiographical), aphoristic, lyrical, anti-systematic' tradition, with its 'foremost exemplars' being 'Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Wittgenstein', misses out on the consummate vitriol that

¹ Jason Weiss, 'E.M. Cioran', in *Writing at Risk: Interviews in Paris With Uncommon Writers* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1991), 1-38 (p. 1).

² E.M. Cioran, *Drawn and Quartered*, trans. by Richard Howard (New York: Arcade Publishing, 2012), p. 148.

³ Ilinca Zarifopol-Johnston, *Searching for Cioran*, ed. by Kenneth R. Johnston (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2009), p. 154.

peppers most of Cioran's work.⁴ In any case, Kierkegaard (ultimately) had his Christian God; Nietzsche his equally transcendent *Übermensch* and eternal recurrence; and Wittgenstein his earlier systematic works, and ascetic, if ambivalent, faith.⁵ Though Cioran lived to the age of eighty-four, 'the grain of human affairs' in his works constantly remained one 'of absolute darkness', precisely the terms on which George Steiner repudiated Cioran's vision (which he also contrasted unfavourably with Shakespeare's 'tragi-comic' vision).⁶ Before moving on from this mode of disclaimer however, there is perhaps one other reason as to why Cioran is so unsavoury and difficult to appropriate within academic discourse: his idiosyncratic anti-rationalism.⁷ As Tomislav Sunic rightly notes, he is an 'author who sees in the modern veneration of the intellect a blueprint for spiritual gulags and the uglification of the world'.⁸ He is therefore a seemingly unworkable combination of anti-systematism, anti-Enlightenment thinking, and anti-rationalism: a reactionary without any cause to believe in. Fortunately, this is precisely one of the starting points of the experience of boredom.

The Failed Mystic

Near the start of *The Trouble With Being Born*, Cioran writes 'What to do? Where to go? Do nothing and go nowhere, easy enough.'⁹ This Beckettian sentence is one of the rare interludes in which Cioran's intensities contract and give a seeming sense of closure. Yet if there is something to take from Cioran's work it is difficulty, one which often translates to a generalised suffering. Unlike Nietzsche, Cioran felt a strong and troubling affinity for the chief Western mode of soteriology that he, like almost all of his intellectual generation, had abandoned, felt abandoned by, or repudiated: Christianity. Indeed, one of his first works—and the last to be written in Romanian—was called *Lacrimi și Sfinți*, or *Tears and Saints*. This digression on mysticism—which is separate to religion, as in the individual experience rather than the end abstraction ('[s]ainthood in itself is not interesting, only the lives of saints are')¹⁰—is something that we must also consider here, if briefly, in relation to Cioran's subsequent take on boredom. When David Foster Wallace called Cioran an 'existential theologian', he was not quite off the mark.¹¹ One cannot imagine of course that Cioran's work on saints could ever be

⁴ Susan Sontag, 'Thinking Against Oneself: Reflections on Cioran', in E.M. Cioran, *The Temptation to Exist*, trans. by Richard Howard (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), pp. 7-29 (p. 11).

⁵ Cf. *Recollections of Wittgenstein*, ed. by Rush Rhees (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 102, 114.

⁶ George Steiner, "'Short Shrift': On E.M. Cioran", in *George Steiner at the New Yorker* (New York, NY: New Directions Publishing, 2009), p. 244.

⁷ By 'idiosyncratic', I mean in contrast to the anti-rationalism present in other philosophers who are a mainstay of academic discourse, for example Derrida. In Derrida's case, for instance, despite the anti-rationalism that underpins his deconstructive probing, he ultimately does not hold out from the possibility of the realisation of something different in the ameliorative sense—hence the implicit and explicit messianism in his notion of *à venir* (cf. *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, The Work of Mourning & the New International*), and his nuanced and constructive writings on a different take of political democracy (cf. *The Politics of Friendship*).

⁸ Tomislav Sunic, 'Emile Cioran and the Culture of Death', Media Monitors Network, 28 April 2003, <<http://www.mediamonitors.net/tomislavsunic3.html>> [accessed 15 July 2015]

⁹ E.M. Cioran, *The Trouble With Being Born*, trans. by Richard Howard (New York: Seaver Books, 1986), p. 13.

¹⁰ E.M. Cioran, *Tears and Saints*, trans. by Ilinca Zarifopol-Johnston (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 4.

¹¹ David Foster Wallace, 'Backbone', *New Yorker*, March 7 2011, <<http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2011/03/07/backbone>> [accessed 14 July 2015]

orthodox. Nevertheless, as his biographer Ilinca Zafriopol-Johnston has said, it is a work with just as strong a connection to the mystical fragments and hagiographies on which it feeds as to its more contemporary existential relations: '[i]ndeed, except for a few passing references to Nietzsche, Rilke, and Schopenhauer, one could imagine it was written centuries before our time.'¹² One is almost taken aback by the sincerity behind Cioran's conversation with the mystics,¹³ an almost Hardy-esque plea (cf. the poem 'God's Funeral', among others) for that in which one can no longer find succour, or even simply find—it is why one of his friends called it the 'saddest book he ever wrote'.¹⁴ This inability to find succour is at the heart of Cioran's quarrel with the mystics' incarnate spirituality, for theirs is an adept way of annihilating time. For one who had glibly noted that '[m]y mission is to kill time, and time's to kill me in its turn', the quality of transcending time makes for an enviable case-study at the very least.¹⁵ To be more exact, this annihilation of time is the preserve of those kenosis-practising mystics who are 'famous for their high degree of spirituality, their intimate personal knowledge of God, who brought about a new "eruption of the absolute into history."'¹⁶ And what is this absolute? It is God, or the fulfilling experience of Being; or, more accurately still, the experience *sui generis* which annuls nothingness and boredom, that which Schopenhauer called 'the sensation of the emptiness of existence'.¹⁷ At this point, it should also be stated that this paper's use of the term boredom is based, unless otherwise stated, on Schopenhauer's definition of it.

For Cioran, 'as long as one believes in philosophy, one is healthy; sickness begins when one starts to think.'¹⁸ That he wrote this in *Tears and Saints* is perhaps indicative of the way he conflated belief with purpose, the immanent belief of the spiritual-mystical experience with the humanistic virtue-based consolation of believing in a philosophy, a religion or ideology (something which Cioran repudiated on many an occasion). The lack of meaning and telos that one becomes aware of when experiencing boredom is what is being presumed here. 'I listen to silence and I cannot stifle its voice: it's all over', writes Cioran.¹⁹ The elemental and eternal silences are both there to haunt him simply because he experiences the sensation of the emptiness of existence; which is why he feels that it is from boredom that we derive 'all our negations', a statement which we will return to later on when questioning historically-situated affirmation. Hence, boredom becomes an 'argument against immortality' as it affirms a fundamental emptiness and temporality at the heart of existence.²⁰ Indeed, as Zarifopol-Johnston writes, the book's central figure is the 'failed mystic', someone who cannot properly inhabit the mystical space precisely because he is 'the one who cannot cast off all temporal ties', from

¹² Zarifopol-Johnston, *Searching for Cioran*, p.124.

¹³ This in spite of its sometimes parodic and blasphemous nature: 'the bloodthirsty and cruel Christ [was] lucky to have died young. Had he lived to be sixty he would have given us his memoirs instead of the cross.' See Zarifopol-Johnston, *Searching for Cioran*, p.134.

¹⁴ Zarifopol-Johnston, *Searching for Cioran*, p.123.

¹⁵ E.M. Cioran, *Drawn and Quartered*, trans. by Richard Howard (New York: Arcade Publishing, 2012), p.107.

¹⁶ Zarifopol-Johnston, *Searching for Cioran*, p.129.

¹⁷ Arthur Schopenhauer, 'On the Vanity of Existence', in *Essays and Aphorisms*, trans. by R.J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin Books, 2004), pp. 51-54 (p.53).

¹⁸ Cioran, *Tears and Saints*, p.42.

¹⁹ *ibid.*, p.90.

²⁰ *ibid.*

which Cioran derives the conclusion that ‘the secret of successful mysticism is the defeat of time and individuation’.²¹

There is another reason behind Cioran’s quarrel with the mystics’ defeat of time: their penchant for suffering. Behind suffering, Cioran ‘detected’ a ‘will to power’ which is necessarily ‘ineffectual’, and which cannot achieve anything ‘except more senseless and cruel suffering’.²² This is imputed to God’s failure to manifest himself, or rather his only appearance as ‘one more nothingness’.²³ In the span of this eternal void, God is present as absence. Indeed, this notion of the dead and absent God was even transformed into a theological principle by Simone Weil, who believed that the ‘unwordliness of God, his silence, and nothingness are his most essential features. God can be present to us only in the form of absence.’²⁴ Cioran would simply reply that such thinking requires faith, and that their humanist-rationalist equivalents require them too; and that these, moreover, are ‘artificial distinctions’ in a battle against ‘strong premonitions’, for ‘[w]hat meaning can logical argument or subtle thought have for someone deeply imbued with a feeling of the irrevocable? All attempts to bring existential questions onto a logical plane are null and void.’²⁵ One could also say that there is an inertia in mysticism that ultimately depletes it of energy—not in the instant of revelation or the moment of ecstasy, but in the duration of life and the expiration of human sanctity (the flesh rots as if to remind us what is really happening in living). Despite this, Cioran did find something in the mystical experience that attracted him more than its humanist-rationalist counterparts: it did not entail (historically-situated) action.

Taoism, Desert Fathers and Sovereign Absence

Like Schopenhauer, Cioran turned to Eastern thought when faced with the moral bankruptcy of Western philosophy and ideology. For Cioran, there is a clear distinction between, and superiority in, a specific form of Eastern thought—Taoism—and the entirety of Western thought, when it comes to a specific category of human agency: action. More than merely a matter of non-action or inaction, it is a question of intensity. In his essay ‘Thinking Against Oneself’—the title is indicative of the entire problem as a failed limit-situation (*Grenzsituationen*) in which the individual experience of dread and anxiety in the apprehension of boredom leads to agonising subjection to a self-reflective consciousness—Cioran meditates on ‘formulas of passivity [...] recipes of wisdom’.²⁶ He laments our failure to take the

“cure” of ineffectuality; to meditate on the Taoist fathers’ doctrine of submission, of withdrawal, of a sovereign absence; to follow, like them, the course of consciousness once

²¹ Zarifopol-Johnston, *Searching for Cioran*, p. 132.

²² Cioran, *Tears and Saints*, p. xxiii.

²³ *ibid.*

²⁴ Susan Anima Taubes, ‘The Absent God’, *The Journal of Religion*, 35:1 (1955), 6-16 (p. 6).

²⁵ E.M. Cioran, *On the Heights of Despair*, trans. by Ilinca Zarifopol-Johnston (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 27.

²⁶ E.M. Cioran, ‘Thinking Against Oneself’, in *The Temptation to Exist*, trans. by Richard Howard (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), pp. 33-47 (p. 34).

it ceases to be at grips with the world and weds the form of things as water does, their favourite element.²⁷

Cioran suggests that we have 'lost the key of quietude', particularly with the coming of the 'Christian virus' which makes us 'heir of the flagellants' who can only 'become conscious' by 'refining [...] excruciations'—this in opposition to Lao-Tzu's teaching that a 'life of intensity is contrary to the Tao'.²⁸ In this, too, the Taoists differ from the mystics as they 'scorn' both the 'curiosity' and 'thirst' for suffering, unlike the mystics who were 'apt to recommend the virtues of the hair shirt, the scourge, insomnia, inanition, and lament.'²⁹ The Taoists did not see a need to move from any sort of nothingness, including the one brought about by the realisation of boredom. The *tao* itself is difficult to define as it 'lies beyond the power of language to describe', but in some fundamental way it is an ineffable cosmological constant reflected in the microcosm of a natural order here on earth; if one's movements are brought 'into harmony' with the *tao*, then the cure of ineffectuality, of limpid transubstantiation from an existentially-aware existence to what Cioran calls the 'apprenticeship to passivity', would supposedly occur.³⁰

Of course, we are not here so much interested in the metaphysical implications or reality of the *tao* as much as what could happen when Taoist teaching is brought to bear on life. The presumption here is that this experiment fails in actuality—and it certainly does for Cioran—but we nevertheless have to go through it in order to both anticipate and structure the conclusion of this paper, which will revolve, specifically, around the 'failure of Quietism', the 'European equivalent of Taoism', and how this failure, if we can even call it that, presupposes 'the story of our possibilities, our prospects'.³¹ Such a conclusion must of course come after an extended analysis of boredom proper, which will also be looked at later on in this paper; but oftentimes what happens (or fails to happen) in the periphery is of equal import to the determination of our prospects—hence this consideration of Taoism's mystical suppositions.

The key Taoist text is the *Tao Te Ching*, written according to tradition by Lao-Tzu in the fourth century BC. As Burton Watson has said, Taoism is marked by a mixture of 'mysticism and quietism', and is devoid of 'systematic or logical exposition of ideas or careful definition of terms, such as one might find in a work of Greek philosophy or for that matter in some works of other schools of Chinese philosophy'—this being amply evidenced by the *Tao Te Ching*.³² 'Tao is empty', writes Lao-Tzu, '[i]ts use never exhausted./Bottomless—/The origin of all things'.³³ Immediately the suggestion is not one of plenitude, but of emptiness, an emptiness which is qualified by the fact that it is an originary reality which can never be exhausted. It strikes one as neutral, indifferent even, already a striking contrast with the Christian myth of

²⁷ E.M. Cioran, 'Thinking Against Oneself', p. 34.

²⁸ *ibid.*

²⁹ *ibid.*

³⁰ Burton Watson, 'Introduction', in Lao-Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, trans. by Stephen Addiss and Stanley Lombardo (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1993), p. xiii.

³¹ Cioran, 'Thinking Against Oneself', p. 35.

³² Burton Watson, 'Introduction', p. xi, xiii.

³³ Lao-Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, trans. by Stephen Addiss and Stanley Lombardo (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1993), p. 4.

origin that Cioran struggled with and which involves divine providence and benevolence ('God is love'—John 4:8). More than that, this indifferential quality suffuses life in its entirety, blunting 'sharp edges', untying 'knots', softening 'glares' and allowing a 'deeply subsistent' mode of existence as the mind is drawn elsewhere from its own contentions.³⁴

Viewed next to the '[m]asters in the art of thinking against oneself, Nietzsche, Baudelaire, and Dostoevsky', who 'have taught us to side with our dangers, to broaden the sphere of our diseases, to acquire existence by division from our being', one can see how the existential mode of being, the idea of which is partially the basis of the modern self-emancipatory individual—what Gerald C. Bruns, following Jean-Paul Sartre and Richard Rorty, in his book *On Ceasing to be Human*, calls 'self-creat[ing] in the dark'—runs in stark contradistinction to the passive obliteration of the self, or rather the acceding to spontaneous absorption of the self into the more elemental and eternal cycles that are being advanced by Lao-Tzu.³⁵ It is with this in mind that Cioran claims 'our disease' as being nothing more than '[c]enturies of attention to time, the idolatry of becoming'.³⁶ Next to these existential aporias, the *Tao Te Ching* reads like a somewhat detached lullaby of being: 'No self-interest?/Self is fulfilled [...] Only do not contend,/And you will not go wrong [...] The self embodies distress./No self,/No distress'.³⁷ The last of these verses sounds ominously similar to the apocryphal Stalin quotation 'Death solves all problems—no man, no problem', though here obliteration of self is not so much a matter of freeing oneself from 'spiritual gulags' as much as actual physical ones. Yet there is a physicality, too, to the Taoist method:

Don't treasure rare objects
And no one will steal.
Don't display what people desire,
And their hearts will not be disturbed.

Therefore,
The Sage rules
By emptying hearts and filling bellies
By weakening ambitions and strengthening bones;
Leads people
Away from knowing and wanting;
Deters those who know too much
From going too far:
Practices non-action
And the natural order is not disrupted.³⁸

This emphasis on a naturally occurring order of subsistence is intriguing not only because it implies a renunciation of a politics of action (something which Lao-Tzu more or less actually does in several instances of the book), but also because it renounces action altogether. There is

³⁴ Lao-Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, p. 4.

³⁵ Gerald C. Bruns, *On Ceasing to be Human* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), p.20.

³⁶ Cioran, 'Thinking Against Oneself', p.35.

³⁷ Lao-Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, p.7, 8, 13.

³⁸ *ibid.*, p.3.

an interesting overlap here with the figure of the 'beggar' who Cioran admired precisely for his lack of 'imposture' and 'fraud':

He, at least, neither lies nor lies to himself: his doctrine, if he has one, he embodies; work he dislikes, and he proves it; wanting to possess nothing, he cultivates *his impoverishment, the condition of his freedom. His thought is resolved into his being and his being into his thought. He has nothing, he is himself, he endures: to live on a footing with eternity is to live from day to day, from hand to mouth* [...] His sloth, of a very rare quality, truly "delivers" him from a world of fools and dupes. About renunciation he knows more than many of your esoteric works.³⁹

What is present here if not a quintessentially elemental and unabstracted model of living; where a sensation of the eternity which annuls time, and with it the necessary conditions for the abolition of boredom, may potentially be brought about by living 'from day to day', 'from hand to mouth', by mere endurance; in other words, by the cessation of philosophising, by being engulfed in mere physicality? Lao-Tzu in fact is quite insistent on these elemental qualities as a precondition for quietude, concreteness and a paradoxically non-existential being-in-the-world. The following extracts summarise the essentials of the Taoist position with respect to the above:

Therefore the Sage
Takes care of the belly, not the eye,
Chooses one, rejects the other [...]

Those who sustain TAO
Do not wish to be full [...]

Things grow and grow,
But each goes back to its root.
Going back to the root is stillness.
This means returning to what is.
Returning to what is
Means going back to the ordinary [...]

Look at plain silk; hold uncarved wood.
The self dwindles; desires fade [...]

Spare words: nature's way [...]

Return to infancy
Return to the uncarved block
Return to simplicity.⁴⁰

It should come as no surprise then that what Cioran considers as 'evil' is 'attachment' (though for him the primary attachment is that of being born, which is certainly not the case with the Taoists).⁴¹ Attachment to that which goes beyond the ordinary, to that which discards mere

³⁹ Cioran, 'Thinking Against Oneself', p.36-37. [My emphasis].

⁴⁰ Lao-Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, p. 12, 15, 16, 19, 23, 28.

⁴¹ Cioran, *The Trouble With Being Born*, p.19.

existence and sensation for self-creation, which according to Heidegger is something that we might experience in the state of ‘profound boredom’.⁴² This is something we will discuss in the following sections, but for now it will suffice to say that the distinction between the Eastern tradition of self-renunciation—which in Taoism is a much more affirmative project than in most other Western discourses of self-renunciation—and with it the apprehension of eternity or simply the annihilation of time-boundedness as an essential part of the human condition, and the Western tradition of the individual’s existential self-creation and -emancipation from the world, is an impasse created by antipodal viewpoints. To resort to brutal oversimplification, the former prizes the stillness of the world and the cosmos that is an imagined order of neutral or indifferential nothingness and which encapsulates the entirety of existence; the latter implicitly prizes something that may be termed violent in its affirmation of action, however humdrum, in the constant creation of the self, of meaning and telos,⁴³ in its various disavowals of the indifferential nothingness of existence by resorting to the ‘superstition of action’.⁴⁴

This is also why Cioran turned away from Nietzsche in his later years, as he could no longer comprehend his Dionysian excesses. In contrast to this, Cioran admired Beckett (with whom he was close friends) and his proclivity for textual and lived stillness. Putting him alongside Wittgenstein as another exemplar of ‘inflexibility, the same temptation to silence [...] the final repudiation of the word’, he wrote that in

other ages, they would have been lured by the Desert. We know now that Wittgenstein at a certain point actually envisioned entering a monastery. As for Beckett, how easy to imagine him, some centuries back, in a naked cell, undisturbed by the least decoration, not even a crucifix. Do I digress? Just remember that remote, enigmatic, “inhuman” gaze of his in certain photographs.⁴⁵

The overwhelming exposure to the sensation of the emptiness of existence, it is hinted, could possibly be overcome in self-renunciation, in a life of carnal and intellectual negation. It is not that the decision itself—the move to the Desert—is not one that requires thought, but rather that what proceeds from the Desert experience is ‘inhuman’ inasmuch as it affords, in its stark lack of vitality, a chance (to paraphrase Bruns) to cease being human—which for the Taoists would simply be the lifelong process of harmonising with the *tao*. It is interesting to note then that the Desert Fathers themselves seemed to focus not so much on the spiritual benefits *in situ*, but rather on the eventuality of subsequent subsummation in which the process of prayer became an attempt at understanding humanity with respect to ‘life, death and neighbours’.⁴⁶ The emphasis on and centrality of the human reads strikingly Western—anthropocentrism holds in the desert just as much as it held in the Garden of Eden, both in deprivation and plenitude. Like Schopenhauer, Cioran also had time for Buddhism, and indeed ‘the Orient in

⁴² Alina N. Feld, *Melancholy and the Otherness of God: A Study of the Hermeneutics of Depression* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2011), p. 130.

⁴³ Within this category, I would also include subtle counter-intuitive variations of meaning and telos, such as Simon Critchley’s concept of ‘meaninglessness as the achievement of the ordinary’. See Simon Critchley, *Very Little... Almost Nothing* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. xxiv.

⁴⁴ Cioran, ‘Thinking Against Oneself’, p. 41.

⁴⁵ E.M. Cioran, ‘Beckett: Some Meetings’, in *Anathemas and Admirations*, trans. by Richard Howard (New York: Arcade Publishing, 1991), pp. 129-136 (p. 135).

⁴⁶ Rowan Williams, *Silence and Honey Cakes: The Wisdom of the Desert* (Oxford: Lion Books, 2004), p. 23.

general', for it was there that he found a radically different conception of nothingness, wherein 'Nothingness does not have the rather grim signification we attribute to it', but is identified rather with 'a state of luminous absence, an ever-lasting radiant void: Being that has triumphed over all its properties, or rather non-Being supremely positive in that it dispenses bliss without substance, without substratum, without support in any world at all'.⁴⁷

This being said, one has to ask if there is ultimately a properly relatable scope in these Taoist and ascetic notions, if, as was the case for Cioran, this is most likely not an option, or in any case not a natural inclination for most people. In this wake of this question, it becomes more pertinent still to see how one can place such notions in wider philosophical gestures that suggest either overcoming or resignation in the exposure to the aporias presented by various definitions of boredom. In terms of post-Enlightenment philosophy of which the rest of this paper will be related, the impulse to overcome or resign in the exposure to the sensation of the emptiness of existence, is one that is crucially related to another aporia: the existential effort to self-create in the dark.

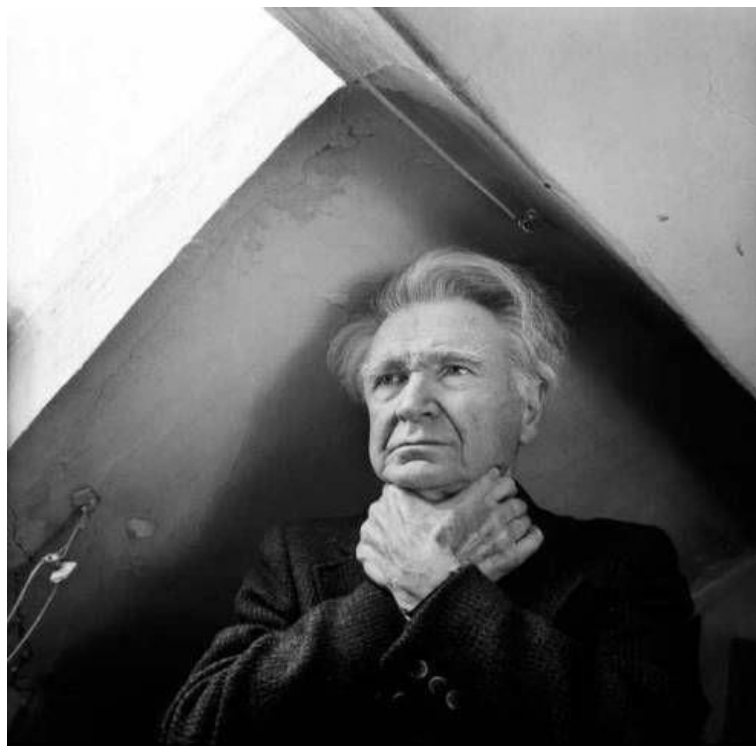


Figure 1: Cioran at home (photo by Arnaud Baumann).

⁴⁷ E.M. Cioran, 'On the Verge of Existence', in *Anathemas and Admirations*, trans. by Richard Howard (New York: Arcade Publishing, 1991), pp. 3-21 (p. 4).

Boredom I: Nothingness and Soteriology

This paper has so far used Schopenhauer's definition of boredom—the sensation of the emptiness of existence—without developing it any further. By not developing the concept, the analysis of mysticism's (be it Christian, Taoist, or otherwise) relationship to nothingness and that nothingness's relationship to boredom has been less burdened in the movement of its reflection and argumentation, even if it is one that is less complete than it ought to be. That, however, is in itself part of the kenotic set-up; it necessarily requires a different mode of speaking, and certainly reflexion, otherwise it risks ending up being nothing more than religious exegesis.

Nevertheless, this paper's focus is Cioran, and his ultimately was a thoroughly negatory existentialism. It is in Schopenhauer that we find the roots of Cioran's conception of boredom. Schopenhauer's conception of the human experience of time and (self-) consciousness is what underpins his negation of life. It is what Nietzsche recoiled from in *The Birth of Tragedy*, when he criticised Schopenhauer's argument in *The World as Will and Representation*, that that which gives the tragic a 'characteristic tendency to the sublime' is the realisation 'that the world and life can give no true satisfaction', which then leads to 'resignation'.⁴⁸ Schopenhauer's conception of the innate vanity present in existence is one that necessarily entails, contra Heidegger, a negative definition of boredom. He writes:

The vanity of existence is revealed in the whole form existence assumes: in the infiniteness of time and space contrasted with the finiteness of the individual in both; in the fleeting present as the sole form in which actuality exists; in the contingency and relativity of all things; in continual becoming without being; in continual desire without satisfaction; in the continual frustration of striving of which life consists.⁴⁹

The last clause is particularly significant, for in it one can see an inherent instability gnawing at the course of human life. If life consists of perpetual striving, it is because it is unsettled, because it is disharmonious with something (nothingness), because it is not yet (and never can be) what it is supposed to be, which is of course nothing, in both senses of the word: it lacks telos (where telos is not a diluted form of bare accomplishment, as in what Julian Barnes calls the 'secular modern heaven of self-fulfilment'),⁵⁰ and it is circumscribed by the nothingness in which it ultimately dissipates, leaving no survivable trace or odour. It is here that Schopenhauer cites the experience as a direct reflection of the valuelessness of existence, 'for boredom is nothing other than the sensation of the emptiness of existence.'⁵¹ He goes on to state that if life, 'in the desire for which our essence and existence consists, possessed in itself a positive value and real content, there would be no such thing as boredom: mere existence would fulfil and satisfy us.'⁵² It follows from this that 'consciousness of time is the fundamental, indispensable

⁴⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, trans. by Shaun Whiteside (London: Penguin Books, 2003), p. 10.

⁴⁹ Schopenhauer, 'On the Vanity of Existence', p. 51.

⁵⁰ Julian Barnes, *Nothing to Be Frightened Of* (London: Vintage, 2009), p. 59.

⁵¹ Schopenhauer, 'On the Vanity of Existence', p. 53.

⁵² *ibid.*, pp. 53-54.

attribute of self-consciousness.⁵³ Viewed in such a manner, human beings are nothing but strands of consciously disintegrating time. And what is that moment of consciousness of time if not an encounter with boredom? We are not here speaking of linear time, but rather a devastating inverse form of *Kairos* (kairos), which in Christian theology is an 'opportune moment' of plenitude, specifically a 'fulfilment or redemption of time' (chief among them being the coming of Christ).⁵⁴

The difference is clear: in this head-on impact with time one is placed or places oneself outside the confines of the series of movements that constitute action in the world, but the experience of that moment is radically different. In the Christian, Taoist and Heideggerian versions, time can be fulfilled or redeemed because it has the potential to exhibit an effortless plenitude. In Heidegger's thinking, this is related in the following manner: that the 'more profound' boredom becomes—which is nothing more than this overflowing and overpowering awareness of time—the more 'completely boredom is rooted in time—in the time that we ourselves are.'⁵⁵ In turn, despite the overwhelming loss of one's bearing with the world as a result of this experience of profound boredom,⁵⁶ there is on this existential precipice the possibility of an 'attunement to boredom [that] discloses a more originary origination' and which 'offers the possibility of freedom for a new beginning, a renewed self-creation'.⁵⁷ More significantly still, disclosure in Heideggerian terminology is cognate with truth, *ἀλήθεια* (aletheia), so the possibility of renewed self-creation in the dark as a result of the experience of profound boredom becomes a far more (self-)transcendent gesture.

In contrast to this eleventh hour quasi-soteriology, the Schopenhauerian and Cioranesque encounter with boredom is one which results in deep inanition and aboulia. What is happening in the Heideggerian apprehension of profound boredom is a Pascalian inversion in which, against all miserable odds, boredom manages to '[attain] a kind of mystical dignity'.⁵⁸ *Ex nihilo* (self-)creation is ultimately the prerogative of the gods, the practice of originary chaos, the temporal triumph over nothingness. One wonders whether Schopenhauer would have reacted with the same venom to Heidegger's—admittedly appealing—sublimations as he did to Hegel's. It brings to mind Derrida's question: '[s]hould one save oneself by abstraction or save oneself from abstraction?'⁵⁹ This gesture—of saving oneself by abstraction—is one which both Schopenhauer (with the exception perhaps of his take on transcendental idealism) and Cioran tended to avoid. In this they are uncommon as the tendency is to try and overcome aporias, even if that merely means the implication of a possible overcoming (in this respect, Jean-Luc Nancy's two-volume work on the *Deconstruction of Christianity*, particularly the second of the

⁵³ Joshua Foa Dienstag, *Pessimism: Philosophy, Ethic, Spirit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), p.23.

⁵⁴ Simon Critchley, 'Heidegger's Being and Time, part 8: Temporality', *Guardian*, 27 July 2009 <<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/belief/2009/jul/27/heidegger-being-time-philosophy>> [accessed 16 July 2015]

⁵⁵ Martin Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude*, trans. by William McNeill and Nicholas Walker (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995), §29-36 (p. 133).

⁵⁶ Lars Svendsen, *A Philosophy of Boredom*, trans. by John Irons (London: Reaktion Books, 2008), p. 19.

⁵⁷ Feld, *Melancholy and the Otherness of God: A Study of the Hermeneutics of Depression*, p. 130.

⁵⁸ E.M. Cioran, 'A Bouquet of Heads', *The Hudson Review*, 15:1 (1962-3), 491-503 (p. 503).

⁵⁹ Jacques Derrida, 'Faith and Knowledge: the Two Sources of 'Religion' and the Limits of Reason Alone', in *Religion*, ed. by Jacques Derrida and Gianni Vattimo (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998), p. 1.

series, *Adoration*, with its openness to essentially transcendent notions of ‘*salut*’ and ‘gift’, is a good contemporary example of this kind of eleventh hour soteriology).⁶⁰

Boredom II: Nothingness and Insomnia

The analysis of boredom so far has worked with mostly definitional explanations in Heidegger’s and Schopenhauer’s works. This is not an area in which Cioran excels; nor was he prolific when it came to offering theoretical formulations of philosophical problems. His thinking on boredom is aphoristic, essayistic and even deeply autobiographical; in this sense we are not too far off from the kind of writing that Paul Valéry made his own (with whom critics had compared him for ‘stylistic incisiveness’,⁶¹ and Cioran admired because of its ‘very pure language’ and ‘horror’ of philosophical jargon).⁶² In another Beckettian moment, Cioran wrote that a ‘sudden silence in the middle of a conversation suddenly brings us back to essentials: it reveals how dearly we must pay for the invention of speech.’⁶³ Such heightened Beckettian moments however are much less common than the many digressions and analyses on boredom and sufferers of boredom that populate Cioran’s work. He viewed Pascal’s struggle with boredom with mischievous relish, writing that boredom was ‘a condition that engrossed him somewhat more than grace’; but at the same time he manages to draw out in his mock-derision an astute formulation of Pascal’s take on boredom’s intrusive manifestations:

He [Pascal] makes it our substance, the “venom” of our minds, the principle that resides “in the bottom of our hearts.” Is it possible he was only pretending, in order to feel it? Nothing could be more false. We can play at charity or piety, pray deliberately (which is what he did), fold our hands and strike an attitude to suit the occasion (which is what he recommended); but boredom—no exercise, no tradition, no method prepares us for it; no doctrine advocates it, no belief exonerates it. It is a feeling with a curse on it.⁶⁴

In this depiction, boredom is a stupefying and incurable malady. Nothing that we do, Cioran is saying, can annul boredom’s pervasiveness or the possible onset of its affliction. The totalising suggestion that Cioran would then proceed to make was that the experience of boredom is nothing more than an amplification of the day-to-day on-goings that constitute active linear time. It was Viktor Frankl who coined the term *Sunday neurosis*, the day that, like God, one gets off from labour.⁶⁵ Boredom comes in when this refractory period opens up unto a Nietzschean abyss. There is a very insightful thought experiment in Cioran’s *A Short History of Decay* that considers precisely this Sunday disease:

⁶⁰ See Jean-Luc Nancy, *Adoration: The Deconstruction of Christianity II*, trans. by John McKeane (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013) and *Dis-Enclosure: The Deconstruction of Christianity*, trans. by Bettina Bergo, Gabriel Malenfant, and Michael B. Smith (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008).

⁶¹ Zarifopol-Johnston, *Searching for Cioran*, p. 7.

⁶² Jason Weiss and E.M. Cioran, ‘An Interview with Cioran’, *Grand Street*, 5:3 (1986), 105-140 (p. 106).

⁶³ Cioran, ‘On the Verge of Existence’, p. 19.

⁶⁴ Cioran, ‘A Bouquet of Heads’, p. 500.

⁶⁵ Refer to Viktor Frankl for further information on this topic.

If Sunday afternoons were extended for months, where would humanity get to [...] The sensation of time's immensity would make each second into an intolerable torment [...] *The universe transformed into a Sunday afternoon*...it is the very definition of ennui, and the end of the universe.⁶⁶

To paraphrase what Thomas Bernhard once wrote: instead of committing suicide, people just go to work. How to lose oneself in the world is the problem, how to counteract the alertness of self-consciousness. But if taken on a more totalising scale—as with the Sunday afternoon phenomenon but transplanted to all of human existence—then it becomes a much greater problem, for we sometimes 'manage to forget ourselves in something; but how to forget ourselves in the world itself?'⁶⁷ Schopenhauer sums up this anxiety at the sensation of the emptiness of existence when he says that the 'pressure of time [...] never lets us so much as draw breath but pursues us all like a taskmaster with a whip. It ceases to persecute only him it has delivered over to boredom [...] want and boredom are indeed the twin poles of human life.'⁶⁸ Schopenhauer again: 'Whenever we are not involved in one or other of these things [striving, intellectual activity, sensual pleasure, and so on] but directed back to existence itself we are overtaken by its worthlessness and vanity and this is the sensation called boredom.'⁶⁹ Despite the conceptual similarities, the difference between Cioran's and Schopenhauer's expression of this sensation of emptiness brought by boredom could not be starker. Again, the chief difference here, as is the case with Cioran and many other philosophers, is temperament. Part of the reason behind this was not merely stylistic: in his youth Cioran suffered from terrible insomnia, and it never left him even when he had recovered from the worst bouts.

In one of the few interviews Cioran ever had, he told Jason Weiss that his seven-year long bout of ceaseless insomnia 'was really the profound cause of my break with philosophy. I realized that in moments of great despair philosophy is no help at all and offers absolutely no answers'.⁷⁰ It was the experience of those 'sleepless nights' he said that was the 'fundamental and most serious experience' of his life; even his turning away from philosophy 'to poetry and literature' has its roots here, not because he found 'answers' in literature, but rather because he found 'states of mind analogous' to his own.⁷¹ For him it was precisely the lack of any sustained and revivifying interlude, a form of *Geworfenheit* in which one is thrown not so much into the world but into a space barren of everything except time that derailed him:

Normally, someone who goes to bed and sleeps all night begins the next day almost a new life. It's not simply another day, it's another life. And so he can undertake things, can manifest himself, he has a present, a future, and so on. But for someone who doesn't sleep, the time from going to bed at night to rising in the morning is all continuous, with no interruption, no

⁶⁶ E.M. Cioran, *A Short History of Decay*, trans. by Richard Howard (London: Penguin Books, 2010), p. 23.

⁶⁷ *ibid.*, p. 24

⁶⁸ Arthur Schopenhauer, 'On the Suffering of the World', in *Essays and Aphorisms*, trans. by R.J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin Books, 2004), 41-50 (pp. 42, 45).

⁶⁹ Schopenhauer, 'On the Vanity of Existence', p. 54.

⁷⁰ Weiss and Cioran, 'An Interview with Cioran', pp. 107-108.

⁷¹ *ibid.*, p. 108.

suppression of consciousness [...] The nightmare continues uninterrupted and, in the morning, start what, since there's no difference since the night before? That new life doesn't exist.⁷²

His bout of 'deep insomnia' did eventually come to an end when, like Beckett's Molloy, he cycled aimlessly, a hundred kilometres a day, for months on end.⁷³ More importantly still, it was from insomnia that he fully grasped the fundamentally disquieting experience of apprehending time in one's consciousness:

You're lying down in the middle of the night and you are no longer in time. You're not in eternity either. Time passes so slowly that it becomes agonizing. All of us, being alive, are drawn along by time because we are in time. When you lie awake like that, you are outside of time. So, time passes outside of you, you can't catch up with it.⁷⁴

The experience of watching time pass is, for Cioran, the 'conscious experience of ennui, of boredom', which is a 'sort of taking consciousness of time, because then time does not pass'; and within this realisation of time or this experience of boredom, one begins to have the essential 'experience of being human', as set against sleep which is 'the return to unconsciousness, to animality [...] to the before-life, to oblivion. Insomnia is the worst illness.'⁷⁵ It is why he wrote of the process of boredom as one that involves a dismantling of the mind, rendering it 'superficial, out at the seams', sapped 'from within', and dislocated.⁷⁶ Jean-Luc Nancy's *The Fall of Sleep* circumnavigates the same terrain as Cioran, but here the focus on time—and by extension boredom—is dissipated in the many relations that consciousness of time has with the world, as 'ambulances tear through the night', rockets launch, children cry, and tanks rumble while 'rending pains in the chest, in the bellies of the cancerous', 'harsh light of lamps that one cannot or will not turn off', and 'obsessive thoughts, torments, remorse, feverish anticipation—fears more than anything else, fears of everything', predominate.⁷⁷ If Nancy's vision of insomnia is coupled with Cioran's, then the experience becomes even more unendurable, as the overwhelming sensation of time passing outside oneself that is boredom becomes cognate with a 'fear of everything'. For Nancy, this kind of insomnia is not merely 'an insomnia that wanders from sleep itself'; instead he describes what seems to be insomnia's equivalent of Heidegger's profound boredom, a *profound insomnia* in which it is the 'matter of the world in which it is impossible to sleep' in, a world 'in which it is forbidden to sleep because of a process of torture whose effectiveness is not in doubt.'⁷⁸ The more significant point that Nancy makes is that '[s]leep, perhaps, has never been philosophical'; for Bruns the reason behind this is that 'philosophy, at least since Hegel, has always conceived human subjectivity in terms of self-consciousness

⁷² Weiss and Cioran, 'An Interview with Cioran', pp. 107-108.

⁷³ *ibid.*, pp. 109-110.

⁷⁴ *ibid.*, p. 110.

⁷⁵ Weiss and Cioran, 'An Interview with Cioran', p. 111.

⁷⁶ E.M. Cioran, 'Some Blind Alleys: A Letter', in *The Temptation to Exist*, trans. by Richard Howard (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 108-125 (p. 112).

⁷⁷ Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Fall of Sleep*, trans. by Charlotte Mandell (New York: Fordham University Press, 2009), p. 37.

⁷⁸ Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Fall of Sleep*, p. 38.

or the self-identity of the spirit.'⁷⁹ This is perhaps the reason why Cioran turned away from philosophy too in the midst of his long insomnia, as it put a premium on self-consciousness and self-identity, and by extension on the freedom to self-create—but not in the dark as we have been saying thus far, but in the cold light of wakefulness, where thought and abstraction try to pummel out of being something graspable, something capable of being understood and lived. Outside this fashioned wakefulness, where structures and systems are remote or outside the narrow space where they can be brought to bear on the individual being, other things happen—it is the space in which one comprehends or at least experiences boredom and nothingness. The problem lies in the fact that this space tends to be centred around an oppressive consciousness, where questions, logic and systems rebound on nothing. If Hell is the ultimate void that some theologians claim it is, then Christ would surely never have managed to harrow it, for he too would have rebounded on nothing. It is for this reason that Cioran wished for a 'vegetal wisdom', and said that 'he who has never envied the vegetable has missed the human drama.'⁸⁰

Quietism and the Fear of Boredom

In this reading so far, the chief effect of boredom seems to be one that impels escape. If we forgo the Heideggerian possibility of a profound boredom that can be rendered into a space for affirmation through *Gelassenheit*—and here the term is being used more with reference to Meister Eckhart's use of the term than Heidegger's—in which the openness to metaphysical or ecstatic self-abnegation ultimately leads to effortless plenitude (in Christian theology, this would be realised through grace), then we are faced with this need for escape.⁸¹ For Cioran, this escape which drives most human beings manifests itself in the totality of history. He asks if history ultimately is 'the result of our fear of boredom', the 'horror' of which has made us 'into that horde of civilized men, of omniscient monsters who know nothing of the essential'—this despite knowing that there 'is no help for it: nothing will reconcile us with boredom'.⁸² The problem here is that while Cioran claims that attachment, which comes about from action, is evil, since it propels us away from the sensation (boredom) that allows us to experience and know the essential (nothingness), he is at the same time castigating boredom, particularly its most intense manifestation, that is insomnia, as the 'worst illness', which in effect means that one is caught in a double bind, so that either option is a step backwards. This is the basis of Cioran's total pessimism.

In history we see the search for 'false Absolutes', which is precisely that which we cannot find in the nothingness that emerges and is always there to be confronted in boredom.⁸³ We are faced then with what Cioran had called the 'failure of Quietism'.⁸⁴ This is a quietism that

⁷⁹ Bruns, *Ceasing to be Human*, p. 4.

⁸⁰ E.M. Cioran, *The Fall Into Time*, trans. by Richard Howard (New York: Quadrangle Books, 1970), p. 178.

⁸¹ See Barbara Dalla Pezze, *Martin Heidegger and Meister Eckhart: A Path Towards Gelassenheit* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2009).

⁸² E.M. Cioran, 'The Golden Age', in *History and Utopia*, trans. by Richard Howard (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998, pp. 99-118 (p. 109).

⁸³ Cioran, *A Short History of Decay*, p. 3.

⁸⁴ Cioran, 'Thinking Against Oneself', p. 35.

emerges after the trauma of confrontation and action; it is the *volte-face* one makes after being witness to that supreme indifferent Otherness which engulfs not only ourselves, but those we love—those of whom we ask to be ‘kind enough to grow old’.⁸⁵ The fall-back position here literally becomes one of falling back away—from vitality, action, hope and their chief attendants and realisations, politics and belief. It is a cauterisation of common and shared humanity; it requires the Nietzschean superhuman or mystical kenosis—which is either the Nietzschean going beyond or the mystical harmonisation with a nothingness free of any negative signification—for one to cease being part of a common and shared humanity and thus transcend the limits of existence. In the totality of history, these scales are inconceivable; as Cioran said, to construct a society in which no one harms one another, ‘you must admit only abulics’.⁸⁶

Perhaps it is at this point that we should question the soundness of Cioran’s vision. Donald A. Crosby, in his perceptive study *The Specter of the Absurd: Sources and Criticisms of Modern Nihilism*, uses Cioran as one of his exemplars of the overlap between the views of existence as either absurd or nihilistic. Crosby takes issue with both Cioran’s and Schopenhauer’s overly negative worldview, that is, that ‘but two states of human life exist, either deadening boredom or excruciating pain’.⁸⁷ He points out that Cioran’s and Schopenhauer’s ‘gross exaggeration’ lies in the fact that most lives ‘are lived on a middle ground somewhere between these two extremes’, to wit, that life is a moderate distillation of boredom and pain.⁸⁸ He further states that they suffer from what Charles Frankel calls ‘cosmic hypochondria’, and that their attempts to ‘peel the veneer from our usual, less probing perceptions, is actually histrionic and overblown’, and so their analyses fall ‘patently short of accurately describing all human life’.⁸⁹ For Crosby rather, even if suffering ‘is part of the fabric of existence’, it is not the ‘unmitigated bane and disaster Schopenhauer, Cioran and other nihilists have taken it to be’.⁹⁰ There is here a technical point of contention, even if it sounds counterintuitive: Schopenhauer and Cioran were not nihilists per se; rather, they favoured self-renunciation when faced—and this is something that *they* claimed admittedly—with a world that was nihilistic *a priori*, that had no value or meaning apart from that which we sometimes try to imbue it with. To describe them as nihilists therefore is to partially misread them (in the same way that many misread Nietzsche as a nihilist). Crosby writes that we can ‘face up to reality and acknowledge its threatening mystery without despairing of the meaning of human life or without denouncing the universe in which it occurs’, and that for us to do so, we need to have ‘powerful symbolizations of the ever-present fact and possibility of suffering [...] effective reminders that it is an aspect of existence’.⁹¹ Again, this seemingly misses the point that the claims which Schopenhauer and Cioran are making are ultimately ontological ones: if existence for them, and in the logic of their argument, cannot but be other than a tangible token that we interact with in the time-

⁸⁵ Weiss and Cioran, ‘An Interview with Cioran’, p. 140.

⁸⁶ Cioran, ‘The Golden Age’, p. 108.

⁸⁷ Donald A. Crosby, *The Specter of the Absurd: Sources and Criticisms of Modern Nihilism* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1988), p. 356.

⁸⁸ *ibid.*

⁸⁹ *ibid.*

⁹⁰ *ibid.*, p.357.

⁹¹ Crosby, *The Specter of the Absurd: Sources and Criticisms of Modern Nihilism*, p. 357.

bound human condition as we know it, which is itself a symptom of a larger nothingness which extends into infinity, then this suffering which is only 'an aspect of existence' is subsumed by the larger whole from which we cannot glean any meaning or purpose, so that what we are confronted by instead is a totalising indifference in which, however, suffering is also present.

However, there is a clear impasse here: Crosby is someone who, like Heidegger, Lao-Tzu and Eckhart, can wrest from this sensation of the emptiness of existence a kind of abstract dignity (following what Cioran said with respect to the 'mystical dignity' wrested from boredom), from which saving premise one can construct an other side to existence that is not predominated by its essential (and essentialising) encounter with or foundation in an ontological and originary nothingness. In any case, one has to doubt Crosby's claims with respect to the middle ground that he suggests as the epicentre of most human life. If we accede to Schopenhauer's point that, 'as a rule we find pleasure much less pleasurable, pain much more painful than we expected', then Crosby's point loses much of its appeal—and ultimately it is to individuals with such views that Crosby must be convincing.⁹² One is also reminded here of a short piece called 'On Suicide' that H.L. Mencken wrote, and which is perhaps the only, or one of the few, of his pieces in which wit fails to overcome poignancy. He writes that:

The universal wisdom of the world long ago concluded that life is mainly a curse. Turn to the proverbial philosophy of any race, and you will find it full of a sense of the futility of mundane struggle. Anticipation is better than realization. Disappointment is the lot of man. We are born in pain and die in sorrow. The lucky man died a 'Wednesday. He giveth His beloved sleep. I could run the list to pages. If you disdain folk-wisdom, secular or sacred, then turn to the works of William Shakespeare. They drip with such pessimism from end to end. If there is any general idea in them, it is the idea that human existence is a painful futility. Out, out, brief candle!⁹³

In response Crosby would say that such "nihilism" is 'symptomatic' of 'hubris' in 'its unqualified rejection of the gift of a bounded life'.⁹⁴ To this one could reply that it is not just the time-boundedness of human life that might make rejection a sensible response, but also the fact that even the "good life" is bound by the contours of inevitable pain and suffering. The use of the word 'gift' here is telling, and recalls Nancy's similar advocacy, when he speaks of '[t]he gift of the world' that calls 'for adoration. It invites us to adoration, commits us to it, arouses it [...] what's more, this gift opens the possibility—if not the necessity—of adoration'.⁹⁵ The same retort which one could give in response to Nancy also applies to Crosby; the very word 'gift' startles one into an inquisitive and alert state of cynicism: what gift is this; who made the gift or where did it come from; whose gift is it to give; who or what is giving it to whom or what; and, more importantly, how does the 'gift' of the world 'open' the possibility, or necessity even, of adoration or the non-rejection of said 'gift'; and why should this 'gift' not be considered a mistake or a non-gift? The worrying thing is that one can

⁹² Schopenhauer, 'On the Suffering of the World', p. 42.

⁹³ H.L. Mencken, 'On Suicide', in *A Mencken Chrestomathy*, ed by. H.L. Mencken (New York: Vintage Books, 1982), pp. 129-132 (pp. 130-131).

⁹⁴ Crosby, *The Specter of the Absurd: Sources and Criticisms of Modern Nihilism*, p. 360.

⁹⁵ Nancy, *Adoration: The Deconstruction of Christianity II*, p. 14.

predict two of many unsatisfactory responses: the first would be an accusation of unwarranted bleakness or pessimism, which belies the whole project of (spirit-)seeking in the first place; the second, and this is the giveaway response, is that you just have to be of believing or different disposition, to wit, that it is a matter of faith. Nothing more, then, than a colossal retracing of faith-driven soteriology: the eleventh hour gesture which pulls one out of the quicksand of time, boredom and nothingness.

This is admittedly the realm of what Steiner called absolute darkness—constant fearful insomnia. There are only small recompenses for Cioran. For instance, he writes that ‘[y]ou cannot imagine, if you haven’t experienced it, the solace of an animal coming to keep you company when the gods have turned their backs.’⁹⁶ He also managed to find ecstatic solace in music, seeing it as a more visceral realisation of Wallace Steven’s supreme fiction: ‘If everything is a lie, is illusory, then music itself is a lie, but the superb lie. That’s how I would define music.’⁹⁷ There is also something to be had in Cioran’s response to the obvious question as to why write, given such a disposition:

One can’t dwell on the ultimate consequences of an attitude, one would have to either become a monk or commit suicide. At bottom one has to admit that life is made of these contradictions, that’s what’s interesting. If I identified completely with what I’ve written, for example, I wouldn’t have written. There’s the whole problem. What should I have done? [...] Everything I’ve done has been the result of a spiritual failure. But for me that is not necessarily a negative concept.⁹⁸

The answer then, if there is one, can only be consummated on a crushingly individual level—but if it works, why should we question it to the point of making it unworkable? The danger, as Cioran would say, comes from the ‘fanaticism’ of action—compensatory action, it might be added—that leads to formulations and answers that go beyond the individual’s own subjective level, which is the space of soteriologies and ideologies. It is in any case difficult to have on the individual level, too; to, as Czesław Miłosz wrote, ‘Not to know. Not to remember. With this one hope:/ That beyond the River Lethe, there is memory, healed.’⁹⁹ Nevertheless, this compensatory impulse is a human instinct as much as any other. In this we side—effortlessly—with that most crestfallen of Fernando Pessoa’s heteronyms, the Baron of Teive, when he said: ‘Yes, I had hopes, because not to hope is to die’.¹⁰⁰ In the final analysis perhaps, we are not willing after all to give ‘the whole of the universe’ for a grain of ataraxy—in confronting fate we would much rather act as ourselves.¹⁰¹

⁹⁶ E.M. Cioran, ‘Encounters with Suicide’, in *The New Gods*, trans. by Richard Howard (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013), pp. 49-67 (p. 57).

⁹⁷ Weiss and Cioran, ‘An Interview with Cioran’, p. 138.

⁹⁸ *ibid.*, p. 136.

⁹⁹ Judith A. Dompkowski, *Down a Spiral Staircase, Never-Ending: Motion as Design in the Writing of Czesław Miłosz* (New York: Peter Lang, 1990), p. 78.

¹⁰⁰ Fernando Pessoa, *The Education of the Stoic*, ed. & trans. by Richard Zenith (Cambridge: Exact Change, 2005), p. 29.

¹⁰¹ Cioran, *The Trouble with Being Born*, p. 21.

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