Emil Cioran's Apophatic Anti-Poesis of Scenic Centrality

Benjamin Barber

United International College
Zhuhai, China
bbarb056@uottawa.ca

Abstract

The twentieth-century Romanian philosophical stylist Emil Cioran was fascinated by the apophatic mystics of the Reformation. They shaped his intellectual development, as he embraced—and then repudiated—Romanian nationalism, before labouring successfully to achieve success at the centre of intellectual life in post-WWII Paris. Apophatic (or negative) theology is scenic, and, as in Generative Anthropology's description of human scenicity, the centre of its scenicity subsists in itself without the necessity of a central object or figure. Leveraging the apophatic mystics' insights into the fundamental emptiness of the scenic centre, Cioran's intellectual development—as it occurred in his transition from writing in Romanian to writing exclusively in French—and his mature French works (notably *Précis de decomposition* [1949] and *La Tentation d'exister* [1956]) consist of iterative attempts to attain scenic centrality. By adapting and extending the apophatic method of contemplation in his writing to explore the paradoxes and impasses of his own thought, Cioran exposes the basic vacuity of the centre of the human scene, the locus where religion and metaphysics have traditionally placed origins, Truth, and Being itself.

Key Words: Emil Cioran, Apophatic Mysticism, Generative Anthropology, Scenicity, Centre

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Generative Anthropology (GA) holds that the mimetic repetition of the aborted gesture of appropriation (or sign) moved the first humans to view the object they pointed towards as sacred. As the ritual of object-designation transformed into religions, which then began an ongoing process of reform, the scenically arrayed worshipers ceased to insist on making a particular object the focus of their sacralizing attention. Having a scene with a centre was enough. Nevertheless, this centre remained the ostensible locus of the deity, who—when translated into the terms of metaphysics—was understood as Truth or Being (*Originary Thinking* 32-33). Apophatic (or negative) theology and its associated mysticism encourages Christian contemplatives to give up any word or concept they have for God. Thus, similar to

GA, apophatic theology views the centre of the sacred scene as, in its most basic form, empty.

This paper seeks to demonstrate how the philosophical stylist, Emil Cioran, engages and deploys the scenicity of apophatic mysticism in his both his intellectual development and two of his mature works. Cioran was a careful students of the practices of Christian mysticism including those of the apophatic mystics, John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila. As a young intellectual writing in Romania, his affinity for the apophatic mystics and Christian mysticism in general, informed his involvement in the Romanian nationalist movement of the interwar years, during which he wrote *Romania's Transfiguration* (1936). In 1937, he had a crisis of faith, both politically and spiritually, that would lead him to publish *Tears and Saints*. As the book was coming out in Romania, Cioran moved to Paris, where he eventually, with the publication of *Précis de decomposition* (1949), achieved national acclaim. Cioran's intellectual development leading up to his success consists of a movement from one scenic configuration to another. In the first, he remains peripheral—gazing longingly at the inaccessible, beatific vision of Romanian nationalism. In the second scene, he accedes to, and then removes himself from, the centralizing prestige of the Parisian intellectual world. He makes clear his reasons for vacating this luminous centre in his mature writings, which develop a style of reflection that rejects and undermines all positivist intellectual systems by querying the existence of existence itself.

In his collection of essays *La Tentation d'exister* (1956) (*The Temptation to Exist* [1968]), Cioran states that, when he closely examines his capacity for representation (i.e. thought or philosophy), he finds it impossible to make incontrovertibly true statements. Because of this, he claims, he cannot understand himself to exist, as, for Cioran, "[e]xistence is . . . defined as thinking," and thought, as he repeatedly illustrates, is inherently paradoxical and unstable (Sontag 13). Straining towards a truthful statement, Cioran tries, but repeatedly fails, to achieve existence. For him, there is only the Void. Occasionally, by thinking against his every assumption, he feels himself come close to existence, but ultimately returns to what he terms a "deficit of being" (*The Temptation* 219). Cioran's stylization of his failure resembles the practices of the mystics. Just as they wrote of their many failures to attain the beatific vision, Cioran reiterates the enduring absence of the central object of the originary scene. In so doing, he foregrounds the scenicity of the human as manifest in our iterative, and typically futile, efforts to recover an origin, Truth, and Being. Cioran's capacity to achieve such a gesture arises from an intellect shaped by a capacity for a rejection of the very assumptions that it constructs itself upon, as he in fact does in each phase of his intellectual development. For Cioran, this process of negation unfolds in relation to two important scenic configurations. The first intellectual scene he engages occurs in his native Romania and the second appears at the nexus of existentialist thought in Paris.

Cioran's biography, written by Ilena Zarifopol-Johnston, indicates he was highly attuned to—and driven by—the scenic mimeticism of intellectual circles. When he arrived in Paris in

1937 to work on a doctoral thesis that he would not complete, he positioned himself at the edges of Sartre's circle in the Café de Flore (Zarifopol-Johnston 4). Every day he would come to listen to the conversation of Europe's brightest young intellectuals, as they grappled with the tremendous upheavals occurring in European society and around the world before, during, and in the aftermath of, WWII (3).

He had begun his career at the University of Bucharest in his native Romania—geographically and intellectually on the edges of Europe: "In Romania, he [was] well known, the published and controversial author of five books and numerous articles. In Paris . . . he [was] nobody, just an exile from Eastern Europe, hoping to make a name for himself in the City of Light" (4). "His equivocal position on the margins of Sartre's group, gravitating around the axis of French intellectual authority, always silent but always present," Zarifopol-Johnston writes, "sums up this ambitious and divided young man, in quest of a center that will focus his own creative energy" (4). His effort to assert himself in the centre of European intellectual life is ultimately successful.

In 1949, after having given up writing in Romanian to refine his capacity to write exclusively in French, Gallimard publishes Cioran's *Précis de decomposition* (in English *A Brief History of Decay* or *A Short History of Decay* [Arcade]). The book was a major success. In *Le Combat*, Maurice Nadeau describes Cioran as a thinker perfectly attuned to the period:

> he has arrived, he whom we have been waiting for, the prophet of our era of concentration camps and collective suicide, the one whose arrival has been prepared by all the philosophers of the void and of the absurd, harbinger of bad news par excellence. Let us greet him and watch him closely: he will bear witness to our times. (qtd. in Zarifopol-Johnston 5)

The following year, Cioran received the Rivarol prize for "best manuscript in French by a foreign author" (5). All of this in spite of having a late draft of his *Précis* rebuffed by Albert Camus, who, as an editor at Gallimard, had told Cioran that he had failed to "enter the circulation of great ideas" (qtd. in Zarifopol-Johnston 5).

Struggling to break away from the margins of intellectual life in Europe, Cioran engaged in a fierce, if quietly personal, rivalry with the French luminaries of the period. Zarifopol-Johnston's description of his efforts vividly illustrates the scenic and quasi-spiritualist nature of his personal campaign to leave the periphery and attain to a powerful centre of intellectual prestige. "He had embarked," Zarifopol-Johnston writes, "on a lonely and painful adventure. . . . Cioran pursued his mission with dogged determination, with a fanatical belief in its importance that was the equivalent of mystical faith" (5). Cioran is far from quietistic in his successful drive to achieve the heights of European intellectual prestige over and against his contemporaries. Indeed, Zarifopol-Johnston—reflecting on his reaction to receiving the award as recounted by his companion, Simone Boué—states that "[h]e

experienced his revenge as a triumph simultaneously over both French pretentiousness and Romanian provinciality" (5). Cioran's emulative posture vis-à-vis the French literati (a posture which mirrors his competitiveness with the apophatic mystics discussed below) appears most starkly, Zarifopol-Johnston argues, in his opposition to Sartre's style of philosophy (5). Indeed, he very consciously takes Sartre as his model and rival. In *A Short History of Decay* he includes a short essay titled "On an Entrepreneur of Ideas" which is an acerbic characterization of Sartre's thought as devoid of intention, style, and human feeling:

> He [Sartre] is a conqueror, and has but one secret: *his lack of emotion*; nothing keeps him from dealing with anything, since he does so with no accent of his own. His constructions are magnificent, but without salt. . . . Having neither preferences nor oppositions, his opinions are accidents; one regrets he believes in them. . . . (174-5)

As elaborated in detail below, in contrast to Sartre, Cioran's self-reflexive thought is alive with his avowal of unwanted emotion and his effort to resist it along with the doubts and certainties that press in upon him. Cioran would later say that his "path was the reverse of Sartre's" (qtd. in Zarifopol-Johnston 5).

Thus, mimetically and symmetrically opposed to the dominant figure at the centre of the scene he sought to conquer, Cioran usurps Sartre's centrality, only to—in the long run—repudiate the very position he sought. In his time at the Café de Flore, Zarifopol-Johnston notes that Cioran sat in silence listening and never speaking. However, she asserts, "[h]is silence was not shyness or intimidation, but inordinate pride" (5). Offering a rigorously scenic interpretation of Cioran's posture vis-à-vis the centre, she goes on to explain that, "[w]ith his body strategically placed on the margins of fame, Cioran made a statement. He was nearly inside the magic circle of Sartre and French cultural life, which had enormous prestige in the eyes of European intellectuals, especially marginal Europeans like Romanians" (5-6). Zarifopol-Johnston completes her scenic analysis by characterizing the centre's periphery: "Just outside the circle, or rather on its borderline, the ambitious interloper [Cioran] worked silently and tenaciously in isolation for another five long years" (5-6). Going on to compare his journey from margin to centre to the struggle of Dostoevsky's character in *Notes from the Underground*, Zarifopol-Johnston states that Cioran's revenge was not the pathetic, impotent gestures of the underground man but, instead, a "blazing success" (6). Cioran would go on to win—but, notably, decline—more awards for this work: the Sainte-Beuve, the Combat, and the Nimier (6). He was praised by Saint-John Perse as "the greatest French writer to honor our language since the death of Paul Valéry" (qtd. in Zarifopol-Johnston 6). Upon his death in 1995, *Le Figaro*, *Le Monde*, *Paris Match*, *Le Nouvel Observateur*, and *Magazine Littéraire* honoured him with retrospectives (6). Zarifopol-Johnston further notes that "Cioran's name has been honored [more than once] with standing ovations in the Assemblée Nationale," where he was listed with other Francophone Romanians as "one of the greatest French philosophers of the 20th century" (6). Acknowledged as having conquered the centre of European philosophy, the starting point of

Cioran's conquest is nevertheless located in mystical theology—a realm of thought often scorned and marginalized by the great intellectual movements of the West.

In an interview with Michel Jakob (published in English in 1994, the year before Cioran's death), Cioran discusses the importance of the Christian mystics and especially the negative theology of Teresa of Avila in his youthful crisis of faith, which resulted in the Romanian publication of his least successful book, *Tears and Saints* (1937). In the interview, Cioran considers the significance of the book in relation to his obsession with Teresa and her mystical project:

> St. Teresa has a certain tone that stirs one to the depths. Although I learned of St. Teresa relatively late and although I felt no religious vocation in myself—nor have I converted—she taught me an unbelievable amount; I am stirred in the truest sense of the word by her. But, as I said, I could not believe—one is simply born with faith or not. (130)

As already noted, Teresa followed a form of negative theology, which derives from the works of Pseudo-Dionysius. Building on Christian teachings about the incomprehensibility of God, Pseudo-Dionysius championed apophatic, or negative, theology. Writing in 500 C.E. under his pseudonym, Dionysius the Areopagite, which alludes to Paul's reference to "the unknown God" in Acts 17:34, Pseudo-Dionysius outlined his programme for attaining union with God in his *Mystical Theology*. His practice requires "all positive (or catophatic) naming of God, important as it is, . . . [to] yield to negative (apophatic) naming in order for the soul to attain union with God who lies beyond all affirmation and negation" (McGinn 219). In chapter one of *Mystical Theology*, Dionysus advises his disciple "to leave behind . . . everything perceived and understood . . . and, with your understanding laid aside, to strive upward as much as you can toward union with him who is beyond all being and knowledge" (220). John of the Cross further developed Dionysus's *Mystical Theology* in his own spiritual guides, *Ascent of Mount Carmel* and *Dark Night of the Senses*, after joining the Reform monastic group—the Carmelites—created by Teresa, which took apophatic principles as the centre piece of its religious practice (Kieran Kavanagh qtd. in McGinn 165-6). Enamored with these mystics' theory and practice, Cioran's development as a thinker—working amid the cataclysmic events unfolding in twentieth century Europe—took on an intense and profoundly contradictory cast.

For Cioran, who ultimately understood himself as born without the capacity for faith, the negative theology of Teresa and John constitutes a megalomaniacal undertaking to exacerbate a desire for a God who does not exist. Zarifopol-Johnston's analysis of the period in Cioran's life when he was writing *Tears and Saints* reveals this time to be one of great upheaval in, not only in his spiritual life but also his political consciousness. Deeming the book blasphemous, Cioran's publisher rejected it just before it was to go to print. However, prior to moving to France to begin his doctorate, Cioran took the plates to another publisher

and paid to have it printed. The book was extremely poorly received (Cioran qtd. in Jakob 126). *Tears and Saints* alternately expresses intense admiration of the mystics' grandiose attempts to achieve union with God. However, it also expresses a profound disdain for their misguided and misguiding aspirations. Cioran "hates the saints," Zarifopol-Johnston writes, "for the habit of hopeless suffering that they bequeathed to us" (126).

The turmoil of Cioran's recognition of his lack of faith, as expressed in *Tears and Saints*, is the culminating gesture in his renunciation of the political project of promoting Romanian Christian nationalism, which he undertook in his 1936 book, *Romania's Transfiguration*. In her analysis of Cioran's development as a thinker, Zarifopol-Johnston juxtaposes the themes of *Tears and Saints* with those of *Romania's Transfiguration*—a work that "borrows the rhetoric of mystical discourse and applies it to the realm of politics"—to fabricate "a utopian political fantasy, dreaming of a Romania 'transfigured' from its 'sub-historic' destiny" (126). In contrast, the *Tears and Saints* recognizes the folly of the mystics' project and, by implication, the folly of militant nationalist self-aggrandizement, which framed its ideology with an agonistic spiritual *askesis*, through which the nation would reach its destined greatness (127). As a Romanian nationalist and author of *Romania's Transfiguration*, Cioran (like the other young Romanian intellectuals of the interwar years) had used mystical language to generate the fascistic ideal of a glorious and truly Christian Romania (128). Zarifopol-Johnston demonstrates that spiritualist principles bolstered the ideology of Romania's Legion of the Archangel Michael (which later became the fascistic, nationalist group, the Iron Guard), to which Cioran's intellectual circle had political ties (128). This spiritualist, nationalist project itself constitutes a scene wherein the ideal of a truly Christian Romania is the longed for centre, and the ostensibly inferior Romanians of the 1920s and 1930s make up the periphery. By, in *Tears and Saints*, attacking and denouncing the saints' mystical project of unity with the divine, while leaving his homeland for France, Cioran renounced Romania's nationalist centre and periphery only to position himself at the edge yet another centre—that of the Parisian intelligentsia. This was the locus of desire that he would succeed in conquering, yet ultimately discover to be just as empty as the longed for ideal of a truly Christian Romania.

The account of Cioran's intellectual development provided by Zarifopol-Johnston illustrates how Cioran's life affords a stark example of the way that intellectual and political life are constructed scenically in the configuration outlined by GA's account of the originary scene. In each of his quests for the centre, whether he attains it or fails to attain it, Cioran ultimately discovers that the locus of the scene persists irrespective of it containing any figure, object, or ideal. As discussed above, this discovery derives from his fixation on the practice of apophatic mysticism, as it is modified by his recognition that he cannot believe. Thus, Cioran is mystically minded, but striving towards a centre that contains no beatific vision, no transcendence. His discovery of the basic vacuity of centres of attention highlights an important aspect of the scenicity of the human, as GA elaborates it. In fact, GA posits the vacant centre that Cioran's crisis of faith revealed to him.

In *Originary Thinking*'s discussion of the idea of God, Eric Gans hypothesizes that "[t]he origin of the idea of God must be scenic because God appears to human beings as a center of attention consciously distinct from themselves" (37). GA holds that the sign designates the originary scene's centre and that the centre of the scene is itself the locus of divinity:

> God is . . . the subsisting center of the scene of representation on which . . . specific ideas appear. As this center, God is no particular object of attention, but the permanent object of attention as such, however it may appear to reveal itself in a particular physical being. This revelation can only be understood . . . as God's appearance rather than his subsistence in the being in question. For the idea of God is the idea of what subsists in the physical being's absence. . . . (38)

Proposing that the scene of representation produces the subsistence of the deity as manifest in a space devoid of any particular being or idea, Gans goes on to assert, "[t]he sign can only designate what occupies the center of the scene, and the being of this center, the center-as-being, is what we call God" (38). If the centre of the scene is vacant while the designation of the divine centre continues, the deity's scenic mode of subsisting manifests in the signs that point towards God's subsistence beyond discrete objects, beings, ideas, and signs themselves. It is the structure of the scene of attention that manifests the deity as absent, since scenicity itself—in its direction of attention towards a vacant centre—is enough to orient the representing subject towards the divine absence. In this sense, GA articulates a negative theology that does not preclude the adoption of catophatic theological traditions, but, rather, illustrates those traditions' contingency upon the scenicity that presents divinity as a vacant centre of attention.

Leading up to articulating this scenic anthropology of the idea of God, Gans addresses the rise of metaphysics after theology, and finds that such philosophizing lacks an anthropology adequate to account for the persistence of the idea of God. Gans asserts that metaphysics had tried to explain the notion of the divine as *Weltgeist* in Hegel and Being in Heidegger. He points out that, more recently, Derrida has exposed of the failure of metaphysics by highlighting the instability of language through the concept of *différance* (33-34). Gans then states that the successive metaphysics that sought a new synthesis for the idea of God have ultimately been abandoned in favour of the positive sciences and asserts that those intellectuals who still entertained an idea of God are ultimately forced to take on an anthropological theology (34). Gans's solution is the originary hypothesis, wherein God and the human emerge from the originary scene simultaneously (35).

In her 1968 introduction to Cioran's *The Temptation to Exist*, Susan Sontag outlines a similar account of philosophy's progress, and ultimate failure, to that traced by Gans. She describes how the decline of metaphysics is followed by the rise of the "various 'positive' or 'descriptive' sciences of man," which included "anthropology, sociology, and linguistics" (11-12). She goes on to observe that, during the period in which the social sciences were

gaining ascendance over metaphysics, an alternative to the new descriptive and positive science emerged. This alternative was “a new kind of philosophizing” which was “personal (even autobiographical), aphoristic, lyrical, [and] anti-systematic” (12). She names its “foremost exemplars. . . [as] Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Wittgenstein” (12), before defining this post-philosophy as:

> philosophizing . . . the awareness that the traditional forms of philosophical discourse have been broken. What remain as leading possibilities are mutilated, incomplete discourse (the aphorism, the note or jotting) or discourse that has risked metamorphosis into other forms (the parable, the poem, the philosophical tale, the critical exegesis). (12)

Sontag states that “Cioran is the most distinguished figure in this tradition writing today” (12). Though Cioran pursues this route of thinking in the form of essays, his essays have an aphoristic quality that, as Sontag notes, bear “witness to the most intimate impasse of the speculative mind, moving outward only to be checked and broken off by the complexity of its own stance” (13). Commenting on one of Cioran’s essays titled “Dealing with the Mystics,” Sontag observes how closely Cioran’s project resembles that of Dionysius the Areopagite, and remarks that he clearly admires the audacious scale of the mystics’ project, which his essays strive to attain by asserting the impossibility of a God of the Beyond (22). This is true, but in the title essay of *The Temptation*, Cioran goes farther than denying the possibility of a deity or a coherent metaphysics, when he gives an autobiographical account of how, as a young scholar, he “apprenticed [himself] to every force that invalidated [his] existence” (216). In his account of this process, Cioran reflects on the social—what GA would identify as the periphery of the human scene—as a wasteland of cadavers.

This spectacle propelled him to the verge of what he refers to as “the Void” (217). “Ceasing to live in terms of a self,” Cioran writes, “I gave death enough rope for my own enslavement; in other words, I no longer belonged to myself. My terrors, even my name were borne by death, and by substituting itself for my own eyes, death revealed to me in all things the marks of its sovereignty” (217). Even his conception of himself—as it is based in the social—is merely an occasion for his own negation and the negation of those around him: “Everywhere,” he states, “I stumbled against future victims of the noose, against their imminent shadows” (217). In this period of his life, Cioran takes the centre of the human scene to be as empty as what lies beyond the outer edge of its periphery. “The Void was my eucharist,” he writes—using a metaphor drawn from the symbolism of the sacred—“everything within me, everything exterior to me was transubstantiated into a ghost. Irresponsible, at the antipodes of consciousness, I ended up by delivering myself to the anonymity of the elements” (217). Continuing, he describes himself as incapable of understanding the spectre of his imminent negation as an impetus for positive thought: “[u]nable to see in death the positive expression of the Void, the agent that awakens the creature from itself, the summons resounding in the ubiquity of drowsiness, I knew

nothingness by heart, and I accepted my knowledge" (217). He persisted in this habit of unknowing, he says, until—having reluctantly attempted to seek the comfort of "the illusion that something exists"—he realized that he could not claim to know any truth, but, sought to become "the conquistador of a continent of lies" (217), that is, feign belief in the possibility of existence. At this point, he recognized that he had only two options: "To be duped or die" (217)—that is, to accept the idea of existence or commit suicide. "After the banality of the abyss," he exclaims, "what miracles in being! Existence is the unheard of, *what cannot happen*, a state of exception. And nothing can engage it save our desire to accede to it, to force an entrance, to take it by assault. *To exist* is a habit I do not despair of acquiring" (218). What GA would term *scenicity* appears in the preceding image of Cioran storming a citadel—a sacred centre encircled by a besieging horde. However, this fortress of Being is, for Cioran, as unattainable as it is an uninhabitable Void; it exists only to the extent that collective desires attempt, yet fail, to attain it.

It is just such a siege of the Void that Cioran sees in the mystics' efforts to achieve unity with the divine. In an essay titled "Dealing with the Mystics," Cioran writes: "It is a mistake to suppose that mysticism derives from a softening of the instincts, from a compromised vitality. A . . . John of the Cross crowned an age of great enterprises and [was] necessarily [a contemporary] of the Conquest" (153). Cioran goes on to argue that the mystics' "idolatry of the will's abeyance, of gentleness and passivity, secured them against a scarcely bearable tension, against that *superabundant* hysteria which is responsible for their intolerance, their proselytism, [and] their power over this world and the next" (153). Thus, "[f]ar from being defectives, they fought for their faith, attacked God head on, appropriated heaven for themselves" (153). Echoing his characterization of his youthful conquest of the "continent of lies," he writes that, to understand the mystics, one must "imagine a Hernando Cortez in the middle of an invisible geography" (153). Seeking to explore this nothingness, mystics are, Cioran asserts,

> [a]vid for every kind of wound, hypnotized by the unwonted, they have undertaken the conquest of the only fiction worth the trouble; God owes them everything: his glory, his mystery, his eternity. They lend existence to the inconceivable, violate Nothing in order to animate it (155).

Having highlighted the absurdity of their effort to animate nothingness, Cioran wryly raises the mystics' project above that of philosophers. "Contrary to that abstract, false void of the philosophers," he writes, "the mystics' nothingness glistens with plenitude: delight out of this world, discharge of duration, a luminous annihilation beyond the limits of thought" (155). From these ornate descriptions of mystical writing it is evident, as already noted, that Cioran both derides and enviously admires the mystics' project. However—through the praxis of ever refining his style in denying the possibility of Truth and Being—he emulates them by striving towards the limits of thought.

Far from being a soul seeking union with the deity, Cioran understands himself as a mind engaged in "a certain type of *difficult* thinking" (Sontag 14), a mind which—if it ever finally reached the limits of thought brought about by self-negation—would be able to recover itself as an existent human being. For Cioran, Sontag observes, "[t]hought and existence are neither brute facts nor logical givens, but paradoxical, unstable situations" (14). Making an apt comparison to Heinrich von Kleist's treatment of self-consciousness in "On the Marionette Theatre," Sontag explains her understanding of Cioran's project as an attempt to rediscover genuine thought by refusing to ever accept any theory or conceptual model:

> [His] thesis [is] that, however much we may long to repair the disorders in the natural harmony of man created by consciousness, this is not to be accomplished by a surrender of consciousness. There is no return, no going back to innocence. We have no choice but to go to the end of thought, [and] there (perhaps), on the other side, in total self-consciousness, to recover grace and innocence. (14)

Thus, Cioran appropriates the apophatic tradition's technique of abnegating conceptions of God as a means to reach Him and, refusing the existence of a deity or anything else, pushes its antithetical logic further. First, he thinks himself out of existence in order to place existence beyond reach and thereby make it into a longed for impossibility, only to turn on his heel and ineffectually strive to attain it. At the end of *The Temptation* he enjoins his reader to take up this radical practice:

> we must learn to think against our doubts and against our certitudes, against our omniscient *humors*, we must above all, by creating for ourselves another death, one that will be incompatible with our carrion carcasses, consent to the indemonstrable, to the idea that something exists . . .
>
> Nothingness may well have been more convenient. How difficult it is to *dissolve* oneself in Being! (222)

Embracing its own nothingness, Cioran's mind longs to turn its gaze back on itself and thereby realize its own non-existence in order to reify itself as an existent entity. However, having outlined his project, his final expostulation is one of failure. Cioran—by publishing his repeated failure—reiterates the enduring absence at the heart of consciousness: an interior scene with an invisible periphery and Void at its centre.

In his adaptation of the apophatic technique, he creates a scene similar to the one posited by GA as the scene of representation. Like GA, Cioran's thought begins by emitting gestures of deferred appropriation. These are his essays and fragments, which avow his desire for the centre and his resentment of the others on the periphery who also strive to attain it; indeed, the signs Cioran emits represent his failed efforts to attain the being others espouse but unwittingly fail to attain. In his attacks on the mystics' hubris and his own efforts to outstrip them, Cioran both comprehends and manifests the mimetic rivalry that compels him to

refine such radical negations. He imitates the desires of the periphery towards the centre, not by emitting a sign that imitates their affirmation of the central object's desirability but by indexing the empty space gaping as the abyssal centre of desire itself. In his interior scene, he identifies an empty space beyond the scene's outer edge, a space created by his symmetrical opposition to the central-object-oriented other. Thus, in engaging the intellectual world through his writing, Cioran uses language, but deploys it in order to make it work against itself. Having vehemently articulated the vacuity of the centre, Cioran turns his back on it and moves as far away from it as possible, thereby establishing an inverted symmetry with his fellow sign-emitters.

In *A Short History of Decay*, Cioran provides a vivid image of the scenicity of language and culture through the attempt to negate it. In a passage titled, "Promenade around the Circumference," he writes:

> Within the circle which encloses human beings in a community of interests and hopes, the mind opposed to mirages clears a path from the centre toward the periphery. It can no longer hear at close range the hum of humanity; it wants to consider from as far away as possible the accursed symmetry which links men together. (21-22)

The mirages rejected by the mind Cioran describes correspond to the fabrications of language—hypotheses, systems, certainties, and fantasized futures, all of which consist of signs collectively fastened to desired objects, be they physical or imaginary. The disenchanted mind, he continues,

> withdraws to the extreme margin and follows the rim of the circle, which he cannot cross so long as he is subject to the body. . . . [W]hile on life's circumference the soul promenades, meeting only itself over and over again, itself and its impotence to answer the call of the Void (22).

At this extreme distance from the symmetry of signs that form the centre, the mind encounters itself at the limit of the scene of language. From this vantage, it can apprehend the scene's centre and perceive, as Gans writes, that the clearing that is the centre is "no particular object of attention, but the permanent object of attention as such" (*Originary Thinking* 38). Such a mind perceives that—within the interior scene of the sign-user—its own representation of the centre is effectively equivalent to its representation of the outer darkness beyond the general human scene and, thereby, representation itself is an iteration of futile gestures.

As noted, *A Short History* forced Cioran's entry to the centre of Parisian intellectual life, and *The Temptation* appeared in French in 1956, while Cioran was an established, enduring, but reclusive presence in the city's literary and philosophical scene. In a 2007 paper on her projects of writing Cioran's biography and translating his Romanian works, Zarifopol-Johnston reflects on the source of Cioran's stylistic power and his taciturnity in the face of

fame. As his translator, she was party to Cioran's habit of rewriting and radically altering many of his early Romanian works in their French translation (2007, 23). Working directly with Cioran while he was alive, Zarifopol-Johnston noted how he often wanted to make large cuts to his early works, cuts which Simone Boué and Zarifopol-Johnston's editor would later urge her to restore (22). Reflecting on his compulsive rewriting and cutting of previous manuscripts as she wrote Cioran's biography, Zarifopol-Johnston argues that this tendency went deeper than his desire to escape his youthful involvement in Romanian fascistic nationalism. Rather, his compulsive effort to distill and fragment his thought into ever more concise forms derives from his affinity for the mystics: "Cioran was engrossed with [the mystics]," Zarifopol-Johnston writes "because he identified with their 'escapist' mode. Like him, the saints and mystics were running away from life, from history, aspiring to something infinitely greater than the narrow confines of their own worlds" (23). By abandoning his nation and its nationalist, fascistic religiosity, Cioran first escapes what he called the "'meaninglessness' of writing—and being—Romanian" to undertake the ascetic *askesis* of learning to write in French (24). Next, he repeatedly revises and refines his thought in another language, thereby undermining its stability; this implicitly destabilizes the centrality of the Parisian intelligentsia, as they saw fit to centralize Cioran who—in *A Short History* and *The Temptation*—deems such centrality akin to the Void.

In his fragmentary, self-confounding aphorisms and essays, Cioran claims to inhabit the absence that the apophatic mystics struggle to conquer through their own contemplative negations. By taking these mystics as models that he ultimately outstrips, he illuminates the Void that is the centre of the originary scene. Since any object, being, or concept could be cast into this blank space, its emptiness is its defining characteristic, one which—in its vacuous banality—forces the onlooker to return his gaze to the language-animated sociality of the periphery: that "hum of humanity" constructed out of the "symmetry which links men together." Cioran sees in this symmetry—wherein ideas proliferate through emulation—a need for the individual to refuse all doubt, all certainty, and all emotion in order to attempt the impossible: to definitively crystallize an ultimate truth that would ground one's Being. Only this gesture could conquer the continent of lies, which our mimetic symmetries ceaselessly engender. Pursuing this lofty ambition, Cioran's anthropoetics are the disjointed rages and resignations of his mind's iterative and abortive struggle to subsist beyond intellectual life's stalemates and aporias, which persist in others' thought and within his own. Ultimately, in its highly wrought contradictions and impasses, Cioran's stylization of his struggle affords readers a unique prospect of the empty centre of humanity's—and the individual's—originary scene.

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