# *Insomnolent Anathemas—*

# *E.M. Cioran's Unbelieving Gift to Theology*

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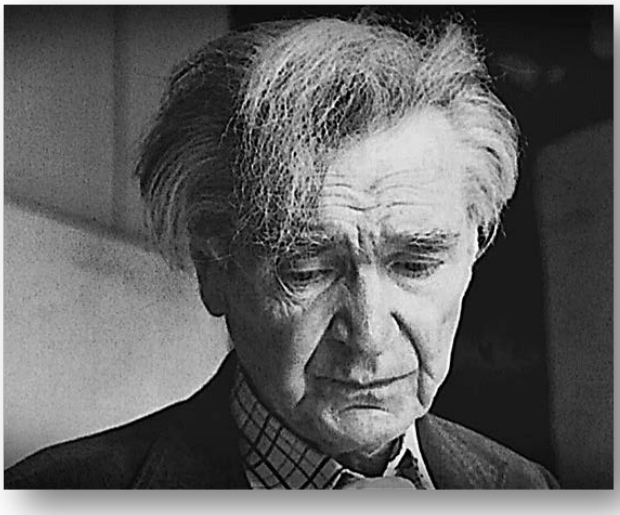

**Abstract**

Over several decades during the second half of the last century, the Romanian-born Parisian intellectual, E.M. Cioran penned a series of uneasy works whose despondent obsession with God is matched only by their utter disavowal of the reality of the divine. Wrestling pessimistically with nihilism in world forged by chronic insomnia, illness, nicotine, and despair, Cioran confronts the theologian with a particularly radical articulation of unbelief hard-won at the 'verge of existence', and existence suffered as an 'accident of God'. This short paper explores the form and substance of Cioran's biting and aphoristic expression of modern unbelief in an attempt to discern something of its theological significance. Perhaps theology would do well to receive this work as a necessary *ascesis* of its inapt and faithless contentment and ease with the world? And could it be that theology stands to be schooled in the near impossibility and profundity of hope by the cynicist's surprising confession that, 'Each time the future seems conceivable to me, I have the impression of being visited by Grace'?

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*'To keep the mind vigilant, there is only coffee, disease, insomnia, or the obsession of death!'* [1]

## 1/ Introduction—Cioran and Theology?

By the time of this death in Paris in 1995, Emile M. Cioran was widely acknowledged as one of the great French literary figures of the 20th century. Born in Romania in 1911, Cioran was the son

[1] EMC as cited by Regier in 'The Philosophy of Insomnia', *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, April 10, 2011.

of a Romanian Orthodox priest and unbelieving mother. His formative childhood years were spent in Sibiu, a small historic market town in Transylvania home to historic German, Hungarian and Romanian speaking peoples. After university studies and a time in which he flirted seriously with the mystical nationalism of the Romanian fascists, Cioran moved to Paris in 1937 to take up a scholarship at the Sorbonne. Paris became his permanent home, and French become the language of his life's work as a literary essayist and aphorist. The spirit and substance of his writing finds apt expression in the titles of his published books: *On the Heights of Despair*, *The Temptation to Exist, A Short History of Decay*, *The Trouble with Being Born*, *All Gall is Divided, Anathemas and Admirations* and *The New Gods* (*Le Mauvais Demiurge*), among others.[2] His reputation as a contrarian and provocateur is announced by the title of the now standard account of his life and works by Partrice Bollon, *Cioran: l'heretique* (1997).

Cioran has an abiding, agnostic interest in religious themes and texts. His thought moves broadly in the sceptical—even cynical—intellectual stream of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche. Educated in philosophy in Bucharest during the time when historian of religion Mircea Eliade was *the* leading light of Romanian intellectual life, Cioran's essays and collections of aphorisms regularly engage historic Buddhist, Jewish and Christian ideas and texts—including those of various Christian mystics—as he wrestles with the existential and cultural questions that preoccupy him. Cioran could even admit that, in a sense, there was something oddly theological about his corpus. He confesses: 'I abuse the word *God*; I use it often, too often. I employ it each time I touch an extremity and need a word to designate what comes *after*' (AA, 14). On another occasion he admits that,

> At bottom, for me, the act of writing is a sort of dialogue with God. I say with God, but I am not a believer, although I cannot say that I am an unbeliever either. But for me, this meeting with God is in the act of writing, with a solitude that meets another, a solitude in front of another, "God" being more alone than oneself.[3]

This confrontation is not one of faith.[4] Rather, 'It is as an informer that I have prowled around God; incapable of imploring Him, I have spied on Him' (AGD, 98). The atheistic work of honest reflection demands that, 'So long as there is a single god *standing*, man's task is not done' (AA, 204). And yet, something of the religious attitude haunts him: 'Like every iconoclast', he

[2] All primary references are made to these texts by their initials and page number in parantheses.
[3] EMC in a recorded interview excerpted in *Emil Cioran 1911-1995*, a film by Patrice Bollon and Bernard Jourdain, at 39:00 minute mark.
[4] 'What a pity that to reach God we must pass through faith!', AGD, 86.

admits, 'I have broken my idols in order to offer sacrifices to their debris' (AGD, 94). Or, as he puts it gnomically, 'God *is*, even if He isn't' (TBB, 191). His work as a whole seems to oscillate between two basic registers. As he himself puts it: 'We should only trust explanations which invoke physiology and theology. Whatever happens between the two is of no importance' (NG, 111)

During the last half of the 20th century Cioran penned a series of uneasy works whose despondent obsession with God is matched only by their utter disavowal of the benevolent reality of the divine. Wrestling pessimistically with nihilism in world forged by chronic insomnia, illness, nicotine, and despair, Cioran confronts the theologian with a particularly radical articulation of unbelief hard-won at the 'verge of existence',[5] an existence suffered as an 'accident of God' (AA, 198).

This short paper briefly explores some of Cioran's biting and aphoristic expressions of modern unbelief in an attempt to discern something of their theological significance. I want to suggest that theology would do well to receive this work as a necessary *scourge* of its own inapt and faithless contentment and ease with the world, and that theologians can be taken to school here concerning the near impossibility of genuine faith and hope.

**2/ Revelatory Insomnia—Sleepless Prophecy?**

Already as a pupil in Romania, Cioran was beset by insomnia and he suffered from a chronic inability to sleep all his life. At the time of his death, one commentator remarked—with only some exaggeration—that Cioran had not slept for the last fifty years.[6] Cioran himself discussed his condition often:

> In my youth there would be weeks during which I never closed by eyes. I lived in the unlived world, I had the sense that Time with all its movements, had concentrated itself within me, where it culminated, where it triumphed. I moved it onward, of course, I was its promoter and bearer, its cause and substance, and it was as an agent and accomplice that I participated in its apotheosis. When sleep departs from us, the unheard-of becomes everyday, easy: we enter it without preparations, inhabit it, wallow in it. (TBB, 109)

Poetically addressing his tormentor on another occasion, he writes:

[5] 'On the verge of existence' is the heading given to the first section of *Anathemas and Admirations*, p. 3f.
[6] Willis G. Regier, 'Cioran's Insomnia', *MLN* 119 (2004), p. 994 [994-1012]

> Insomnia, you … in a single night grant more knowledge than days spent in repose, and, to reddened eyelids, reveal yourself a more important event than the nameless diseases or the disasters of time! … I appealed to philosophy, but there is no idea which comforts in the dark, no system which resists those vigils. The analyses of insomnia undo all certainties.[7]

The experience was tortuous: 'What is that one crucifixion compared to that daily kind any insomniac endures?' screams one aphorism (TBB, 14). For this was a 'special kind of sleeplessness that produces an indictment of birth' itself (TBB, 3). Or, as he put it in another place, 'And God saw that that light was good': such is the opinion of mortals, with the exception of the sleepless, for whom it is an aggression, a new inferno more pitiless than the night's' (AA, 162).

Cioran 'made insomnia a laboratory', and all of his writing arises from this place of exhausted perspicacity.[8] Grief and suffering accumulate without relief or remittance as insomnia converts all our pain 'into a blow of fate, [and] stands vigil over our wounds and keeps them from flagging' (AA, 140). Insomnia delivers him from the distractions and comforting conceits of modern bourgeois life—indeed from the numbing and deluding comforts that a well-rested life itself affords—and forces a confrontation with the self and the world at once brutal, unrelenting, liminal and lucid. Cioran's long fascination with the literature of mystical experience suggests that he conceives of his own harrowed perceptions as an analogy—and perhaps also parody—of such extremes of insight. An exhausted 'lucidity' concerning the terrible actuality of existence was the unwelcome and discomforting gift, one that produced in him an permanent 'affront at being born' (TBB, 116). The burden of his entire corpus is to communicate the distilled 'discomfort and ambiguity' of this prophetic lucidity to his readers (TBB, 9). The very antithesis of Job's theological comforters, Cioran writing looks to sharpen and amplify suffering by unveiling its depth and scope, inescapability, and meaninglessness. Cioran summarised his vocation once in this saying: 'Lucidity's task: to attain to a *correct* despair, and Olympian ferocity' (AGD, 26).

### 3/ The Obviousness of Gnosticism—Unbelieving Natural Theology

The unrelenting wakefulness of a 'mind *staved in* by lucidity' (NG, 89) makes this harsh work Cioran's vocation: 'My mission is to see things as they are', he remarks, 'exactly the contrary of a

[7] EMC, *The Short History of Decay* (1949), from the 'Invocation to Insomnia', p. XX.
[8] Regier, 'Cioran's Insomnia', p. 994.

mission' (AA, 119). And so the world delivers up its truth to him: 'existence = torment' (TBB, 116). As Cioran explains, 'it is not the violent evils that mark us but the secret, insistent, tolerable ones belonging to our daily round and undermining us as conscientiously as Time itself' (AA, 80). We find ourselves 'deep in a hell each moment of which is a miracle' [and not a good one] (TG, 120) and our lives are but fleeting sketches in a 'chemical comedy' that 'gnaws at our vitals and maddens us' (AA, 191). Our bodies are of no particular value save to 'make us understand the meaning of the word *torturer*' (AA, 160). In the end, 'every *life* is the story of a collapse', our different biographies serving only to show how many ways there are to enact 'the art of the debacle' (AA, 194). As Cioran puts it darkly, 'everyone expiates his first moment' (TBB, 160) in a life that testifies that 'it is not God, it is *Grief* which enjoys the advantages of ubiquity' (AGD, 93). Hegesias of Cyrene's remark, that 'life seems good only to the madman' summarises the case well enough (TBB, 191); or in Cioran's own words: 'There is only one sign that indicates that we have understood everything: *tears without cause*' (NG, 113).

Cioran goes on to assert that 'everything is wonderfully clear if we admit that birth is a disastrous or at least inopportune event; but if we think otherwise, we must resign ourselves to the unintelligible, or else cheat like everyone else' (TBB, 98). Insomnia strips human consciousness of its seemingly natural defence mechanism by which it affirms and validates its own existence within the sphere of existence. Freed from this tick (and trick) of nature by the gift of sleeplessness, Cioran sees that it would have been better for creation as such to have been left to its 'primal nullity' (TBB, 190), though as it is we can 'trace' the line that connects 'the sovereign zero out of which emerges that subaltern zero that constitutes ourselves' (AA, 144). There is finally nothing profound in such wistful and wishful thinking, as it merely amounts to the 'scrutiny of our own vertigo' (NG, 23). What remains is resignation 'to becoming, to surprises that are no such thing, to calamities that pretend to be uncommon' (AA, 189) overlaid with a primal fear that 'we are victims of an *aggression* of the Future' (AGD, 128). In short, as Cioran writes, the human 'proceeds from one chaos to the next' and finds its 'destiny . . . in acceding to the *integral* chaos' that constitutes life submerged in 'the anguish of the indefinite' (AA, 138; NG, 31).

This is where an appreciation for what we might call the 'obviousness of Gnosticism' comes into its own. If one is to preserve one's sanity before the 'spectacle of injustice' and carnival of meaninglessness that is human existence, we must acknowledge that we inhabit 'a failed universe', one that is 'majestically miscarried' (TBB, 125; AA, 165). Discerning that life itself is a

vice to which we have merely become habituated (DQ, 141), 'the odour of the creature puts us on the track of a fetid divinity' (AGD, 81). 'Nothing could persuade me', he writes in *The New Gods*, 'that this world is not the fruit of a dark god whose shadow I extend, and that it is incumbent upon me to exhaust the consequences of the curse hanging over him and his creation' (NG, 89).

Cioran labours on in one text after another to display the demiurgic farcical tragedy that is human existence. He invites his readers to concede as self-evident that the world we inhabit is a 'botched job', 'a *fault*' (NG, 5), the handiwork of a 'suspect god' who merits only 'execration' and 'abuse' for inaugurating the alarming 'epidemic of life' which now seethes over the earth (NG, 5, 4, 12). How else to account for a world in which human life is but the sum of boredom and suffering whose conspiracy 'evokes an evil without site or support, only that indefinable *nothing* that erodes you. . . A pure erosion, whose imperceptible effect slowly transforms you into a ruin unnoticed by other and almost unnoticed by yourself' (DQ, 139)? Sufficiently exhausted to glimpse the truth of it, Cioran espies that we finally have no warrant to assert even the value of being over non-being:

> 'Ceasing to exist signifies nothing, can signify nothing. What is the use of being concerned with what survives a nonreality, with a semblance that succeeds another semblance? Death is in fact nothing, it is at most a simulacrum of mystery, like life itself. Antimetaphysical propaganda of the graveyards (AA 169-70).

The result is a deeply amoral nihilism that simply renders theodicy irrelevant. Absent the metaphysical privileging of being over non-being, or the need to reconcile the horrors of life with the perfection of the Creator, the problem of evil dissipates meaninglessly. What remains is simply the brute fact of manifold, futile human suffering met with weary quizzicalness and uneasy acquiescence. 'Lucidity', as Cioran observes, 'is the only vice which makes us free—free *in a desert*' of demiurgic design (TBB, 12).

**4/ Conclusion—Miserabilism and Faith's Proper Disease in the World**

What, if anything, might Christian theology learn from Cioran's dark ruminations? We might take our encounter with this extraordinary body of work not as a source of our theological reflection, but as an occasion—indeed a provocation—to pursue renewed theological

responsibility for the substance and implicates of the Christian gospel. Much might be said; let me venture only two brief remarks.

First, an open encounter with Cioran can serve as an occasion to recollect just how *unnatural* is the Christian doctrine of creation, and how difficult it is and should be to win and uphold its core tenets. An encounter with Cioran reminds the theologian that the goodness of creation is affirmed as a matter of faith, and not sight, i.e., that it is something confessed in the teeth of an unvarnished experience of life in this world. If we allow Cioran to unsettle our complacency a little we might discover again just how difficult and properly counter-intuitive is Christian faith in the good Creator and the goodness of creation. Set against the demiurgic actuality of so much of our lived experience—Cioran's preoccupying theme—the doctrine of creation represents no easy and uncontested 'theistic forecourt' to Christian belief and can and should afford little by way of ready apologetic traction. That the doctrine of the creation has its proper mainsprings in the reflexivity of salvation faith can, again, be recollected from here. For those honestly awake to the horrors of the world, any tranquil assertion of its goodness, and of its origin in and from the goodness of God, is difficult at best, and laughable at worst. Tertullian, Cioran reminds us, considered Gnosticism to be the natural default spiritual condition of humanity (NG, 24), a creation-repudiating posture readily fuelled by the sufferings, indignities and diminishments of everyday life. Perhaps a meeting with Cioran can serve to make the theologian's own faith in creation strange, even 'properly' unbelievable, once again, for the sake of rediscovering its true force and form and consequences anew. Closely related lessons are perhaps also to won here concerning the crucial service of a robust doctrine of sin to making Christian—indeed, human—experience of present world if not fully intelligible or meaningful, then recognizable in its unintelligibility and seeming meaninglessness.

Related, and second, time spent in the company of one of Europe's great modern *miserablistes* might also serve to reacquaint theologians with that dualism which is ingredient in the gospel. Notable aspects of modern faith and theology might be thought to be remote from faith's proper discomfiture with and struggle against the world 'that is passing away' and its household gods. There is in Cioran a sustained refusal of the putative intellectual and spiritual virtues of moderation—whether Aristotelian, bourgeois, or both—in favour of an over-wakeful recognition of the paradoxical truth that human existence is for us at once a horror and a wonder, that things are simultaneously much worse than we typically allow ourselves to admit, and also much better. Cioran concentrates almost upon the first half-this paradox, to be sure.

Yet just so, he invites fresh theological reflection upon the way in which the gospel itself dialectically renders the reality of our lives as ones graciously suspended over an abyss in hopeful despair. In other words, Cioran's testimony might help to shake us loose from our easy acquiescence with the official optimisms of our age. It might also serve as a valuable occasion to discern and to repent of theology's inapt and faithless ease with the world in as much as it bespeaks a deep forgetfulness of that eschatological *un*ease integral to any faith that clings to the future of the Crucified and Coming One.

In short, there is perhaps a lesson here concerning just how difficult genuine faith and hope are and must be. When Cioran confesses that, 'each time the future seems conceivable to me, I have the impression of being visited by Grace', he testifies powerfully to the near impossibility and adventitious reality of hope, something our over-comfortable Christian faith would do well not to forget.

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