

Emile M. Cioran Looks at Rumanians and Hungarians. A Characterization or Caricature?

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Emile M. Cioran is a Rumanian from Transylvania who lives in France and writes in French. He was born in the Hungarian village of Resinár (now Rasinari, Rumania), studied in Bucharest, went to Paris in 1937 never to return to his native land, keeping for companion a faithful "destiny" which fills the space of his dreams and thoughts. In this foreign environment he considers himself as "an intruder, a troglodyte" (HU, 30), without past, present or future. Among the many Protean personalities he likes to put on, we should not hope to find the face of the poet; he is too "unhappy (. . .) to be a poet," he says, and "sufficiently indifferent to be a philosopher": he is contented to be lucid and to feel to be condemned [" . . . Je ne suis que lucide, mais assez pour être condamné" (LS, 73)]. Cioran does not write poetry, but he likes to philosophize, and without identifying himself as a philosopher, he pours all his poetical inspiration into his very personal way of looking at the world, his favorite subject being the vanishing and collapse of civilization, in general; and the "decomposition" of the present civilization of nations, in particular. Did he really decide to become a "décomposeur?" Reading beyond his *Précis de décomposition*, one is drawn to the conviction that Cioran has assumed the rare endeavor to defend the prerogatives of a past golden age which never existed, except in the form of primitive societies, which are being wiped out by sciences, psychology, psychoanalysis, philosophy, religion, etc. "Only the illiterate," he says, "have given me the *frisson* of being, which stands as a witness to the truth. Carpathian shepherds have made a much deeper impression upon me than the professors of Germany, the wits of Paris" (TE, 136). On the other hand, Cioran contemplates, with a kind of bitter delight, how great nations rise and fall; how eager they are to enter into history, if they have not yet participated in its making, and how sadly they exit, carrying

their shame of having failed, sliding into the backstage of History. Russia makes the first case, Spain illustrates the second (TE, 68).

Cioran draws an even more pessimistic picture of small nations. First of all, they experience neither "sudden expansion," nor "gradual decadence" (TE, 69). "Their evolution cannot be abnormal, for they do not evolve. What is left for them? Resignation to themselves, since, outside, there is all of History from which, precisely, they are excluded" (TE, 69). It seems that for Cioran History and great Nations reserve the exclusive right to play games in which it is impossible for small nations to find a place, thus they are transformed, in spite of themselves, into victims. Being excluded from major games, small nations are condemned to quarrel among themselves, hating each other, not being big enough to fight.

Now, how does Cioran look at his native country? In the many tentative surveys he offers on the state of the soul of the world today and its culture, he spends little time on asking questions like, "How one can be a Rumanian" (TE, 80). His answers, when he gives them, should be taken with their face value, for Cioran, as a moralist, responds to his own question both with utter sincerity and with his whole life: he wants to be a man before being called a Rumanian. Then, as a Rumanian, since he spent most of his life in "exile," he is bound to be objective, when considering the possible ethnic and cultural problems of Transylvania. Finally, as a Transylvanian Rumanian, in regard to the Hungarian question, he may not stand on the same ground as his fellow countrymen from Moldavia or Vallachia.

Before further analyzing Cioran's sentiments for his native land, I would propose a short philosophical digression which should help us to understand his unique character. In his *Histoire et utopie*, he accuses the Hungarians for having inflicted upon him the "worst humiliations" one can experience, "that of being born a serf" ["la pire des humiliations, celle d'être né serf" (HU, 18)]. But he calls Moldavia the "Paradise of neurasthenia," "a province of a charming sadness absolutely unbearable" (EA, 154). His skeptical non-humanism finds men "Marginal to God, marginal to the world, marginal to ourselves," and he reaches the paroxysm of his skepticism, by exclaiming that ". . . it is incredible that one can be a man" (FT, 48). To follow him on his ladder of metaphysics (theology?), one cannot but descend. This whole world being a failure, one cannot imagine that it was created by God. "Nothing could persuade me," he says, "that this world is not the fruit of a dark god whose shadow I extend, and that it is incumbent upon me to exhaust the consequences of the curse hanging over him and his creation" (NG, 89). And again, "It is difficult, it is impossible to believe that the God Lord—'Our Father'—had a hand in the scandal of creation. Everything suggests that He took no part in it, that it proceeds from a god without scruples, a feculent god. Goodness does not create,

lacking imagination; it takes imagination to put together a world however botched" (NG, 4). Man should not clutch his destiny at such a god; if he does, he degrades himself to the level of an "obsolete animal" (FT, 52). He goes even farther to ask, "What did God do when He did nothing? How did He spend, before Creation, His terrible leisure?" (FT, 87). One can readily see that Cioran reduces God's existence and activities to fit human thinking. On the one hand, he implies that God, if He had existed before Creation, must have been bored—"The only argument against immortality," he says, "is boredom" (LS, 63)—on the other hand, he agrees to settle humanity on the level of the animal life. It is not a question of happiness, nor of immortality; Cioran does not promise anything of that sort; he hopes to convince his readers that "The lowest animal lives, in a sense, better than we do" (FT, 44). One finds any number of texts in Cioran where his nostalgia for nature and natural goodness grazes the doctrine of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Consciousness kills happiness.

His reluctance to enjoy civilization, culture, history, begins with birth. It seems that for Cioran the very beginning of life is marked with the unbearable burden. "No one recovers," he says, "from being born, a deadly wound if ever there was one. Yet it is with the hope of being cured of it some day that we accept life and endure its ordeals. The years pass, the wound remains" (FT, 69). Obviously, there is no way to excuse oneself, saying that "I do not forgive myself for being born" (TBB, 15), because the nostalgia for non-being makes existence neither void nor less pleasant. From the failure of Creation by God, Cioran arrives to a kind of conclusion that "Paradise is the absence of man" (FT, 69), which brings us close, I suppose, to the Sartrean thesis that "L'enfer, c'est l'autre." If, then, birth is an "irreparable event" (FT, 170), what should a small nation do with its individual citizen, who is "the accident of an accident," because, after all, "life [itself] is an accident?" (FT, 128).

With the least hesitation, Cioran confesses that he hates Rumania because of its people who are "enamored of their own torpor and almost bursting with hebetude" (TE, 70). He pitches up his tent between Montesquieu and Voltaire, and raises the question with the former: What does it mean to be a Persian ["or as the case would have it, a Rumanian?" (TE, 70)], and he answers with Voltaire, by saying that "we"—meaning Rumanians—"we had sprung from the lees of the Barbarians, from the scum of the great Invasions, from those hordes which, unable to pursue their march West, collapsed along the Carpathians and the Danube, somnolently squatting there, a mass of deserters on the Empire's confines, daubed with a touch of Latinity" (TE, 70). He says that every time he is tempted to exterminate his whole nation, he is retained by this thought that, "One does not massacre stones" (TE, 70). And he reaches the climax of his black humor, by saying that "My country whose existence, obviously, made no sense seemed to me

a résumé of nothingness or a materialization of the inconceivable . . . To belong to it—what a lesson of humiliation and sarcasm, what a calamity, what a leprosy!” (TE 71).

Of course, Cioran will not stand on this last negative point; after all, no country deserves so much despise. His country does offer him at least one great edifying example: Rumania taught him what a nation of destiny may be. He finally understands that, unlike Germany—where destiny is found within the German character and, therefore, it often turns against the German people to destroy it—“the Rumanian Destiny,” being an outsider, demands only to adapt oneself to it. “It would be indecent for Rumania,” he asserts, “to believe in effort, in the utility of action” (TE, 71). In the passive attitude of his nation, Cioran finds a gold mine of strength and virtue by which it (his nation) has been able to overcome adversities and enjoy prosperous days. In short, Cioran finds it gratifying to know that Rumania can furnish the world both with a knowledge of “savoir-faire” and a sense of “relaxation in face of Necessity” (TE, 72). He finally enlarges the horizons of his views on his country by identifying the tone of its heart with the “Balkan popular sensibility” which expresses its lamentations in the chorus of the “Greek tragedy” (TE, 73).

And what about Hungary and the Magyars? Having been born in Transylvania, Cioran must have a “workable” knowledge of the Hungarian language and character. In a fictitious dialogue, his imaginary interlocutor asks him the question, “Do you persevere in your prejudices against our little neighbor to the West, and do you still nourish in their regard the same resentments?” (HU, 16). It must be noticed that he calls Hungary “notre petite voisine de l’Ouest,” signifying by that, I suppose, that Hungary being a small nation, certainly smaller than Rumania, has no international role to play, therefore no input in world politics. That perfectly fits his general philosophical principles, and without openly denigrating Hungary, he situates her outside of history, in a kind of political “limbo” of idleness. However, just as in the case of Rumania he abandoned his negativistic attitude to find the real face of his people and nation, with Hungary, too, he overcomes his personal prejudices to admire the values and virtues of the Magyars; not without some reservation, though.

There are two eminent qualities of the Magyars which occupy the mind of Cioran: the character of the Hungarian and his language. Being convinced that the Magyars are related to the Huns, Cioran endows the Hungarian nation with all the characteristics of the Huns. Now, It is a historical fact that the Huns tried to stretch their dominion and power over the whole Western Europe. Having failed in their conquest, they too settled down on the shores of the Danube. Their strolling around Europe, however, did not happen without “savagery” and “terror.” That was a part of their nature that they brought in from Asia. This penchant for savagery, the

Hungarians have prolonged it and they keep it alive in their “melancholy made of subdued cruelty,” Cioran concludes (HU, 19–21). Cruelty, the way he sees it, does not mean a negative virtue in the life of a nation. Cioran—and I would take his predicament with a grain of salt—sees in cruelty a source of vitality, a kind of Bergsonian “élan,” which carries the nation into its future. “Only cruel peoples,” he says, “have the chance to approach the very source of life, its palpitations, its kindling arcana: life reveals its essence only to eyes inflamed with blood-lust . . .” (TE, 68).

It would be a difficult task to classify nations according to the cruelty they practiced against others or underwent on the hand of others. Who would have fathomed a few centuries ago the infinite pain that ideological cruelty can afflict on nations, on a whole continent? And the extent of the political and economical pressure a nation can exercise on a particular ethnic group, who will ever be able to measure the anxiety it causes! But, in spite of Cioran’s subtle accusation, it is interesting to note that in his general pessimistic survey of the Western civilization, he makes some remarkable exceptions. He admires with no reservation the vitality and the genius of the Jews, and the beauty of the Hungarian language. One may find his views on the Jews theologically wanting, for Cioran believes that their strength lies not so much in the possible supernatural vocation that they had received, as in the way they imposed their faith on the Heavens. “Is this people not the first to have colonized heaven, to have placed *its* God there?” (TE, 79). This euphoria he experiences in the “colonized heaven” of the Jews, Cioran also rediscovers it in the realm and atmosphere of the Hungarian language.

Before spelling out his personal feelings about Hungarian, it will not be without interest to survey briefly Cioran’s sentiments about language in general. One of the phenomena of the general decadence in French culture that makes him suffer is the slow decay that he perceives in the evolution of the French language: “. . . We are attending the splendid disintegration of a language” (TE, 132). But then, what should a language be like? On this issue, too, Cioran, faithful to his dialectic thinking, proceeds by contradicting himself. Although he himself is a writer who writes in a foreign language, he seems to condemn this very practice. “A writer worthy of the name,” he states, “confines himself to his mother tongue and does not go ferreting about in this or that alien idiom” (NG, 90). He passes an even more severe judgment over himself by condemning the “man who repudiates his language for another,” for, by changing his language one changes both “his identity and his disappointments” (TE, 74). One would take it for granted that he is a happy person—as his alter-ego tries to make him realize it (cf. HU, 9)—because if he lost a mother tongue, in exchange he received an international language, French. But his dream about language does not coincide with this reality, for, as he says, “I dream

of a language whose words, like fists, would fracture jaws” (NG, 88). That ideal language could refer to German or Russian, I suppose. As for French, Cioran thinks that it defends itself against intruders, and he looks at it as if it were a fortress: a stiff syntax keeps the words in an order, a “cadaveric dignity,” and not even God could dislodge them from the place where they have been assigned to (HU, 10).

This is the language which captivates his imagination and subjugates Cioran’s whole being. It fascinates him in spite of the pains he had to pay for gaining it. That, however, does not explain entirely his fascination; he seems to have given up his mother tongue with few regrets. What he calls “regrets,” elicits very little compassion. Speaking of his mother tongue that he traded in for the elegance of French, he regrets, he writes with humor in *Histoire et utopie*, “l’odeur de fraîcheur et de pourriture, le mélange de soleil et de bouse, la laideur nostalgique, le superbe débraillement” (HU, 10). I can easily understand that, after what he said about his own mother language, Cioran sincerely envies his Hungarian neighbors, not only for their “arrogance,” but also for their language. His admiration for the Hungarian language, as I mentioned, should be compared to that he feels for the Jews. Two different entities, two different judgments and appreciations, though.

From what Cioran says of the Hungarian language, one would conclude that it responds to his “linguistic dream.” Leaving aside, for the time being, the musical quality of the Hungarian, we can agree with Cioran that its rhythm and tonality do remind the listener of a fist which “fractures” jaws. Its “ferocity,” he says, has nothing in common with anything human. He then goes on, remembering the world of Baudelaire’s “Correspondance” and “Hymne à la Beauté” in which the poet looks at the universe as a compact unity where the sound of another world is associated to the perfume of corrosiveness and power, sounding both as a prayer and roaring. Where does all that beauty come from? From heaven or hell? “Whether you come from heaven or hell, what difference does it make, O Beauty! enormous monster, frightening and ingenuous,” exclaims Baudelaire. And here is the text of Cioran:

Je jalouse, je vous l’avoue, l’arrogance de nos voisins, je jalouse jusqu’à leur langue, feroce s’il en fut, d’une beauté qui n’a rien d’humain, avec des sonorités d’un autre univers, puissante et corrosive, propre à la prière, aux rugissements et aux pleurs, surgie de l’enfer pour en perpétuer l’accent et l’éclat. (HU, 17)

Reaching these heights of admiration for the Hungarian language, Cioran, as if feeling the vertigo of having flown into a forbidden sphere, reassures his readers that he is far from letting himself be promoted to the “rank of the Hungarian [“promu au rang de Magyar” (HU, 19)]; on the contrary,

keeping in mind that he was “ridiculed, booed at, mistreated” (HU, 19), he repeats that their insult has settled so deep in his mind and soul that, if his enthusiasm should diminish by one degree only, he would no longer boast of the vain honor the Hungarians bestowed upon him by persecuting him. This subtle but cynical remark should not take the place of my conclusion. Cioran knows that peoples, just like individuals, inspire contradictory sentiments, “we love and hate them at the same time” (HU, 19). I would add to all that we love them for what they are; and we hate them for the same reason. Fortunately, we cannot change them, but history invites us to change our attitudes. That is what colonial powers had to learn, and that is how modern history is being written. I agree with Cioran that, “La patrie n’est qu’un campement dans le désert” [“Your homeland is but camping in the desert” (HU, 10)]; but the great art of rapport between nations is to be willing to share the space of this very desert.

NOTES AND BIBLIOGRAPHY

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