

LITERATURE AND LITERARY CRITICISM ACCORDING TO AN “INCOMPLETE DISBELIEVER”, EMIL CIORAN

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ABSTRACT. *Literature and Literary Criticism according to an “Incomplete Disbeliever”, Emil Cioran.* The present study analyses the views of Cioran, as an “incomplete believer” upon literature and literary criticism, as he defines himself. Despite his pretended reticence about these cultural fields, the philosopher, often considered a writer, both in Romania and in France, is a passionate literature reader, as well as the author of lyrical, highly expressive essays, convinced of the ontological value of literature and arts.

Keywords: *Cioran, literature, literary criticism, lyricism, novel, philosophy, disbelief.*

REZUMAT. *Literatura și critica literară în viziunea unui „sceptic incomplet”, Emil Cioran.* Studiul de față analizează viziunea lui Cioran, ca „sceptic incomplet”, așa cum se autodefinește el, asupra literaturii și a criticii literare. În pofida reticenței declarate față de aceste domenii culturale, filosoful, adesea considerat, atât în România, cât și în Franța, un scriitor, este un cititor pasionat de literatură și autorul unor eseuri lirice de o expresivitate remarcabilă, încredințat de valoarea ontologică a literaturii și a artei.

Cuvinte cheie: *Emil Cioran, literatură, critică literară, lirism, roman, filosofie, scepticism.*

In Emil Cioran’s view, literature and literary criticism hold a paradoxical privileged place. If, according to Mircea Eliade, Constantin Noica or Lucian Blaga, creation is a response to the “terror” of history, to the “tragic” human condition, as well as a possible way to overcome determinism, Cioran mainly positions himself against action of any kind. His insistent urge is towards non-manifestation and non-expression, both standing for an overall world denial. “On the edges of

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despair”, the young philosopher considers the human condition a tragedy, existence – meaningless, time – the greatest enemy of mankind, becoming – an unacceptable notion, history, culture and knowledge – real dramas. Man would thus be a mere unhappy animal, abandoned to death. Everything is called into question except vital, organic truths, springing from personal experience. And such truths are always supposed to be beyond verbal expression, in the disbeliever’s opinion.

Nevertheless, Cioran appears to be passionate about words, writing and reading at the high temperatures imposed by his restless spirit, ardently devoted to truth, even if only through this kind of seductive negations. According to his own repeatedly disclosed confessions, he writes just to avoid suicide and to endure life more easily. He describes himself as “an incomplete disbeliever” and as “an elegiac complainer over the end of the world”².

In his philosophy, which is rather an anti-philosophy, an appeal to vivid experience against conceptual thought, the initially discredited literature still gradually gains positive values. Moreover, Cioran’s non-systematic thought, predicated on negation, contradiction and paradox, is expressed in a remarkably lyrical style, noticed by most of his critics.

The philosopher of “the end of the world” constantly stands against being portrayed as a writer or as a man of letters, denying, in fact, any possible submission to specific directions or trends. In a dialogue with François Bondy, for instance, he claims to hate writing and to have written rather less³. On another occasion, he confesses his disbelief in literature and pretends to have kept apart both from literature and from philosophy in his books⁴. “No, I have neither talent, nor style”⁵, he complains in his diary, adding that, in his opinion, writers stand for the most abhorrent species⁶.

However, critics seem to share quite different opinions in this respect, from the very beginning. Commenting on his first book, entitled *On the Edges of Despair* (*Pe culmile disperării*), G. Călinescu speaks about some “vaporous philosophical essays”⁷, while Șerban Cioculescu identifies an “essentially lyrical, confessional, aggressive” author⁸. This critical portrait remains mainly the same

² Cioran, *Caiete III 1967-1972*. Translated from French by Emanoil Marcu and Vlad Russo, București, Humanitas, 2000, p. 260; p. 17.

³ *Convorbiri cu Cioran*, București, Humanitas, 1993, p. 9.

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 134.

⁵ Cioran, *Caiete II 1966-1968*. Translated from French by Emanoil Marcu and Vlad Russo, București, Humanitas, 1999, p. 15.

⁶ Id., *Caiete III 1967-1972*, ed. cit., p. 95.

⁷ G. Călinescu, *Istoria literaturii române de la origini până în prezent*. Edited and forwarded by Al. Piru, București, Minerva, 1982, p. 955.

⁸ Șerban Cioculescu, „Operele premiate ale scriitorilor tineri needitați”, in vol. *Pro și contra Emil Cioran. Între idolatrie și pamflet*. Anthology, forward and notes by Marin Diaconu, București, Humanitas, 1998, p. 34.

even after his next books, reviewed rather by literary critics than by philosophers, both in Romania and in France. Quite relevant is Eugen Simion's remark, namely that Cioran writes literature, although he theoretically despises it, aiming at a possible aesthetic restoration of the unaesthetic in existence, in the tradition of symbolism and of Baudelaire. "What we nowadays enjoy in Cioran's writing is precisely the literature within his philosophical discourse", concludes the critic⁹. Yet, this situation is less surprising than it seems to be, considering that the famous cultural generation directed by Nae Ionescu Cioran belongs to shows much interest in the relationship between philosophy and arts, opposing to the old generation influenced by Titu Maiorescu, as Ion Ianoși states¹⁰. The thinker's disbelief in literature is not singular either, considering Eugène Ionesco's injurious remarks, as well as Constantin Noica's or young Mircea Eliade's incriminating opinions in this respect. Cioran's personal mark in this problem resides in a fastidious disapproval, as pure in intentions, as impure in its inner substance. Over and above, he considers himself an incomplete disbeliever, privately confessing to his friend, Sanda Stolojan, that one should not be impressed by words, and that a passionate negation actually represents an affirmation, since ultimately everything is affirmation¹¹. Made by a prophet of the end of the world, such an observation sounds rather astounding. Thence, Cioran, the non-philosopher and the non-writer, is certainly aware of the deficiencies of his non-system, reflecting an assumed constitutive duality.

"I am not a writer, he claims in his diary, because I don't like writing. I am not seeking the 'truth', but the reality, as sought by a hermit – who has abandoned everything for it. I want to know what is real and why we cannot possess it¹².

In *The Syllogisms of Bitterness (Silogismele amărăciunii)*, Cioran seems to share Nietzsche's opinion on philology, stating that "it is hard to imagine a more deceiving universe than the literary one and a more untruthful individual than the man of letters¹³, while in a letter published in the book entitled *The Temptation to Exist (Ispita de a exista)*, he prosecutes literature in a rather literary way: "Getting inside the literary inferno, you will experience deceit and venom; disconnected from reality, turned into a parody of your own person, you will no longer be able to live anything but formal, indirect experiences; you will be devoured by words /.../. As for the men of letters, they will prove to be useless. However, you will become aware of all this just too late, long after having wasted your best years of life in a superficial, unsubstantial world. The man of letters? A big-mouthed,

⁹ Eugen Simion, *O mitologie a nedesăvârșirilor*, București, Tracus Arte, 2014, p. 299.

¹⁰ Ion Ianoși, *O istorie a filosofiei românești în relația ei cu literatura*, Cluj-Napoca, Apostrof, 1996, p. 177.

¹¹ Cioran, *Caiete III 1967-1972*, ed. cit., p. 149.

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 59.

¹³ Cioran, *Silogismele amărăciunii*. Translated from French by Nicolae Bârna, București, Humanitas, 2002, p. 15.

selling his miseries for almost nothing, exposing and endlessly repeating them; impudence – display of secret thoughts – is his precept in life; he is a prostitute”¹⁴. Moreover, the thinker endorses the relation of literature to the originary sin, to further predict a non-literary era, already manifesting itself through the “corruption” of literary genres, proper to the eclecticism of contemporary culture. Although the presumed future death of literature, as a concern for nothingness, satisfies the philosopher’s general distaste, he surprisingly mentions in another text, prophetically called “Beyond the Novel”, that the absence of literature would turn us into mere robots¹⁵.

The so-called decadence of contemporary culture is supposed to be primarily revealed by the dissolution of the novel, as a hybrid, impure literary genre, animated by vulgarity and arrivisme, dealing with a second hand humankind, advocating the art of low talking and of peeping in, as a substitute of old metaphysics. Reversely, Cioran longs for the profoundness of the “Ungrund” sought by the mystics, yet conceding that the contemporary novel, void of substance, characters, conflict and causality as it is, attempts to venture up to the roots of the Unrevealed. The alleged decline of contemporary culture and art may thus stand for a possible regeneration, since “any end encloses a promise and liberates the horizon”¹⁶. According to this interpretation, the writer’s hope for the end of the novel entailed by current syncretism is a call for realness as opposed to fiction, in a general meaning.

As to his literary tastes, Cioran paradoxically lingers on his contradictory opinions, as he confesses, for instance, not being able to read a novel up to the end, although the most fascinating – if not even greatest – books he had ever read happened to be novels. In his diary he expresses, more or less ironically, his regret for not having been a novelist¹⁷, despite his distrust in literature.

Among all the literary species, the essay seems to hold a privileged place in his view, despite the usual contradictions. Letters and diaries are considered to be less fictitious than other narratives, he maintains, but, on the other hand, “to keep a diary means to get a fishwife’s habits, to notice any kind of irrelevant things, to insist upon them, and, furthermore, to place too much importance to what happens to one, neglecting instead the essential, to become a writer in the worst meaning of the word”¹⁸. Two years later, reflecting on his own confessional writing habits, Cioran decides to never give them up, since this very so-called “trivialness” might reveal the essential. Therefore, the diarist, as well as the

¹⁴ Idem, “Scrisoare despre câteva impasuri”, in vol. *Ispita de a exista*. Translated from French by Emanoil Marcu, București, Humanitas, 2016, p. 89.

¹⁵ Idem, “Dincolo de roman”, in vol. *Ispita de a exista*, ed. cit., p. 135.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 133.

¹⁷ Cioran, *Caiete II 1966-1968*, ed. cit., p. 46.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 399.

novelist, would fail into nothingness, though nothingness itself leads to substance, while the essayist, as a prisoner to a tricky literary genre requiring constant contradiction¹⁹, is still the most reliable writer of all.

As a repudiator of literature who still does approach literature, if only by means of confession, or as a philosopher who subscribes, in the footsteps of Kierkegaard, to a modern way of expression such as the fragment, Cioran proves to be not just an incomplete disbeliever, but even a paradoxical assertive pessimist. His apocalypses fail to be ultimate, always shattered by redemptive glimpses of hope. Besides, his lyrical, passionate style is often not consistent with his prophetically proclaimed negativism.

Surprisingly, the prosecutor of literature is a constant reader of poetry, and especially of the Romantic poets, sharing their belief in the power of aesthetic emotion to reveal completeness. Many of his remarks on poetry are void of any mark of nihilism: "As long as one keeps close to poetry, he states, he is not exposed to inner emptiness/.../. As in the case of music, one comes close to an essential, overwhelming thing: some kind of a gift, of a supernatural complicity with the Astounding. Time is moved away and one is expelled out of becoming. Music and poetry, two sublime aberrations"²⁰. Like Berdiaev, Cioran considers poetry a way of universal redemption, and poets – superior to saints. Although he praises non-expression and non-action, one of his "admiration sketches", dedicated to Saint-John Perse, holds language as a possible substitute of the universe itself, in case of extinction²¹.

Beyond the bitter disbeliever fighting against modern culture and civilization, there is also a romantic believer, fascinated by the compensatory world of poetry, and dreaming of a possible lyrical redemption. The former intends to avoid the "perils" of poetry, not to give in the seduction of lyricism, while the latter eventually comes to regret having abandoned lyricism for the elegant expression that made him famous in France. Statements like the following should be read with mistrust, as the brilliant stylist disapproves of intimate confession in general: "My ideal of writing: to put to silence once and for all the poet hidden inside; to get rid of the last residuals of lyricism; – to resist one's inner core; to forsake one's inspirations, to trample on one's elations – and even one's dissatisfactions"²². Despite these intentions revealing both ludic bitterness and nostalgic nonconformism, the essayist does not abandon either his lyrical personal style or his literary preferences, the same way as the

¹⁹ Cioran, *Mărturisiri și anateme*. Translated by Emanoil Marcu, București, Humanitas, 1997, pp. 136-137.

²⁰ *Convorbiri cu Cioran*, ed. cit., p. 209.

²¹ Cioran, "Saint-John Perse", in *Exerciții de admirație. Eseuri și portrete*. Translated by Emanoil Marcu, București, Humanitas, 1993, p. 112.

²² Idem, *Caiete I 1957-1965*. Foreworded by Simone Boué, translated from French by Emanoil Marcu and Vlad Russo, București, Humanitas, 1999, p. 10.

agnostic's interest in the mystics remains vivid against all negations. He never turns against his "inner core", writing only by the impulse of inspiration, always consumed by the most intimate elations or idiosyncrasies. Even in non-lyrical moods, he keeps reading at least one poem a day, unaware of the consequences of his own distinction between truth, on the one hand, and reality, on the other, or between the "unessential" specific to literature and the essential pursued by the mystics. Therefore, the "inferno" of literature appears to be one of his constant greatest delights.

Among Cioran's favourite authors are Dostoyevsky, read about five or six times, Shakespeare, the English poets, Baudelaire, Pascal, Dante, Swift, Proust, Eminescu and Blaga. Confessional literature, letters, memoirs and biographies, expressing the "accidental", that is the "real", also provide an enjoyable reading. On the other side, he dislikes contemporary literature, especially French literature, represented by Sartre, Camus, Gide and even Paul Valéry, as well as the modern poetical trends, such as Hermeticism or Avant-garde. French literature is supposed to have become a mere expression of language itself, while criticism, be it literary, artistic or philosophical, reflects a concern for the method instead of a free, personal reflection.

Criticism itself is wholly disapproved both by young Cioran and by the author of the *Treatise of Decomposition (Tratat de descompunere)*: "Among all reflections, the most useless ones are those on literature. Criticism is the most futile activity possible; one should better be a grocer than write about others"²³. Critics would thus be nothing else but scandalous parasites, hanging out at the periphery of literature.

Nevertheless, despite his conviction that nobody should write about anybody, Cioran embraces criticism himself, even only for financial reasons, as he confesses. Hence, he is the author of an unaccepted preface to Paul Valéry's eighth volume of *Works*, where the French poet is described as a sheer "sentence-maker", a "costive, subtle and fussy spirit"²⁴. Similarly, reflecting on *The Death of Ivan Ilici*, he identifies Tolstoy's supposedly dubious anxious, tormented spirit, his self-hatred and world horror, as well as the incongruence between his life and his beliefs²⁵. All these – in a fluid, highly expressive, almost fictional style, quite surprising for a language and literature disbeliever. The nihilist is obviously a very original and passionate critic, fully aware of the limits of his objectivity: "I am writing a text about Tolstoy's fear of death, he confesses, and, as I usually do, I think more of myself than of the author I have to speak about"²⁶.

²³ Idem, *Caiete II 1966-1968*, ed. cit., p. 216.

²⁴ *Ibidem*, pp. 280-284.

²⁵ Cioran, „Cea mai veche dintre spaime”, in vol. *Căderea în timp*. Translated by Irina Mavrodin, București, Humanitas, 1994, pp. 123-139.

²⁶ Idem, *Caiete I 1957-1965*, ed. cit., p. 199.

Both his approvals and disapprovals seem to be speculative, quite risky adventures, whereas admiration comes close to hyperbola, and distaste – to the pamphlet. However, the texts in the volume entitled *Exercices d'admiration* are elegant, lyrical essays, written in an expressive, almost poetical style. Here are, for example, some reflections on the verses of Saint-John Perse: "Literate and virgin, deliberate and originary lyricism, emerged from an insight of saps, from an erudite inebriety of elements, a Pre-Socratic and anti-biblical inebriety that assimilates to the sacred everything bearing a name, and thus being able to be redeemed by language – this real redeemer"²⁷. Neither the "inferno" of literature, nor the "misery" of criticism are visible in these reflections that seem to be written rather by an enthusiastic Impressionist than by a simple scribe endowed with no literary gift, as he describes himself. While the diarist thinks of literary analysis as an obstacle to spiritual evolution, the occasional critic idealistically dreams of the redemptive power of language. Constantin Noica justly notices Cioran's extraordinary understanding of the artistic and cultural phenomenon in which he actually invested everything, despite his professed nihilism. "I know nobody else's means being in such a discordance with ends", exclaims the philosopher²⁸.

Therefore, literature is not at all repugnant to Cioran, despite his pretended contempt, while literary criticism looks distasteful to him only in its postmodern forms. As a deceived enthusiast or as an elegiac disbeliever, the essayist disapproves with the so-called "scientific", methodological criticism, "hybridized" by the intrusion of other cultural fields, instead of promoting genuine literary reflection: "What is nowadays named the innovation of criticism, he asserts, means adopting an exterior language, unspecific to literature. Not to speak as writers, but as philosophers, sociologists and all the others. The whole actual criticism is carried on either on behalf of Marx, Freud or Heidegger or on that of some new discipline using a new terminology"²⁹. Moreover, he appreciates impressionistic criticism, based on spontaneous, emotional reading, as an experience of self-knowledge rather than as an arid scientific approach.

Many of Cioran's considerations on literature reveal both his assumed incomplete disbelieving and what Eugen Simion calls "a messianic mythology" predicated upon "the essential paradox of *Cioranism*", namely "the contradiction between the radically nihilistic view on modern world" and "the project of an active man, willing to change and redeem the world after having striven to blow it up"³⁰. The philosopher of the end of the world does confess that his writings attempt to

²⁷ Idem, „Saint-John Perse”, in vol. *Exerciții de admirație. Eseuri și portrete*, ed. cit., p. 106.

²⁸ Constantin Noica, „Gânduri despre Emil Cioran”, in vol. *Pro și contra Emil Cioran. Între idolatrie și pamflet*, ed. cit., p. 293.

²⁹ Cioran, *Caiete II 1966-1968*, ed. cit., pp. 212-213.

³⁰ Eugen Simion, *op. cit.*, p. 56.

bring awakening, since the simple act of writing means transcending relativity, temporality and, ultimately, death. The essays and portraits in the book entitled *Exercices d'admiration* abound in literary creeds postulating the superiority of arts upon all the other fields of knowledge, in a quite lyrical, assertive manner. Hence, in a "Brief Confession" at the end of the book, Cioran claims that writing means "competing and even surpassing God, by the mere power of language"³¹.

To conclude, the apocalyptic philosopher pretends to have got lost in the universe of Letters only to prevent suicide or murder, deeply convinced that real life resides beyond words. The "superficial" and "delusive" world of literature, opposite to both reality and spiritual life, suggests the very inferno, as a direct consequence of the originary sin. Thus, the novel is supposed to be an "inept" literary species, yet pointing to the profoundness of the "Ungrund", as revealed in its latest forms of expression. Similarly, confessional literature implies the habits of a "fishwife", despite the fact that this very kind of "trifleness" put down daily might accede to completeness. In turn, poetry is considered a miscellany of trickery and ecstasy, and still an opposite to emptiness, relativity and becoming, invested with a superior ontological status. Literature itself is at the same time misleading and aiming at transcendence. Entering the "inferno of literature", Cioran certainly proves to be both an incomplete disbeliever and a messianic idealist, persuaded that a passionate negation represents an affirmation.

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³¹ Cioran, „Scurtă confesiune”, in vol. *Exerciții de admirație. Eseuri și portrete*, ed. cit., pp. 195-197.