

## BETWEEN NIHILISM AND ANARCHISM (A PHILOSOPHICAL POEM BY GHERASIM LUCA)

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**ABSTRACT.** In this paper we provide a new solution to the nihilist dilemma of non-being's precedence over being. Starting from proponents of nihilism like Arthur Schopenhauer, Friedrich Nietzsche and Emil Cioran, we move to the anti-systemic "war machine" of Romanian-French poet Gherasim Luca, who, inspired by anarchistic theoreticians and Symbolist poets, asserted that only direct and concrete action could harass and sabotage the hegemonic power. His poem, *Tragedies Which Are Meant To Happen* is not only an important text of Romanian surrealist poetry, but also a page of the modern history of anarchistic philosophy.

**Keywords:** *anarchism, nihilism, surrealism, systemic anomaly, transgression, philosophy of poetry.*

*„Gherasim Luca est un grand poète  
parmi les plus grands : il a inventé  
un prodigieux bégaïement, le sien.”  
(Gilles Deleuze)*

### SCHOPENHAUER, NIETZSCHE AND CIORAN ABOUT THE 'NIHILIST DILEMA'

The preliminary point of our study can be named, after Milan Kundera, *the unbearable pain of existence*:

An ancient legend recounts how King Midas hunted long in the forest for the wise Silenus, companion of Dionysos, but failed to catch him. When Silenus has finally fallen into his hands, the King asks what is the best and most excellent thing for human beings. Stiff and unmoving, the daemon remains silent until, forced by the King to speak, he finally breaks out in shrill laughter and says: 'Wretched, ephemeral race, children of chance and tribulation, why do you force me to tell you the very thing which it would be most profitable for you not to hear? The very best thing is utterly beyond your reach not to have been born, not to be, to be nothing. However, the second best thing for you is: to die soon.'<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy And Other Writings*, ed. Raymond Geuss and Ronald Speirs, trans. by Ronald Speirs, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2007, pp. 22-23.

This fragment from *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872) summarizes the functioning principle of nihilism. If life equals pain, the anesthesia of death has a positive value. The first aspect of the "very best thing" is "not to have been born", which is equivalent to never having entered the pre-being uterus. The second is "not to be": this is the synthetic expression of not-being. To place "not to be" above "to be" is to forever blame the values of life. If this had been the case, Hamlet's existential monologue would never have taken place. Moreover, from the perspective of "not to be" [*nicht zu sein*], birth is the only Schopenhauerian "crime" and death the sole salvation. "Not to be" generates Gnostic imperatives and Cioranian commandments: not to generate, not to create under all circumstances (if "to live is to die", then to give birth is to sentence to sufferance and cruel torment.) The third aspect is "to be nothing" (from *nicht zu sein* to *nichts zu sein* or from not-being to nothingness). One could argue that the *being of nothing* is, before establishing itself as an ontological statement, a theological revelation. It probably sends us to the beginning of the *Genesis* ("And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep", Gen 1:2), which clearly shows that the eons *before* the Big Bang have a nihilistic sacramental value.

However, the "second best thing" is "to die soon" [*bald zu sterben*]. From a nihilist perspective, death is salutary if it comes right away, because existence has its charms (called by the Indians *Maya*), which can lure one and transform him into a servant. Moreover, the *adiaphoria* (the Stoic and Nietzschean word for indifference) of non-existence is to be preferred from a – so called – rationalist reasoning: because as long as one is alive, he is forced to endure – almost ceaseless – pain. Let us pay attention: Silenus tells us that it is most unprofitable for us *to know* the cursed essence of existence. Cioran adhered to the severe proclamation of the "consciousness as doom" [*Bewusstsein als Verhängnis*], the Bible also asserted that "ignorance is a bliss": "For in much wisdom is much grief: and he that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow" (Ecc. 1, 18). Once we become aware that pain is the root of living, anxiety will poison our joy. Consciousness is a malady but had we chosen to stay on the path of ignorance, we would have been incarcerated till today in Eden, where we were prisoners of "natural necessity" (Hegel): we would have remained forever beasts.

Starting from the precedence of nonbeing over being, from the *unbearable pain of existence*, one can imagine at least three attitudes. The first one is represented by Schopenhauer and Cioran, who deny life and emphasize renunciation, the "burning" of the will, the eternal sleep of Nirvana. The second attitude belongs to the late Nietzsche (1880-1889), who transgresses the nihilist revelation from *The Birth Of Tragedy*: "Life is a nightmare I won't fear! It is also a beautiful dream, let's keep on dreaming!" With all its arbitrary, with all its contingency, with all the *misery*, we have to pass the test of eternal return, we have to live this life as we were doomed to repeat it for infinity.

Have you ever said Yes to a single joy? O my friends, then you said Yes too to *all* woe. All things are entangled, ensnared, enamored; if ever you wanted one thing twice, if every you said, 'You please me, happiness! Abide, moment' then you wanted *all* back. All anew, all eternally, all entangled, ensnared, enamored – oh, then you *loved* the world. Eternal ones, love it eternally and evermore; and to woe too, you say: go, but return! *For all joy wants eternity.*<sup>2</sup>

From the *no* declared to existence ("the very best thing is ... not to be") we move on to an *yes* uttered precisely to *the unbearable pain of existence*, we are transported from passive nihilism to anti-nihilism. Nietzsche suggests that only an overman (a metaphor for the human being in the pursuit of excellence) can accept a living seemingly synonymous with sufferance. How should we understand this Nietzschean idea from an existential point of view? How do we absorb it in our lives? The nihilist dilemma is practically a conflict between Schopenhauer and Nietzsche: if Schopenhauer chose non-existence over existence, Nietzsche argues that life, despite all its emptiness, meaninglessness and disorder, despite its *identity with pain*, is more valuable than death. Nietzsche's argument goes beyond common sense and logic, an argument fit for the overman, who is the "being of overcoming".

### FROM NIHILISM TO ANARCHISM

One can see that there can be another way, a third attitude, a third solution of the nihilist aporia, of the intuition of the nightmarish character of life. It is the way of Lautréamont, Max Stirner, Bakunin and the Romanian-French poet Gherasim Luca. Lautréamont observed:

Let my war against man go on for eternity, since each recognizes his own degradation in the other ... since we are both mortal enemies. Whether I am destined to win a disastrous victory or to succumb, the struggle will be good: I alone against mankind.<sup>3</sup>

To fight against mankind is to fight against God: we remember the ethics of the samurai who *fights a losing battle*<sup>4</sup> against an immensely powerful enemy. Existence is a *losing battle*, because it is synonymous with disintegration („life is a process of breaking down”<sup>5</sup>), decay and humiliation and because it ends in total and

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<sup>2</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, in *The Portable Nietzsche*, trans. Walter Kaufmann, Viking Press, New York, 1982, p. 435.

<sup>3</sup> Comte de Lautréamont, *Maldoror and Poems*, trans. by Paul Knight, Penguin Books, London, 1978, 4, 1, Kindle edition.

<sup>4</sup> Robert Wicks, *Modern French Philosophy. From Existentialism to Postmodernism*, Oneworld, Oxford, 2003, pp. 65-78.

<sup>5</sup> F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Crack-Up*, ed. Edmund Wilson, New Directions, New York, 2009, p. 69.

absolute obliteration. Nevertheless, Lautréamont teaches us that we must fight even if humanity and/or divinity is against us. We observe that the *third path*, which moves on from nihilism to anarchism, asserts that the solution to the aporia of nonexistence is *not* the Buddhist-Schopenhauerian renunciation, nor the superhuman Nietzschean transgression (which applies only individually and heroically). The solution might be the war declaration, the creation of the war machine, the making of the systemic anomaly capable of displacing and sabotaging the hegemonic power.

A declaration which brilliantly synthesizes the philosophy of systemic anomaly that harasses the hegemonic power is the call to arms against all the masters:

It would be foolish to assert that there is no power above mine. Only the attitude that I take toward it will be quite another than that of the religious age: I shall be the *enemy* of every higher power, while religion teaches us to make it our friend and be humble toward it.<sup>6</sup>

If Christianity and common sense pleaded for surrender when outnumbered, if all the philosophers bending before the almighty system preached in fact submission, Lautréamont and Luca would launch a counter-attack against hegemonic repression. The anarchist position claims that the one who refuses to fight is a lowly creature who does not deserve salvation: "Remember! There is no more empty nor detestable creature in nature than the man who runs away from his demon."<sup>7</sup>

If the principle of anarchism asserted the call to arms against a superior opponent (or the creation of a war machine that must harass the hegemonic power), the most intimate essence of anarchism is provided by the message of a *creative destruction*: "Let us ... trust the eternal Spirit which destroys and annihilates only because it is the unfathomable and eternal source of all life. The passion for destruction is a creative passion, too!"<sup>8</sup> We could probably say that through anarchism nihilism becomes *pre-anti-nihilism*, nihilism becoming a propaedeutics for its own destruction. In this line of argument, destruction is the *creation before creation*. To quote Nietzsche, "only as creators can we destroy!"<sup>9</sup> The third way, the third solution to the nihilist impasse, is, therefore, a fight against mankind, more exactly a fight against our own humanity (Lautréamont), a fight against the Master (Stirner) and a pleading for creative destruction (Bakunin).

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<sup>6</sup> Max Stirner, *The Ego and Its Own*, ed. David Leopold, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2000, p. 165.

<sup>7</sup> *The Heart of Darkness* (1993), directed by Nicolas Roeg, script by Benedict Fitzgerald, after a novel by Joseph Conrad.

<sup>8</sup> Sam Dolgoff (Ed.), *Bakunin on Anarchy*, Vintage Books, New York, 1971, p. 57.

<sup>9</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, ed. Bernard Williams, trans. Josefine Nauckhoff and Adrain del Caro, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2001, p. 70.

### GHERASIM LUCA'S ANARCHISTIC MANIFESTO

This triple tendency is found in Gherasim Luca's poetical manifesto, *Tragedii cari vor trebui să se întâmple* [*Tragedies Which Are Meant To Happen*], published in 1933. The poem is constructed on the foremost Romantic – and then Symbolist – antithesis between I and the others, which precludes the staging of an "appetite for destruction".

my fingers shivering like poplars, short as bullets/ squeezed firmly the woman's white neck/ like ancient poets were squeezing in their custom love fits for nature/ flowers – sheep – field and stars/ the poets from today, the poets with fingers shivering like poplars and short as/ bullets/ have each at home a woman's white neck which must be strangled/.<sup>10</sup>

The atmosphere of this poem reminds us of Rimbaud's declaration "I took arms against justice"<sup>11</sup> [*Je me suis armé contre la justice*] from the beginning of *A Season in Hell*. Luca's war machine invests in "fingers ... short like/ *bullets*" and in "pockets ... containing *stones* of all sizes" (italics ours). The ancient poets wrote about "flowers, sheep, field and stars", executing a sort of "pastoral masturbation" – the libido of the Surreal poetry moved, however, in the territory of strangulation. Crime (as a metaphor for separation, as declaration of independence) is the origin of modern poetry: it is a "crime", for instance, to separate from one's parents as a teenager, just the same as the contempt of Romantic love, the "hurting of Beauty" (Rimbaud), and "the strangulation of the woman's white neck" are all "crimes".

We must ask: why is the modern poet a criminal? Why "flowers, sheep, field and stars" are neither necessary nor sufficient anymore? Why does he take arms and strangles with "shivering" and "bullet-like" fingers? Maybe because the separation of the assassin, who breaks from the pattern of likeness, creates a sort of post-human individual, who can no longer find satisfaction in the existing culture and civilization, in the "narrow" concept of "humanity" (if overman were a post-human, man would be many times sub-human) and, therefore, invents another *path*, transgressive and anarchic, beyond the opiate of passive nihilism or the ecstasy of anti-nihilism, a path dedicated to the war against man and his creator and directed towards the mystic and aesthetics of destruction.

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<sup>10</sup> Gherasim Luca, *Inventatorul iubirii și alte scrieri* [*The Inventor of Love and Other Writings*], ed. Ion Pop, Dacia, Cluj-Napoca, 2003, pp. 90-91 (translation mine).

<sup>11</sup> Arthur Rimbaud, *Rimbaud Complete*, ed. and trans. Wyatt Mason, Modern Library, New York, 2003, p. 195.

The assuming of the poet's criminality brings along a feeling of power and the awareness of freedom: "I am free", "Now that we are free ..." A new contrast is built between "us", "the poets from today" and the others, the ordinary people, who will always choose – to remind a dilemma presented by Dostoyevsky – happiness instead of freedom.

At the same time other men began walking on the great boulevards of the city/ they have white fingers, fat like pieces of bacon, they keep the fingers in their pockets/ stuffed with the last picture of the girlfriend and a snotty handkerchief.

Luca's attack against the others, the representatives of mediocrity, conformism and – one could infer – consumerism, has three stages:

a) Their spirit is flabby and greasy ("fingers, fat like pieces of bacon"), while the spirit of the modern poets is straight and vertical; the others are serial products who rather express sub-humanity, they are "dead souls" living in incubator of self-unawareness;

b) If the poets from today are criminals and assassins, if they have strangled sentimentality and romantic love, the others are prisoners and servants of Eros ("their pockets/ stuffed with the last picture of the girlfriend");

c) Next to the picture of the beloved one, we have the "snotty handkerchief," which has one or two meanings: love is a "duel of salivas", "milking" its "absolute from the misery of the glands"<sup>12</sup>. Moreover, "the snotty handkerchief" becomes the coat of arms of the dehumanized others.

From a psychoanalytical perspective, this monstrous presentation of the alterity, having "fingers like pieces of bacon" and being replaced by "a snotty handkerchief" symbolizes Luca's anxiety toward the others (that anxiety which is the root of all anger) and his compensating contempt. The others could be a projection of the inferior side of the poet's personality, a projection of his shadow, which must be accepted and integrated in order for the writer to evolve. A similar manifestation is to be found in Nietzsche who both fears and loathes the shadows [*umbræ*] of the overman: the last man, the dwarf and the ugliest man. Gherasim Luca's separation with his (near) Romantic and misanthropic traits shows how hard it is – almost impossible – to see yourself in the other.

The poets from today, the poets with fingers shivering like poplars and short as/ bullets/ the poets with pockets containing stones of all sizes/ must know that the single difficulty is the smashing of the first window of the great boulevards/ because all the other windows will smash by themselves/ just as it is enough to extinguish the first star and all the others will be themselves extinguished.

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<sup>12</sup> E.M. Cioran, *A Short History of Decay*, trans. Richard Howard, Arcade Books, New York, 1972, p. 36.

One might remember here Bakunin's plea for the creative destruction. The step from persona to individuation (or in Heidegger's terms, from they-self to authenticity) consists in the "smashing of the first window". The shop window, a metaphor for consumerism, capitalism, system and also for our own reflection – a double, a shadow – is an obstacle in the way of our liberation. (Self)creation deprived of (self)destruction is only a sham.

I want to apologize for the star comparison, poets,/ it's only a memory from another time/ ... the poets from today, the poets with fingers shivering like poplars and short as/ bullets/ may throw their stones at the star comparison/ it will probably be the first window smashed/ and all the other windows will smash by themselves./

To "smash" the window, to pierce the heart of the system, we must once and for all give up the "pastoral masturbation", the "old times/ when I was ecstatic about blooming trees and I used to faint at every sunrise." The first smashed window, the one which opens the path from impersonality to individuality, from bad faith to authenticity, from destruction to creation, is the "strangling" of the star comparison. Luca's poem starts with the assassination of sentimental love and finishes with the assassination of a certain pastoral and cosmological language, which – needless to say – coincides with the obliteration of a certain being mode, a distinct ontic dimension. The beloved one must die, the language must disappear, the man from today must be annihilated. What is left? Maybe only the "smile that surveys annihilated landscapes"<sup>13</sup>, the *Vorlust* of apocalypse experienced from Planet Melancholia<sup>14</sup>.

Gherasim Luca chooses the third solution to the nihilist clash between nonexistence and existence, the path that goes from nihilism to anarchism. If Schopenhauer, the young Nietzsche and Cioran were mesmerized by the passive nihilism of renunciation, by the "European Buddhism", the sleep of Nirvana, if the older Nietzsche chose the "creation beyond himself", which signifies the transgression of the over-man toward anti-nihilism, Luca – along the proponents of anarchism and surrealism – directs his poem to the more practical and concrete war against the hegemonic power and the corrupted human being, pleading for the purity, beauty and creativity of destruction.

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>14</sup> *Melancholia* (2011), directed and written by Lars von Trier.