
(Anti-)Semitism 1890s/1990s: Octave Mirbeau and E.M. Cioran

ALEKSANDRA GRUZINSKA
ARIZONA STATE UNIVERSITY

Octave Mirbeau was thirty-seven when his first book, *Lettres de ma chaumière* (*Letters from My Cottage*) appeared in 1885. This event was preceded by an impressive journalistic career and contributions to influential newspapers that appealed to readers of divergent political interests. His participation in these newspapers earned him the reputation of a controversial journalist. In order to protect his identity he often resorted to using pseudonyms. He espoused divergent causes, so to speak, and made more credible the saying, “*le journaliste se vend à qui le paie*” (“the journalist sells himself to whoever pays him”; Michel and Nivet 91).¹ He first wrote for the Bonapartist newspaper *L'Ordre de Paris* (1872), and later for the provincial paper *L'Ariégeois* during the period of the Moral Order (May 16, 1878), and finally for Arthur Meyer who enlisted his sharp pen at *Le Gaulois*. When on October 26, 1882 his article on the “Actor” appeared in *Le Figaro*, it created an uproar. Mirbeau and “*Le comédien*” became overnight the talk of all Paris. The *Figaro's* editor, Francis Magnard, had encouraged Mirbeau to write the article, then as an afterthought withdrew his support when a delegation of actors stormed into the *Figaro's* headquarters. As for Mirbeau, he immediately resigned.² From January 15 to April 18, 1883, he became chief editor of a short-lived but innovative paper, *Paris-Midi/Paris-Minuit*, providing brief up-to-date news. At last, he achieved greater independence and freedom of expression by editing *Les Grimaces* (Nivet 82).³ This pamphlet represents another brief but significant editorial interlude, which lasted from July 21, 1883 to January 12, 1884. It came to haunt Mirbeau some fifteen years later at the time of the Dreyfus affair and seriously threatened his credibility as a journalist.

With the editorial participation and support from friends such as Etienne Grosclaude, Paul Hervieu, Alfred Capus, and L. Grégori (Michel and Nivet 159), Mirbeau pursued in *Les Grimaces* an agenda of openly denouncing controversial and provocative political and financial scandals (*L'affaire Dreyfus* 159 note). The brothers Mourgues and Edmond Joubert provided the financial backing for the

pamphlet (Michel and Nivet 158). Joubert, who held the position of vice-president of the Banque de Paris et des Pays-Bas, no doubt competed with powerful and influential bankers such as the Rothschilds.⁴ They became one of Mirbeau's targets (Michel and Nivet 166).⁵

The first issue of *Les Grimaces* depicts Paris as “foire ouverte à tous les banquismes [et à toutes les] spéculations des brigands impunis de la finance” (“a fair open to manipulations and speculations by financial crooks who are never called to account”; Nivet 83). The intention was “faire grimacer tout ce faux monde de faiseurs effrontés” (“to make grimace the scheming shameless sharks of finance”; Michel and Nivet 160). Yet, in a letter to a friend Mirbeau indicated that “Les Grimaces seront très antirépublicaines et très antijuives” (the pamphlet would be “very anti-republican and anti-Jew”; 165). Their focus on “le banditisme politico-financier” (“the political-financial banditry”) was reason enough to anticipate Mirbeau's anti-Semitic orientation in future issues of the pamphlet (161). Michel and Nivet suggest that his anti-Semitism seemed not to be a manifestation of a personal obsession, but more a sign of “des relents antisémites” (“traces of anti-Semitism”) that one could find in the writings of Proudhon, Michelet, Vallès, and Jules Guesde on one hand, and the association of capitalism with Jewish finances on the other (165). It was not surprising at the time to connect the Jewish financiers and bankers to the “*Krach* [collapse] de l'Union Générale” which had taken place on January 19, 1882 (Nivet 86).

In his first front-page article entitled “*Ode au choléra*” (“Ode to Cholera”), Mirbeau invokes the dreaded disease and invites it to make a clean sweep of politicians, bankers, and influential bourgeois. In subsequent issues he thunders against the Rothschilds, especially their powerful hold on the French economy. He criticizes the “*congé confessionnel*” (“religious leave”) that granted the Jews the privilege to take time off from military duty in order to celebrate Jewish holidays such as Yom Kippur (Michel and Nivet 166).

In order to lessen the impact of his influence on the readers, the anti-Dreyfusards made every effort to discredit Mirbeau and undermine his reputation by attacking his integrity and credibility as a journalist. When the time came in 1898 to review the Dreyfus case, they exhumed Mirbeau's anti-Semitic rhetoric. First *Le Jour* published “*Un farouche antisémite*” (“A fierce anti-Semite”) on November 7, 1898. It was followed by “*Un Républicain de vieille date*” (“A Republican from Way Back”) on November 14, 1898. In these articles a certain Mathieux poured out sarcasm, saying: “*J'ai toujours cru à l'existence de plusieurs Octave Mirbeau*” (“I have always believed in the existence of more than one Octave Mirbeau”; *L'affaire Dreyfus* 159). The next day, on November 15, 1898,

Mirbeau took the offensive in *L'Aurore* with "*Palinodies*." His "Recantations" failed to stop the newspaper *La Libre parole* from publishing a month later "*La Religion d'état*" (Dec. 20, 1898). "The National Religion" was filled with anti-Semitic rhetoric exhumed from the October 13, 1883 issue of *Grimaces*. The newspaper had concealed the writer's identity and withheld his name in order to sharpen the curiosity of its readers. Mirbeau's name was revealed the next day, after the fact. The revival of Mirbeau's anti-Semitic verve came at a time when he had become a staunch Dreyfusard collaborating at *L'Aurore*, the same journal that had published Zola's controversial article, "*J'accuse*" ("I Accuse") on January 13, 1898.

In "*Palinodies*" or "Recantations," Mirbeau writes in the first person singular. Without making any attempt to deny his past anti-Semitism, he explains in a highly lyrical and passionate tone the reasons for the "apparent inconsistencies" of his views, commitments, and character. André Gide, who did not admire Mirbeau, nonetheless enthusiastically praised in his *Lettres à Angèle* (49-50)⁶ a passage from "Recantations" where, in three sentences, the first person singular appears sixteen times supported by three first person possessives: "*mon droit*," "*mon honneur*," "*moi-même*" ("my right," "my honor," "myself"). The passage also contains a variety of tenses, including seven verbs in the present, two in the "*passé composé*," three in the imperfect, one "*passé simple*," one future, two present subjunctives, and three infinitives. In spite of the amazing array of verbs, tenses, and first person pronouns, the passage retains an air of unusual elegance, lightness and clarity worthy of admiration. Mirbeau also makes effective use of reiteration. The repetition of certain words produces a highly lyrical and poetic style:

Ce que je suis aujourd'hui, je ne l'étais pas il y a dix ans; ce que je fus, il y a dix ans, je ne l'étais pas, il y a vingt ans; et dans vingt ans à supposer que je sois encore — je veux espérer, oui, je pousse le cynisme jusqu'à espérer que je ne serai pas celui que je suis aujourd'hui.... Aujourd'hui, j'aime des personnes, des choses, des idées qu'autrefois je détestais, et je déteste des idées, des choses, des personnes que j'ai aimées jadis.... C'est mon droit, je pense, et c'est mon honneur; et c'est aussi la seule certitude par quoi je sente réellement que je suis resté d'accord avec moi-même. (L'affaire Dreyfus 160)

(That which I am today, I was not ten years ago; that which I was ten years ago, I was not twenty years ago; and in twenty years to suppose that I will still be — I wish to hope, yes, I pursue my cynicism so far as to hope that I shall not be that which I am today.... Today, I love people, things, and ideas that once I detested; and I detest ideas, things and people that once I loved.... It is my right, I believe, and my honor, and it is also the sole certainty by which I truly feel that I have remained in harmony with myself.)

Having proclaimed the right to change his mind, Mirbeau admits that he has held contradictory views at different periods in his life: he confesses, "*J'ai détesté les Juifs*,

et cette haine, je l'ai exprimée dans Les Grimaces" ("I hated the Jews and I expressed my hatred in *Les Grimaces*" (*L'affaire Dreyfus* 163). Yet, in spite of apparent contradictions in his writings and sympathies, he assures his readers that there is only one Mirbeau, he who has proclaimed all along the right to change one's mind. A hefty dose of irony helps him make his point as he recalls a young man's conversation with Ernest Renan. "*Je n'ai jamais varié dans mes convictions!*" ("I have never wavered in my convictions"), the young man told Renan (162). The latter supposedly replied with obvious sarcasm: "*C'est donc que vous n'avez jamais pensé!*" ("So that is why you have never thought"; 162). Mirbeau intensifies the ironic mode by inviting us to admire some very narrow-minded people:

... les braves gens qui ... n'eurent jamais qu'une idée ... ce qui équivaut à n'en avoir pas du tout ... et sur qui l'étude, l'observation quotidienne, l'expérience et les révélations de la vie, l'enseignement des faits, les surprises de l'histoire ont passé sans avoir pu modifier quoi que ce soit à leur organisme intellectuel, à ce qu'ils appellent, sans rougir, leur idéal. (L'affaire Dreyfus 162)

(... those good people who never had but one idea ... which is the same as not having had any at all ... and for whom study, daily observation, experience and the revelations of life, the lessons of deeds, and the surprises of history have gone past without having been able to change anything whatever in their intellectual perspective, in that which ... they call, without blushing, their ideal.)

On the other hand, a man (like Mirbeau for instance), "*qui n'est pas un politicien, qui ne sert aucun parti, ni aucune bande, ni aucun fond secret*" ("who is not a politician, who serves no party nor any clique nor any secret cause"), such a man will certainly find joy in discovering every day "*quelque chose de nouveau dans le domaine de la justice et de la beauté!*" ("something new in the realm of justice and beauty"; 160). Indeed, "*l'harmonie d'une vie morale, c'est d'aller sans cesse du pire vers le mieux*" ("the harmony of a moral life lies in constantly proceeding from the worse to the better"; 160). The pursuit of moral harmony is no trifle undertaking, and should elicit our admiration. There is joy in self-improvement. It requires that a man repudiate "*un à un, les mensonges où le retiennent, si longtemps, prisonnier de lui-même ces terribles chaînes de l'éducation de la famille, des prêtres ou de l'Etat*" ("one by one, the lies that keep him a prisoner of himself, these terrible chains from his upbringing at home, from the priests, and from the State"; 160-161). Unfortunately, he tells us, "*C'est plus difficile qu'on ne pense d'effacer ces empreintes, tant elles sont fortement et profondément entrées en vous*" ("it is more difficult than one thinks to expunge these imprints, so strongly and profoundly have they become part of you"; 161). This is why he suggests that "*Il faut bénir cette affaire Dreyfus de nous avoir en quelque sorte révélés à nous-mêmes d'avoir donné à beaucoup d'entre nous ... un sens plus large de l'humanité*" ("We should thank this Dreyfus

affair of ours for having in some way revealed to ourselves — for having given to very many among us ... a much greater sense of humanity”; 161).

Justice, according to him, provides the strongest ingredient that binds men of diverse backgrounds who grow tired of being enemies. His own anti-Semitism seems to have been fueled by a daily contact at *Le Gaulois* with Arthur Meyer “[*qui*] *appelait l’antisémitisme, comme Jésus le miracle*” (“who called forth anti-Semitism just as Jesus invoked a miracle”; 163). In closing his essay, Mirbeau pays an admiring tribute to Joseph Reinach:

J’ai admiré son talent ... Et à mesure que je le connaissais et que je l’aimais, chaque jour, d’avantage, j’aurais bien voulu effacer de mon oeuvre ... certaines pages méchantes, avec le remords de les avoir écrites. (L’affaire Dreyfus 164; my emphasis).

(I admired his skill ... and as I knew and loved him, more every day, *I would have permitted the removal from my work ... of certain malicious pages, with regret for having written them.*)

As for Reinach, he valued Mirbeau’s integrity. On August 23, 1898, he turned over to Mirbeau, no questions asked, forty thousand francs meant for Zola, who needed the money to pay penalties that were imposed upon him (164). Even today, forty thousand francs is a sum of money not to be trifled with without a receipt.

Rémy de Gourmont was a friend who greatly admired Mirbeau. Was it not he who once described Mirbeau as “*une intelligence en marche*” (“an intellect still growing”), someone capable of rethinking and revising an opinion, in the name of justice and peace in this instance? During his early career as a journalist, Mirbeau may have given the impression that he contradicted himself. This no doubt was to be preferred to giving up “his right to change [for the better].” Such a right presupposes a deeper moral adventure than simply changing one’s mind. “Change,” in this case, implies “[*être*] *d’accord avec soi-même*” (“to live in harmony [or agreement] with oneself”). As ironic as this may sound, change includes an element of sameness and continuity.

Mirbeau’s frequent about-face in his allegiances makes him appear as someone who was not to be trusted. On the other hand, his recantations may well represent a long and arduous trajectory across various political fields from which he finally emerged as an anarchist and pacifist true to himself. Anarchism and pacifism describe his “mature” identity. They probably were present all along, though they were less evident than his anti-militaristic stance, which found its highest expression in *Le calvaire* (*Calvary*, 1887) and in his battles as a Dreyfusard. Though he had not changed overnight, he nonetheless took a firm stand once he became

involved in the battle. His commitment earned him the title of “*l'imprécateur au coeur fidèle*” (“the denunciator with a steadfast heart”). This is how “*mirbeaulogues*” (Mirbellian scholars) and “*mirbeaulâtres*” (Mirbeau enthusiasts) see him today. He staunchly supported Zola, and served the Dreyfus battle with passion and courage. On one occasion he was spit upon and ridiculed in Toulouse. His presence was also noted in Rennes (1898) where the decision to review the Dreyfus case took place. Yet, ironically, he remains notoriously absent from studies on the Dreyfus affair. During those years, it took courage on Mirbeau's part to reverse a once anti-Semitic stance by “thinking against himself.”

The Romanian writer of French expression who has been a model during the latter part of the twentieth century on how “to think against oneself” is E.M. Cioran. The first essay in *La tentation d'exister* (1956) (*The Temptation to Exist*, 1968) bears the title of “*Penser contre soi.*” It reflects an attitude that kept Cioran on his guard, shielded him from “falling into time” and helped him avoid becoming misguided and entangled in sensitive issues. Yet, a sustained critical look at himself, so evident in his French writings, had failed him in his twenties and left him vulnerable to “the temptation to exist” and to falling into Time and History. Under the influence of Nae Ionescu,⁷ who at the time was a popular and renowned teacher of philosophy in the pre-World War II Bucharest, the young Cioran's enthusiasm, fired by Nae Ionescu, led him briefly to support in Romania the anti-Semitic orientation of the Iron Guard.⁸

Cioran came to Paris in 1937 at the age of twenty-six. He never returned to Romania, nor left Paris except for short pleasure trips in and out of France. Nor did he become a French citizen. His first book in French, *Syllogismes de l'amertume* (*Syllogisms of Bitterness*) appeared in 1949. By then, he had switched languages and had adopted French as his only means of written expression. He continued to live in Paris very modestly until his death on June 20, 1995. Cioran's first four books came out in Romania between 1934 and 1937. A fifth book was published in 1940, shortly before Romania was to enter the arena of World War II. He is the author of fifty-four articles published in nine Romanian journals, thirty-four of which appeared in *Vremea* alone. The first of the articles dates back to 1931 when Cioran was only twenty; the last appeared in 1940 when he was twenty-nine (Heres 395, 398-401).⁹ He was already living in France when he wrote a sixth and last book in Romanian between 1941 and 1944. Some fifty years later, it was translated into French in 1993 as *Bréviaire des vaincus* (*Breviary of the Vanquished*).

Cioran has earned the envious position of the most original and outstanding French essayist of our time¹⁰ and the Polish poet Adam Zagajewski calls his latest volume, *Cahiers 1957-1972* (1997), “the most sensational and outstanding of his

books.” While his works in French have been translated into many languages, the Romanian ones have remained unknown, no doubt due to Romania’s extreme isolation from the rest of the world during the communist regime. That they were destroyed or were no longer available seemed like a valid assumption at one time. However, in the aftermath of the Ceausescu demise in 1989/1990, Romania opened its doors to the West. Works that were once considered forbidden reading, punishable by imprisonment, began to circulate again, including *all* of Cioran’s Romanian writings. In the last years of his life, he suffered from Alzheimer’s and felt diminished within himself, so he stopped writing. It is then, in his eighties, that the passionate works he had written in his twenties became available in new editions, and some in translation. The latter are purged of incriminating passages, representing, no doubt, differences in style,¹¹ or ideas that were no longer current, or more likely, were no longer professed by Cioran.¹² To use his own expression, some of his “*boutades incendiaires*” of the 1930s have now become the object of a new book entitled *Cioran l’hérétique* (*Cioran the Heretic*). For instance, he praised Hitler “*qui lui inspire sympathie et admiration*” (“who awakened in him sympathy and admiration”). He supported the Iron Guard in an article written in 1934.¹³ Furthermore, his “*apologie du fanatisme ... se conjugue avec une phobie revendiquée de tout ce qui est juif*” (“justification of the fanaticism ... combines with a professed dread of ‘everything Jewish’”; Enthoven 99). Cioran’s critics came forward after his death, that is after 1995, for good reasons no doubt, including one that sounds somewhat frivolous but rings very true: “*Nous l’aimions trop, sans doute, pour aller y voir de son vivant*” (“we loved him too much, no doubt, to get to the bottom during his lifetime”; 99).

La Tentation d’exister is a collection of philosophical essays published in 1956, some twenty years after Cioran had left Romania and settled in Paris. It contains, in fourth position, “*Un peuple de solitaires*” (“A People of Solitaires”).¹⁴ Some day we may learn why the essay was published in 1956. Was the Hungarian uprising of that year an influential factor? What degree of sincerity or pose does the essay contain? In a penetrating article in *Le Monde* (June 22, 1995), Edgar Reichmann suggests that Cioran’s friendship with Benjamin Fondane (who died in Auchswitz),¹⁵ and with Paul Célan (who was driven to despair and took his life in 1970),¹⁶ moved him to revise his thinking:

Chez le moraliste Cioran une profonde prise de conscience face à l’immensité du désastre qui avait frappé le judaïsme européen, prise de conscience qui non seulement modifia sa réflexion sur le peuple juif, mais devait également lui dicter un mea culpa, paru en 1956, signifiant la reconnaissance de ses égarements passés. (Reichmann 29)
(As for the moralist Cioran, [he experienced] a profound pang of conscience in the face of the immensity of the disaster that had struck European Jewry, a pang

of conscience that not only changed his thought about the Jewish people, but also was to require of him a *mea culpa*, published in 1956, in which he made known his recognition of his past aberrations.)

The *mea culpa* Reichmann refers to is none other than “A People of Solitaries.” Like Mirbeau, Cioran writes in the first person singular. He goes one step further by identifying himself with the Jews. Three themes dominate in the essay: exile, solitude, and suffering. Although God and the relationship of the Jews with their God is another powerful theme, it is exile, solitude, and suffering which he sees as sources of renewal and energy. They help shape a strong identity through “*épreuves*,” “*souffrances*,” and “*tribulations*” (“tests,” “sufferings,” “afflictions”). Intertwined as they are, they offer a chance to experience “*l'éternel présent*” which represents privileged moments in time that project us outside of History and affords us an unexpected foretaste of immortality in our lifetime. In reviewing the history of the Jewish people, Cioran gains by the same token a deeper understanding of himself, for he has known first hand exile, solitude, and suffering. Moreover, the essay is built around the verb “*divaguer*” (“to wander”).¹⁷ It reflects a feeling of admiration for a people whose history inspires awe. The verb suggests a mixture of rational thinking and delirium.

Quand on est prêt à capituler, quel enseignement, quel correctif que leur endurance! Combien de fois, lorsque je mijotais ma perte, n'ai-je pas pensé à leur opiniâtreté, à leur entêtement, à leur reconfortant autant qu'inexplicable appétit d'être! Je leur suis redevable de maint revirement, de maint compromis avec la non-évidence de vivre. Et pourtant, leur ai-je toujours rendu justice? Tant s'en faut.” (Oeuvres 867)

[When one is ready to capitulate, what a lesson, what a corrective in their endurance! How many times, when I was indulging the prospect of my ruin, have I not thought of their stubbornness, their persistence, their comforting as well as inexplicable appetite for being! I owe them many returns, many compromises with the non-evidence for living. And yet, have I always done them justice? Far from it. (*The Temptation to Exist* 91)]

Thus, as early as 1956, Cioran admitted his youthful errors. He did it with some poetic discretion, and left out incriminating details:

Si, à vingt ans, je les aimais au point de regretter de n'être pas des leurs, quelque temps plus tard, ne pouvant leur pardonner d'avoir joué un rôle de premier plan dans le cours des temps, je me pris de les détester avec rage d'un amour-haine. L'éclat de leur omniprésence me faisait mieux sentir l'obscurité de mon pays voué, je le savais, à être étouffé et même à disparaître; tandis qu'eux, je le savais non moins bien, ils survivraient à tout, quoi qu'il advînt.” (Oeuvres 867)

[If at twenty I loved them to the point of regretting not being one of them, later on, unable to forgive them for having played a leading role in the course of history, I found myself loathing them with the fury of love turned to hate. The viv-

idness of their omnipresence made me all the more sensitive to the obscurity of my country, doomed, I knew, to be smothered and even to disappear; while they, I knew just as well, would survive everything, whatever happened. (*The Temptation to Exist* 91)]

As a society, we have survived the Holocaust and have taken note of Sartre's admonition that we must take life seriously and assume responsibility for our actions. Unfortunately, it is all too often impossible to foresee their consequences. The lack of foresight is not meant here to be an invitation to excuse our irresponsibility, but it is a mitigating factor:

A l'époque je n'avais qu'une commisération livresque de leurs souffrances passées et ne pouvais deviner celles qui les attendaient par la suite. Songeant à leurs tribulations et à la fermeté avec laquelle ils les supportèrent, je devais saisir la valeur de leur exemple et y puiser quelques raisons de combattre ma tentation de tout abandonner. (*Oeuvres* 867-8; my emphasis)

[Furthermore, at the time, I had only a bookish commiseration for their past sufferings, and could not divine those that were in store for them. Afterwards, thinking of their tribulations and of the resolution with which they endured them, I was to grasp the value of their example and to deride from it several reasons for struggling against my temptation to abandon everything. (*The Temptation to Exist* 91-92)]

In his essay, Cioran perceives the Jews as a model of strength to be emulated. Readers will find no anti-Semitism in Cioran's works of French expression: "The French Cioran is an attractive writer" who takes pride in posing as an intractable skeptic (Gopnik 174). Yet, today, some critics fear that another type of death awaits Cioran as a result of his youthful support of the Iron Guard, though Cioran himself was never in the Iron Guard (Gopnik 176). Should they be proven true, readers may never learn to savor "passionate" essays like "A People of Solitaries." Rather than condemn them to oblivion, Cioran's early writings can enlighten us about the way a brilliant mind became disoriented, "*déboussolé*" to use Reichmann's expression, and later found the courage to reverse his thinking, not unlike Mirbeau had done a century earlier.

In a long essay on "*Poezja i watpliwość*" ("Poetry and Doubt") devoted to Cioran, the Polish poet Adam Zagajewski refers to a temporary dark shadow moving across Cioran's biography. He obviously has in mind the episode of fascism, which represents a moment of true enthusiasm on the part of the young Cioran for the Romanian Iron Guard. In his *Cahiers* (*Notebooks*), published posthumously (November 1997), Cioran comments that his *affirmations* (his sympathy for the Iron Guard for instance) only brought him worries, while his *negations* (his aphorisms) elicited enthusiasm. Zagajewski's penetrating appraisal of Cioran's

oeuvre leads him to modify his (and our) perception of the Romanian misanthrope. It is not Cioran's brief misguided support of the Iron Guard, but his "lifelong" passionate love adventure with poetry and music that matters in the end. It endows his works with a redeeming and enduring quality.

What common traits of interest link Cioran and Octave Mirbeau? Their *fin-de-siècle* position for one, and the anti-Semitism of their early writings, their change in attitude later in life and their subsequent freedom from anti-Semitic feelings. They both mention experiencing feelings of guilt and they had Jewish friends whom they admired (Reinach; Fondane and Célan). But there are differences as well. By the time *Les Grimaces* had stopped publication in 1884, Mirbeau was thirty-six and a fledgling writer without a book to his name. In 1898, in his fifties, he had the good fortune of defending himself and responding to accusations of anti-Semitism. In our *fin de siècle*, E.M. Cioran stands on trial for errors he once committed as a young student of philosophy in his early twenties. In later years, "[sa] compassion devait se métamorphoser en un remords qui allait féconder l'ensemble de son oeuvre écrite en français" ("[his] compassion was to change into a remorse that went on to enrich all of his work written in French"; Reichmann 29). For Cioran, the question of guilt is even more far reaching, as Reichmann suggests: "*Sur ce bref égarement idéologique qu'il ne se pardonnera jamais faut-il voir dans son scepticisme absolu ultérieur l'expression d'un remords infini?*" ("with regard to this brief ideological aberration for which he will never forgive himself, is one to see in his later absolute skepticism the expression of a remorse with no bounds?"). Adam Gopnik concurs by saying that "It is possible — in Paris, it is almost compulsory — to read his fifty years of wit and sleeplessness as an act of expiation, and his choice of France, French, and the classical style as a rueful renunciation of the Romantic hysterical style that had led him so close to the Iron Guard" (174). André Gide addressed the problem of our youthful "engagement" in these terms:

Songez donc: c'est de vingt à trente ans qu'une carrière se décide; est-ce de quinze à vingt que l'on aura pu réfléchir? Qu'y faire? car c'est une fatalité. L'action seule vous éduque: on ne l'apprend qu'en agissant; un premier acte vous engage; il éduque, mais compromet; dût-on l'avoir trouvé mauvais, c'est le même qu'on va refaire.... [Gide concludes that,] A trente-cinq ans vous n'avez fait que des écoles; mais vous apportez un passé qu'on réitère en avenir. La vie d'un 'homme libre' est décidément difficile et terriblement motivée. (Lettres à Angèle)

(So think about it: a career is chosen when one is between twenty and thirty years old. Has one been able to ponder from fifteen to twenty? What is one to do? Because it is bound to happen. The deed alone teaches you: only by acting does one learn; a first act engages you; it teaches, but it compromises.... At thirty-five

you are still just learning; but you carry with you a past that will be repeated in the future. The life of a “free spirit” is decidedly difficult and dreadfully driven.)

Was it the urge to remain independent and free to speak out that motivated Mirbeau so frequently to change allegiances to the point of contradicting himself? Was it the desire to stay free and uncommitted that inspired Cioran to choose skepticism as a way of life? These are questions that remain to be answered, and for that matter, may remain unanswered for some time.¹⁸ ✱

Notes

¹ Murray D. Sirkis, Professor Emeritus at Arizona State University, has kindly translated certain passages from Mirbeau and Gide for which no other English translation was available.

² Mirbeau severely criticized actors in “*Le comédien*.” He later reversed his attitude and dedicated an admiring article to Sarah Bernhardt as a token of gratitude for having accepted the part of Madeleine in his play, *Les Mauvais Bergers* (*Le Journal*, 20 April 1898).

³ The pamphlet was announced on May 25, 1883 in a radical paper, *Le Réveil* (*L'imprimeur* 157).

⁴ The Rothschilds in question represent the French branch of the family; this explains the slightly different spelling of the name.

⁵ Michel and Nivet suggest that in part at least, this was “*un antisémitisme de commande*” (“a mandatory anti-Semitism”; *L'imprimeur* 167).

⁶ To express his admiration, Gide begins by saying: “*Monsieur Mirbeau fait comme tant d'autres devraient faire: il change.... Que M. Mirbeau nous permette donc de faire comme lui, de l'aimer d'autant plus aujourd'hui que nous l'aimions moins naguère et qu'il en est plus revenu.*” (“Monsieur Mirbeau does as so many others ought to do: he changes.... Therefore let M. Mirbeau allow us to do as he has done, to love him all the more today as, recently, we loved him less, and let him be more reconciled with that.”)

Gide then compares the act of suicide with that of contradicting oneself:

Parlant du suicide de Gérard de Nerval, Baudelaire ou Gautier, je ne sais plus lequel, revendique deux libertés que l'on refuse volontiers aux hommes: celles de se tuer, celle de se contredire. Aux yeux de certains, c'est presque la même chose. Aux yeux d'autres c'est presque le contraire, et seuls ceux qui sont morts, ou presque, ne se contredisent jamais. C'est l'avis de M. Mirbeau qui tient à vivre, et c'est le mien. (Lettres à Angèle 49-50)

(Speaking about the suicide of Gérard de Nerval, Baudelaire or Gautier, I no longer know who lays claim to the two freedoms that are readily denied to man-

kind: the first, to kill oneself; the second, to contradict oneself. In the eyes of some, they are nearly the same thing; in the eyes of others, they are nearly opposites, and only those who are dead or nearly so never contradict themselves. That is the advice of M. Mirbeau, who holds on to life, and it is mine also.)

⁷ Among the men who influenced Cioran in his youth and whom he continued to admire is Nae Ionescu (1890-1940). He is remembered as:

professeur [de métaphysique] adulé de la faculté de philosophie de Bucarest, figure emblématique de l'époque qui joue un rôle décisif dans l'engagement politique des plus brillants esprits de la Jeune Génération [M. Eliade, C. Noica, Cioran ...] au côté de la Garde de fer, l'extrême droite roumaine de l'époque. (Liiceanu 29)
(esteemed professor [of metaphysics] in the Department of Philosophy at Bucharest, a figure symbolic of the period who played a decisive role in the political engagement of the more brilliant minds of the Young Generation [M. Eliade, C. Noica, Cioran ...] in support of the Iron Guard, the most extreme Romanian rightists at that time.)

According to Liiceanu,

Cioran retient surtout son (Ionescu's) inaccomplissement et son échec. De Paris, il écrit à Noica, encore bouleversé par la disparition du professeur: "... Comment pourrais-je exprimer cet homme? Il participe indifféremment de notre intelligence et de nos vices, il incarne la formule individuelle de l'inaccomplissement de chacun d'entre nous. Toutes les fois que mon inefficacité me fait frissonner, je pense à lui, symbole de déflections visibles et de transfigurations cachées, prototype actif démultiplié en notre impuissance. Ton adoration pour Nae, la mienne, celle des autres, fera de lui la plus haute figure de nos impossibilités, l'échec le plus fortifiant à partir duquel revigorer nos drames." (Liiceanu 29-30)

(Cioran especially remembered Ionescu's non-fulfillment and his failure. From Paris, still upset by the disappearance of the professor, he wrote to Noica, "How could I explain this man? He impartially shares our vision and our vices; he embodies the individual form of non-fulfillment of everyone among us. Every time that my ineffectiveness makes me shudder, I think about him: a symbol of obvious defections and hidden transfigurations, a vigorous prototype diminished by our impotence. Your idolization of Nae, mine, that of others, will make him the highest figure of our impossibilities, the most strengthening failure from which to reinvigorate our tragedies.")

⁸ Calinescu provides the following historical details: "The Journal [*Cuvântul*] was suppressed on 1 January 1934, a few days after the assassination of Prime Minister I.G. Duca by members of the Iron Guard. Ionescu himself was detained as an Iron Guard sympathizer in early 1934" (151). The influence of the Iron Guard on the Romanian intellectuals (Mircea Eliade, Eugène Ionesco, and E.M. Cioran for instance) remains to be documented according to Calinescu.

⁹ In her thesis, Doris Heres provides an up-to-date bibliography of Cioran's writings inclusive of the year 1987. The list of his Romanian works appears on pages 395-401.

The nine Romanian journals include: *Gândirea* (1931, 1932, 1933, 1934); *Revista de filozofie* (1931); *Florea de foc* (1932); *Azi* (1932, 1933); *Calendarul* (1932-1933); *Discobolul* (1933); *Vremea* (1933, 1934, 1935, 1936, 1937, 1940); *Pagini Literare* (1934, 2 contributions); and *Actiunea* (1936).

Cioran wrote the first five books in Romanian: 1) *Pe culmile disperării*. Bucuresti: Fundatia pentru Literatura si Arta "Regele Carol II," 1934; 2) *Cartea amagiriilor*. Bucuresti: Cugetarea, 1936; 3) *Schimbarea la fata a României*. Bucuresti: Vremea, 1936; 4) *Lacrimi si Sfinti*. Bucuresti: Editura Autorului, 1937; 5) *Amurgul gândurilor*. Sibiu: Dacia Traiana, 1940.

¹⁰ In *Le Monde* (June 22, 1995), Reichmann sees Cioran as "*le plus important moraliste français de ce temps en théoricien de la dérision*" ("a theorist of ridicule, he is today's most important French moralist"; 29).

¹¹ Even in Cioran's French writings and their English translations, style continued to be an issue in the reception of his works. In "A Monk Manqué" (*The New Yorker*, May 12, 1975), John Updike speaks of Cioran's French works (in English translation). He comments:

Painfully well written, with the congested precision of a man striving to keep a terrible temper under control, erudite, assertive, passionate, his essays tend to settle toward a bleak canceling-out, a multiplication of doubts, that leave the reader uncertain as to what he has read, or indeed, whether he has read anything. (138)

To illustrate his point, he quotes Cioran: "The void is nothingness stripped of its negative qualifications, nothingness transfigured." Updike adds, "The reader's mind, benumbed, becomes as blank as nirvana" (138).

¹² "[Cioran] deletes certain 'Pretentious and stupid pages' of the first edition. Actually Cioran deletes the entire chapter on 'National Collectivism' from a 1990 edition [Publishing house: Humanitas] of his 1937 book, *The Transfiguration of Romania* (Bucharest: Vremea, 1937)" (Calinescu 151).

¹³ Reichmann describes the Iron Guard as "*une organisation féroce ment antisémite*" ("a fiercely anti-Semitic organization") and refers to Mircea Eliade, Constantin Noica, and Emile Cioran as "*Une jeune génération d'intellectuels déboussolés*" ("a young generation of intellectuals without bearings").

¹⁴ In the *Cahiers*, on December 5th, 1967, Cioran notes:

Susan Sontag écrit, dans sa préface à l'édition américaine de La Tentation d'exister, que mon essai sur les Juifs est le chapitre le plus superficiel, le plus bâtif du livre. Je pense au contraire que c'en est le meilleur et de loin. A quel point ces critiques manquent d'instinct! Un texte aussi passionné ne peut être "cursory" [superficiel], je

l'ai porté en moi pendant des années. Et quelle idée de déclarer une chose superficielle parce qu'on ne l'aime pas! (*Cahiers* 533)

(Susan Sontag writes in her preface to the American edition of the *Temptation to Exist* that my essay on the Jews is the most superficial, the most ill-considered in the book. On the contrary, I think that it is by far the best. How greatly these critics lack instinct! A text so passionate cannot be “cursory” [superficial]. I have carried it with me for some years. And what an idea it is to declare something superficial because one does not like it!)

¹⁵ Disciple of Chestov and of Husserl, Benjamin Fondane was sent to Auschwitz in 1944 (Liiceanu 31). Cioran's 1973 essay on Fondane later appeared in *Exercices d'admiration* (1986).

¹⁶ On February 6, 1967, Cioran notes in the *Cahiers*:

Il paraît que Paul Celan se serait suicidé. Cette nouvelle non encore confirmée me remue plus que je ne puis dire. Depuis des mois je suis moi aussi agité par ce 'problème'. Pour ne pas avoir à le résoudre, j'essaie d'en déchiffrer la signification. (470)

(It seems that Paul Celan has committed suicide. This still unconfirmed news moves me more than I can say. For some months, I myself have also been bothered by this ‘problem’. In order not to have to resolve it, I am trying to decipher its significance.)

On May 11, 1970, we find another entry: “*Nuit atroce. Ai songé à la sage résolution de Celan*” (“A horrible night. Have considered Celan's wise solution”).

Celan est allé jusqu'au bout, il a épuisé ses possibilités de résister à la destruction. En un certain sens, son existence n'a rien de fragmentaire ni de raté: il s'est pleinement réalisé.

Comme poète, il ne pouvait aller plus loin; il frisait, dans ses derniers poèmes, la Wortspielerei [jeu de mots]. Je ne connais pas de mort plus pathétique ni moins triste. (807)

(Celan has reached the end. He exhausted his possibilities for resisting destruction. In a certain sense, his existence has nothing fragmentary or wasted: it has been fully realized.

As a poet, he could not go further; he was close to “*Wortspielerei*” [punning] in his last poems. I don't know of any death more pathetic or less sad.)

On May 12, Cioran is at the Cemetery de Thiais. While attending the burial of Paul Celan he notes that “*Dans l'autobus, de la porte d'Italie au cimetière, qui est beau, j'ai eu une sensation de délivrance*” (“In the bus from the *Porte d'Italie* to the cemetery, which is beautiful, I had a sense of deliverance”; 807).

¹⁷ “*Divaguer*” may be translated as to stray (as from the correct path by intent) or to be errant, meaning to begin to ramble, or to let one's mind wander.

¹⁸ This paper was read at the 23rd Annual NCFS Colloquium held at the University of Georgia (Athens), Oct. 16-19, 1997.

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