

Falling into Salvation in Cioran

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In the world of E.M. Cioran's writings, there seems at first to be little room for ideas about salvation. His authorial voice, speaking to us from an undefined time and space, constantly reminds us that we are condemned to live and to suffer, and that lucidity demands not only that we recognize that no god can save us, but also that we excise any notion of hope or progress from our view of the hostile world and our accursed place in it. What role could any talk of salvation have in such a world where it seems laughable even to use the word? And yet Cioran does return, again and again, to the idea of salvation, most especially in middle-period works such as *La chute dans le temps* (*The Fall into Time*), *Le mauvais demiurge* (*The New Gods*), and *Ecartèlement* (*Drawn and Quartered*). Like the idea of God, the notion of salvation haunts Cioran's texts even though lucidity reminds us of the impossibility of either's existence, a state of affairs that leads to what Susan Sontag has called Cioran's "tortured thinking" (Sontag 14). While his declarations about salvation are, as always, categorical, an attempt to establish a full portrait of his view of salvation draws us into a rich network of other related themes, revealing the complexity of his view as it is articulated throughout many different works. In this essay, I attempt to articulate Cioran's complex, innovative, and multifaceted view of salvation. I argue that while he proposes several potential nontraditional sources of salvation, and in this sense retains a traditional focus on the possibility of salvation even while departing radically from the Christian version of it, these new kinds of salvation are always temporary, provisional, and in constant need of renewal.

A passage in the *Précis de décomposition* (*A Short History of Decay*) suggests the complex terrain Cioran navigates when he approaches the notion of salvation, which for him would cancel life rather than prolonging or improving it:

Une doctrine du salut n'a de sens que si nous partons de l'équation existence-souffrance. ... Le salut finit tout ; et il nous finit. Qui, une fois *sauvé*, ose se dire encore vivant ? ... Le salut ne hante que les assassins et les saints, ceux qui ont tué ou dépassé la créature ; les autres se vautrent—ivres morts—dans l'imperfection...

Le tort de toute doctrine de la délivrance est de supprimer la poésie, climat de l'inachevé. Le poète se trahirait s'il aspirait à se sauver: le salut est la mort du chant, la négation de l'art et de l'esprit. Comment se sentir solidaire d'un aboutissement ? Nous pouvons raffiner, jardiner nos

douleurs, mais par quel moyen nous en émanciper sans nous suspendre ?
Dociles à la malédiction, nous n'existons qu'en tant que nous souffrons.
(O 604)¹

A doctrine of salvation only makes sense if we start from the equation existence-suffering. ... Salvation finishes everything, and it finishes us. Once *saved*, who would dare call himself still alive? ... Salvation haunts only assassins and saints, those who have killed or gotten beyond the creature; others wallow—dead drunk—in imperfection...

The error of all doctrines of deliverance is to suppress poetry, climate of the unfinished. The poet would betray himself if he aspired to save himself: salvation is the death of song, the negation of art and spirit. How to feel solidarity with an end? We can refine, cultivate our pains, but by what means could we emancipate ourselves from them without suspending ourselves? Docile to malediction, we exist only inasmuch as we suffer.

Salvation here becomes a temptation, just as living itself is for Cioran a temptation, even though we would know, if we were sufficiently lucid, that it would be better not to live than to live.² To be saved is to pass into a realm of changelessness, which by definition opposes itself to life and the constant progression through time. To believe in salvation of any kind is to be convinced that there could be a kind of life that is better than the form it takes now, which for Cioran is non-sensical since to live is to suffer. Cioran implies that we are not often able to face the full consequences of such an affirmation; the temptation to end suffering is also the temptation not to exist. We are tempted both to exist and not to exist, for different reasons and at different times, but neither option, it seems, is permanently justifiable or desirable, since, as we shall see below, we rarely find ourselves in a sufficiently lucid state to affirm the desirability of non-existence. Already in this passage, we see a set of interrelated themes and characters—life rightly understood, art, suffering, poets, and saints—that will frequently accompany Cioran's considerations of suffering throughout his works. We shall see below that Cioran comes back in his later writings to the figure of the poet and writer and maintains the link between them and salvation, but in different ways than he proposes here in the *Précis*.

To act in the world—whether by creating works of art or simply by living daily life—requires maintaining a state of illusion, since lucidity leads directly to inaction because it reveals the futility of acts of any kind, and here Cioran explicitly mentions salvation as one of those acts which we would renounce instantly in a sufficiently lucid state: “Que si tous nos actes—depuis la respiration jusqu'à la fondation des empires ou des systèmes métaphysiques—dériveraient d'une illusion sur notre importance, à plus forte raison l'instinct prophétique. Qui, avec

la vision exacte de sa nullité, tenterait d'être efficace et de s'ériger en sauveur ?" (O 584) 'If all our acts—from breathing to the foundation of empires or metaphysical systems—derive from an illusion about our importance—all the more so does the prophetic instinct. Who, with an accurate vision of his nullity, would try to be effective and to set himself up as a savior?' Rather than aspiring to find or be a saviour, it would be best to meditate eternally on that impossibility; at least that would remove us, like monks, from the *via activa* 'active life' and allow us to contemplate the truth of our existential predicament of being able neither to live nor not to live. Cioran in fact reclaims monastic space as the locus of these new kinds of world-renouncing reflections:

A nous autres il nous faudrait des cloîtres aussi dépossédés, aussi vides que nos âmes, pour nous y perdre sans l'assistance des cieux, et dans une pureté d'idéal absent, des cloîtres à la mesure d'anges détrompés qui, dans leur chute, à force d'illusions vaincues, demeureraient encore immaculés. Et d'espérer une vogue de retraites dans une éternité sans foi, une prise d'habit dans le néant, un Ordre affranchi des mystères, et dont nul « frère » ne se réclamerait de rien, dédaignant son salut comme celui des autres, un *Ordre de l'impossible salut...* (O 722)

As for us others, we need cloisters that are just as dispossessed and as empty as our souls, to lose ourselves there without the assistance of the heavens, and in a purity of the absent ideal, cloisters made for disabused angels who, in their fall, by means of vanquished illusions, remained immaculate. And to hope for a vogue of retreats in an eternity without faith, a taking of the religious habit in nothingness, an Order freed from mysteries, and from which no "brother" would ask for anything, disdaining his salvation as he disdains that of others, an *Order of the Impossible Salvation...*

The rhythm of monastic life is, in part, an attempt to replace linear time with a cyclic conception of time that more closely approximates the changelessness of eternity as opposed to our own constantly fluctuating world. Here Cioran not only adapts traditional monastic contemplation to his own new vision of eternity as impossible salvation, he also reverses the notion of the fall; for him, the fall of the angels is not the source of our damnation but rather of the ability to transcend illusion, and most notably, in this context, the illusion of the possibility of salvation. The attempt to cancel linear time is also an effort to cancel the fall itself, since the fall is for Cioran a fall into time, as one of his book titles indicates.³ To vanquish linear time is

also to triumph over one of the most problematic illusions of modernity, that of progress. For Cioran, the terms were synonyms in the nineteenth century.⁴

It is worth pausing a moment over the relationship of earthly progress to Cioran's innovative conception of the fall. It is not so much acting on the desire for knowledge as a broader conception of *any* action that results in our perdition:

L'homme n'aurait pas dû se vouer à l'acte mais se plonger dans la passivité, ne rien changer au néant établi, commencer et finir par un détachement non pareil. L'histoire est un péché. Son péché. Ceux qui idolâtrèrent l'avenir sont solidaires de ces héritiers d'Adam, dont la superbe s'est révélée source de ruine. Le Siècle des Lumières a rejeté l'idée de chute, de mal originel; d'où son caractère brillant et l'attraction qu'il exerce sur des esprits à la fois subtils et naïfs. (Cioran "Face" 195)⁵

Man should not have given himself to the act but should plunge into passivity, change nothing in the given nothingness, begin and end by an unrivaled detachment. History is a sin. Its sin. Those who idolize the future are in solidarity with those inheritors of Adam, whose arrogance revealed itself as a source of ruin. The Enlightenment rejected the idea of the fall, of original evil; from there comes its shining character and the attraction it exercises over spirits that are at once subtle and naïve.

Rather than seeing the Enlightenment as a triumph over ignorance, a promethean attempt to liberate humanity from fears relating to the unknown, Cioran sees it as advancing us further in the direction of the fall, but not for the traditional theological reasons that relate the fall to the human sin of pride. In fact, he writes elsewhere that it is not this disobedience of Adam and Eve but rather the Christian notion of the Incarnation that represents the most exaggerated expression of hubris by overestimating the importance of human beings in the world:

L'Incarnation est la flatterie la plus dangereuse dont nous ayons été l'objet. Elle nous aura dispensé un statut démesuré, hors de proportion avec ce que nous sommes. En haussant l'anecdote humaine à la dignité de drame cosmique, le christianisme nous a trompés sur notre insignifiance, il nous a précipités dans l'illusion, dans cet optimisme morbide qui, au mépris de l'évidence, confond cheminement et apothéose. Plus réfléchie, l'Antiquité païenne mettait l'homme à sa place. (O 1188)

The Incarnation is the most dangerous flattery of which we have been the object. It will supposedly have given us an inordinate status, out of all proportion with what we are. By raising the human anecdote to the dignity of a cosmic drama, Christianity duped us about our insignificance, it brought us into illusion, into that morbid optimism which, in contempt of the evidence, confuses progression with apotheosis. Better thought out, pagan Antiquity put man in his place.

Instead of making a theological argument about knowledge, Cioran argues, rather pragmatically, that knowledge simply cannot lead to happiness; therefore the notion of progress is null and void to any except those who are too naïve to see that this is so. While he largely abandons traditional theological explanations, in this case, as in so many others in his work, there is still an echo of traditional theology in this explanation of the myth of progress:

Tout pas en avant, toute forme de dynamisme comporte quelque chose de satanique: le « progrès » est l'équivalent moderne de la Chute, la version profane de la damnation. Et ceux qui y croient et en sont les promoteurs, nous tous en définitive, que sommes-nous sinon des réprouvés en marche, prédestinés à l'immonde, à ces machines, à ces villes, dont seul un désastre exhaustif pourrait nous débarrasser. Ce serait là pour nos inventions l'occasion ou jamais de prouver leur utilité et de se réhabiliter à nos yeux. (*O* 1087)

Every step forward, every form of dynamism consists of something satanic: “progress” is the modern equivalent of the Fall, the secular version of damnation. And those who believe in and promote it, definitively all of us, what are we if not outcasts on the move, predestined to the squalid, to those machines, those cities, of which only an exhaustive disaster could rid us. That would be the one chance for our inventions to prove their usefulness and to rehabilitate themselves in our eyes.

Here Cioran adds a key element to his conception of anti-progress, that is, the fact that we are predisposed to retain a conception of hope and therefore of progress; it is difficult for most of us to sustain thinking and acting in a way that negates those concepts. If anything could save us from this inherent “fault,” it would be lucidity, but here we fall back into the paradox that lucidity in no way brings about salvation; it only serves to remind us, as we shall see below, that the ideal for

humanity would be to abandon most everything that typically defines the human, including action first and foremost, and to strive to imitate plant life.

At this point it would be tempting to affirm that no salvation is possible for Cioran, that, for all of the reasons just outlined, he only invokes the word to confirm its impossibility or to refer to the way the concept functioned historically. But this would be misleading, since Cioran often does speak of salvation as attainable. Our next task is thus to examine the many routes that Cioran affirms, at one time or another, as providing salvation. The first of these is suicide. He affirms in *Le mauvais démiurge* that

la mort n'est pas nécessairement ressentie comme délivrance ; le suicide délivre toujours: il est summum, il est paroxysme de salut. On devrait par décence choisir soi-même le moment de disparaître. Il est avilissant de s'éteindre comme on s'éteint, il est intolérable d'être exposé à une fin sur laquelle on ne peut rien, qui vous guette, vous abat, vous précipite dans l'innommable. (O 1205)

death is not necessarily felt to be a deliverance; suicide always delivers: it is a *summum*, the paroxysm of salvation. One should, by decency, choose oneself the moment to disappear. It is degrading to die the way people do, it is intolerable to be exposed to an end against which one is powerless, which lies in wait for you, slays you, pushes you headlong into the unnameable.

While this affirmation seems categorical, one does not have to look far to find its refutation. We read just a few pages further: “Que l'on se supprime ou non, tout demeure inchangé. Mais la décision de se supprimer paraît à chacun la plus importante qui ait jamais été prise. Cela ne devrait pas être ainsi. Et pourtant cela est, et rien ne pourra prévaloir contre cette aberration ou ce mystère” (1208-9) ‘Whether one kills oneself or not, everything remains unchanged. But the decision to kill oneself seems to each person to be the most important one that was ever made. This should not be so. And yet it is, and nothing will be able to prevail against this aberration or this mystery.’ This is much more consistent with Cioran’s other remarks on suicide and with what we have established above—namely, that since any kind of action is fruitless and, worse, leads in fact to our perdition, suicide, which is itself an action, cannot ultimately be our salvation.⁶

Looking elsewhere for potential sources of salvation in Cioran, we might be tempted to find it in music, which is a constant source of emotional transport for him and a potential release from unrelenting pessimism. As Nicole Parfait has noted, music was consistently, from Cioran’s earliest writings, even a source of what Parfait categorizes as salvation:

C'est d'abord dans la musique que [Cioran] croit trouver un espoir de salut. "Elle seule, affirme Cioran, peut nous détourner des finalités de la vie": ce faisant, "elle nous en *délivre*, en ce qu'elle nous fait l'*oublier*" (*Le livre des leures*). D'où vient ce pouvoir? C'est que la musique touche une zone plus profonde que la conscience: l'univers des sens, où règne l'immédiateté des impressions. Elle transforme le corps en un champ réceptif immatériel, abolissant tant ses limites physiques que ses besoins et ses souffrances. Réduisant la dualité, elle masque l'activité réflexive de la conscience, laissant le champ libre aux sensations. (Parfait 58-59)

It is at first in music that [Cioran] believes he finds a hope of salvation. "It alone," Cioran affirms, "can turn us away from the finalities of life": in doing so, "it *delivers* us from it, by making us *forget* it" ("The Book of Traps"). Where does this power come from? It's that music touches a deeper zone than consciousness: the universe of the senses, where an immediacy of impressions reigns. It transforms the body into an immaterial receptive field, abolishing its physical limits as much as its needs and its sufferings. Reducing duality, it masks the reflexive activity of consciousness, leaving the field free for sensations.

Given music's liberating power, Cioran fears that a time will come when we will no longer be moved by it: "Quand la musique même est impuissante à nous sauver, un poignard brille dans nos yeux; plus rien ne nous soutient, si ce n'est la fascination du crime" (*O* 799) 'When music itself is powerless to save us, a dagger shines in our eyes; nothing supports us anymore, except the fascination of the crime.' The word *sauver* 'to save' appears here, to be sure, but it does not appear to carry its full metaphysical import as it does in so many other instances in Cioran's writings. This seems to be one of the few instances when he uses the word in a quasi-metaphorical sense, meaning perhaps that music temporarily dulls our senses or forestalls lucidity. That kind of illusion, however, could never count as salvation in the full meaning of the term.

Cioran also implies at one moment in *Le mauvais démiurge* that skepticism itself is a form of salvation:

Je conserve un fond de scepticisme que rien jamais ne pourra entamer et auquel je reviens toujours après chacun de mes emballlements. Que ce scepticisme soit congénital ou acquis, il ne m'en apparaît pas moins comme une certitude, voire comme une libération, quand toute autre forme de salut s'estompe ou me rejette. (*O* 1249)

I keep a background of skepticism that nothing will ever be able to cut into and to which I always come back after each one of my flights of enthusiasm. Whether this skepticism be congenital or acquired, it appears no less to me as a certainty, even as a liberation, when any other form of salvation dims or rejects me.

Here skepticism would align itself with lucidity, thus avoiding the problem of illusion that was inherent in seeing music as salvation. Cioran implies that other forms of salvation are deficient because they are not consistently applicable. It is interesting to note that he says not that he rejects salvation, but that it rejects him. But when pushed to its limit, Cioran implies at other points, skepticism leads to yet another paradox, namely our being able to see that we do not in fact need to be saved. Thus salvation would come, via skepticism about salvation, from our being able to free ourselves from thinking about salvation to begin with: “Quand on a compris que rien n’est, que les choses ne méritent même pas le statut d’apparences, on n’a plus besoin d’être sauvé, on est sauvé, *et malheureux à jamais*” (*O* 1210) ‘When one has understood that nothing is, that things do not even merit the status of appearances, one no longer needs to be saved, one is saved, *and miserable forever.*’ Salvation is thus simultaneously granted and devalued. We shall see below, however, that this too is only a provisional and not entirely satisfactory answer to the problem of salvation, since we are not able, according to Cioran, to accept truly and permanently the kind of salvific nihilism he proposes here.

Living requires the kinds of illusions that block our ability truly to conceive that nothing really exists. By definition for Cioran, what we call “life” depends on illusion: “Et comme [l’homme] avance en vertu de l’illusion acquise, pour s’arrêter il faudrait que l’illusion s’effritât et disparût ; mais elle est indestructible tant qu’il demeure complice du temps” (*O* 1083) ‘And as [man] advances by virtue of his acquired illusion, to stop it would be necessary for the illusion to evaporate and disappear; but it is indestructible as long as it remains complicit with time.’ All of this comes round once again to the notion of the fall, specifically the fall into time, from which there can be no release. And so we continue to fall both into time and into religious conceptions even though we know them to be illusions, thus guaranteeing that we can never be saved by refusing to maintain the importance of being saved in the first place. Haunted by religious thought and religious vocabulary, Cioran’s own writing voice is an example of this inability to get beyond religious thinking. The vestiges of religious thinking in his writing are some of the illusions beyond which we find it hard to think and live for a sustained period of time; the atheist is no less delusional than the believer, since both require fictions to sustain life:

Nous durons tant que durent nos fictions. ... Exister équivaut à un acte de foi, à une protestation contre la vérité, à une prière interminable... Dès lors qu'ils consentent à vivre, l'incrédule et le dévot se ressemblent en profondeur, puisque l'un et l'autre ont pris la seule décision qui marque un être. (O 969)

We last as long as our fictions last. ... Existing equals an act of faith, a protest against the truth, an interminable prayer... As soon as they consent to live, the faithless person and the devout one resemble each other deeply, since both have made the only decision that marks a being.

And so, if living means believing in fiction, then making the affirmation that we are saved when we understand that nothing is, would involve renouncing the very skepticism that led us here, since, as Cioran writes in *De l'inconvénient d'être né* (*The Trouble with Being Born*): "La certitude qu'il n'y a pas de salut est une forme de salut, elle est même *le* salut. À partir de là on peut aussi bien organiser sa propre vie que construire une philosophie de l'histoire" (O 1390) 'The certainty that there is no salvation is a form of salvation, it even *is* salvation. From there one can organize one's own life as well as constructing a philosophy of history.' To be able to follow these lines of thinking simultaneously, we would need to adopt both absolute skepticism and absolute certainty. This would be salvation, but here, once again, its conditions of existence are shown to be logically impossible.

Given that an acknowledgment of the nullity of existence, along with a concurrent reduction in all of the faculties typically associated with human nature, are what would bring us closest to something like salvation, it is not surprising that Cioran affirms the value of sleep as a potential relief from the suffering that characterizes existence:

N'importe qui se sauve par le sommeil, n'importe qui a du génie *en dormant*: point de différence entre les rêves d'un boucher et ceux d'un poète. Mais notre clairvoyance ne saurait tolérer qu'une telle merveille dure, ni que l'inspiration soit mise à la portée de tous: le jour nous retire les dons que la nuit nous dispense. Le fou seul possède le privilège de passer sans heurt de l'existence nocturne l'existence diurne: aucune distinction entre ses rêves et ses veilles. Il a renoncé à notre raison, comme le clochard à nos biens. Tous deux ont trouvé la voie qui mène hors de la souffrance et résolu tous nos problèmes ; aussi demeurent-ils des modèles que nous ne pouvons suivre des sauveurs sans adeptes. (O 826-27)

Anybody can save himself by sleep, anybody is a genius *while sleeping*: no difference at all between the dreams of a butcher and those of a poet. But our clearheadedness would not tolerate such a wonder's lasting, nor that inspiration be within everyone's grasp: daytime takes back the gifts that the night provides. Only the crazy person possesses the privilege to pass smoothly from nocturnal to diurnal existence: no distinction between his dreaming and his waking. He has renounced our reason, as the homeless person has renounced our goods. Both have found the way that leads out of suffering and resolved all our problems; thus they remain models of saviors that we can follow without followers.

From this it emerges that salvation is absolutely individual—since a person cannot follow someone else into insanity—as well as involuntary, and thus impossible by sheer act of will alone, not to mention undesirable for us as long as we cling to such inherently human tendencies as to believe that being sane is preferable to being insane. Still, sleep provides at least temporary or provisional salvation, since in sleep we have a taste of what the unconscious void is like. Sleep is the state that most resembles another of Cioran's announced ideals, that of being a plant: "Plantes et bêtes portent sur elles les marques du salut, comme l'homme celles de la perdition" (*O* 1437) 'Plants and animals carry the mark of salvation, as man carry those of perdition.' Once again, the fall into time is related to our permanent damnation on account of the fact that we are perpetually changing, not just in the sense of growing older, which we share with the animals, but in our ability to imagine the future and thus imagine humanity differently: "Sans aller chercher dans les égouts des recettes de sagesse, comment ne pas reconnaître les avantages qu'a sur nous un rat, justement parce qu'il est rat et rien d'autre ? Toujours différents, nous ne sommes nous-mêmes que dans la mesure où nous nous écartons de notre définition" (*O* 1078) 'Without going looking for recipes of wisdom in the sewers, how can we not recognize the advantages that a rat has on us, precisely because he is a rat and nothing else? Always different, we are only ourselves to the extent that we distance ourselves from our definition.' But what, then, of the act of creation itself? If sleep brings us a step closer to animal consciousness, then our active building and creating brings us nearer to God's work. Predictably, movement closer to God is not positively valued in Cioran: "De quoi sommes-nous coupables, sinon d'avoir suivi, plus ou moins servilement, l'exemple du créateur ?" (*O* 1170) 'Of what are we guilty, if not of having followed, in a more or less servile way, the example of the creator?' Cioran condemns parenthood by the same logic: "Cette incapacité de demeurer en soi-même, dont le créateur devait faire une si fâcheuse démonstration, nous en avons tous hérité: *engendrer* c'est continuer d'une autre façon et à une autre échelle l'entreprise qui porte son nom, c'est, par une déplorable singerie, ajouter à

sa « création »” (O 1174) ‘This incapacity to stay in oneself, of which the creator had to make such a regrettable demonstration, we have all inherited it: *to have children* is to continue by another means and on another scale the enterprise that bears his name, it is, by a deplorable act of clowning, to add to his ‘creation.’” But we are in far more complex territory once we talk not about human creation in general but about artistic creation specifically, and more precisely still, about the act of writing, which will be the final potential route to salvation that we shall consider. In a sense, Cioran’s comments on the subject follow the same general trajectory that we saw operating in the case of salvation itself, namely, he at times provides the blanket condemnation of the idea that one would expect, yet that condemnation is nuanced and even called completely into question by many of his other writings.

An eminently human activity, writing is by its nature associated with the fall and with original sin according to Cioran:

Ecrire des livres n’est pas sans avoir quelque rapport avec le péché originel. Car qu’est-ce qu’un livre sinon une perte d’innocence, un acte d’agression, une répétition de notre chute ? Publier ses tares pour amuser ou exaspérer ! Une barbarie à l’égard de notre intimité, une profanation, une souillure. Et une tentation. Je vous en parle en connaissance de cause. (O 881)

Writing books is not without some relationship to original sin. For what is a book if not a loss of innocence, an act of aggression, a repetition of our fall? Publishing one’s defects in order to amuse or exasperate! An act of barbarism toward our intimacy, a profanation, a sully. And a temptation. I speak from personal experience.

Writing, on this account, draws us ever deeper into original sin rather than providing a way out of it, which is consistent with Cioran’s appraisal of all particularly human pursuits. Like living itself, writing requires a large dose of illusion in order to sustain itself:

Produire, « créer », c’est s’interdire la clairvoyance, c’est avoir le courage ou le bonheur de ne pas percevoir le mensonge de la diversité, le caractère trompeur du multiple. Une œuvre n’est réalisable que si nous nous aveuglons sur les apparences ; dès que nous cessons de leur attribuer une dimension métaphysique, nous perdons tous nos moyens. (O 1142)

To produce, to “create,” is to forbid oneself clear-sightedness, it is to have the courage or the happiness to not notice the lie of diversity, the

deceiving character of the multiple. A work is only achievable if we blind ourselves to appearances; as soon as we cease to attribute a metaphysical dimension to them, we lose all our means.

But here a very different note emerges in the words “courage” and “happiness.” Unlike other proposed sources of salvation, which ultimately draw us ever deeper into perdition, writing seems to hold out hope for something more. If it requires just as much delusion about our condition as the other solutions, the difference seems to be the lucidity which the writer brings to the delusion that leads to the possibility of writing.⁷ The delusion is controlled by the writer, rather than encroaching upon him or her unwittingly. Writing thereby becomes a means of confronting, even if not vanquishing, the illusions inherent in human life, and therefore requires courage temporarily to enter those illusions so as better to illuminate and give voice to them. This is, perhaps, the appropriate degree of involvement in the human condition, this act of giving voice to it without drawing the full consequences of that condition: “Ne tirent les dernières conséquences que ceux qui vivent hors de l’art. Le suicide, la sainteté, le vice—autant de formes du manque de talent. ... C’est une diminution salutaire qui fait de tout acte de création un facteur de fuite” (*O* 626) ‘Only those who live outside of art draw the last consequences. Suicide, holiness, vice—so many forms of lack of talent. ... It’s a saving diminution that makes of each act of creation a factor of evasion.’ Passing into action to any greater extent than writing would be to fall into the same trap we explored above, that of not cancelling but merely adding to the fall of humanity by seeking to overcome it through an action like suicide, which, by permanently suspending existence, permanently cancels lucidity without having changed the fallen human condition at all.

Suicide is an act of negation whereas writing is not. Cioran exempts the poet and writer from his condemnation of action, and, in his middle and late work, does not hesitate to use the vocabulary of salvation when describing their task:

Le poète, lui, ... prend le langage au sérieux. Il s’en crée un à sa façon. Toutes ses singularités procèdent de son intolérance aux mots tels quels. Inapte à en supporter la banalité et l’usure, il est prédestiné à souffrir à cause d’eux et pour eux ; et cependant c’est par eux qu’il essaie de se sauver, c’est de leur régénération qu’il attend son salut. Quelque grinçante que soit sa vision des choses, il n’est jamais un vrai négateur. (*O* 944)

The poet ... takes language seriously. He creates himself one in his own manner. All his singularities proceed from his intolerance of words as they are. Incapable of tolerating the banality and wear of them, he is predestined to suffer because of them and for them; and yet it is by them

that he attempts to save himself, it is from their regeneration that he awaits his salvation. No matter how grating his vision of things may be, he is never a true negator.

The poet is cast here in the role of the hero, predestined to suffer in the persistent attempt to procure the only kind of salvation that may be possible, that is, an individual's own salvation by him or herself. By continuing to engage in work that is certain to produce suffering, the poet engages most fully with life, which is equivalent to suffering for Cioran. But the creative act, when applied to words, escapes the condemnation of action that Cioran applies almost universally elsewhere. Writing situates itself halfway between the continuation of illusion and the working through of lucidity; it is neither one in any complete sense and participates simultaneously in both. It is the kind of paradoxical act that can respond to the series of paradoxes that Cioran's tortured thinking about salvation has generated at every turn.⁸ Even though the poet can save only him or herself, we are nonetheless invited to follow him or her:

Puisque le poète est un monstre qui tente son salut par le mot, et qu'il supplée au vide de l'univers par le symbole même du vide (car le mot est-il autre chose ?), pourquoi ne le suivrions-nous pas dans son exceptionnelle illusion ? Il devient notre recours toutes les fois que nous désertons les fictions du langage courant pour nous en chercher d'autres, insolites, sinon rigoureuses. Ne semble-t-il pas alors que toute autre irréalité est préférable à la nôtre, et qu'il y a plus de substance dans un vers que dans tous ces mots trivialisés par nos conversations ou nos prières ? Que la poésie doive être accessible ou hermétique, efficace ou gratuite, c'est là un problème secondaire. Exercice ou révélation, qu'importe. Nous lui demandons, nous autres, qu'elle nous délivre de l'oppression, des affres du discours. Si elle y réussit, elle fait, *pour un instant*, notre salut. (O 944-5)

Since the poet is a monster who attempts his salvation by the word, and since he replaces the void of the universe with the very symbol of the void (for is the word anything else than that?), why would we not follow him in his exceptional illusion? He becomes our recourse every time that we desert our fictions of ordinary language in order to seek others, unusual, if not rigorous. Does it not seem then that all other unreality is preferable to ours, and that there is more substance in a line of poetry than in all those words trivialized by our conversations or our prayers? That our poetry must be accessible or hermetic, effective or gratuitous is a secondary problem. Exercise or revelation, what does it matter? We ask of it, we

others, that it deliver us from oppression, from the torments of discourse. If it succeeds, it makes, *for an instant*, our salvation.

Poetry's illusions are not, then, illusions like any other. The fact that we seek them in full cognizance of their status as illusions allows us to draw a benefit from them that Cioran does not hesitate to label "deliverance."

Is this not, however, too easy a solution to a problem whose complexity Cioran has underscored throughout all the writings we have quoted? One would be tempted to think so, especially when reading this passage in conjunction with others in which he poses a simple equivalence between writing and suicide, claiming that the act of writing is a *soulagement* 'relief,' a way of exteriorizing the self, without which he would have killed himself.⁹ But the key aspect of this solution, which does not allow for salvation by a simple substitution of one kind of illusion for another, is at the end of the passage quoted above, highlighted in Cioran's own italics: poetry becomes for an instant our salvation. By abandoning the notion of permanence, we are able to achieve a very temporary form of salvation which is in constant need of renewal. Since we are condemned to exist in time, and since changeless eternity is impossible, humanity's constant falling can only be lessened by constant renewal of salvation, the time of voluntary suspension of illusion through writing. From this constantly renewed salvation stems the cyclic nature of Cioran's own writings, which, often refusing linear development, turn around the same sets of ideas from aphorism to aphorism and from book to book. Cioran himself links his obsessional rewriting of key ideas to a notion of writing as therapy: "Si je n'ai fait qu'écrire le même livre, en marge des mêmes obsessions, c'est pour avoir constaté que cela me libérait, en quelque sorte. J'ai vraiment écrit par nécessité. La littérature, la philosophie, que sais-je encore, ne furent pour moi qu'un prétexte. L'acte d'écrire comme thérapeutique, c'était cela l'essentiel" (Liiceanu 85) 'If I have only written the same book [over and over again], in the margins of the same obsessions, it is because I noticed that it liberated me in some way. I truly wrote by necessity. Literature, philosophy, or whatever, were only a pretext for me. The act of writing as therapeutic, that was the essential thing.' Here Cioran's theology aligns itself perfectly with his attitude on writing: he explicitly affirms both a provisional *theological* salvation and the momentary *personal* salvation available to us through poetry that he affirmed in the passage quoted above:

Tel théologien, dans sa scandaleuse naïveté, croit à la rédemption tout en niant le péché originel ; mais si le péché n'est pas consubstantiel à l'humanité, quel sens attribuer à l'avènement du rédempteur, qu'est-ce qu'il [est] venu rédimer ? Aucunement accidentelle, notre corruption est permanente, elle est de toujours. De même l'iniquité: ... elle est même ce

qu'il y a de plus *visible* ici-bas, où remettre les choses en place exigerait un sauveur pour chaque génération, pour chaque individu plutôt. (*O* 1225)

Some theologian, in his scandalous naiveté, believes in redemption while denying original sin; but if sin is not consubstantial with humanity, what meaning can we attribute to the coming of the redeemer, what has he come to redeem? Not at all accidental, our corruption is permanent and has been there from the start. The same with iniquity: ... it is even what is most *visible* here below, where putting things back in place would demand a savior for each generation, or rather for each individual.

This individual saviour, which, as we have seen, is in fact each person for him or herself, is also a provisional saviour. Cioran remarks a few pages further on:

Dans la décision de renoncer au salut, il n'entre aucun élément diabolique, car, s'il en était ainsi, d'où viendrait la sérénité qui accompagne cette décision ? Rien de diabolique ne rend serein. Dans les parages du Démon, on est au contraire morose. C'est mon cas... Aussi ma sérénité est-elle de courte durée: juste le temps de me décider à en finir avec le salut. Par bonheur je m'y décide souvent, et, chaque fois, quelle paix! (*O* 1251)

No diabolical element enters into the decision to renounce salvation, for, if it were thus, from whence would come the serenity that accompanies this decision? Nothing diabolical renders one serene. In the vicinity of the Demon, one is, on the contrary, morose. That's my case... Therefore my serenity is short-lasting: just the time to make up my mind to be done with salvation. Happily I decide that often, and, each time, what peace!

And so both the need for salvation and the constantly renewable decision to renounce salvation are temporary and provisional. Serenity is not impossible for Cioran; it comes both through writing and through the conscious decision to renounce salvation, and perhaps the two acts function interdependently.¹⁰ But the essential point is that serenity comes only with the realization that there can be no permanent salvation, and that, while it is in constant need of renewal, it is, all the same, perpetually renewable by a further act of writing or a renewed commitment to renounce the need for salvation in the first place.

A number of commentators on Cioran have focused on the role of writing. Rachel Mutin has emphasized the palliative aspect that, as we have seen above, Cioran himself sometimes evokes. Mutin writes:

Geste cathartique permettant de canaliser ses angoisses, ses rages, ses hantises et ses obsessions, le fait d'écrire fut donc pour Cioran un moyen de se délivrer, de « s'expurger » d'un débordement intérieur quasi insupportable. ... Ainsi, c'est très probablement dans l'écriture que Cioran trouva une résolution palliative ..., celle d'un retrait nostalgique envisagé à la fin de sa vie: en revenir à une sorte de monde cynique, parvenir à une somptueuse décadence. (Mutin 240)

A cathartic gesture which permits him to channel his anguishes, his rages, his hauntings and obsessions, the fact of writing was thus for Cioran a means of delivering himself, of "purging" himself of a nearly intolerable interior overflowing. ... Thus, it is very probably in writing that Cioran found a palliative resolution ..., that of a nostalgic retreat imagined at the end of his life: to come back to a sort of cynical world, to arrive at a sumptuous decadence.

Even in this emphasis on the therapeutic value of writing, Mutin appeals to the vocabulary of redemption to describe the effect of writing, which leads us to suspect that there is more to the role of writing in Cioran, despite what he himself occasionally affirms, than a simple pharmaceutical aspect, a pure descent into illusion. Other critics have emphasized the theological dimension of writing, its characterization as a fall and thus concomitant with our fall into time and into the degraded state which is the only possible human existence:

Cioran ne se pardonne pas de continuer à écrire. Seul le silence est grand. Il est de la race de ceux qui ne l'ignorant point, ne peuvent pour autant renoncer à la parole, à l'écriture surtout. Cioran le désespéré est un homme de lettres. Contradiction à laquelle il fut sensible. Occasion nouvelle de se moquer de lui-même avec un ricanement non tout à fait dépourvu de complaisance. (Mauriac 215)

Cioran does not forgive himself for continuing to write. Only silence is grand. He is of the race of those who, well aware of that, cannot for all that renounce the word, and the written word especially. Cioran the hopeless is a man of letters, a contradiction to which he was sensitive. A new occasion to mock himself with a snicker that is not without indulgence.

Claude Mauriac's descriptive vocabulary accurately reflects the relation between writing and the fall. If, as we have seen, Cioran refuses to assign a diabolical motive to the decision to renounce salvation, there *is* something that relates

writing to our fallen condition. Condemned to language just as we are condemned to exist in time, unable thus to perpetuate silence, the palliative measure which is writing is also a sign of our further falling. As Mauriac emphasizes, however, Cioran is himself conscious of the fall, which to some extent mitigates its effects, allowing a kind of lucidity-in-illusion through ironic detachment.¹¹ Cioran in fact claims that condensing language into aphorisms is a way of taming language's inevitable expansion:

Il est plus aisé de renoncer au pain qu'au verbe. Malheureusement le verbe glisse au verbiage, à la littérature. Même la pensée y tend, toujours prête à se répandre, à s'enfler ; l'arrêter par la pointe, la contracter en aphorisme ou en boutade, c'est s'opposer à son expansion, à son mouvement naturel, à son élan vers le délayage, vers l'inflation Vous dirai-je le fond de ma pensée ? Tout mot est un mot de trop. Il s'agit pourtant d'écrire: écrivons..., dupons-nous les uns les autres. (*O* 882)

It is easier to renounce bread than the word. Unfortunately the word slides into verbiage, into literature. Even thought tends towards that, always ready to spread itself out, to puff itself out; to stop it at the stinging point, to contract it into an aphorism or a witty saying, is to oppose its expansion, its natural movement, its movement toward padding out and inflation Shall I tell you the depth of my thought? Every word is one word too many. The thing is to write though: let us write..., let us dupe each other.

Even though we are forever condemned, this does not cancel all interest in life, as Mauriac's phrase "a parcel of attachment" aptly conveys. We get the sense that it is not simply, as Cioran sometimes postulates, that an inability permanently to renounce life is a mark of our complicity with the fall, but rather an affirmation, however provisional, temporary, and always open to skeptical interrogation, that writing can and does form a real attachment to life and allows us to take some degree of momentary but deep pleasure from it.

Here it is important to make a distinction between pessimism and nihilism, for while Cioran may sometimes be considered a nihilist, and while many of the assertions we have quoted would give partial credence to this view in that he repeatedly affirms that nothing would be better than something, nonexistence better than existence, the role that writing plays for Cioran would suggest that pessimism is a more helpful perspective through which to consider his writings. In his insightful book on pessimism, which argues, in sympathy with Cioran, that pessimism arises as a reaction to modern linear notions of time and its implications about progress, Joshua Foa Dienstag characterizes the difference this way: "Pessimism expects nothing. But this is not nihilism. Nihilism would be not

wanting anything. Extreme nihilism? *Wanting nothing*” (Dienstag 256). In other words, pessimism provides a potential art of living, fully lucid about the “dissonance and disorder” of the world (Dienstag xii) and therefore able to find joy by tempering expectations.¹² It is not prohibited for the pessimist, as it would be for the nihilist, to believe that something may, at least temporarily, make life worth living. Cioran’s earliest readers in French already saw this attitude emerging through his brutally pessimistic prose. Maurice Nadeau’s review of *Précis de décomposition*, originally published in *Combat* in 1949, notes that Cioran’s act of writing removes him from nihilism:

Sur le bord de la voie triomphale qui mène à la destruction atomique il pose le sac et s’assied, fourbu, refusant toutes les consolations et toutes les pitiés.

Il croit encore à quelque chose puisqu’il écrit, se confesse et chante sa détresse. Parce qu’il la module dans une langue d’autant plus admirable qu’elle est d’emprunt, parce qu’il la distribue artistement en périodes lyriques, les unes facilement oratoires, les autres d’une concision à la Nietzsche ou à la Pascal, aurons-nous le front de dire que cette détresse est feinte? (Nadeau 212)

On the side of the triumphal way that leads to atomic destruction he puts down his bag and sits, exhausted, refusing all consolations and all pity.

He still believes in something since he writes, confesses, and sings his distress. Because he modulates it in a language that is all the more admirable since it is a borrowed one, because he distributes it artistically in lyrical phrasings, some easily oratorical, others of a concision like that of Nietzsche or Pascal, will we have the effrontery to say that this distress is feigned?

While it cannot redeem us eternally, and while it may not even hold up to skeptical inquiry, writing remains for Cioran as necessary as living; he called it, in his last published book, a “defensible illusion.”¹³ Writing is never innocent, nor are the subjects of its pronouncements fixed or permanent; they are, rather, always subject to revision or even to perpetual restatement of the same. But lucidity about what writing can or cannot do as therapy, theology, or art of living, while it is not a definitive mode of salvation, is at least the beginning of the way to talk about it in terms that respect and reflect the full complexity of the idea.

To sum up, then, the role that salvation plays in Cioran distinguishes his writings from others’ by its fundamental ambiguity that refuses to resolve itself into an affirmation or rejection of the notion. While he considers many potential routes to salvation, including music, suicide, silence, and skepticism, all of these

turn out to be provisional modes of salvation at best, and the notion of redemption continues to haunt Cioran. While he refuses what we could label “belief,” his writing is nonetheless informed by and infused with the remnants of a theological discourse, a fact that makes it difficult to get beyond the notion of salvation, and all the more so when we consider that to find something like a permanent solution to the problem of salvation would divorce us from our human nature, bringing us closer to animal or even plant-like existence. Given our condemnation to remain within the human, writing offers the closest thing Cioran can find to a solution: it is provisional and temporary, yet eternally renewable when we find ourselves in defiance of our lucidity. If we are unable, even in a post-theological age, to get beyond our attachment to the concept of salvation, writing lucidly about that failed attempt might just be the next best thing.

Notes

1. References to Cioran’s *Œuvres* will be designated in the text by the abbreviation *O*. All translations are my own.
2. Pierre Nepveu comments on a fundamental paradox in Cioran: “Je ne peux pas vivre dans ce monde, je ne peux pas me résigner au temps ; mais je ne peux pas davantage en sortir. Paradoxe, fondateur, sans doute, mais presque trop facile, car on peut s’y installer comme dans une prison somme toute assez confortable, y tracer des beaux cercles et y cultiver à l’infini les fleurs d’un lyrisme plutôt décadent” (Nepveu 13-14) ‘I do not want to live in this world, I do not want to resign myself to time ; but nor can I leave it. As paradox that is no doubt fundamental, but almost too facile, since one can place oneself within it as in a prison that is all in all rather comfortable, and to trace beautiful circles there and cultivate on to infinity the flowers of a rather decadent lyricism.’
3. For a detailed analysis of *La chute dans le temps* in conjunction with original sin, see David 149-175.
4. “Tout le long du siècle dernier, progrès fut synonyme de salut” (Cioran, « Face » 194) ‘All throughout the last century, progress was synonymous with salvation.’
5. An important element of Cioran’s critique of progress is that good and evil are constant quantities in the universe; therefore progress is impossible insofar as it claims to diminish the amount of evil in the world: “Les modernes répugnent ... à cette idée, spécifiquement antique, suivant laquelle les biens et les maux représentent une somme invariable, qui ne saurait subir aucune modification.

Avec notre hantise du progrès et de la régression, nous admettons implicitement que le mal change, soit qu'il diminue ou qu'il augmente. L'identité du monde avec lui-même, l'idée qu'il est condamné à être ce qu'il est, que l'avenir n'ajoutera rien d'essentiel aux données existantes, cette belle idée n'a plus cours ; c'est que justement, *l'avenir*, objet d'espoir ou d'horreur, est notre véritable *lieu* ; nous y vivons, il est tout pour nous" (O 1188) 'Moderns find repugnant ... this idea, specifically ancient, according to which goods and evils represent an invariable sum, which could not be modified. With our obsessive fear of progress and regression, we admit implicitly that evil changes, either it diminishes or augments. The identity of the world with itself, the idea that it is condemned to be what it is, that the future will not add anything essential to the existing givens, this idea no longer has currency; it is that the *future*, object of hope or horror, is our true *place*; we live there, it is everything for us.'

6. Cioran often distinguishes the idea of suicide from the act; the latter is more fruitful: "Je ne vis que parce qu'il est en mon pouvoir de mourir quand bon me semblera: sans l'*idée* du suicide, je me serais tué depuis toujours" (O 775) 'I only live because it is in my power to die whenever I want: without the *idea* of suicide, I would have killed myself forever ago.'

7. Patrice Bollon underscores the permanent coexistence of lucidity and delusion in Cioran, "l'exigence de la lucidité la plus éclairante *et* la nécessité de l'illusion la plus obscurantiste, la recherche de la sagesse *et* l'acquiescement aux pulsions les plus viles, l'élan mystique vers la sainteté *et* l'attachement au matérialisme le plus athée ... ! Comme si coexistaient en permanence en lui et à tout propos l'affirmateur et le négateur ..." (Bollon 150) 'the demand for the most illuminating lucidity *and* the necessity of the most obscuring illusion, the search for wisdom *and* the acquiescing to the most vile drives, the mystical yearning for saintliness *and* the attachment to the most materialist atheism ...! As if the affirmer and the negator coexisted permanently and about every subject in him'

8. For an insightful reading of the way Cioran cultivates rather than refuses paradox, see David 85-106.

9. "Parce que écrire, si peu que ce soit, m'a aidé à passer d'une année à l'autre, car les obsessions *exprimées* restent affaiblies et en partie surmontées. Je suis sûr que si je n'avais pas noirci du papier, je me serais tué depuis longtemps. Ecrire est un soulagement extraordinaire. Publier aussi. Cela vous paraîtra ridicule, et c'est pourtant très vrai. Car un livre est votre vie, ou une partie de votre vie, qui vous rend *extérieur*" (*Entretiens* 17) 'Because writing, no matter how little, helped me

to pass from one year to another, for *expressed* obsessions remain weakened and in part overcome. I am sure that if I had not blackened some paper, I would have killed myself a long time ago. Writing is an extraordinary relief. Publishing too. That is going to seem ridiculous to you, and yet it's very true. For a book is your life, or a part of your life, that renders you *exterior*.'

10. One should perhaps add that the impermanence of salvation is also related to the impermanence of ideas in Cioran's writing, which Edward Said identifies as a source of suffering: "Ce qui le fait particulièrement souffrir, pense-t-il, c'est son incapacité à « avoir lieu ». Comme le neveu de Rameau il voit le monde, et son écriture exprime donc une série de positions prises—mais seulement provisoirement. Il les abandonne ensuite car « le sens », déclare-t-il, « commence à dater ». Inéluctablement les difficultés qu'il rencontre le font revenir à une conscience de l'impasse de l'écriture elle-même" (Said 174) 'What particularly makes him suffer, he thinks, is his incapacity to "take place." Like Rameau's nephew he sees the world, and his writing thus expresses a series of stances—but only provisionally taken. He then abandons them because "meaning," he declares, "begins to make something seem dated." Ineluctably the difficulties he encounters make him return to a consciousness of the impasse of writing itself.'

11. Sylvie Jaudeau calls this the lucidity of the "last man" in Cioran: "En une magistrale inversion, l'homme déchu peut se prévaloir de l'incomparable privilège de vivre en toute conscience son destin mortel. « La vérité de la chute est devenue notre vérité » peut-il dire désormais. ... Caractérisée par la lucidité, [sa conscience] oublie les illusions immanentes au temps et reconsidère l'histoire en la privant de son aura. Elle l'envisage du point de vue du « dernier homme », cette espèce nouvelle qui a cessé de confondre devenir et absolu, qui a cessé de sacraliser le temps historique comme le faisaient les anciens en le rendant complice de l'intemporel ou d'un absolu transcendant qu'ils plaçaient dans le paradis, la fin des temps, ou dans d'autres utopies" (Jaudeau 40-41) 'In a magisterial inversion, fallen man can prevail on account of his incomparable privilege to live in all awareness of his mortal destiny. "The truth of the fall has become our truth," he can say from now on. ... Characterized by lucidity, [his consciousness] forgets illusions that are immanent to time and reconsiders history while depriving it of its aura. It envisions it from the point of view of the "last man," that new species that has ceased to confuse becoming and the absolute, which has ceased to make historical time sacred as the ancients did in rendering it complicit with the atemporal or with a transcendent absolute that they placed in paradise, the end of time, or in other utopias.'

12. For a discussion of pessimism and disappointment in Cioran, see Acquisto.

13. “Je disais l’autre jour à un ami que, tout en croyant plus à l’écriture, je ne voudrais pas y renoncer, que travailler était une illusion défendable et qu’après avoir gribouillé une page ou seulement une phrase, j’avais toujours envie de siffler” (*O* 1651) ‘I was saying the other day to a friend that, even while no longer believing in writing, I would not want to renounce it, that working is a defensible illusion and that after having scribbled a page or just a sentence, I always felt like whistling.’

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