

Emil Cioran's "Letter to a Faraway Friend"

translated by Richard Howard ¹

FROM THAT which was ours² and now is no one's, you urge me, after so many years of silence, to send you details about my occupations, and about this "wonderful" world in which, you say, I am lucky enough to live and move and have my being. I might answer that I am a man without occupation, and that this world is not in the least wonderful. But so laconic a reply cannot, for all its exactitude, assuage your curiosity or satisfy the many questions you raise. There is one among them which, scarcely to be distinguished from a reproach, strikes me more than all the rest: you ask if I ever intend to return to our own language, or if I shall remain faithful to this other tongue in which you (quite gratuitously) attribute to me a facility I do not, and never shall, possess. It would be the narrative of a nightmare, were I to give you a detailed account of the history of my relations with this borrowed idiom, with all these words so often weighed, worked over, refined, subtle to the point of non-existence, bowed beneath the exactions of nuance, inexpressive from having expressed everything, alarming in their precision, burdened with fatigue and modesty, discreet even in vulgarity. How should a Scyth come to terms with such terms, grasp their true meaning and wield them with scruple, with probity? There is not one among them whose exhausted elegance fails to dizzy me: no longer a trace of earth, of blood, of soul in such words. A syntax of severe, of cadaverous dignity encompasses them and assigns them a place from which God Himself could not dislodge them. What consumption of coffee, of cigarettes, and of dictionaries merely to write one halfway decent sentence in this unapproachable³ language, too noble and too distinguished for my taste! I realized as much,

¹ Cioran wrote this in the 1950's, and it was published in 1960 by Gallimard in the original French, then translated by Richard Howard in E. M. Cioran, *History and Utopia* (New York: Arcade Publishing, 2015): 1-20. All italics are Cioran's. I placed a space between his paragraphs to make it easier to refer to them in discussion or study.

² The country is Romania. The letter is addressed to Constantin Noica, a charismatic and influential theorist who remained in Romania (rather than fleeing to France like Cioran), and who spent several years in prison after the pseudocommunist regime took over. In addressing Noica, Cioran is also addressing his own role— his "youthful" involvement in the Iron Guard and Romanian fascism—or seeking to explain it.

³ The word "unapproachable" plots a downward curve in frequency of use since 1890. One wonders if increased approachability is characteristic of the modern.

unfortunately, only after the fact, when it was too late to change my course; otherwise I should never have abandoned our own, whose odor of growth and corruption I occasionally regret, that mixture of sun and dung with all its nostalgic ugliness, its splendid squalor. Return to it, I cannot; the tongue I was obliged to adopt opinions and subjugates me by the very pains it has cost me. Am I a "renegade," as you insinuate? "A man's country is but a camp in the desert," says a Tibetan text. I do not go so far and would give all the landscapes of the world for that of my childhood. Yet I must add that, if I make it into a paradise, the legerdemain or the infirmities of my memory are exclusively responsible. Pursued by our origins—we all are; the emotion mine inspires necessarily translates itself into negative terms, the language of self-punishment, of humiliation acknowledged and proclaimed, of an accession to disaster. Is such patriotism answerable to psychiatry? Perhaps, yet I cannot conceive of any other, and, considering our destinies, it seems to me— why hide it from you? — the only reasonable kind.

MORE FORTUNATE than I, you have resigned yourself to our natal dust; you possess, further, the faculty of enduring any regime, including the most rigid varieties. Not that you lack a nostalgia for caprice and chaos, but after all I know no mind more refractory than yours to the superstitions of "democracy." There was a time, it is true, when I resisted it as much as you do, perhaps more than you do: I was young and could not admit other truths than mine, or concede to an adversary the right to possess, to exercise, to impose his own. That "sides," parties, could face yet not confound each other was beyond my comprehension. Shame of the Race, symbol of an anemic humanity without passions or convictions, unfit for absolutes, unworthy of a future, limited at every point, incapable of raising itself to the lofty wisdom which taught me that the object of an argument was the pulverization of the adversary—so I regarded the parliamentary system. Those regimes, on the other hand, that sought to eliminate and replace it seemed to me splendid without exception, in harmony with the movement of Life, my divinity in those days. If a man has not, by the time he is thirty, yielded to the fascination of every form of extremism—I don't know whether he is to be admired or scorned, regarded as a saint or a corpse.⁴ Lacking biological resources, has he not located himself above or below time? Positive *or* negative, the deficiency is no more than that. With neither the desire nor the will to destroy, he is suspect, he has triumphed over the demon or, more serious still, was never possessed by one. To *live* in

⁴ Cesar Pavese in his diaries dated 26 March 1938: "Subconsciously I knew that for me love would be a massacre. Nothing is salvaged. . . . Conscience is shattered: look at my letters and homicidal temptations. My character is warped: look at my imprisonment. The illusion of my genius has vanished: look at my stupid book and my translator-traitor's mentality. Even the hardiness of the ordinary man in the street is lacking. At thirty I cannot earn a living. . . . I have reached the point of hoping for salvation from outside myself, and nothing can be more obscure than that."

any true sense of the word is to reject others; to accept them, one must be able to renounce, to do oneself violence, to act against one's own nature, to *weaken oneself*; we conceive freedom only for ourselves—we extend it to our neighbors only at the cost of exhausting efforts; whence the precariousness of liberalism, a defiance of our instincts, a brief and miraculous success, a state of exception, at the antipodes of our deepest imperatives. By our nature we are unsuited to it: only the debilitation of our forces makes us accessible to it: tragedy of a race which must debase itself on one hand to be ennobled on the other, and of which no member, unless by a precocious decrepitude, sacrifices to "humane" principles.⁵ Tolerance, the function of an extinguished ardor, of a disequilibrium resulting not from an excess but from a dearth of energy—tolerance cannot seduce the young.⁶ We do not involve ourselves in political struggles with impunity; it is to the cult of which the young were the object that our age owes its bloodthirsty aspect: the century's convulsions emanate from them, from their readiness to espouse an aberration and to translate it into action. Give them the hope or the occasion of a massacre, they will follow you blindly. At the end of adolescence, a man is a fanatic by definition; I have been one myself, and to the limits of absurdity. Do you remember that period when I poured out incendiary tirades, less from a love of scandal than a longing to escape a fever which, without the outlet of verbal dementia, would certainly have consumed me? Convinced that the evils of our society derived from *old men*, I conceived a liquidation of every citizen over the age of forty, that onset of sclerosis and mummification, that turning point after which, I chose to believe, every individual becomes an insult to the nation and a burden to the collectivity. So admirable did the project seem to me that I did not hesitate to divulge it; those concerned were something less than appreciative of its tenor and labeled me a cannibal: my career as a public benefactor began under discouraging auspices. You yourself, though so generous and, in your way, so enterprising, by dint of reservations and objections had persuaded me to give it up. Was my project so blameworthy? It merely expressed what every man who loves his country hopes for in his inmost heart: the suppression of half his compatriots.

WHEN I THINK of those moments of enthusiasm and frenzy, of the wild speculations that raddled and ravaged my mind, I attribute them now not to dreams of philanthropy and destruction, to the obsession with some unascertainable purity, but to an animal melancholy which, concealed beneath the mask of fervor, functioned at my

⁵ "Let us be frank. If Cesare Pavese were to appear before you, talk to you, try to make friends with you, are you sure you would not find him objectionable? Would you feel confidence in him, be willing to go out for a gay evening in his company?" Cesar Pavese wrote in his diary on April 8, 1938, after recalling his prison cell.

⁶ On 3 August 1939, Cesar Pavese wrote: "Tolerance of ideas is born of the illusion that truth is something rational. But as soon as one accepts the principle that any idea is based on an initial choice, and that the will is the first organ of understanding, then it becomes impossible . . ." (I wanted to see what would happen if I inserted an ellipsis here, as if to defy what Pavese wrote next.)

expense though I was it's willing accomplice, enchanted not to be obliged, like so many others, to choose between the insipid and the atrocious. The atrocious falling to my portion, what more could I ask? I had a wolf's soul, and my ferocity, feeding on itself, satiated, flattered me: I was, in other words, the happiest of lycanthropes. Glory I aspired to and shunned in one and the same movement: once achieved, what is it worth, I reminded myself, from the moment it singles us out and imposes us only on the present and future generations, excludes us from the past? What is the use of being known, if we have not been so to this sage or that madman, to a Marcus Aurelius or to a Nero? We shall never have existed for so many of our idols, our name will have troubled none of the centuries *before* us; and those that come after—what do they matter? What does the future, that half of time, matter to the man who is infatuated with eternity?⁷

BY WHAT STRUGGLES I managed to rid myself of such madness I shall not tell you, it would take too long, requiring one of those endless conversations that is, or was, a Balkan secret. Whatever my difficulties, they were far from being the sole cause of the change in my orientation; a more natural and more painful phenomenon greatly contributed to this: age, with its unmistakable symptoms. I began to show more and more signs of tolerance, symptoms, it seemed to me, of some inner upheaval, some doubtless incurable disease. Worst of all I no longer had the strength to desire my enemy's death; quite the contrary, I *understood* him, compared his venom to my own: he existed and-nameless downfall! — I was glad he existed.⁸ My hatreds, the source of my exultations, died down, diminished from day to and day, and in departing carried off with them the best of myself. What will I do? Into what abyss will I creep? I kept wondering. And in proportion as my energy waned, my penchant for tolerance waxed; no doubt about it, I was no longer young: *others* seemed conceivable to me, even real. I said farewell to *The Ego and Its Own*; discretion tempted me: was I done for? One must be, in order to become a *sincere* democrat.⁹ To my delight, I realized that such

⁷ After WWII, Cioran's *A Short History of Decay* refused rationality's illusion, the foundation of philosophy. Rationality, to Cioran, was a form of utopian thinking that believed solutions were possible ("Utopia is a mixture of puerile nationalism and secularized ecclesiastical angelism"). Utopia abolishes "the irrational and the irreparable," thus placing itself in opposition to the tragedy of human existence. Nietzsche's nihilism was still creative—it still held space for the genius creator that Cioran no longer believed in as "freedom" depends on emptiness; "the condition that determines it is the same condition that cancels it." Mankind prefers the shackles to the terror of freedom, he concluded. See E M Cioran, *A Short History of Decay*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Arcade Publishing, 2012): 42. As for fame and glory, they guide us in the present and future while excluding us from the past. "What does the future, half the time, matter to those of us who love eternity?" Cioran asks in *A Short History of Decay*, echoing his question to Noica here.

⁸ "I shall never console myself for the mediocrity of my enemies," Cioran wrote in the *Cahiers* dated January 4th 1965.

⁹ "The only difference between intellectual production and bowel movements is that the stream of text onto paper or into the computer (the convulsions) increases through disinhibition (opening of the intellectual sphincter): the more one excretes, the more follows it," Alexander Kluges wrote *The Labyrinth of Tender Force*.

was not exactly my case, that I retained certain vestiges of fanaticism, some traces of youth: I compromised none of my new principles, I was an *intractable* liberal. I am still. O happy incompatibility, O saving absurdity!¹⁰ I sometimes aspire to set an example as a perfect moderate: I congratulate myself at the same time upon not succeeding, so greatly do I fear my own dotage. The moment will come when, no longer fearing it, I shall approach that ideal equilibrium I sometimes dream of; and if, my friend, the years should lead you, as I hope, to a downfall like mine, then perhaps, toward the century's end, we shall sit side by side in our resuscitated parliament and, one as senile as the other, may both bear witness to a perpetual and enchanting spectacle.¹¹ One becomes tolerant only insofar as one loses one's vigor, as one collapses—oh, charmingly!--into childhood, as one is too weary to torment others whether out of love or out of hatred.

AS YOU SEE, I take "broad" views. So broad I have no idea where I stand on any problem at all. You shall judge as much for yourself; to the question you ask: "Do you still harbor your old prejudices against our little neighbor to the west, do you still resent her as much?" I don't know what answer to give; at best I can dumbfound or disappoint you. Because, of course, we do not have the same experience of Hungary.

BORN BEYOND the Carpathians, you could not know the Hungarian policeman, terror of my Transylvanian childhood.¹² When I so much as glimpsed one from afar, I was panic-stricken and ran away: he was the alien, the enemy; to hate was to hate *him*.¹³ Because of him, I abhorred all Hungarians with a truly Magyar passion. In other words they *interested* me. Subsequently, the circumstances having changed, I no longer had any reason to hate them. But the fact remains that long afterward I could not imagine an oppressor without evoking *their* defects, *their* glories. Who rebels, who rises in arms? Rarely the slave, but almost always the oppressor turned slave. The Hungarians know tyranny at close range, having wielded it with an incomparable proficiency: the minorities of the old monarchy could testify to that. Because they were so gifted, in their past, in the role of masters, they have been, in our own day, less disposed than any other nation of central Europe to endure slavery; if they had a talent for fiat, how could they fail to have one for freedom? Strong in their tradition as persecutors, accustomed to the mechanism of subjugation and intolerance, they have risen against a regime that has its similarities to the one they themselves had reserved for other peoples. But we,

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¹¹ And once upon a time Cioran, Celan, Blanchot, Jabes all lived in the same neighborhood and took walks together. And once Zbigniew Herbert visited. Took a 4 hour walk with Celan. "Happiest 4 hours of my life," he said later. When asked what they spoke of, Herbert said: "Nothing." (From a tweet by Ilya Kaminsky)

¹² "Tragedy is not concerned with human justice. Tragedy is the statement of an expiation, but not the miserable expiation of a codified breach of a local arrangement organized by the natives for the fools. The tragic figure represents the expiation of original sin, of the original and eternal sin... of having been born." According to my notebooks, Maurice Blanchot wrote this somewhere my mind has erased.

¹³ "A man who hates someone is never alone," Cesar Pavese reassured his diary on 31 May 1938.

dear friend, not having had the occasion, hitherto, of being oppressors, cannot now have that of being rebels. Deprived of this double fortune, we bear our chains dutifully, and it would scarcely be gracious of me to deny the virtues of our discretion, the nobility of our servitude, while admitting nonetheless that the excesses of our modesty impel us to disturbing extremes; so much discretion exceeds all limits; it is so disproportionate that it sometimes manages to discourage me. I envy, then, the arrogance of our neighbors, I envy even their language, savage as it may be but of a beauty that has nothing human about it, with sonorities of another universe, powerful and corrosive, appropriate to prayer, to groans and to tears, risen out of hell to perpetuate its accent and its aura. Though I know¹⁴ only its swear words, Hungarian never fails to delight me, I never tire of hearing it, it enchants and repels me, I succumb to its charm and to its horror, to all those words of nectar and cyanide, so suited to the exigencies of an agony. It is in Hungarian that one should expire—or renounce dying.

THE FACT IS, I hate my former masters less and less.¹⁵ Upon reflection, even in the days of their splendor, they were always alone in the heart of Europe, isolated in their pride and their regrets, lacking any profound affinities with the other nations. After several incursions into the West, where they could exhibit and expend their first savagery, they fell back, conquerors degenerating into sedentaries, to the banks of the Danube, there to sing, to lament, to erode their instincts. There is, in these refined Huns, a melancholy consisting of a suppressed cruelty, whose equivalent is not to be found elsewhere: it is as if the blood began dreaming about itself. And at last resolved itself into melody. Close to their essence, though defiled and even branded by civilization, conscious of descending from a unique horde, stamped by a fatuousness both profound and theatrical which affords them a style more romantic than tragic, how could they disappoint the mission that fell to their lot in the modern world: to rehabilitate chauvinism, by introducing into it enough pomp and fatality to make it picturesque to the eyes of the disabused observer. I am all the more inclined to acknowledge their merits since it is they who have made me suffer the worst humiliation, that of being born a serf, as well as "pangs of shame" — the most intolerable of all, according to one moralist. Have you yourself not experienced the voluptuous pleasure to be taken in an effort of objectivity toward those who have

¹⁴ "Knowing something may not mean that one can affect a course of events; but the things one knows, one can hold onto, if not with one's hands, at least with the mind; and that, because one can then arrange them as one prefers, can give one the illusion of being in control of them," Marcel Proust wrote in *Swann's Way*, as translated by James Grieve.

¹⁵ "We can and do change without mass conversion experiences. It is easier to get a change of emphasis than a change of heart. Sometimes we need someone who can point out unconsidered implications of how we already think more than we need an oracle or a prophet," Richard White told the attendees of his lecture at UC Davis in 1999. "I am a historian," he added.

flouted, scorned, mistreated you, especially when you secretly share their vices and their miseries? Do not, from this, infer that I long to be promoted to the rank of Magyar. I am far from any such presumption: I know my limits and intend to abide by them. On the other hand, I also know those of our neighbor, and should my enthusiasm for her drop, even one degree, it would suffice to disengage my vanity from the honor Hungary did me by persecuting me.

PEOPLES, much more than individuals, inspire contradictory sentiments; we love and loathe them at the same time; objects of attachment and of aversion, they do not deserve our harboring, in their behalf, a specific passion. Your partiality to those of the West, whose defects you do not clearly distinguish, is the effect of distance: an error of optics, or a nostalgia for the inaccessible. Nor do you distinguish any better the lacunae of bourgeois society; I even suspect you of a certain leniency in its regard. That from such a distance you should have a wonder-working view of it is natural enough; since I know it at close range, it is my duty to combat the illusions you may entertain.¹⁶ Not that such a society is entirely and absolutely displeasing to me—you know my weakness for the horrible—but the expenditure of insensitivity it requires in order to be endured is out of all proportion to my reserves of cynicism. It is an understatement to say that in this society injustices abound: in truth, it is itself the quintessence of injustice. Only the idle, the parasite, the expert in turpitude, the great swindler, and the petty crook profit by the benefits it bestows, the opulence on which it prides itself: surface pleasures and surface profusions. Under the shellac it shows off lies a world of desolation whose details I shall spare you. Without the intervention of a miracle, how to explain that it does not reduce itself to dust before our eyes, or that someone does not blow it up instantaneously?¹⁷

"OURS IS worth no more; quite the contrary," you will object.¹⁸ I agree. But there's the rub! We¹⁹ find ourselves dealing with two types of society—both intolerable. And the worst of it is that the abuses in yours permit this one to persevere in its own, to offer its own horrors as a counterpoise to those cultivated *chez vous*. The capital reproach one can address to your regime is that it has ruined Utopia, a principle of renewal in both institutions and peoples. The bourgeoisie has understood the advantage to be

¹⁶ Cioran: "Unconsciousness is a country, a fatherland; consciousness, an exile." See E.M. Cioran, *The Trouble with Being Born*, trans. Richard Howard (Simon and Schuster, 2013): 120.

¹⁷ "The world is the greatest affront," wrote Walter Benjamin, closing a letter to a friend while languishing in Capri in 1925.

¹⁸ Cioran to Constantin Noica in 1978, commenting on Noica's new book, *The Romanian Sentiment of Being: "Your last book is excellent; the only thing is that it could have been called just as well *The Paraguayan Sentiment of Being*. In your place, I would return to Logic: where, if not there, can one rave better?" From Emil Cioran. *Scrisori către cei de acasă / Letters for Those Who Remained Home* (Bucharest: Humanitas, 1995): 310.*

¹⁹ "We has no address, no location. We's general dislocation makes addressability a kind of pretense, a kind of performance, as the relay between enactment, embodiment, and indictment," Fred Moten wrote.

derived from this failure against the adversaries of the status quo; the "miracle" which saves, which preserves it from an immediate destruction, is precisely the debacle of the other side, the spectacle of a great idea disfigured, the resulting disappointment which, laying hold of men's minds, paralyzes them. A really unhoped-for disappointment, a providential support for the bourgeois who lives on it and from it extracts the reason for his security. The masses are not stirred if they have no more than a choice between present evils and evils to come; resigned to those they suffer now, they have no interest in risking themselves in the direction of others which are unknown but certain.

Foreseeable miseries do not excite men's imaginations, and there is no example of a revolution breaking out in the name of a dark future, a grim prophecy. Who could have guessed, in the last century, that the new society would, by its vices and its iniquities, permit the old one to preserve, even to consolidate itself; that the possible, having become reality, would fly to the rescue of the past?

ON EITHER SIDE, we are at a nodal point, both fallen from that naïveté in which speculations on the future are elaborated.²⁰ In the long run, life without utopia is suffocating, for the multitude at least: threatened otherwise with petrification, the world must have a new madness. This is the one piece of evidence to be gained from an analysis of the present. Meanwhile, our situation on this side is certainly a curious one. Imagine a society overpopulated with doubts; in which, with the exception of a few *strays*, no one adheres utterly to anything; in which, unscathed by superstitions and certainties, everyone pays lip service to freedom and no one respects the form of government that defends and incarnates it. Ideals without content, or, to use a word quite as adulterated, myths without substance. You are disappointed after promises that could not be kept; we, by a lack of any promises at all. At least we are aware of the advantage the intelligence gains from a regime that, for the moment, lets it function as it will, without submitting it to the rigors of any imperative. The bourgeois believes in nothing, true enough; but this truth is, I daresay, the positive side of his vacuum, for freedom can be manifested only in the void of beliefs, in the absence of axioms, and only where the laws have no more authority than a hypothesis.²¹ If you were to object that the bourgeois nonetheless believes in something, that money perfectly fulfills, for

²⁰ Elsewhere, Cioran wrote that Dostoevsky is forgivable because he did his time in prison, and then chose to write from a fictional space rather than a personal one. Lev Shestov thought prison changed Dostoevsky., made him a prisoner to inarticulate "hatred of humanity" from his prison years. The failure to confront that hatred directly led to an embrace of national salvationism through a Russian spirit, anything that reduced the power of the individual to shape Russianness. Cioran has this too. Cioran's disgust for Bucharest mimics Dostoevsky's disgust for Paris with its crowds of bourgeois humans talking about liberty and fraternity, while living *insincerely*. This notion of sincerity bothered Cioran as well. What Shestov notes of Dostoevsky might be applied to Cioran in that both wanted the world to burn for the sake of some higher good, some ideal nation. And both repented of their youthful radicalism.

²¹ "A lawn both disheveled and baldish, with a middle parting of asphalt, and all studded with pale dun leaves." This thing Vladimir Nabokov laid in *Bend Sinister*.

him, the function of a dogma, I should reply that this worst of all dogmas is, strange as it may seem, the one that is the most endurable for the mind. We forgive others their wealth if, in exchange, they let us starve to death *in our own way*. No, it is not so sinister, this society which pays no attention to you, guarantees you the right to attack it, invites you, even obliges you to do so in its hours of sloth when it lacks energy to execrate²² itself. As indifferent, in the last instance, to its own fate as to yours, it is in no way eager to infringe upon your misfortunes, neither to reduce nor to aggravate them, and if it exploits you, it does so by an automatism, without premeditation or spite, as is appropriate to weary and satiated brutes that are as contaminated by skepticism as their victims.²³ The difference between regimes is less important than it appears; you are alone by force, we without constraint. Is the gap so wide²⁴ between an inferno and a ravaging paradise?²⁵ All societies are bad; but there are degrees, I admit, and if I have chosen this one, it is because I can distinguish among the nuances of trumpery.

FREEDOM, I was saying, demands, in order to manifest itself, a vacuum; it requires a void—and succumbs to it.²⁶ The condition that determines it is the very one that annihilates it. It lacks foundations; the more complete it is, the more it overhangs an abyss, for everything threatens it, down to the principle from which it derives. Man is so little made to endure or deserve it, that the very benefits he receives from it crush him, and freedom ultimately burdens him to the point where he prefers, to its excesses, those of terror. To these disadvantages are added others: a liberal society, eliminating "mystery," "the absolute," "order," and possessing a true metaphysic no more than a true police, casts the individual back upon himself, while dividing him from what he is, from his own depths. If such a society lacks roots, if it is essentially *superficial*, this is because freedom, fragile in itself, has no means of maintaining itself, of surviving the dangers which threaten it from without and from within; it appears, moreover, only in the twilight of a regime, only at the moment when a class is declining, dissolving: it was the collapse of the aristocracy that allowed the eighteenth century to divagate so magnificently; it is the collapse of the bourgeoisie that allows us today to cultivate our

²² To execrate is "to feel or express great loathing for." Cioran uses this word (as translated by Howard) three times within this letter.

²³ "Skepticism is the sadism of embittered souls," Cioran writes. "The more stress we lay on our torments, the more inseparable they seem from our unredeemed condition." (From "The Odyssey of Rancor" in *History and Utopia*, trans. Richard Howard.)

²⁴ "Skepticism is the rapture of impasse," Cioran declares. See E M Cioran, *The Trouble with Being Born*, trans. Richard Howard (Simon and Schuster, 2013): 112.

²⁵ "Why can't we accept the fact that the right thing to do is live inside this very special tension which keeps suicide suspended?" Franz Kafka asked Milena in an August 1920 letter translated by Philip Boehm.

²⁶ "Only he who creates the void around us does a service. My gratitude to those who made me more alone, who—in spite of themselves, but no matter—have contributed to my spiritual consolidation." [Cioran in *Cahiers*, June 5, 1969]

fantasies.²⁷ Freedoms prosper only in a sick body politic: tolerance and impotence are synonyms. This is patent in politics as everywhere else. When I first glimpsed this truth, the earth gave way under my feet. Even now, though I tell myself: "You belong to a society of free men," the pride I take in the fact is still accompanied by a sense of dread and inanity, the result of my terrible certitude. In the course of history, freedom occupies no more instants than ecstasy in the life of a mystic. It escapes us at the very moment we try to grasp and formulate²⁸ it: no one can enjoy freedom without trembling. Desperately mortal, once it is established it postulates its lack of a future and labors on, with all its undermined forces, to its own negation, its own agony. Is there not a certain perversion in our love for it? And is it not horrifying to worship what neither can nor cares to *last*? For you who no longer possess it, freedom is everything; for us who do, it is merely an illusion, because we know that we shall lose it and that, in any case, it is made to be lost. Hence, at the heart of our void, we cast our glances in all directions, without thereby neglecting the possibilities of salvation that reside in ourselves.²⁹ There is, moreover, no such thing as a perfect vacuum in history. That unheard-of absence to which we are reduced, and which I have the pleasure and the misfortune to reveal to you, you would be mistaken to imagine merely a blank, uninscribed; for in it I discern—presentiment or hallucination? — a kind of expectation of *other gods*. Which ones? No one can say. All I know, and it is what everyone knows, is that a situation like ours cannot be endured indefinitely.³⁰ Deep within our consciousness, one hope crucifies us, one apprehension exalts us. Unless they assent to death, the old nations, however rotten, cannot dispense with new idols. Whether or not the West is irremediably corrupt, it must rethink all the ideas stolen from it and applied (by counterfeiting them) elsewhere: I mean that it is incumbent upon the West, if it seeks to make itself illustrious once more by a throb or a vestige of honor, to take back the utopias that, in its need for comfort, it has abandoned to the others, thereby dispossessing itself of its genius and its mission. Whereas it was the

²⁷ "The colors go," the Butterfly collector muses. But: "There is a last glow in the window to which the stairs of the day still lead." See *Bend Sinister*.

²⁸ "This material, physical aspect of letters and their unceasing whiff of reality posed an irresistible temptation for Kafka. He began to hover over letters as never before. They became sexual fetishes. He spread them out in front of him, laid his face upon them, kissed them, inhaled their smell. On walks or short business trips, he took Felice's letters along with him, to fortify himself." [from William H Gass, *Life Sentences: Literary Accounts and Judgements*]

²⁹ Constantin Noica: "The world has more genius than me,' Goethe used to say. It can be added that the wisdom of the world knows deeper things than the wisdom of a language alone can say. But every language is, after all, the wisdom of the world in one of its versions." [from Noica, *The Romanian Sentiment of Being*, 59]

³⁰ "- Why not?

- Because our access to the moment and our access to the end of the world belong to two different worlds." [from Alexander Kluge and Gerhard Richter, *Dispatches from Moments of Calm*, trans. Nathaniel McBride, 89]

West's duty to put communism into practice, to adjust it to its traditions, to humanize, liberalize, and thereafter propose it to the world, it has left to the East the privilege of realizing the unrealizable, of deriving power and prestige from the finest of our modern illusions. In the battle of ideologies, the West has shown itself timid, harmless; some congratulate it for this, whereas it is to be blamed: in our day and age, one does not accede to hegemony without the cooperation of those lofty, lying principles employed by virile peoples to dissimulate their instincts and their aims. Having abandoned reality for ideas, and ideas for ideology, man has slid toward a derived universe, toward a world of subproducts in which fiction acquires the virtues of a primordial datum. This process is the fruit of all the rebellions and all the heresies of the West, yet the West refuses to draw the final consequences: it has not initiated the revolution that was its imperative, the revolution that its entire past demanded, nor has it carried to their conclusion the upheavals of which it was the instigator. By disinheriting itself in favor of its enemies, the West risks compromising its denouement and missing a supreme opportunity. Not content with having betrayed all those precursors, all those schismatics who have prepared and formed it from Luther to Marx, it still supposes that someone will come, from the outside, to initiate *its* revolution, to bring back its utopias and its dreams.³¹ Will the West ever understand that it has a political destiny and a role only if it rediscovers in itself its old dreams and its old utopias, as well as the lies of its old pride? For the moment, it is the adversaries of the West who, converted into theoreticians of the duty it evades, are building their empires on its timidity, its lassitude. What curse has fallen upon it that at the term of its trajectory it produces only these businessmen, these shopkeepers, these racketeers with their blank stares and atrophied smiles, to be met with everywhere, in Italy as in France, in England as in Germany? Is it with such vermin as this that a civilization so delicate and so complex must come to an end? Perhaps we had to endure this, out of abjection, in order to be able to conceive of another kind of man. As a good liberal,³² I do not want to carry indignation to the point of intolerance or to let myself be carried away by my moods, though it is sweet, for us all, to be able to infringe upon the principles that appeal to our generosity. I merely wanted to point out to you that our world, far from wonderful, could in a sense become so if it consented not to annihilate itself (as it inclines all too readily to do), but to liquidate its failures by undertaking *impossible* tasks, opposed to that dreadful good sense which is disfiguring and destroying it today.³³

³¹ "-Can a sound also be rooted in both?

-No." [Alexander Kluge & Gerhard Richter, *Dispatches from Moments of Calm*, trans. Nathaniel McBride, 89]

³² Frank Kafka to Milena, 26 August 1920: "I am dirty, Milena, infinitely dirty, this is why I scream so much about purity. No one sings as purely as those who inhabit the deepest hell – what we take to be the song of angels in their music." [Translated by Philip Boehm]

³³ One can almost see William Gass biting his lip, trying to resist the incline of this line as he typed it: "When Franz's relationship with Felice was at an end, she saved his letters; he burned hers."

THE FEELINGS the West inspires in me are no less mixed than those I entertain toward my country, toward Hungary, or toward our *big* neighbor, whose indiscreet proximity you are in a better position to appreciate than I. The excessive good and bad I think of Russia, the impressions she suggests when I reflect upon her destiny—how can I put such things without falling into the preposterous?³⁴ I make no claim to change your opinion about her, I merely want you to know what she represents for me and what place she occupies among my obsessions. The more I think about her, the more I find that Russia has formed herself, down through the ages, not the way a nation is formed, but the way a universe is formed, the moments of her evolution participating less in history than in a somber, terrifying cosmogony. Those tsars with their look of dried-up divinities, giants solicited by sanctity and crime, collapsing into prayer and panic—they were, as are these recent tyrants who have replaced them, closer to a geological vitality than to human anemia, despots perpetuating in our time the primordial sap, the primordial spoilage, and triumphing over us all by their inexhaustible reserves of chaos. Crowned or not, it was their significance, as it is still, to leap *beyond civilization*, to engulf it if need be; the operation was inscribed within their nature, since they have always suffered from the same obsession: to extend their supremacy over our dreams and our rebellions, to constitute an empire as vast as our disappointments or our dreads. Such a nation, coterminous both in its thoughts and in its actions with the confines of the globe, does not measure itself by present standards or explain itself in ordinary terms, in an intelligible language: it would require the jargon of the Gnostics, enriched by that of a general paralysis. Certainly it borders (has not Rilke assured us?) on God; as it also does, unfortunately, on our own country, and will again, in a more or less immediate future, on many others—I dare not say on all, despite the specific warnings that a malignant prescience intimates. Wherever we are, Russia already touches us, if not geographically, then without a doubt internally. I am more disposed than any man I know to acknowledge my debts to her: without her writers, would I ever have grown aware of my wounds and of my duty to surrender to them?³⁵ Without her and without them, would I not have wasted my agonies, missed out on my chaos? This penchant which leads me to make an impartial judgment upon her and at the same time to testify to my gratitude is hardly, I fear, to your taste at the present time. I therefore break off such unseasonable eulogies, stuffing them inside myself where they will be condemned to be fruitful and multiply.

³⁴ "Having failed with everything belonging to the world of fact and external life, nature creates its ultimate impediment to happiness by making it a psychological impossibility," writes Marcel Proust, considering Gilberte's simultaneous proximity and absence. "The phenomenon of happiness does not come to pass; or else it leads to utter bitterness."

³⁵ Maurice Blanchot: "A writer is his own first dupe, and at the very moment he fools other people he is also fooling himself." See *The Station Hill Blanchot Reader: Fiction & Literary Essays*, ed. George Quasha, trans. Lydia Davis, Paul Auster, and Robert Lambertson (Barrytown, N.Y.: Station Hill/Barrytown, Ltd, 1999): 367.

EVEN IN the days when we amused ourselves by tallying our agreements and our differences, you reproached me for my mania of judging without bias both what I take to heart and what I execrate,³⁶ of entertaining only double—necessarily false-feelings³⁷ which you imputed to my incapacity to experience a true passion, while insisting on the delights I derive from them.³⁸ Your diagnosis was not inexact; yet you erred with regard to the category of the delights. Do you suppose it is so agreeable to be both idolater and victim of the pro and the con, an enthusiast divided against his enthusiasms, a raving madman eager for *objectivity*? This does not happen without sufferings: the instincts protest, and it is indeed despite and against them that one advances toward an absolute irresolution, a state scarcely distinct from what the language of the ecstasies calls "the last point of annihilation."³⁹ In order to know, myself, the whole of my thoughts about anything at all, in order to pronounce not only on a problem but on a trifle, I must oppose the major vice of my mind, that propensity to espouse all causes and at the same time dissociate myself from them, a kind of omnipresent virus divided between covetousness and satiety, a benign yet deadly agent as impatient as it is blasé, undecided between scourges, inept at adopting and specializing in shifting from each to the other without discrimination effectiveness, bearer and bungler of the incurable, a traitor to all diseases, those of others as to its own.⁴⁰

NEVER TO HAVE occasion to take a position, to make up one's mind, or to define oneself— there is no wish I make moods, those more often. But we do not always

³⁶ On 27 November 1917, Kafka committed the following meta to his diary: "In the diary one finds proof that, even in conditions that today seem unbearable, one lived, looked around and wrote down observations, that this right hand thus moved as it does today, when the possibility of surveying our condition at that time does make us wiser, but we therefore must recognize all the more the undauntedness of our striving at that time, which in sheer ignorance nonetheless sustained itself." [translated by Ross Benjamin]

³⁷ The man-made shoreline is an inauthentic landscape, Proust insists in *Swann's Way*: "And as a further guarantee of the storm's authenticity, I needed the shore on which it beat to be the original unspoiled shoreline, and not some esplanade recently laid down by a town-council." A fake landscape contaminates even the passing storm with its sticky falseness. [Translated by Griefes]

³⁸ In his diaries, Franz Kafka describes an inability to stay inside himself which manifests as a sort of impertinence. In many diaries, the speaker alternates between someone who *writes* and someone who *wrote* what they are writing.

³⁹ Although he leans into Dostoevsky's rather essentialized, 'Slavophilic' reading of suffering here, Cioran's later work is reminiscent of Leonard Cohen in its frequent references to 'Buddhist' ideas that appear as potential liberations from the relationship with suffering. To note: what passes for Buddhism in Western countries is often different from that of Eastern Buddhists whose spirituality hasn't been facilitated or mediated by capitalism.

⁴⁰ The question of Cioran's sincerity in softly repudiating his fascism as a form of youthful madness comes up often. It is more, I think, than a question of purity—more of a question as to what constitutes repudiation to someone who stayed apolitical. We absolve Elizabeth Warren of her early Republicanism (despite the neo-fascist inclination of post-Trump Republicanism) because she is so forcefully committed to its opposite, and has made that commitment her mantle, her platform, her selfhood. What Cioran sought for Romania, a grand redemption from the narrative of small, insignificant states, is precisely what he cannot offer his readers, given his commitment to passivity as both aesthetic and metaphysical state. It is interesting to consider how the rhetoric of repudiation—and its attendant discourses—complicates legibility across cultures and disciplines.

master our or attitudes in the bud, those rough drafts of theory. Viscerally inclined to systems, we ceaselessly construct them, especially in politics, domain of pseudo problems⁴¹, breeding grounds of the bad philosopher who resides in each of us, a realm I would be exiled from for the most commonplace of reasons, a piece of evidence which is raised in my eyes to the rank of a revelation: *politics revolves uniquely around man*. Having lost the taste for beings, I nonetheless wear myself out in vain acquiring one for things; necessarily limited to the interval that separates them, I expend and exhaust myself upon their shadow.⁴² Shadows too, these nations whose fate intrigues me, less for themselves than for the pretext they afford of revenging myself upon what has neither form nor outline, upon entities and symbols. The idler who loves violence safeguards his *savoir vivre* by confining himself in an abstract hell. Abandoning the individual, he frees himself of names and faces, deals with the imprecise, the general, and, orienting his thirst for exterminations to the impalpable, conceives a new genre: the pamphlet *without object*.

CLINGING to fractions of ideas and to figments of dreams, that having arrived at reflection by accident or by hysteria, and not at all by a concern for rigor, I seem to myself, among civilized men, a kind of intruder, a troglodyte enamored of decrepitude, plunged into subversive prayers, victim of a panic that emanates not from a vision of the world but from the spasms of the flesh and the *tenebrae* of the blood. Impermeable to the solicitations of clarity and to the Latin contamination, I feel Asia stirring in my veins: am I the offspring of some inadmissible tribe, or the spokesman of a race once turbulent, today mute? Often the temptation seizes me to forge for myself another genealogy, to *change* ancestors, to choose among those who, in their day, spread grief among the nations, contrary to my own, to our modest and martyred land stuffed with miseries, amalgamated to the mud and groaning beneath the anathema of the ages. Yes, in my crises of fatuity, I incline to believe myself the epigone of some horde illustrious for its depredations, a Turanian⁴³ at heart, legitimate heir of the steppes, the last Mongol. . . .

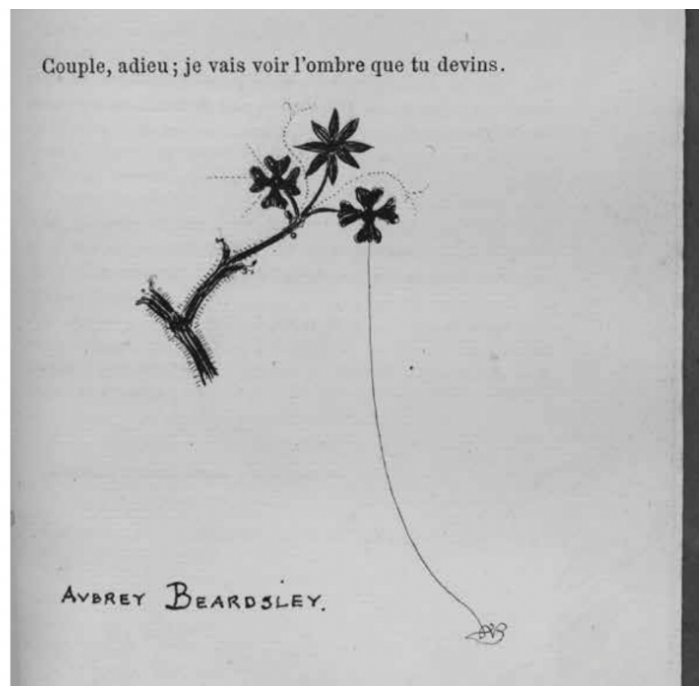
I WOULD not end here without once again warning you against the enthusiasm or the jealousy my "luck" inspires in you, specifically the opportunity to loll in a city whose memory doubtless haunts you, despite your roots in our evaporated country. This city, which I would exchange for no other in the world, is for that very reason the source of my misfortunes. All that is not Paris being equal in my eyes, I often regret that wars

⁴¹ In philosophy, a pseudo-problem is one that arises only as a result of a misuse of language.

⁴² "Every reading is a narration whose rhythm is determined by the rhetoric of what it fails to say about its relation to the text and to the madness of the text," Shoshana Felman concludes in *Writing and Madness: (Literature/Philosophy/Psychoanalysis)*.

⁴³ "Turanian is an obsolete language-family proposal subsuming most of the languages of Eurasia not included in Indo-European, Semitic and Chinese." (*Oxford Language Dictionary*)

have spared it, that it has not perished like so many others. Destroyed, it would have rid me of the happiness of living here, I could have spent my days elsewhere, at the ends of the earth. I shall never forgive Paris for having bound me to space, for making me *from somewhere*.⁴⁴ Mind you, I am not forgetting for a moment that four-fifths of its inhabitants, as Chamfort has already noted, "die of grief." I should add further, for your edification, that the remaining fifth⁴⁵, the privileged few of whom I am one, are no different in their feelings, and that they even envy that majority its advantage of knowing of what to die.



"What kind of reality does truth possess if it is powerless in the public realm?"⁴⁶

⁴⁴ They say a saint never performs miracles in her own country. In the sepia photograph, my mother smiles slyly, her half-lidded eyes thick with secrets; her torso leaning casually against the ornate monastery gate.

⁴⁵ What is a saint? A saint is someone who has achieved a remote human possibility. It is impossible to say what that possibility is. I think it has something to do with the energy of love," Leonard Cohen wrote in *Beautiful Losers*.

⁴⁶ Hannah Arendt, ["Truth and Politics."](#)