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The Crisis of Modernity: Cioran – International Colloquium

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The latest International E.M. Cioran Colloquium, which takes place every two years in various cities around the world, was hosted on 24–25 October 2023 by the Complutense University in Madrid under the patronage of the Romanian Language Institute, The Romanian Cultural Institute and the Romanian Embassy in Spain. Forty international academics and Cioran experts from the US (Arizona State University), South America, Europe and Japan lectured and debated topics related to “The Crisis of Modernity” as reflected in some of Emil Cioran’s 40 books, translated into all major languages. I spoke with writer and Professor Felix Nicolau who teaches Romanian language and literature at Complutense University and who participated at the colloquium.

Felix Nicolau is a Romanian philologist, lecturer in Romanian culture at Complutense University of Madrid and professor at the Technical University of Construction of Bucharest, Department of Foreign Languages and Communication. He is a lecturer at the Romanian Language Institute in Bucharest and is affiliated to the Doctoral School of the University “1 Decembrie 1918” in Alba Iulia, Romania. He is editor of the *Swedish Journal of Romanian Studies* at the University of Lund, Sweden, where he taught for 4 years, editor of Madrid-based journal *Littera Nova*, and of Dublin-based journal *Itaca*.

He holds a PhD in Literary Studies from the University of Bucharest with a thesis on Romanticism in the creation of Mihai Eminescu. His books include *The Nuclear History of Culture. Hermeneutic Quanta; Ingen fara på taket/ Totul e sub control. Lär dig rumänska/ Învață limba română; You Are not Alone. Culture and Civilization, Morpheus: from Text to Images. Inter-semiotic Translation; Communication and creativity. Interpreting contemporary text; Take the Floor. Professional Communication Theoretically Contextualized; Cultural Communication: Approaches to Modernity and Postmodernity; The Inhuman Aesthetics. From Postmodernism to Facebook; Eminescu's Code; Anti-canonics; Homo imprudens*.

As a writer, Felix Nicolau is a member of the Romanian Writers' Union and contributes literary criticism and history to numerous literary magazines. He has published several books of poetry and two novels: *Kamceatka. Time Is Honey*, *At the Hands of Women, Tender and Cool*, *Bach, Manele and Kostel*, *The Conquest of Laughter*, *The Invention Fair*.

George Stanica (GS): The essay you presented was about climate, illness and mysticism or quasi-mysticism in some works by Cioran which was partially the topic of Christian Santacrose, one of Cioran’s translators and Paolo Borges of the University of Lisbon. What is your understanding of mysticism in Cioran?

Felix Nicolau (FN): In my opinion, Cioran is a good connoisseur of mystical writings and mystical concepts. This can be seen in many of his books, particularly in *Tears and Saints*. As a master of paradox, Cioran is also anti-mystical in the sense that he sees no hope in the transcendent, the ardor of prayer or asceticism simply irritates him, which makes him resemble a damned nineteenth century Romantic hero. However, it is an irritation born out of frustration; he wishes he could have been capable of such ardor, such devotion and self-denial. His theological conception being a Gnostic one at its core – the Demiurge is fundamentally evil – it follows that mystics are misguided overachievers. So Cioran is a mystic *à rebours*. I agree

with Patrice Bollon who considered him a dandy (Vălcan 2018: 13), in the profound sense, not the sartorial one. This also implies some kind of play-acting, i.e. Cioran in real life was not an uptight person, as the tone and drift of some of his works may suggest. Moreover, his exile and character condemned him to marginality and asymmetry (*Ibidem*: 14), and thus to a certain kind of freedom.

GS: What was the view expressed by Christian Santacroce on Cioran's mysticism?

FN: Santacroce translated Cioran's book *Tears and Saints* (1937) into Spanish, a zenith of youthful intensity (Vălcan 2018: 246), which was followed by a spiritual decline that Cioran then lamented all his life. At the same time, this book is his most lyrical, so the essayist's inverted mysticism is fuelled by lyricism. In his paper, Santacroce highlighted the religious background of Cioran's existentialism.

GS: Prof Mattia Luigi Pozzi of Italy spoke about the irrational side of the books written by Cioran as a reader of Hegel. That sounds quite intriguing as Hegel was a systematic philosopher of reason, exemplified by his "Phenomenology of Spirit."

FN: Indeed, Pozzi calls Cioran a heretic (Mattia Luigi Pozzi 2011: 5). In essence, Cioran takes advantage of the Hegelian triadic metaphysical system in which evil and non-existence are co-opted in contradiction to classical metaphysics based on dualist-axiological oppositions (Pozzi 2008: 212). Cioran also takes advantage of Nietzsche's contribution to this dismantling of the perfectly structured and almost mechanical idealism expounded by Hegel. Especially since it has been hypothesized that Cioran might be seen as the follower or even the emulator of the asystematic Nietzsche, which is only valid at the instrumental level. Nietzsche creatively uses contradiction as *dynamis*. Moreover, Cioran placed Bossuet, Hegel, Marx, apostles of logic and meaning, in the same paradigm. He says that this kind of pure-and-hard rationalism is providential-like in nature and thus makes the smooth transition from theology and metaphysics to historical materialism (*Exercises d'admiration*). Cioran's idiosyncrasy after the early quasi-Hegelian books, dreaming of the militarism of the Spirit on horseback, of hierarchy, of system and of academic and political rationalism, also feeds on Hegelian energetism and dynamism. Cioran's mature and old-age writings operate under the same demolishing but invigorating Hegelian antithesis; except that the optimistic classicist synthesis will never emerge in the thinker twinned with Pascal, Schopenhauer, Shestov, Rozanov and the morphic Pessoa, as José Thomaz Brun presumes (Vălcan 2018: 30)

GS: You spoke about the influence of climate on Cioran's life, Prof Monica Garoiu and Prof Ciprian Vălcan spoke about Cioran's love for Spain. Could you sum up your views and the other views expressed at this colloquium on Cioran's fascination with Spanish culture and climate?

FN: A lesser-known of Cioran's works is the *Talamanca Notebook* in which the thinker laments the declining quality of Spanish melancholy. He probably has in mind the galloping modernisation of this country. The contemporary Spaniard, although it may not be appropriate to generalise, seems to me neither melancholic nor mystical. Cioran wrote inspired by reading and wishful thinking. In Ibiza he behaves like a vampire: he only goes out at dusk, the sun makes him sick, and he comes back as white as when he left the house. And yet Spain and its representative culture fascinate him. He may have also slipped allusions into his travel accounts: necessarily he was supposed to appear different, disconnected, feigning disability, in

reality cultivating his aristocratic morbidity. So, it was Spanish culture that fascinated Cioran rather than the climate of the country; at least the climate of the middle and Southern areas. Of course, the Spanish-speaking lecturers were happy to point out Cioran's relationship with Spain (and Latin America). Santacroce recounted a trip he and Cioran had taken through Spain, a Spain that was still ancient, where to the essayist's mind everything seemed far away and long ago.

GS: Apathy, laziness and the nonsense allowing us to live in the world, topics debated by prof Lopezello and philosopher Carlos Javier Gonzales Serrano. How could we sum up their views on Cioran's Wallachian nothingness as presented by the two speakers?

FN: Lopezello was impressed by Cioran's style and seemed to admire Cioran's courage in dispelling the neutrality claims of academic philosophy. For Cioran, consciousness is the ultimate source of suffering, hence his interest in lucidity and death. These topics would bring Cioran closer to the Pre-Socratics. When confronting these unbearable evils, he uses the weapon of irony, the only one that could combat man's innate perversity. But what convinces Lopezello to study Cioran's work is its capacity to reflect a common, non-elitist reason, uniquely capable of revealing the monstrosity of history.

For Carlos Javier Gonzales Serrano, Cioran appears to manifest mystical-religious tendencies, but without metaphysical impetus. This would translate into a lack of philosophical system, which for a system philosopher can mean laziness. Cioran's pessimism has a metaphysical basis which is paradoxically centred on the everyday and on the Camus-like absurd. In Serrano's view, the submission to chance in Cioran's books appears to be converted into a radical humanism: suffering must be contained in order not to turn the world into a vale of tears; in fact, a stoic face of the thinker who lived detached from material affluence.

His "agony-method", i.e. the renunciation of any hope that would sustain the Sisyphean effort imagined by Camus, implies total scepticism. Here is a similarity and a difference to Hemingway, for whom the struggle must be waged even beyond the hope of success, although there are stories by Hemingway in which fatalism drives the protagonists to inaction and surrender. Cioran's agonistic method leads neither to inaction nor to false hopes, but to a sometimes sarcastic, sometimes detached reflection on history and the everyday.

GS: Prof Juan M Marin of Jaume I University in Spain spoke at this conference about the success and failure of Cioran's struggle with French and his attempt to become one of the great masters of the French Language. Is there any doubt that Emile Cioran achieved his aim?

FN: Not only did he succeed in French, but Ilinca Zarifopol-Johnston, translator of two of Cioran's books into English, says that she has identified the rewriting of important portions of his Romanian texts into French, so that she decrees that his entire French oeuvre is "a translation-cum-rewriting of his Romanian oeuvre". Thus, *Tears and Saints* was twice rewritten and then tacitly integrated into his first book published in France, *Précis de décomposition*. Her hypothesis is that Cioran resorted to self-translation and along with it, rewriting.

According to Cioran's account, after eight years of relocation to France, while translating Mallarmé into Romanian, he realized he had to start writing in French. This transfer to French meant a linguistic *askesis* or, as he declared, "putting on a straight jacket". So, the passionate

rationalist managed to happily combine the elegant rigidity of French with the brash flexibility of Romanian.

GS: Prof Alexandra Gruzinska of Arizona State University presented her reflections on Cioran's "*élan vers le pire*". Did she share Manuel Gregorio Gonzales's interpretation of Cioran's view on history?

FN: In addition to the *l'élan vers le pire / the drive to the worst*, Cioran has an Excel table view of history. Thus, he mixes civilisation with culture and considers that there are major and minor cultures. The minor ones are so mainly by their own fault and in order to escape the curse, they have to abolish their internal law so as to enjoy a flourishing development like the major ones. Minor forms of historical life are generators of inferiority complexes. Major cultures would be animated by a history instinct, very close to the idea of vital space, *Lebensraum*, while minor cultures would degenerate if left to evolve organically. So, there would be a cultural determinism similar in kind to the Calvinist one, a *numerus clausus*.

Prof Gruzinska presented the case of Witold Gombrowicz, who also believed that small cultures could become big through certain processes. As a matter of fact, Gombrowicz continued to write in Polish all his life, arguing that Western cultures do not have a monopoly on greatness. So, Gombrowicz would nurture a superiority complex that would manifest itself in a camouflaged form in Cioran. Prof Gruzinska believes that Cioran's initial historical pessimism, especially about the future of Europe, was unjustified. Today, with the economic and political crisis, she is no longer so sure that Cioran was wrong.

GS: The Spanish writer Pablo Javier Perez Lopez presented the paper, LA DESOLACIÓN COMO ETICA. Desolation means, in all Latin-based languages, loneliness, emptiness, forsakenness, bleakness, sadness and melancholy. Perez Lopez described Cioran's desolation as his ethics; could you give us a summary of his view?

FN: He finds a similarity between the Romanian poet Eminescu's and Cioran's visions, namely that the Romanian people would be afflicted by sadness, skepticism, pessimism and fatalism, that Romanians are a melancholic people. The essence of this ontology would be the word "dor", considered by Cioran as the Romanian particularization of nostalgia. The popular songs called "doine" are also witnesses of this pessimism and defeatism. Hence the lack of tragic courage and the feeling of permanent exile that would haunt the Romanian soul. On the other hand, Romanians suffer from a soulful excess that gives it a tragic sense of existence that is Oriental in nature, but also peripherally European, as in the Spanish and Portuguese cases. Of course, all these considerations are philosophical–anthropological constructs without much connection with the reality on the field.

As to *desolación como etica/ desolation as ethics*, It should not be forgotten that Cioran was a man of contrasts. He had condemned Romania for its technological and institutional backwardness, but after years in Paris he felt nostalgic for the Romanian and Spanish villages, as well as for his contact with simple people. Pablo Javier sees him not so much as purely cynic, but as a Socratic cynic, someone who lives on the margins in order to maintain authentic relationships. Consequently, he identifies a denying humanism, an ethic of a Romantic devoid of Romanticism, an ethic that is built through temperament and acceptance of otherness. Clearly this would be an ethic of the old Cioran, and not of the young Cioran, an abysmal, perhaps even Adamic, morality in a vacuum.

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