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## CIORAN: A REFLECTION ON DECADENCE AS A LIFESTYLE

“All’s good if it’s excessive.”  
Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom*

### *I, the Decadent*

The term “decadence” generated ample debate during the nineteenth century among historians, philosophers, scholars and writers. Its derived term, *decadentism* – coined by the low-profile literary critic Anatole Baju and writ large in the title of his magazine, *Le Décadent littéraire et artistique*, established in April 1886 – enjoyed but ephemeral glory in French culture, that is, until the advent of symbolism (whose name was coined by Jean Moréas in his article of the same title published in the *Le Figaro* issue of 18 September 1886). However, apart from the conceptual relevance of decadentism as apparent rather through an aesthetic approach, the culture of decadence reached an apogee in 1886 with the publication of K.-J. Huysmans’s novel *À Rebours*. The novel, a synthesis of decadentism, influenced an entire generation of writers from Oscar Wilde in Britain and Gabriele D’Annunzio in Italia to Stanisław Przybyszewski in Poland and the rather low-profile C.I.A. Nottara in Romania. Each of these writers looked to the exemplary model by the French novelist to pen their own novels – respectively *The Portrait of Dorian Gray*, *Il Piacere (The Child of Pleasure)*, *Die Synagoge des Satan (The Synagogue of Satan)*, and *Suflete obosite (Tired Souls)* – as a model of decadent becoming, of a lifestyle oriented towards the peculiar aesthetics of decadentism, and whose protagonist embodies it in minute detail. What Huysmans’s novel offered, after all, was an undivided ontological assumption of a form grounded exclusively in aesthetic principles. By his emblematic character, Des Esseintes, Huysmans opened the door to a way of conduct, a set of rules, a form of special asceticism which assimilated excess to such a degree as to elevate it to the rank of an aesthetic imperative on the border of a lifestyle – that of the dandy<sup>1</sup> – with a long-standing history. In Huysmans’s novel, sensitivity to the formality of life reached the proportion of a genuine *Gesamtkunstwerk* (“total work of art”).

What happens when decadence is articulated in the first person? There are countless instances when fin-de-siècle writers assume this lifestyle not exclusively in terms of a rhetoric, but also of a special stylistics. We owe to Paul Verlaine a

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<sup>1</sup> See the history of this lifestyle in Adriana Babeți, *Dandysmul. O istorie [Dandyism: A History]*, Iași, Polirom, 2004.

rigorous identification, within a prodigious generation, of those poets whom he dubs *les poètes maudits*. His book of the same title, published in 1884, includes Arthur Rimbaud, Tristan Corbière, Stéphane Mallarmé, Marceline Desbordes-Valmore, Villiers de l'Isle Adam, and Pauvre Lelian, an anagram of Verlaine's own name. Verlaine's selection criterion is such as to align poetry with a lifestyle. Decadentism consists in a pose, in an insurgency doubled by a festive "upside down" recognition (*à rebours*, in Huysmans's terms), an aesthetic secular damnation. We can note a series of writers who espoused decadence biographically, thus outlining a personal conduct where literature affords the exemplary model, even a decadent art of living, or an art of decadent living.

Verlaine's celebrated poem *Langueur*<sup>2</sup> – which some regard as a decadent *ars poetica* – establishes such a template, profitable for analysis by virtue of its textual conciseness. Published in the volume *Jadis et naguère* (1884), *Langueur* starts with a now famous line: "Je suis l'Empire à la fin de la décadence" ("I am the Empire as the decadence/ Draws to a close"<sup>3</sup>). This is one of the most compelling poetic statements, which forges a deliberate alignment of a political form with a poetic one. Yet, identification with an age entails identification with its peculiar sensibility rather than simply with its events, with historical acts. The metaphor's economy crystallizes incidentals through a decadent sensibility. What does this identification suggest? What strikes here is a certain grandiloquence, the remainder of a romantic rhetoric which appropriates exceptionalism as its own hallmark and makes a show of it. The poem already signals here a form of gesticulation which will become progressively more apparent. However, the identification is nuanced, for it is aligned with a derived temporality which, in turn, heralds another alignment, this time a formal one.

The demise of decadence does not indicate, in Verlaine's poem, merely a time span, the final, crepuscular (st)age of a political entity, state, empire, etc. Indeed, France's defeat in the Franco-Prussian War (1870) and the loss of her role as a major political actor are hinted at in the poem. The phrase "les grands Barbares blancs" ("the tall, fair-haired Barbarians"<sup>4</sup>) alludes to the Germans who, in a typically decadent scenario, act as the destroyer of an empire weakened from the

<sup>2</sup> "Je suis l'Empire à la fin de la décadence./ Qui regarde passer les grands Barbares blancs/ En composant des acrostiches indolents/ D'un style d'or où la langueur du soleil danse./ L'âme seulette a mal au cœur d'un ennui dense./ Là-bas on dit qu'il est de longs combats sanglants./ O n'y pouvoir, étant si faible aux vœux si lents./ O n'y vouloir fleurir un peu cette existence!!! O n'y vouloir, ô n'y pouvoir mourir un peu!!! Ah! tout est bu! Bathylle, as-tu fini de rire?! Ah! tout est bu, tout est mangé! Plus rien à dire!!! Seul, un poème un peu niais qu'on jette au feu./ Seul, un esclave un peu coureur qui vous néglige./ Seul, un ennui d'on ne sait quoi qui vous afflige!"

<sup>3</sup> *One Hundred and One Poems by Paul Verlaine: A Bilingual Edition*. Translated by Norman R. Shapiro, Chicago – London, University of Chicago Press, 2000. Unless mentioned otherwise, all translations of Verlaine come from this edition.

<sup>4</sup> My translation. Translator Norman R. Shapiro names them "Vandals" without any further description; his "midst Vandals' conquest" sounds harsher than is Verlaine's neutral "passer".

inside. What matters, however, is a style that decadence imposes, which is why subsequent approaches configure the stylistics pertaining to a lifestyle, a manner of being decadent, a decadent lifestyle, or, in Wittgenstein's terms, a *Lebensform*. The poem evinces an affectation of grandeur, which hearkens back to Nerval's *El desdichado*<sup>5</sup>, a voice of superbia attuned to the delectable great disasters.

We encounter here a form of sensibility specific to the age that has imbued the everyday, which literature – whether poetry, prose or drama – best reflects. The first identification Verlaine offers via the poetic voice is one with the spirit of the age, a *Weltanschauung* transposed here through a metaphor typical of decadence: that of an Empire in its decline. “La grandeur et la décadence” is a cliché which corresponds to a *fin du siècle* obsession that Balzac would employ in the title of his novel *Histoire de la grandeur et la décadence de César Birotteau* (1837), *The Rise and Fall of César Birotteau*. From the fall of the Roman Empire to the fall of César Birotteau there's a leap which the nineteenth century saw fully manageable, a leap from the destiny of an empire to that of an average bourgeois and the world he built into existential patterns.

History unfolds as a spectacle, a dramatization in which the decadent self participates as a spectator. Participation entails here the existence of a form of mediation which the spectacle affords. Yet there is more to it. The decadent self offers itself as a spectacle, and witnesses history as a *spectateur désengagé*. The personal spectacle which the self presents is that of a stylistics peculiar to decadence which imposes a certain conduct, a formal plan averse to any other kind of investment, a mode. The savour of *le mieux de la fin*, a brief respite of calm, of relative poise under duress, is the privileged moment.

In his *Sade, Fourier, Loyola*<sup>6</sup>, on Sade's scenography in *Les Cent Vingt Journées de Sodome, ou l'École du libertinage*, Roland Barthes analyses the transformation of horror into an elaborate set, a theatre minutely devised for the four Sadian perverts within a micro-society organized in accordance with a caricatural utopian model tipped to the dystopian. The relative distance between the spectator and the actors of this drama is marked here through a play of incidentals extended as an echo or semi-blindness: “Là-bas on dit qu'il est de longs combats sanglants” (“I'm told that [down there] bloody battles rage hard by”). Yet, it is lived indirectly, it is a form of living mediated aesthetically as is typical of a decadent sensibility. What does theatricality entail? Not necessarily enhanced, deliberately emphatic gestures, but also the need to render form expressive again, to strengthen representation through gestures. When gestures become saturated, namely mannerism, gesticulation starts making a show of itself rather than

<sup>5</sup> “Je suis le Ténébreux, – le Veuf, – l'Inconsolé./ Le Prince d'Aquitaine à la Tour abolie:/ Ma seule Etoile est morte, – et mon luth constellé/ Porte le Soleil noir de la Mélancolie.” (*El desdichado*, 1854).

<sup>6</sup> Roland Barthes, *Sade, Fourier, Loyola*. Translated by Richard Miller, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976.

conveying a certain content. This poetic I, or if you wish poetic subject, becomes the subject of mannerism, rather than of history.

Poetic gesticulation frames the acrostic within a form at once ritualized and derisory, so that poetic gesticulation is in fact a stylistics – a special one: of “the aureate diction”. The rococo was the imperial gilded style, the style of the decadent empire. The crepuscule thaws into choreographic form. Everything is form and abides by a rule set by the style. We witness here an expression of saturation where everything is closed, from the opportunities for delight to the discourse itself, such as in Mallarmé’s poem *Brise marine*: “La chair est triste, hélas! et j’ai lu tous les livres” (“The flesh is sad – and I’ve read every book”<sup>7</sup>). What is left is no longer the substance but its reflexion, its jocularity, its representation, the choreography of surfaces. We see here an emphatic touch drained of vitality and reduced to mere stylistic shape. Decadent culture, like the life forms it generates, is one of excess, if a paradoxical one, an excess sprung from a lack typical of saturated universes which, in their turn, become mannerism-ridden universes, namely such universes which cultivate form, expression, outline, and so on.

A writer may assume a decadent style as lifestyle also through the mediation of the institution of literature. What happens when a philosopher assumes decadence not simply in their life or bibliography, but also at their intersection? In *Perennial Decay: On the Aesthetics and Politics of Decadence*, the volume editors, Liz Constable, Dennis Dennisoff and Matthew Potolsky, discuss the attitude evolved by those who dabble in decadence in terms of *dramas of differentiation*. The editors refer here to a dissimulated apotropaic rite whereby scholars set themselves apart from, so as to ward off, the pejorative-malefic potential of decadence and decadentism, by disclaiming any affinity with the subject of their investigation. In fact, the editors never contemplate the opposite of this attitude. Simply stated, there also exist, at the opposite end, *dramas of identification*, or *dramas of proximity*. Among the philosophers who have made decadence not just their topic but also their own existential dimension, two names stand out by far: Friedrich Nietzsche and Emil Cioran. Both assume decadence as a lifestyle – of their own lives.

To make my introduction truly effective in approaching the subject at hand I must outline here two further directions of inquiry into the works of the two philosophers. The dramatic, spectacular effect that Verlaine too creates in his *ars poetica* is characteristic of decadent gesticulation. That Cioran himself noticed the theatricality which the decadent self indulges in, is apparent in his *Notebooks II*, in an entry on the French Revolution: “What, to me, makes the Revolution of ’89 less glorious is that everything occurs on the stage, that its leaders fidget and fret like

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<sup>7</sup> Stéphane Mallarmé, *Œuvres Complètes*. Édition de Bertrand Marchall, Paris, Gallimard, 1998. English translation: Stéphane Mallarmé, *Collected Poems and Other Verse*. Translated by E. H. and A.M. Blackmore, New York, Oxford University Press, 2006.

actors, that even the guillotine is a spectacle. In fact, the whole French history is but a *representation*: a series of events that one watches rather than participates in. Hence the sense of frivolity which even Terror engenders, looked at *from a distance*<sup>8</sup>. Cioran's "from a distance" establishes the *écart* necessary for aesthetic sublimation of atrocity, its displacement to an order of "representation", of spectacle and the elimination of everything that is alive, vital, of the palpable and the palpitating. In a sense, here Cioran comes close to Guy Debord's reflections on the "society of the spectacle" which Debord defines as an "inversion concrète de la vie" ("a concrete inversion of life"), just as life turned spectacular is for him "fausse vie" ("counterfeit life"), a "pseudo-usage de la vie" ("a pseudo-use of life"<sup>9</sup>). Cioran is sensitive to forms: he elides France with formal excess, with the seductions of form and the practice of formalism, to the detriment of affective and instinctual disorder on a wide scale ranging down to detail and trivia. We will need to turn to Friedrich Nietzsche as the philosopher investigates Wagner's art, in *Der Fall Wagner (The Case of Wagner)*, for a thorough discussion of decadent sensibility.

*Nietzsche, Cioran and sickness as a lifestyle*

In *The Rhetoric of Sickness from Baudelaire to D'Annunzio*, Barbara Spackman notes the existence of what she calls a "rhetoric of sickness", which is at the same time a "rhetoric of decadence", a type of discourse that enables diverse aspects of sickness – and not exclusively the clinical ones – to proliferate. Thus, convalescence becomes a mode of valorising artistically or philosophically the experience of sickness: "Convalescence as the scene of artistic and philosophic creation is an ideologeme of decadent texts, a narrative that lies between texts."<sup>10</sup> We can notice that Barbara Spackman's "convalescence" names not the aftermath of sickness, but an explanatory narrative, an instance of mediation. As regards decadence as sickness, convalescence is not simply a transitory stage which heralds recovery, but rather a stage that prolongs indefinitely, a condition whose evolution has not fully ceased. This is one of the senses which Nietzsche ascribes to decadence in his *Ecce Homo* – a long, never completed, convalescence. Convalescence entails the continuation of sickness, if in diminished, contained, metabolized form: "A long, all too long series of years signifies recovery for me – unfortunately it also signifies at the same time relapse, decline, periods of a kind of

<sup>8</sup> Emil Cioran, *Caiete II: 1966–1968 [Notebooks II: 1966–1968]*, București, Humanitas, 2010, pp. 285, 286.

<sup>9</sup> Guy Debord, *La Société du spectacle*, Paris, Gallimard, 1967. English version: *The Society of the Spectacle*. Translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith, New York, Zone Books, 1994, § 2, 48, 49, respectively.

<sup>10</sup> Barbara Spackman, *The Rhetoric of Sickness from Baudelaire to D'Annunzio*, Ithaca – London, Cornell University Press, 1989, p. IX.

*decadence*<sup>11</sup>. Thus, Nietzsche situates decadence not at a physiological level; he dissociates it from nervous conditions, from the degenerescence which is central to the late nineteenth-century medical construal of decadence. Rather, Nietzsche aims to render decadence a sickness in itself, if a sickness of the philosopher, by arguing that dialectic, for instance, is “a symptom of decadence”. Notwithstanding, philosophy and physiology engage here in a special, almost symbiotic relationship, and impose a dietetics, or, to state it otherwise, a form of asceticism. The sicknesses afflicting the philosopher favour philosophizing. Furthermore, they accelerate cognition, the capacity to render thinking cogent and subtle.

Nietzsche admits that he is at once a decadent but also, dialectically, the opposite as well: “Apart from the fact that I am a *décadent*, I am also the opposite of it”<sup>12</sup>. He is as much a physician as his own patient. The difference lies in that, unlike most “decadents”, Nietzsche opts to treat his “decadence” and, in this case, he chooses the right remedy. In effect, his decadence is of a very special sort, for it concerns one direction alone: “My proof of this, among other things, that I have always chosen the *right* means against bad conditions: while the *décadent* always chooses the means harmful to himself. As *summa summarum*, I was healthy, as an angle, as a specialty, I was *décadent*”<sup>13</sup>. Decadents appropriate a certain lifestyle, yet, as A. E. Carter aptly remarks, Nietzsche establishes a difference between himself as a philosopher of decadence and the decadents proper: “The cult of decadence is just such a revolt. But here is the paradox: the decadents, even when they refused to live by Rousseau’s gospel, never denied its truth. They were like unfrocked priests celebrating the Black Mass – perfectly aware that their cult was blasphemous”<sup>14</sup>. This concerns the philosopher’s desire to “donner du style à son caractère” (“give style to his character”), or, in, Marielle Macé’s terms, “de rester souverain dans l’exercice d’une esthétique du vivre” (“to remain sovereign in the exercise of an aesthetics of living”<sup>15</sup>).

Nietzsche opts to and can cure himself because *summa summarum* he is healthy, unlike the decadents, who choose deliberately the blasphemous cult of decadence, that is, to fuel the sickness. Nietzsche renders *healing an asceticism in form*, built as it is on a network of strictures which include reclusion, renunciation, etc., which belongs with the modern fascination “pour l’idée d’une égalisation de la vie à sa forme, voir à sa règle – pour le thème des exercices spirituelles, des techniques de soi, du soin pris à soi, et même pour les vie monastiques” (with “the idea of an alignment of life with its form, regard of its rule – [with] the theme of

<sup>11</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo & The Antichrist*. Translated by Thomas Wayne, New York, Algora Publishing, 2004, p.12.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 13.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>14</sup> A.E. Carter, *The Idea of Decadence in French Literature 1830–1900*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1958, p. 4.

<sup>15</sup> Marielle Macé, *Styless. Critique de nos formes de vie*, Paris, Gallimard, 2016, p. 207.

spiritual exercises, of techniques of the self, the care of the self, and even [with] the monastic life”<sup>16</sup>).

We should note that sickness is constitutive to the decadent mode. The decadent assimilates weaknesses, exhaustion, devitalization, barrenness as his means of expression, his lifestyle. Nietzsche deploys a dialectical strategy to reclaim, virtually paradoxically/ counterintuitively, a vitality which lies in the lack of vitality and which the sickness (Wagner) generates, thus triggering reflection. “Illness itself can be a stimulus to life: but one must be healthy enough for such a stimulus! Wagner increases exhaustion: therefore he attracts the weak and exhausted to him.”<sup>17</sup>. Nietzsche’s remarks on the relationship between sickness and philosophy switch constantly between metaphor and denotation. A counterpoint inspired by the above statement can be found in Cioran’s *Notebooks*, where the Romanian philosopher regards physiological weakness, the lack of vitality, as the stimulus to a theory able to identify the pattern of overwhelming, superlative, vitality: “When one thinks that the theory of the uebermensch was advanced by a man afflicted by all sorts of sickness, by a frail, extremely vulnerable man – what a lesson!”<sup>18</sup>. Or, should we wish a reflection similar to the one above, we can find it in Cioran: “I am astounded by the energy my own *taedium vitae* demonstrates. Not a day passes when I can’t feel its virulence, its force. And this has been so since I was about seventeen years old. (Why should I date such an essential sentiment? Better said, ever since I was born.)”<sup>19</sup>.

Both Nietzsche and Cioran endeavour to go beyond the cliché of decadent literature, peopled as the latter is by neurotics, angst-ridden individuals, hysterics and sick people, whose hypersensitivity is the physiological correlation of a culture-informed hypersensitivity. Their placing within the confines of decadence is irrelevant here, for both philosophers turn decadence into an opportunity for shaping reflection, for settling in a lifestyle which stimulates philosophical thinking filtered through their own physiology. Notwithstanding, there is a notable episode in Cioran, simultaneously revealing and ludicrous, inflected by a mythology indebted to decadence. Prompted by the reading of a vulgarization book, *The Genius and Syphilis*, penned by one Similianici, an adolescent Cioran takes up from the decadent bible the notion that syphilis may enhance brain functions and produce a stimulus which permits utilization of one’s full creative potential. Cioran truly hoped that the medical examination would diagnose his syphilis and open his accession to geniality: “I wished to be syphilitic. My mother had me to take a blood test. [...] I was at the crossroads: on the one hand, I wished

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 202.

<sup>17</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Case of Wagner*, in *The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche*, vol. 8. Translated by J.M. Kennedy, New York, Macmillan, 1924, p. 13.

<sup>18</sup> Emil Cioran, *Caiete II*, p. 293. All translations are mine.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 290.

I wouldn't miss this unexpected opportunity; on the other, I wished I would miss it"<sup>20</sup>.

In her case study of Cioran's minutely recorded diseases, Marta Petreu also proposes a qualitative distinction among them relative to their capacity to stimulate philosophizing. Insomnia extended naturally into neurosis catalyzes Cioran's philosophical becoming. His neurotic condition, in fact, finds an early and most compelling expression in *On the Heights of Despair*, which Cioran claims as fully grounded in his convalescent experience and which remarkably encapsulates what Barbara Spackman names a *rhetoric of sickness*. He poses as the virtually syphilitic damned genius, with a hereditary burden, the last scion of a "degenerate family" – all landmarks of the decadent bible. Subsequently the philosopher proceeds to a reappraisal of decadence; he contends, as Nietzsche did before, the formative role of disease in (his) philosophical becoming. Cioran argues that disease assists anthropogenesis – "The spirit is the offspring of an existential illness, and Man is a sick animal"<sup>21</sup> – and physiology's role as the punctuation of a lifestyle thus informs philosophy: "Our body inspires our doctrine"<sup>22</sup>. Having studied the correspondence and early articles of Cioran, Marta Petreu stresses the determining role of sickness in the penning of his books: "his ars poetica is indeed psychosomatic, [...] he [Cioran] drew on his own body"<sup>23</sup>.

Another difference which separates Cioran from the decadent bible concerns his refusal to sublimate disease aesthetically; he dissociates the aesthetic as artificiality from the authenticity of living which disease augments: "The only genuinely authentic experiences in this world are bound to be those generated by illness"<sup>24</sup>. Cioran's "trăirism" (doctrine of experiential bias) shuns a deliberately aesthetic shape, but configures a mode which hinges on the cultivation of excess, manifested as fervour and contained delirium – which confer a particular style on his discourse. "Those who entertain a graceful sense of living cannot either experience or understand the distress of supreme anxiety which rather emerges only in a diseased individual. Everything profound in this world can only rise from illness. Whatever doesn't do so has merely an aesthetic, formal value. To be ill means to live, willy-nilly, on heights"<sup>25</sup>. Cioran wants us to distinguish between the aesthetic and the non-aesthetic, life-pertaining, relevance of an event. Cioran's existence – as Marielle Macé contends about Michaux – "fait place aux valeurs de

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<sup>20</sup> Cioran in dialogue with Gerd Bergfleth, in *Convorbiri cu Cioran [Conversations with Cioran]*, București, Humanitas, 2004, p. 104.

<sup>21</sup> Emil Cioran, *On the Heights of Despair*. Translated by Ilinca Zarifopol-Johnston, Chicago – London, University of Chicago Press, 1992, p. 48; see also "the spiritual fecundity of illness", p. 27.

<sup>22</sup> Emil Cioran, *Caiete II*, p. 289.

<sup>23</sup> Marta Petreu, *Despre bolile filosofilor. Cioran [On the Philosophers' Sicknesses: Cioran]*, Iași – Cluj-Napoca, Polirom – Apostrof, 2010, p. 23.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 31.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 68.



la défaillance, à la force de perdre pied, de se désapproprier” (“has been replaced by values of failure, of losing self-control, of losing oneself”<sup>26</sup>).

In their attempts to establish a lifestyle on the border of a decadent sensibility both stand apart not through its refusal but rather through its metabolization. Nietzsche engages in an act of opposition saturated to the point of identification, and Cioran in an identification so polemical as to revoke it. Both opt for what Baudelaire calls “*etudie la crime dans son propre coeur*” (“studying the crime in his own heart”), or, in other words, opt to live ideas in their own body, to bestow on them the force of exemplarity through assumption of a lifestyle.

### *Failure as a lifestyle*

Stylizing conduct, gestures, or existence itself to its minute details characterizes decadent sensibility. An anthropology of decadence centres on a live figure of style: the dandy. Cioran does not refer to this emblematic figure of decadence, presumably because of the latter’s assumed social display, of his staged existence, but also because of the manifold means available to the dandy to power the spectacle of his own self. The precarity of an impoverished existence on the verge of the derisory, the destitution which the writer makes no fuss over determines him to assume rather a bohemian condition as the condition of continual provisionality in the stead of the prestige a dandy enjoys, pledged as the latter is to the art of living. There is only a thin line separating bohemian existence from failure; this is why Cioran bestows on the former an ontologically “superior” status, namely that of failure. Affinity with the bohemia is occasioned by the proximity of failure: “Only the failures can near the essential”<sup>27</sup>.

Cioran capitalizes on failure within the economy of both his life and his nation’s destiny. Failure is the outstanding reverse side which Cioran prides himself on like on a title of honour, whereas its obverse – premised on the contemptible forms of social achievement, success, popularity, or stability – has waxed derisory. We know that Cioran consistently refused French citizenship, for the expatriate condition suits his disengagement from society as the epitome of a lifestyle; likewise, he refused to have any occupation or accept any award during his lifetime. Such refusal is more than symptomatic of arrogance; rather, it points to the deliberate assumption of a conduct akin to monastic regulation, from the vow of poverty to humility. This kind of existential engagement, although akin to ascetism, does not replace it. On the contrary, it testifies to the accuracy of the distinction proposed by Michel Foucault, in *Le courage de la vérité*, between two approaches of classical philosophy to intertwining techniques of the self with the

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<sup>26</sup> Marielle Macé, *Style*, p. 211.

<sup>27</sup> Emil Cioran, *Caiete II*, p. 278.

courage of the truth: “la modalité platonicienne, qui privilégie les *mathemata* et la connaissance, et la modalité cynique, qui donne en revanche à la pratique de soi la forme d’une épreuve et cherche la vérité de l’être humains non dans une doctrine, mais dans une certaine forme de vie qui, subvertissant les modèles en cours dans la société, fait du *bios philosophikos* un défi et un scandale” (“the Platonic approach, which privileges the *mathemata* and knowledge, and the cynic approach, which offers, by contrast, a practice of the self in the form of a test and searches for the truth of the human being not in a doctrine but in a certain lifestyle which, subversive as it is of the current models in society, renders *bios philosophikos* a form of defiance and a scandal”<sup>28</sup>). From this perspective Cioran behaves rather like a cynic philosopher who assumes a precarious life condition, a marginality verging on destitution, in his attempts to confer life to the “truth” proffered discursively by this “form of life”, this “use of the self”. Thus, Cioran’s work becomes what Michel Foucault defines as an ethopoetics, the reflection of reflective and voluntary practices in the ethical values of a work, in its stylistic make-up. To a large extent Cioran successfully wedded his work to a matching lifestyle, the only inconsistency in this “world-famous thanatologist doubled by an indefatigable thanatomanic”, as Iliana Gregori aptly calls Cioran<sup>29</sup>, being his inability to commit suicide compounded by a problematic longevity.

Two articles, “Fragmente de cartier latin” (“Fragments of the Quartier Latin”), published in *Cuvântul* of 31 January 1938, and “Parisul provincial” (“Suburban Paris”), published in the weekly *Vremea* of 8 December 1940, sum up Cioran’s reasoning of his fascination with the condition of the failure and leading such a life. The Latin Quarter of Paris becomes the privileged site of an experience of failure lived by the countless émigrés, “the failures, vagabonds and emigrants of the world”. The writer notices within this category of failures a homogeneity which, nevertheless, does not contradict the difference observed from the perspective of loneliness. The homogeneity mentioned by Cioran is grounded in a number of shared features: “voluptuousness of immediacy, the aspiration of the lowliest of the unhappy and imbecile to ‘live’, to be ‘modern’, to let go of regrets and voluntarily build up errors”<sup>30</sup>. Cioran describes a lifestyle assumed by the heterogeneous bohemians who populate the Latin Quarter, in which to assume error is not the result of having failed in an attempt, but is the practice of deliberate failure, as a goal. “The lack of inner censure and desire to exhaust life frenetically lead nearly all the residents of the Quartier – sooner or later – to fail.”<sup>31</sup>. Failure

<sup>28</sup> Michel Foucault, *Le courage de la vérité*, Paris, Gallimard – Seuil, 2009, p. 243.

<sup>29</sup> Iliana Gregori, *Cioran. Sugestii pentru o biografie imposibilă* [*Cioran: Suggestions for an Impossible Biography*], București, Humanitas, 2012, p. 24.

<sup>30</sup> Emil Cioran, “Fragmente de cartier latin” [“Fragments of the Quartier Latin”], in *Revelațiile durerii* [*Revelations of Pain*]. Edited by Mariana Vartic and Aurel Sasu, Cluj-Napoca, Echinox, 1990, p. 181.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibidem*.

emerges against the augmentation of experience, against the assumed excessive exercise of vitality, against mobilization in the inconsistency of immediacy, in the ephemerality of the now. There are a few coordinates which structure this lifestyle of the Parisian bohemia. First of all, there is the savour, the taste of failure, the stimuli that the metropolis offers, simply put, a particular form of hedonism which mitigates disaster, divides it into piecemeal doses, ensures its flow, pares off its brutality. Second, for Cioran failure yields aesthetic results, which is symptomatic of decadent sensibility, with its special stylistics: “You don’t come here to die, but only to enrich the ennui poetically, to yield aesthetically to misery, to dance daintily with one’s own solitude”<sup>32</sup>. Misery, boredom, loneliness, this constellation of dissolution of the self invites an aesthetic result, a stylization, which savouring entails and aestheticization operates, “for everything is for *savouring* here, God included”<sup>33</sup>. Failure has thus become a lifestyle which includes a style of suffering which, in turn, implicates a style of transforming suffering in aesthetic act. What is more, Cioran uses the plural to refer to the stages he is traversing – he will internalise failure gradually – yet at this stage Paris affords him a lifestyle in accordance with a sensibility with emphatic decadent markers: “The sweet lure of hopelessness I have felt nowhere else in the world. Nor the nobility of failure. Paris bestowed on us a nimbus of uselessness, a prestige of inutility, and yielded the substance of its slow demise to our doubts. I *was sinking with it*”<sup>34</sup>. Both the themes of decadence and the privileged modes are emphasized at every turn, yet Cioran seasons his experiential bias with a reflection which allows a small écart to assume not only a lifestyle, but also the model that generates it, “l’Empire à la fin de la décadence”.

Cioran dedicates an entire book, *Schimbarea la față a României* [*Romania’s Transfiguration*], published at *Vremea* in 1936, to failure at the collective level. Here Cioran fleshes out a full-fledged utopian project of reinvigorating Romania through the reinvestment of collective energies into an event of the magnitude of disaster. The philosopher uses the instruments of the morphology of culture, which is why failure is couched in both identity and destiny terms. He projects the condition of failure to the level of a nation. The Hungarians embody a vocation of failure: Cioran’s assessment has no scientific grounds, but is rather predicated on an aesthetic criterion such as when he associates the failure of the Hungarian nation to its music: “The Hungarians are a nation of conquerors now turned into good-for-nothing loafers. Prodigal failures. Hungary has no reason to exist other than an aesthetic one. [...] What makes Hungary appealing to me is its uselessness, its political insignificance, the eternal bitterness at its heart”<sup>35</sup>. Cioran outlines here

<sup>32</sup> *Ibidem*, p.182.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibidem*, p.183.

<sup>34</sup> Emil Cioran, “Parisul provincial” [“Suburban Paris”], in *Revelațiile durerii*, p. 193.

<sup>35</sup> Emil Cioran, *Schimbarea la față a României* [*Romania’s Transfiguration*], București, *Vremea*, 1936, p. 225.

an aesthetic anthropology: ascription to a type corresponds to a lifestyle at the scale of history and space. Failure earmarks this lifestyle, with which Cioran can resonate.

Such notions will be returned to over time, such as in *Îndreptar pătimăș* (*The Passionate Handbook*). The text affirms a new possibility of living steeped in failure, a collective failure, assumed at identity level, in effect, an *ontology of failure*. Cioran confers a *delectatio morosa* on/to this lifestyle centred on failure, yet also a certain “charm”. Cioran’s “nihilism” does not deny life, but places it irrevocably under age. Ill-luck requires being lived, becomes a lifestyle, a delectable disaster. The profusion of negative epithets is exceeded only by their hyperbolization, even as with Cioran any such instance turns into paradoxical virtue. To get a clearer image of the negative one needs to develop the film of characters: “We have raised the negative pleasure of being Wallachian to the heights of destiny.”<sup>36</sup> “Our sole positive feature is to have transformed ill-luck into charm. We have enlivened negation. We wallow in being persecuted. Only in it can we act as creators. Bad has become our aspiration for ascension, defeat our transcendence. What an uncreated creature the Romanian is. Save misfortune, everything else is but virtual in us.”<sup>37</sup> “Consciousness of shipwreck is the spiritual core of the Walachian. That’s why his contribution to the diversity of man is overwhelmingly new, and insofar as Adam failed, our emergence [as a nation] is the most outstanding example since the creation”<sup>38</sup>.

Cioran’s obsession with failure is circumscribed by his assumption of an existence of the surface, of a lifestyle severed from the metaphysical and which dabbles exclusively in the ordinary, the banal, the average. To this lifestyle Cioran counterpoises another lifestyle, one which plunges the human being into excess, which mobilizes all insurgencies, which allows *transfiguration* (to quote his religious metaphor). Another obsessive notion in Cioran, balance, whether construed as lucidity, in *Despre Franța* (*On France*), or as “settling down” or “discernment”, in *Îndreptar pătimăș* (*The Passionate Handbook*), is that which diminishes the opportunities to rejuvenate life with its specific energies. Hence Cioran’s experiential bias, which embraces the irrational, towards utilizing the raw matter of life, towards its originary sources. And here Cioran deliberately cultivates paradox, for the *raison d’être* becomes the irrational which he couches in terms of “desire”, with its relative synonyms: suffering, yearning, thrill, restlessness, debauchery, madness. This entire constellation of synonyms seemingly configures a dimension of the incommensurable, a disorientated dynamic. The lifestyle Cioran proposes is Life; anything that falls beyond its

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<sup>36</sup> Emil Cioran, *Îndreptar pătimăș II. 70 de fragmente inedite* [*The Passionate Handbook: Seventy Original Fragments*]. Edited by Constantin Zaharia, București, Humanitas, 2011, p. 24.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 25.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 26.

confines, as well as anything that organises, orientates or ameliorates it, contradicts it. Nonetheless, the Life which Cioran proposes as a lifestyle is different from the mere existence in instinctual terms; it is not vegetative life, but one of vitality in excess, channelled into precise action. Marielle Macé has identified the dynamic condition of “life forms”, which comprise tensions, deliberations, options, engagements, aso: “Les ‘formes de vie’ ne sont jamais des objets, ce sont toujours des raisons, des motifs: raisons de vivre, motif à être, raisons d’agir” (“The ‘forms of life’ are never the object, they are always the reason: reasons to live, reason to exist, reasons to act”<sup>39</sup>). Cioran proposes a form of enthusiasm as lifestyle, and delirium as a superlative form, as pure excess. “Time itself and existence are decaying with the settling down of the flesh. We exist through its follies, we breathe through its amalgam of yearning and pain. Discernment kills the thrill of existing. Desire is the evil without which we would go crazy for fear of nothingness. For to desire is to raise nothingness to the dignity of possibility, just as yearning traverses the nothingness of being like a delusion of plenitude. Between to be and not to be, there is only a difference of degree: everything boils down to knowing whether Nothingness is active or not. Existence is but a metaphor for restlessness, the content which man’s fierce debauchery offers itself”<sup>40</sup>. Cioran adopts such prophetic rhetoric in *Romania’s Transfiguration*, on the verge of delirium. Gérard Dessons has noticed that both style and rhetoric are strategic elements which “permettent de normaliser le délire en le faisant basculer du côté de la singularité langagière, contre les tentatives de l’assimiler à un comportement pathologique” (“permit the normalization of delirium by switching to linguistic uniqueness, against attempts to assimilate it to pathological behaviour”<sup>41</sup>). At the same time, Gérard Dessons argues that Cioran’s writing is not transparent, does not include the sign model, but is aligned with the significance of the poem. In accordance with the definition of the poem by Henri Meschonnic in *De la langue française. Essai sur la clarté obscure*<sup>42</sup>, namely of a relationship of reciprocal transformation between a form of language and a form of life, beyond any reference to verses, poetic imagery or even an affect opposed to the concept. Starting from the existence of a form of poetic delirium accessible to the hermeneut, why shouldn’t we speak about of a style of delirium, a prophetic style in the case of Emil Cioran, as Gérard Dessons has identified a *style de la folie* (style of folly)?

To insinuate a lifestyle in assessing a certain category as an existential category only to transform it into a stylistics is Cioran’s *modus operandi*. Cioran tries each and every category to the intensity of experience, of his experience,

<sup>39</sup> Marielle Macé, *Style*, p. 285.

<sup>40</sup> Emil Cioran, *Îndreptar pătimăș II*, p. 53.

<sup>41</sup> Gérard Dessons, *La manière folle. Essai sur la manie littéraire et artistique*, Paris, Manucius, 2010, p. 141.

<sup>42</sup> Henri Meschonnic, *De la langue française. Essai sur la clarté obscure*, Paris, Hachette, 2001.

when he pictures himself its subject. However, the starting point is to introduce that category as a fact of civilization, a collective trait, and thus starting from the moot premise of the homogeneity of a collective subject. In the chapter “Civilization and Frivolity” of Cioran’s *Précis de décomposition* [*A Short History of Decay*] we have precisely such a rationale that is to a large extent indebted to the morphology of culture which Cioran will use throughout his oeuvre. Frivolity is contrasted to earnestness due to how it has influenced the specific treatment of values – not so much their scorning as their relativization. Accordingly, in the first instance frivolity is a category intended to define a civilization and implicitly a culture of frivolity. Cioran cites the case of ancient Greece in the age of Alcibiades and eighteenth-century France. Besides its comprehensive manifestation, frivolity also becomes symptomatic of decadence, signalling as it does the twilight stages of civilization. Cioran immediately couches it in terms of a lifestyle: the “lively exercise which lends a flavour of futility to life”<sup>43</sup>. Moreover, he identifies a special flavour of frivolity, which signals a certain intensity of living, a flavour of confused, aimless life, with no axiological investment. He unravels its thematically canonical phrase, boredom, and an emblematic character to embody its lifestyle, Alcibiades in ancient Greece and Madame du Deffand in eighteenth-century France. Yet, by using the term “exercise” Cioran also intimates a frivolous becoming, a training, which elevates this exercise above mere exercising of a privilege, to the level of a spiritual exercise that centres on the “pursuit of the superficial”. This pursuit has a “spiritual”, “metaphysical” causation, the realization of “the impossibility of any certitude”<sup>44</sup>, and leads to a commitment as serious as the possibility of certitude would have generated. “There remain, nonetheless, the appearances; why not raise them to the level of a *style*? Thereby we define any intelligent period. Thereby we find more prestige in expression than in the soul which supports it, in grace than in intuition; emotion itself becomes polite”<sup>45</sup>. What would this style of appearances consist of?

The style Cioran proposes is a lifestyle. His is not a rhetorical question, but the reflection of ratiocination endowed with conclusive force. Any reflection, any meditation has a double circuit in Emil Cioran. It emerges from a state and is merely derivative until proclaimed at once as a lifestyle and a stylistic choice. The style defines here the symbiotic relationship between the style proper, identified in accordance with Spengler’s morphology of culture, and a lifestyle that quantifies the state from which Cioran’s reflection starts. In this case, frivolity generates an entire constellation of similitudes and relates states. The full expression of frivolity is ennui, the superficial, the futile – all of them as ways of living, as existential

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<sup>43</sup> E.M. Cioran, *A Short History of Decay*. Translated by Richard Howard, New York, Skyhorse Publishing, 1992, p. 8.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 8-9.

propositions. They are not genuine, though, but choices of a form of conduct, of a lifestyle, one that needs practice for refining. All the incidentals Cioran proposes have little to do with the mere exercising of certain indulgences or the lack of metaphysical tension. Rather, they belong with the assumption of a lifestyle in the aftermath of deliberation by subjects with in-depth access, but who nonetheless have chosen to renounce such pursuits programmatically so as to establish their opposite. This boils down to choosing between one lifestyle or another by embracing a certain set of values. The suppressed values still exist on the formative horizon of the subject, and choice not so much disavows them as it banishes them. Cioran's existential condition emerges from a move of denial, from a tension of deliberation, and entails the reorientation of will in the selection of a lifestyle. Even if the motivations will subsequently become apparent at the level of civilizations, of cultures, they are actuated at individual level, and are retrievable as the experience assumed by Cioran the subject.

*Celebration of mannerism, stylistics of decadence:  
the art of living amidst a decadent civilization*

“Je perçois bien la France par tout ce que j’ai de pourri en moi” (“I see France well by everything that is rotten in me”<sup>46</sup>). Emil Cioran's statement, in his manuscript of 1941, written (in Romanian) at the time France was under German occupation and published only posthumously, becomes emblematic. Within Cioran's oeuvre, his brief essay *Despre Franța* [*On France*] becomes, in Alain Paruit's terms, *le livre charnière*, a turning-point book. It is one of the last texts written in Romanian and thus marks the end of a stage which heralds Cioran's change in destiny: not only his self-imposed French exile, but also writing in French as a crucial intellectual option. *On France* is also an exercise of admiration, the first one of a series which Cioran dedicates to French culture. Cioran had already penned a robust oeuvre in Romanian: *Pe culmile disperării* [*On the heights of Despair*] (1934), *Cartea amăgirilor* [*The Book of Delusions*] (1935), *Schimbarea la față a României* [*Romania's Transfiguration*] (1936), *Lacrimi și sfinți* [*Tears and Saints*] (1937). *Amurgul gândurilor* [*The Twilight of Thought*] is published in Sibiu in 1940, in the very year he embarks on writing *Îndreptar pătimaș* [*The Passionate Handbook*], completed in 1945. *On France* presents the unequal confrontation between a “barbarian” and the prima donna of European culture and civilization at the time, France, or rather its very centre, Paris. *On France* rehearses in part the topic of *Romania's Transfiguration* from the perspective of Spengler's morphology of culture. Nonetheless, the relationship between the two cultures is analysed here in much more nuanced terms, even as Cioran's personal stakes are also different. The Romanian prophetic proclivity and

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<sup>46</sup> E.M. Cioran, *De la France*. Traduit par Alain Paruit, Paris, Édition de l'Herne, 2011, p. 40.

Cioran's own febrile utopianism regarding Romania's destiny are well nigh gone. If in his *Romania's Transfiguration* Cioran aimed to mobilize collective energies even through projecting such enterprise within the dynamic of a historical catastrophe of great magnitude, in *On France* the one to measure himself against France is Cioran himself, in a relationship of similitude of destiny able to anticipate his affiliation. In *Romania's Transfiguration*, Cioran had assessed the pertinence of solutions concerning the becoming of a "small culture" by polemically playing off against each other the exemplarity of grand cultures and the potential of the small ones; this time the topic of Romania's transfiguration gives way to the topic of the *transfiguration of Emil Cioran himself*, and proposes a relationship between lifestyles. More specifically, Cioran courts the French culture and civilization, now in its twilight, until he can insinuate himself within a lifestyle which he evaluates polemically, with strong acumen. His option of a destiny undergirds this moment of his settling before the mirror of the French culture and civilization, with which he discovers his profound affinity, one that exceeds mere espousal of an exemplary model. The "rotteness" he invokes metaphorically describes not only Cioran's prodigious European culture, his erudition, but also the form of his own sensibility, akin to decadence, which he simultaneously attunes and opposes to a lifestyle. *On France* evinces, in Cioran, what Roland Barthes identifies as "les moments fragiles d'un individu" ("the sensitive moments of an individual").

Irina Mavrodin has aptly noted, in a series of essays, another aspect of Cioran's shift from his mother tongue to a foreign language, not from one culture and civilization to another. She regards Cioran's writing style as one of "paradox and ambiguity". Cioran strikes her as a "barbarian" who has to comply with the strictures and norms of French, a language of order and rigour. To change one's language means for the Romanian writer to force a change of his mental template, to exchange the "delirium" as a discursive expression of incontrollable affects with self-control and lucidity. *On France* is a book almost entirely devoted to form, formality, mode, conduct and surfaces, to the extent Cioran regards them as belonging to a constitutive dimension of French culture and civilization. In his study *Style and Civilization* (1957), A. E. Kroeber argues that the notion of style has the role to render concrete culture in its entirety; in the case of great cultures and civilizations such as the French one, one deals with "super-styles", a "style of style" or a "total lifestyle"<sup>47</sup>. Even so, Cioran tends to single out the notion of style, even the obsession for style, as the peculiar trait of French culture, insofar as it informs a lifestyle to the minutest detail. Cioran pays utmost attention to expression both at the level of writing and in everyday communication, cemented

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<sup>47</sup> A.E. Kroeber, *Style and Civilization*, apud Bruno Martinelli (dir.), *L'interrogation du style – Anthropologie, technique et esthétique*, Aix-en-Provence, Presses de l'Université de Provence, 2005, pp. 30, 31.



as a mentality reflex within a lifestyle which reverses the relationship between shallowness and depth. Such obsession for formality relative to his writing style highlights Cioran's affinity for, or at least attainment of, if not a symbolic influence by, an *écriture artiste* peculiar to decadent writers, for whom style considerations override all others. Privileging stylistic effect, surface effects, a witticism over deep structures represents, for Cioran, a peculiar trait of French culture, which also configures a lifestyle. What David Weir remarks about the effect that *écriture artiste* has on the decadent novel is comparable to what Cioran states about the French culture as one of form: "Decadence by definition [...] makes the superficial substantial."<sup>48</sup> Writing – an embodied one in Cioran's case, therapeutic, angst-ridden – constitutes in this context the locus geometricus of the manifestation of a lifestyle endowed with the trappings of art, and thus transformed into an "art de l'existence" characterized by what Cioran names "la stérilité de la perfection": "Un de vices de la France a été la stérilité de la perfection – laquelle ne se manifeste jamais aussi clairement que dans l'écriture. Le souci de bien formuler, de ne pas estropier le mot et sa mélodie, d'enchaîner harmonieusement les idées, voilà une obsession française. Aucune culture n'a été plus préoccupée par le style et, dans aucune autre, on n'a écrit avec autant de beauté, à la perfection. Aucun Français n'écrit irrémédiablement mal. Tous écrivent bien, tous voient la forme avant l'idée. Le style est l'expression direct de la culture" ("One of the vices of France was the sterility of perfection – which never manifests itself as clearly as in writing. The concern to formulate well, not to mutilate the word and its melody, to chain ideas harmoniously – here's a French obsession. No culture has been more concerned with the style and in no other has one written with so much beauty, to perfection. No Frenchman has written irremediably badly. All write well, all regard the form before the idea. The style is the direct expression of culture"<sup>49</sup>). Apart from the exaggeration and generalization which frame Cioran's observation, we can notice that he solves the tension between form and idea to the benefit of formality as representative of French culture. Nevertheless, we should remember that with Cioran the opposites enter into a dialectical relationship, so that the "vice" of formalism becomes a stylistic virtue. Cioran's remarks – circumscribable by the morphology of culture – refer, nonetheless, to the institution of a lifestyle. A series of seemingly paradoxical remarks concern a reversal which privileges the formal exercise, a voluntary training, a reflexive practice so as to get the desired stylistic effect. "Être superficiel avec style est plus difficile qu'être profond. Dans le premier cas, il faut beaucoup de culture; dans le second, un simple déséquilibre des facultés. La culture est nuance; la profondeur, intensité. Sans une dose d'artificiel, l'esprit

<sup>48</sup> David Weir, *Decadence and the Making of Modernism*, Amherst, University of Massachusetts Press, 1995, p. 24.

<sup>49</sup> E.M. Cioran, *De la France*, pp. 24, 25.

humain se brise sous le poids de la sincérité, cette forme de barbarie” (“Being superficial with style is more difficult than being profound. In the first case, it takes a lot of culture; in the second, a simple imbalance of faculties. Culture is nuance; the depth, intensity. Without a dose of artificial, the human spirit is breaking under the weight of sincerity, this form of barbarism”<sup>50</sup>). Once again, the style, as David Weir states, “makes the superficial substantial”. Cioran notices this stylization in manner, with its careful management of “trivia” which assumes the scale of vital investment. A disproportionate attention given to the diverse manifestations of trivia in the everyday, epitomizes a prodigious exploitation of the resources of the banal and define a lifestyle. “La médiocrité a atteint un tel style qu’il est difficile de trouver chez l’individu ordinaire, chez l’homme de la rue, des exemples de stupidité caractérisée. C’est en cela que la France est grande par des *riens*. Il se pourrait que, finalement, la civilisation ne soit pas autre chose que le *raffinement de la banalité*, le polissage des choses minuscules et l’entretien d’un brin d’intelligence dans l’accidentel quotidien” (“Mediocrity has reached such a style that it is difficult to find characteristic examples of stupidity in the ordinary individual, in the man in the street. [...] It is in this that France is great in *nothing*. It could be that, finally, civilization is nothing other than the *refinement of banality*, the polishing of little things and the maintenance of a little intelligence in everyday accidentals”<sup>51</sup>). Cioran dabbles in his everyday life to study the typically French lifestyle which does not postulate the primacy of outstanding individualities over collective amorphousness, but records average traits. “Qu’a-t-elle aimé, la France? Les styles, les plaisirs de l’intelligence, les salons, la raison, les petites perfections. L’expression précède la nature. Il s’agit d’une culture de la forme qui recouvre les forces élémentaires et, sur tout jaillissement passionnel, étale le vernis bien pensé du raffinement. La vie – quand elle n’est pas souffrance est jeu” (“What does France like? Styles, the pleasures of the intellect, salons, reason, small perfections. Expression precedes nature. It is a culture of form that recovers the elemental forces, and on any outburst of passion, displays the well conceived lustre of refinement”<sup>52</sup>).

For Cioran, that the “minor” arts should be shifted to general public use and thus undergird a lifestyle that defines the “spirit” of a culture, belongs with decadence. Attention to details, “trifles”, symptomatic of an aestheticizing inflation of trivia, becomes, for Cioran, the hallmark of decadence through their incorporation within the symbolic economy of a lifestyle. The decadent style has thus been appropriated as an ordinary lifestyle. It no longer describes the floating artistic subcultures, the bohemia, of a handful of dandies, but has become shared goods. In the chapter entitled “Un long adieu au dandysme”, Marielle Macé

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<sup>50</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 35.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 32.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 13.

defines style as the regularization of everyday life through the appropriation of an art of discourse or even of literature, in the absence of any stylistic discrimination which dandyism champions programmatically: “Cette identification entre la forme et la forme belle, entre le style et le supplément artistique, cette confusion même entre l’attention au ‘comment’ et l’esthétisation de soi, nourrissent surtout l’histoire du dandysme” (“This identification between the shape and the beautiful shape, between the style and the artistic supplement, this very confusion between attention to the ‘how’ and the aestheticization of the self, nourishes especially the history of dandyism”<sup>53</sup>). Proper to dandyism, Marielle Macé contends, is a re-establishment of the regular, of an aesthetic order of life; in other words, we are dealing here with another lifestyle which takes up a few characteristic traits, retrievable in the aesthetics it represents. One might infer, from Cioran’s reflection on these stylized lifestyles or rather in which stylization plays a cardinal role, that French culture is intoxicated by a diluted dandyism ready to spill over into mass culture. More specifically, one could speak about an *ontological dandyism* peculiar to French culture, which gives the upper hand to formality in any form of social interaction, which privileges the stylistic exercise in the relations between people as the outlining of a lifestyle inferable from its aesthetic articulation.

We should also note that Cioran does not refer to a particular style, even though he compares the French and German Gothic so as to highlight a series of significant differences. He gets close to a “taxonomy of style”, in Richard Shusterman’s terms, which distinguishes between a lifestyle as an individual style and the taxonomy of style, the utilization of one particular style, for instance an artistic style, as fashioned at any one point: “il nous faut rappeler la distinction bien connue entre le concept taxinomique de style et le concept de style individuel. En un sens évident mais peut-être trivial, si un individu manifeste du style au sens taxinomique du concept (par exemple, s’il a un mode de vie stoïcien ou épicurien, s’il peint dans un style baroque ou écrit dans le style du XVIIe siècle), alors il fait montre d’un certain style. Mais lorsque nous disons qu’un individu a du style, nous entendons par là quelque chose de plus, quelque chose de plus spécifique ou plus personnel, et qui sert à distinguer l’artiste de ceux avec lesquels il peut avoir en commun un style général; il s’agit de quelque chose qui, telle une signature, sert à le distinguer en tant qu’individu” (“We should remember the well-known distinction between the taxonomic concept of style and the concept of individual style. In an obvious but perhaps trivial sense, if an individual expresses style in the taxonomic sense of the concept (for example, if he has a stoic or epicurean lifestyle, if he paints in a baroque style or writes in the style of the seventeenth century), then he shows a certain style. But when we say that an individual has style, we mean something more, something more specific or more personal, which serves to distinguish the artist from those with whom he can have

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<sup>53</sup> Marielle Macé, *Style*, p. 219.

in common a general style; it's something that, as a signature, serves to distinguish him as an individual"<sup>54</sup>). On closer inspection, we realise there is no perfect overlap with Shusterman's concept, for Cioran's is a philosophy of style spilled over into everyday life. It is not one or several styles, but an effort of stylization of the trivia of life, repeated as "tiny perfections". To Cioran this stylization effort – which, in Shusterman's terms, becomes *self-stylization* – becomes the founding element of a decadent reversal, Artifice before Nature. Cioran uses a synonym for *artificiality*, namely "expression". So do Oscar Wilde in *The Decay of Lying* and Baudelaire in *Eloge du maquillage*: "la vie factice a remplacé la vie naturelle" ("artificial life has replaced natural life"). The cult of the artificial points to a decadent sensibility which pays attention to the details that beautify life, but also to way of living with art affecting all details of modern life. Cioran introduces here a nuance: a formalism typical of the culture of decadence as a culture of form opposed to passion, fervour, or elemental forces. This culture of form is, for Cioran, inseparable from the exercise of reflection and lucidity, of witticism. Yet, what witticism are we talking about, and how can it be shaped, how does it acquire a style? Is this the witticism of the salon, a ludic version which entails a measure of theatricality, of artificiality, an art of the conversation: "France is the *country of dialogue*"<sup>55</sup>. Everything in this culture of form is externalized, everything excludes interiority, it is a culture of the spectacle, in which the *raison d'être* is that of asserting a taste. Cioran's choice of France is one of a destiny, and concerns a lifestyle with which he has affinities, and confronted with which he acts as the "barbarian" before "l'Empire à la fin de la décadence".

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<sup>54</sup> Richard Shusterman, "Style et style de vie", *Littérature*, 1997, 105, p. 103.

<sup>55</sup> E.M. Cioran, *De la France*, p. 34.

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## CIORAN: A REFLECTION ON DECADENCE AS A LIFESTYLE (Abstract)

I started this study from a basic observation formulated by the vast exegesis dedicated to the work of the philosopher Emil Cioran: his philosophy seems to spring from a practice, from a particular endorsement of a lifestyle, drawing to a series of emblematic gestures, the most prominent of all being the refusal of social integration. Nevertheless, this refusal goes hand in hand with the need to be validated, through an intense activity in terms of reading and writing, within the host culture (the French); also, it implies a refusal of new citizenship redoubled by enfranchisement through culture, etc. Appealing to a famous poem by Verlaine, it seemed to me necessary to restore a defining gesture that focuses on the ontological status of the Romanian philosopher: labeling as "decadent" the apparently contradictory position of the "barbarian", whose voice brings echoes from a "small" and recent culture (the Romanian). Thus, I analyzed the way in which Emil Cioran translates into a form of life/ lifestyle the philosophical elements that marked his formative trajectory through Oswald Spengler's work, *The Decline of the West*. In order to analyze Cioran's identification with the Decadent movement, I also addressed Friedrich Nietzsche's work, which

offered more clues concerning Decadence and decay, in particular, for Cioran's style of philosophical reflection, for his idea of "thinking" through the body, and for his attention to a particular metabolism. As case studies, I chose Emil Cioran's essay *On France* and his lesser-known youth articles collected in the volume, *The Revelations of Sorrow*. The first essay highlights the fact that we need to rethink the morphology of culture from the perspective of life forms associated with specific stylizations of everyday life. The other youth articles enhance the fact that the Bohemian lifestyle should be reconsidered thoroughly because it mirrors the most specific modalities of the French culture and civilization. In conclusion, I analyzed a part of Cioran's reflection not only as an instance when a life form is assumed (the Bohemian style), but also as a form of life interbreeding a prestigious cultural form (the French culture) and the philosopher's own type of sensitivity (decadence).

*Keywords:* Decadence, Lifestyle, Aestheticism Fin de Siècle, Sickness, Bohemia.

### CIORAN: O REFLECȚIE DESPRE DECADENȚĂ CA STIL DE VIAȚĂ (Rezumat)

Am început acest studiu de la o observație banală înregistrată în vasta exegeză dedicată operei filozofului Emil Cioran: filozofia sa pare să se reverse într-o practică, să decurgă dintr-un stil de viață, schițând o serie de gesturi emblematice, cel mai subliniat dintre ele fiind chiar refuzul integrării sociale. Cu toate acestea, refuzul său merge mână în mână cu nevoia de a fi validat printr-o intensă activitate în ceea ce privește cititul și scrisul în interiorul culturii de adopție (cea franceză); de asemenea, implică și refuzul acceptării unei noi cetățenii dublată de încetățenirea prin cultură etc. Apelând la faimosul poem al lui Verlaine, mi s-a părut necesar să restaurez un gest definitoriu care focalizează statutul ontologic al filozofului român: și anume etichetarea ca decadentă poziția aparent contradictorie a "barbarului" a cărui voce se face ecoul unei culturi "mici" și recente (cea română). Astfel, am analizat modul în care Emil Cioran traduce într-o formă de viață/ un stil de viață elementele filozofice care au marcat traseul său formativ sub influența operei lui Oswald Spengler, *Declinul Occidentului*. Pentru a chestiona identificarea lui Emil Cioran cu Decadența, m-am adresat deopotrivă operei lui Friedrich Nietzsche care oferă mai multe informații privitoare la decadență și declin în particular pentru stilul reflecției filozofice a lui Emil Cioran, pentru ideea sa de a "gândi" prin intermediul corpului și pentru atenția pe care o acordă unui metabolism particular. Ca studiu de caz, am ales eseul lui Emil Cioran, *Despre Franța* și mai puțin cunoscutele sale articole de tinerețe grupate în volumul, *Revelațiile durerii*. Primul eseu subliniază faptul că morfologia culturii poate fi regândită din perspectiva formelor de viață asociate stilizărilor aferente ale vieții cotidiene. Câteva din articolele de tinerețe relevă faptul că stilul de viață boem merită să fie reconsiderat din perspectiva felului în care oglindește modalități specifice ale culturii și civilizației franceze. În concluzie, am analizat o parte a reflecției cioraniene nu numai ca mod de asumare a unei forme de viață (stilul de viață boem), dar și ca formă de viață care conjugă un model cultural prestigios (cultura franceză) și propria sensibilitate a filozofului, sensibilitatea decadentă.

*Cuvinte-cheie:* decadență, stil de viață, estetism *Fin de Siècle*, maladie, boemă.