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Eliade and his generation - metaphysical fervour and tragic destiny

Abstract:

In the study, the author brings under scrutiny some of the main theses that Eliade advances, in the Romania of the years '30, as the recognized "spiritual leader" and main theorist of his generation. The argument focusses upon the intriguing emotional and ideological climate of his generation, more precisely upon their specific and ostentatious search for authenticity, spirituality, and metaphysical foundation. The essential point to be argued throughout the study is the tragic sense of the generation's evolution, a tragic that is relevant, on one hand, on an individual level, and, on second hand, on transindividual level, within the larger historical and ideological context.

The distantiating from the "spiritual itinerary"

Acknowledged as the spiritual leader in the 1930s, Mircea Eliade published in the journal *Cuvântul* (between the 6th of September and the 16th of November of 1927) a series of programmatic articles entitled *Itinerariu spiritual* [*Spiritual Itinerary*]. Surprisingly, in 1933 he wrote an article entitled *Moment nespirtual* [*Nonspiritual Moment*]. This became a reverse in the negative, a parodical interpretation of the metaphysical moment that Eliade's professor, Nae Ionescu, had theorized upon in his university lectures. Eliade's critical response to the so-called "authenticity" and "spirituality" that emerged from the mantle of Ionescu's charismatic personality is relevant for the paradoxical evolution of his former principles. Eliade mocks, somewhat in the style of the insurgent Eugen Ionescu, the leitmotifs of his "spiritual" generation. The former promoter and theorist of the spiritual itinerary is now moving away from his old obsessions: "Sir, I confess I am tired of seeing everybody doing the same thing. You produce 'spirituality', someone else does 'authenticity'; someone brings about mysticism and the other skepticism, one exasperates everybody around him with India and the other with America, five of them scream about agony and other five about orthodoxy, a smart one writes the apology of barbarism and a smarter one jumps in the pit after him - for the

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illusion of experiencing the void. We reproduce old forms, sir, and we reproduce them up until we reach nausea..." And further on: "We all are, after all, some sort of buffoons - and I would like to confess, in this time of anger against you and against myself, that I am sick of it and I do pity our mockery. (...) I hate and despise you with the same sincerity. (...) Something else, I can't tell you how thirsty I am for something else, something completely different from what we are doing right now."¹

For the author of the *Spiritual Itinerary*, the temporary detachment from the ideals of his generation stands as a paradoxical therapeutics, a sort of slow poisoning - a Mitridatism, I might say - if we take into consideration the fact that Eliade's itinerary crossed, after all, the boundaries of the Iron Guard's inferno. If Petru Comarnescu, the organizer of the group *Criterion*, denounced in 1933 "the false position of the right wing",² amongst whom there were Nae Ionescu, Mircea Vulcănescu, and Constantin Noica, the case of Eliade's attitude is more complicated in this respect. Thus, in 1937 Eliade was to attach to the spiritual revolution that he himself had inaugurated a decade earlier "a political end, somewhat linked to the Legion, although such a political goal had no real base."³ Eliade himself had set the main points of reference for his generation's spiritual itinerary: the new dilettantism, unmediated living, authenticity, the imperviousness of the synthesis, mystical experience, orthodox Christianity. This temporary step of Eliade's apart from the spiritual ideals emerged from a kind of destiny neurosis. The distance that Eliade kept from the theories is a paradox that better fulfills, as in the case of young Eugen Ionescu, the profile of "the generation of '27" (a label formulated by the critic Dan C. Mihăilescu regarding the year when the *Itinerary* appeared).

Eugen Ionescu's bitter and pathetic letter sent from Paris to Tudor Vianu, dated 19 September, 1945, is totally symptomatic of his disagreement with the "criterionists." As compared to the "bragging young generation", Tudor Vianu's generation proved to be, in Ionescu's opinion, "much luckier", "more solid", whereas "we were some giddy-heads, some unfortunates. As far as I am concerned, I cannot blame myself for having been a fascist. But this reproach can be leveled against almost everybody else: Mihail Sebastian remained clear-minded and authentically human. Too bad he is gone. Cioran is here, in exile. He admits that as a young man he was wrong. I find it hard to forgive him."⁴

As far as Eliade is concerned, Eugen Ionescu thinks he is the "great guilty one", but he immediately denounces the unchallenged bad influence of Nae Ionescu on the outstanding *Criterion* generation. Eliade, Cioran, Noica, Vulcănescu, Haig Acterian, and Mihail Polihroniade are all amongst the victims of "the hateful departed man Nae Ionescu. If it hadn't been for Nae Ionescu (or if he hadn't argued with the king) we would have had, nowadays, a valuable leading generation, aged 35-40. Because of him, all became fascists. He created a stupid, frightening 'Reactionary Romania.'"⁵ Blaming the political opinions of several members of his generation, who under Nae Ionescu's influence were contaminated by the ideology of the right wing, Eugen Ionescu discovers in the failure of the criterionists an immense tragic farce, directed by fatal and inviolable occult laws: "Fatality follows in everybody's footsteps - both those who did not let themselves get caught up in stupidity and madness and then all those who are still lucid. Absurd accidents and mysteries took place, and threw them on the other side: a plague, in the case of Alexandru Vianu, a drunk driver, that brought about the death of Sebastian. They all integrate themselves within the common destiny; they are silently solidary."

Eugen Ionescu doesn't forget to underline the so-called irony of destiny that, sparing the *Criterion*'s agent, Petru Comarnescu, deepened the void around him. Beyond his hypercriticism, translated into the sharp and sometimes unfair, ironically exaggerated

portraits that he drew of his *Criterion* colleagues, the exiled Ionescu admitted, more or less explicitly, a real emotional dependence upon this fascinating 'young generation': "On my part, I split and left the party: even if I came back, could I get to find my roots again? I always hated them: I fought against them, they hated me in their turn - but without them, my enemies, I feel lonely. I was doomed to love them and be tied to them. Who shall I continue the dialogue with? I am branded with the same sign myself."⁶ Emil Cioran, another exceptional personality of this generation endowed with the passion of total freedom - an evidence of this being, among other things, the voluntary exile of some of its most valuable members: Eliade, Cioran, Ionescu, Vintilă Horia - confessed, in a letter addressed to the same Tudor Vianu, that Paris gave him a "poetical distance from the world." This is an affective distance that could have been obtained only as a result of a prolonged contact with the sea or the desert, since this city "ruthlessly speeds self awareness, people here discover much quicker than elsewhere the void, unhappiness or luck."⁷ Only a few years after Cioran assumed this philosophy of the interior "desert" - a kind of despair that reaches the climax in a paradoxical inner peace - the emotional attitude of the exiled Ionescu, soon to become world-famous as Eugene Ionesco, seems to be much foggier. The latter admits that he actually has a contradictory love-hate relationship with his own spiritual generation. The inquisitorial light that Eugene Ionesco sheds upon the generation of '27, throughout his acid and desperate correspondence with Tudor Vianu, still reveals some typical characteristics of the generation's itinerary.

But what are the involuntary temperamental affinities and the specific adoptive age of this outstanding generation?

Authenticity, aliveness, experientialism

Youth, for instance, is the spiritual crest of Nae Ionescu himself, who stays alive in the memory of his generation, as Father André Scrima says, "through and for the sake of his youth", in a careless and provocative "complicity with youthfulness."⁸ Cioran, in his turn furious about the pornography accusation brought against Eliade's writing, and angry because of the threat of Eliade's dismissal from the University, expresses his revolt against the "old men". His text (published in *Vremea*, June, 1937) is actually an acid pamphlet, with strong accents that seem to be taken out of Swift and Dostoyevsky, where gerontophobia reaches a kind of pathological cynicism. Here are some significant extracts from the article entitled *Crima bătrânilor* [*The Old People's Murder*]: "A Saint Bartholomew's Night among certain old people is the only salvation", or, "Our interest is to accelerate their agony and pitifully not to sentence them to life."⁹

The vocation of *youth* - be it real or just an adoptive mental state - is nothing else but the symptom of a complex spiritual attitude, one that can only be described through terms as *authenticity*, *aliveness* [in Romanian, *trăire*] and *experientialism*. Yet the often contradictory solidarity of the generation is to be seen in the early writings of Eliade, Cioran, Ionescu, Mihail Sebastian, Noica and other similarly *organic* authors, who experience a typically organic philosophical and artistic thinking. The writer of the generation is a man that thinks through and with his biology and all, his thoughts being just as many revelations of pain, according to an emblematic expression of Cioran's. In *Pe culmile disperării* [*On the Edge of Despair*], a book that appeared the very same year, 1934, as Ionescu's *No* (*Non*, in French, or *Nu* in the original Romanian edition), Cioran

prefers the *organic* man to the abstract one: "In front of the abstract man, who only thinks for the pleasure of thinking, there is the organic man who thinks under the determinant of a vital disequilibrium, who is beyond science and beyond art. (...) People are not yet convinced that the time of superficial and intelligent preoccupations is gone and that the problem of pain is infinitely more important than that of the syllogism."¹⁰ The dichotomy *philosophical syllogism* / *living pain* is polemically speculated by young Ionescu in an essay called *Contra literaturii* [*Against literature*], published in *Facla*, in 1931: "Yesterday, my unrestrained cry of joy, my friend, and today your shoulders quivering in weeping make me feel as if I were your brother, the way no other speech, deliberation or logic could have done before."¹¹ In a micro essay in *Discobolul* (May, 1933), Cioran stigmatized in his turn the dryness and the inner void of these apparently intelligent people, pleading instead for "the essential and organic thinker, for whom the thought means urgent necessity and risk altogether."¹²

Claming their roots from Nietzsche's a-moral *will to power*, as well as from the *abyssal man* of Dostoyevsky and Gide's 'fervours', or descending from the *Lebensphilosophie* or the Papinian "masculinity", transformed into Eliade's "apology for virility", the members of the generation of '27 are all interested in the agonistic, troubled kind of thinking, set under the sign of a "vital disequilibrium". But perhaps the one who managed to induce in them - from Elide to Cioran, Mihail Sebastian, Stelian Mateescu, Mircea Vulcănescu, Constantin Noica, Arșavir Acterian, Petre Țuțea, and last but not least Jeni Acterian - the need of an organic and authentic thinking is the Socrates-like professor Nae Ionescu, who taught metaphysics and the history of logic. In an article written on the occasion of the 30th commemoration of Nae Ionescu's death, Father André Scrima invoked the charismatic presence, already a legend at the time, of the professor. The latter is eulogized for the special "coherence" of his thought, "of a different order, anterior to the 'system'", and for the organic quality of his thinking, "because of whom the living spirit brakes the mirror effect of the subject-object reflection, that closes him within the space of a *de-finite* philosophical work, and states itself as a free and awake state of mind...."¹³ Even the "written language" of the professor is, in Scrima's apologetic vision, an organic mixture of the word with a meaningful revelation, his genuine "pronunciation" having a surprisingly "impersonal" effect. The controversial mentor of the generation - whose so-called spontaneity in delivering courses was, in fact, skillfully stage directed - had upon the young proselytes a fascinating influence, that of a "superb intelligence, always to be grasped in the act." A similar portrait of the professor, seen as a Mephistophelian charming character, tormented by anxieties and by existential paradoxes, is drawn by his very first disciple, Mircea Elide, both in the novel *Gaudeamus* and in his *Memoirs* (Nae Ionescu is in fact the model for several other literary characters, such as Ghiță Blindaru from *De două mii de ani* [*Since Two Thousand Years Ago*] by Mihail Sebastian, of The Logician from Ionescu's *Rhinoceros*).

Metaphysical euphoria and the cult of the ego

As a prerogative of the organic thinker, authenticity is the crossing point of more than one coordinate of the generation's program. First of all, there is one characteristic that Ion Ianoși called "the hypertrophy of a personalized relationship to the world,"¹⁴ when he was talking about the mentor of the generation, Nae Ionescu. This means, in other words, the specific tendency of hypertrophying the ego, related with polemical and

persuasive intentions. Because of it, several members of this generation, as many fervent proselytes of the “lyrical” philosophy of Nae Ionescu, wrote journals and essays that were profoundly marked by the “preoccupation for the concrete” and by the metaphysical preoccupation for both their personal and ethnic destiny. They all belonged to an existentialism *avant la lettre*, because of their non-systemic and non-dogmatic approach to certain philosophical relations: those between transcendence-immanence, consciousness-existence, and freedom-metaphysical “imprisonment”, then the becoming of the authentic self in relationship with the other, the authenticity of living and profound experientialism, the confrontation of the individual with the anxieties and the “revelations” of pain, the extreme and liberating despair, the ethical ego, the aesthetic ego, and the religious ego (if we are to take on Kierkegaard’s distinctions), and also the demoniac, the tragic, and the heroic ego. Turning back, for now, to what I would call the vocation of egotism, it is naturally countermarked, in the ’30s, by the spectacular vocation, that of the ostentatious and not for only once scandalous exit from oneself, to be found with Nae Ionescu, Emil Cioran, Eugen Ionescu, or Petre Țuțea.

This narcissistic shift between implosive and explosive attitudes gains, for the representatives of the generation of ’27, an added degree of authenticity, when crowned by what Petru Comarnescu, in an article published in *Vremea*, 10th of January 1932, called “the metaphysical euphoria”. Metaphysical euphoria was understood by *Criterion*’s organizer somehow like the religious experience, the mystical urge or the magical rite, as an essential component of *experientialism*. This was a key phenomenon of the young Romanian culture at that time.¹⁵ Searching for a metaphysical justification of both literature and the everyday life at the same time, Eugen Ionescu and Emil Cioran were able to justify the fundamentally tragic perspective over the individual and his ethnic destiny. In other words, the metaphysical euphoria is for them - as for every other member of their generation - the condition of the tragic appearance, the halo of nobility that makes it possible. In fact, the tragic is to be noticed both on an individual and social level. The tragic aura gained by the individual and by the collective itinerary, in the ’30s, could be seen as a chance to value the avatars of the ego and those of the ethnic being. This amazing generation, which follows a historical cataclysm and senses another one, sets out its energies in two complementary directions: “the assumed identity of being Romanian” and “the outburst of the ego”. One of the criterionists’ mottos could be found in a substantial synthetic formulation of a well-known critic: “the cult of self-expression as a supreme ethno-creative guarantee.”¹⁶

In the affective and ideological climate of the generation, the narcissistic cult of the ego allies itself to axiological relativism, and, consequently, to the nostalgia for metaphysical, transindividual values. The title of a little essay of Ionescu’s from 1935, entitled *Eu [Me]*, is symptomatic in this respect. The incendiary part one of Ionescu’s volume *Nu* is entitled *Eu, Tudor Arghezi, Ion Barbu și Camil Petrescu [Me, Tudor Arghezi, Ion Barbu and Camil Petrescu]*. The narcissism of the generation of ’27 is also to be noticed, when pointed towards polemical purposes, in another peculiar coincidence. A decade earlier, Mircea Eliade gave the title *Papini, me and the world* to a chapter of his *Novel of a Nearsighted Adolescent*.

As a consequence of a hypertrophied, theatrical ego, Ionescu, in his turn, takes on an exaggerated negativism, representative for “the negativity of the young generation” (this is the title of the book of another generationist, Mihail Ilovici). In an article published in *Facla*, June 4th 1936, entitled *Despre “generația în pulbere” [About the “generation turned into dust”]*, Eugen Ionescu’s circumspection towards his own generation

and towards its ideologist, Mircea Eliade, sometimes reaches the sarcasm and the acute condemnatory attitude: "Having, after all, like all Romanians, like Farfuridi [a comic character of Caragiale - n.n.] himself, the obsession "What will Europe say", the ridiculous Mirciulică Eliade considers that the right evaluative criterion for the young generation is the approval or consecration come from abroad. (...)Mircea Eliade has ten "troubled" friends, and because they are so "troubled" (this fact being obvious to him from the conversations he had with them), these friends of his must be some sort of geniuses. And if they have become University professors at age 30 (N. Iorga became professor at 24), Mircea Eliade is then forever amazed. We have to admit, as calmly as possible, that Mircea Eliade's three criteria of selection (approval from abroad, "inner struggle," and University teaching job) prove the complete naivety (to be polite) that is so very characteristic to the adorable leader of the young generation."¹⁷

If we take into account Ionescu's omnipresent negativity - one directed either against the criterionists or against the "old men" - we must look for a complementary relation between the *inner tragic* and the *external theatricality* of his public appearances and manifestations. I must mention here a consonance between Eugen Ionescu and N. Steinhardt, the one who, in the very year of Ionescu's Nu, 1934, makes his debut with an anti-generation book, *În genul... tinerilor* [*In the style... of the young men*].^s This totally surprising parody - if we think about the later Steinhardt, the monk from Rohia, of the writings of Cioran, Noica, Eliade, Geo Bogza, Saşa Pană and many others - is not so much the product of an explosion of the critical hypertrophied ego, as in Ionescu's case. On the contrary, it is the product of a stripping of the self, as Steinhardt himself said, and of a *passing through*, by imitative sympathy, to the others.

The immanent tragic and the lack of absolute values

The appeal to parody and exploitation of a mimetic disposition are, for the members of this generation, the effect of their awareness that the hierarchy of values is relative. At the same time, they polemically state the need for absolute aesthetic, ethical, and metaphysical values. After all, even Ionescu's *No* is based on his skeptical attitude, originating in the "lucid admission of the relativity of all values and, at the same time, in the tragic feeling... of the necessity of absolute values, recognized as being humanly impossible to reach."¹⁹ We can identify, in the case of Cioran, the same tragic itinerary, from the overrating of his own individuality to the point when this overwhelming individuality, that admits value in itself only, although deceiving, reaches the impossibility of building any other axiological criterion outside itself. About the tragic mix up of any values' hierarchy, Cioran confesses the following, in a letter addressed to his friend Bucur Țincu: "All my tragedy - as he wrote on the 4th of March, 1932 - reduces itself after all to one fact only: I can no longer establish a hierarchy of spiritual contents and values of any kind."²⁰

Still, the individuality is felt, in its "uniqueness", as a value, "all the subtext of the inner life" being, according to Cioran's metapsychology, an "inner narcissism."²¹ Up to a point, Cioran's sentences about the narcissistic exaltation and those of Ionescu, followed by a common inability to use any axiological terms, seem to be interchangeable. For example, with an even greater purifying negativism, Cioran tends to extend his narcissism over the whole generation. His words, at the same time messianic and eschatological, could be attributed as well to the insurgent critic that wrote the essayistic diary *No*: "You can build nothing with no negation. You become aware of yourself in a per-

fect self awareness, when you eliminate and shadow everything that is external. As an individual, you must believe you are the centre of the universe, and as a generation, the peak of history. You cannot live without a divine shiver and with no delirious seductions. Any messianic feeling is an eruption of the infinity in formation, a paroxysm that dilates the individual or an epoch. (...) The myth of generations surpasses a historical relativism and awakens an eschatological representation. At last, a generation with a great calling considers itself the crowning and the end of all efforts.”²²

Consequently, Cioran's ego projects his own negativism and his constant agony in confronting the void over his whole spiritual generation. The latter seems to faithfully mirror his anxieties and demoniacal euphorias. In fact, in his article *Spiritualitate* [*Spirituality*], published in October 1934 in *Criterion*, Mircea Vucănescu considers that both Eugen Ionescu and Emil Cioran belong to a sort of “agonic spirituality” (along with P. Manoliu, M. Ilovici, and I. Dobridor). That is a special branch of the generation, characterized by “full spiritual crisis and values revision,”²³ by negative lucidity and tragic doubtfulness. The tragic vision of the generation of '27, with its agonic, conflicting, and dynamic component, is revealed through certain theories of amorality, as well as in their skepticism towards axiology. Cioran, for instance, seems to be suspended in a quasi-impersonal state of mind that sets him in the position of a lyrical philosopher - a *storm-philosopher*, I might say, or some kind of an Orator of the void (similar to Ionesco's, at the end of his well-known play *The Chairs*). His revelations become a prophecy of universal apocalypse, where the Apollonian *principium individuationis* makes place for the metaphysical vision of collective ritualistic despair of a Dionysian type. This is one way to read, on an abysmal level, Cioran's statements in the same letter to Bucur Țincu, dated the 4th of March, 1932. On the background of the Nietzschean disease - his insomnia being real this time, but he also suffered from an adopted or ideal disease, the Dostoyevskyan epilepsy - he seems to undergo a self destruction. His self, excessively individualized before, disseminates in the paroxysm of pain. The sleepless nights place him “beyond despair, beyond the limits of endurance”, where everything “seems to be set on the same plan, insignificant and null”. Next, Cioran confesses to Bucur Țincu about an “asthenic feeling of life”, one that “makes me unable to enjoy anything, but to constantly torture and destroy myself”. And he adds: “You must know that if I live, I will make myself remarked by an extreme attitude; I will fearlessly suffer the ultimate consequences. I am no longer afraid of any idea or attitude. Here they call me cynical. (...) I am not too young, since I am beyond all ages.”²⁴

As in the case of Cioran, caught up in the despair of his untemporal insomnia, young Eugen Ionescu feels suspended in his own sense of existential gratuity. For him, literary criticism is, as literature itself, “a futile game of wits on serious subjects,”²⁵ a game devoid of any metaphysical thrill. Such a negative exorcism of the death fantasy, imbedded in literature, can be associated once more to some of Cioran's assumptions, which can stand for possible mottos in front of some chapters of *No*: “To destroy means to act, to create in mockery. (...) Negation is not an absence; it is plenitude, a troubled and aggressive plenitude. If we find salvation in action, to deny is to save your own self, to follow a project, to act a part.”²⁶

Left at the will of his own negative and somehow demoniac conscience, the human subject can only have the chance of a tragic immanence, issued by the unique *fatality* of his own conscience. Cioran's tragic despair, as well as Ionesco's, could be associated to the dimension of the modern tragic, one from beyond the tragic. This almost absurd tragic emerges from some sort of metaphysical clandestine condition, in the

absence of any transcendent mark. Sentenced to lucidity and fed by the “passion in immanence”, originated in a similar metaphysical deception, Nae Ionescu also appears to be, in Cioran’s vision, such a tragic hero. About this “master of doubts”, Emil Cioran says in an article published in *Vremea*, June 6th 1937: “When God didn’t embrace you, you settle to the orgy of temporality. The divine silence leads tortured men into politics. (...) I learned from him that existence is merely a fall, and who could stop me then from concluding that the purpose in life is torment, self torture, satanic voluptuous enjoyment?”²⁷

Beyond the sophistic justifications that Cioran finds for the serious political deviations of his master, his text re-positing the tragic condition from the perspective of the immanence/transcendence relationship. The tragic question is thoroughly detailed in an essay dated 1933, *Revelațiile durerii [The Revelations of Pain]*: “If life is an immense tragedy, it is due to the immanence of the demoniac principle alone.”²⁸ Once the immanent demoniac negation is stated, the philosopher blames on the conscience the task of converting the demoniac principle into a tragic one. For the tragic to be possible, it is necessary, Cioran says, that the demoniac principle of life be not surpassed, only diminished. The human being, in this case, is not entirely free, but falls under the “determinant of an interior element”, or under the irrational of an interior fatality. The conscience vainly attempts to counterattack such a fatality, through the tragic *hybris*: “When it comes to humans, you are aware of fatality, hence the tragic. The more it gains in intensity, the more it has as a determinant an inner fatality, immanent and not transcendent, because in this case we are closer to the sad than to the tragic.”²⁹

Confronted with the obsession of death, Eugen Ionescu also hypertrophies his own ego, in an attempt at self-compensation, while making any possible hierarchy of values (both moral and aesthetic) explode. The revelations of pain, which bring the revelations of the *void*, also gradually lead Cioran to give up the moral criteria. His metaphysical nihilism is reminiscent, to a certain extent, of the amoral philosophy of Nietzsche, who metaphorically formulated the thesis of God’s death. Polemically arguing against the Christian concept of pain and considering the redemption a mere illusion, Cioran exalts the suffering as a supreme anti-value, by which the Void itself is being valued. Hence, the tragic impact of the conscience with the irrational seed of life contradicts any “metaphysical fundamentalism” of a so-called “moral teleology”. So, “only those who live unconsciously can formulate a verdict, because the moral criteria are instinctively assimilated, so that moral absolutism is characteristic of mediocre people. Living without a morale means the surpassing of any morale and living on the high edge.”³⁰ Once more, as in the case of Ionescu’s *No*, the tragic vision, issued by the immanent fatality of one’s own conscience, results in the relativity of values of any kind.

The ability to identify the immanent tragic comes from the *metaphysical vocation* of the generation of ’27. Petru Comarnescu spoke of a certain *metaphysical euphoria*. In 1937, a decade after *The Spiritual Itinerary* had appeared, Mircea Eliade foretold that “the historical era we are getting ready to enter will take place under the sign of the metaphysical”, adding that the writer who would want to express his own era will have to write “under the metaphysical sign of time.”³¹

Cioran clearly distinguishes between mere suffering and the aesthetical experience of suffering, pleading, as Ionescu does, for the man who only writes to “keep himself away from crying”. But even as early as 1927, in the pages of his *Spiritual Itinerary*, Eliade already stated the *insufficiency of literature*, which was, in the opinion of the generation’s leader, no more than “an impure synthesis”.

The tragic destiny of the generation

The Romanian writers of the year '27 prove a tragic vocation, one that can be discovered not only on the level of individual destiny. This tends to be recognized as a sign of nobility, at the collective level of their generation taken as a whole. The fact appears symptomatic for the tensed historical period of intermission between two World Wars. From a rationalistic point of view, Mihai Ralea denounces the unfortunate effects of barbarian vitality and of spiritual excesses, pleading, in a prophetic essay titled *Misiunea unei generații* [*The Mission of a Generation*], for the creation of a specifically Romanian ethics: "If our generation should feel any calling, then we would have to fight on the battle field of ethics. We should fight the Byzantine attitudes, the "phanariotism", the shrewdness, the unfairness, the trivial skepticism and the mocking joviality, frequently used by Romanians in order to surpass the most tragic situations. We claim, for the honor of our people, a little tragic sense of existence, a bit of conscientious bitterness, instead of the sinister operetta or musical comedy that uses up our energies."³²

Ralea's attitude, although polemical against the Bergson-like vital irrationality of the generation, is confirmed by the definitions that Mircea Vulcănescu, Emil Cioran, and Eugen Ionescu offer to a specifically Romanian world-view. Appealing, in *The Romanian Dimension of Being*, to a phenomenological hermeneutics of the national character, Mircea Vulcănescu states that the Romanian spirit does not acknowledge any absolute impossibility. In spite of his critical insight as "an inborn opponent", the Romanian is "not a negativist but a limit setter", therefore preserving "an equilibrium and a limit in each gesture which, although devoid of tragic stiffness, do not lack nobility"³³.

As for the assumed Romanian *Weltanschauung*, one declaration of Ionescu is challenging and polemical, even self punishing: "If I were a Frenchman, I should be some sort of a genius". But as far as the imminence of death is concerned, the "metaphysically exiled" Ionescu, like Cioran, is far from having an emotional reaction influenced by the Romanian national legend of "Mioritza". The law of "whatever is meant to be... will be", that Mircea Vulcănescu talked about in connection with the mild Romanian metaphysical vision, doesn't seem to work when it comes to both Ionescu (the later French Ionescu) and Cioran.

When writing somehow admiringly, in 1936, about the structural non Byzantine attitude of Mircea Eliade, about his heroic cultural activism - opinions later restated in *Exercices d'admiration* [*Exercises of Admiration*] - Cioran complains, instead, of a supposed lack of a spiritual attitude of a tragic kind (a founding, civilizing, constructive tragic) in the Romanians: "There is a tendency of abandonment, of nonresistance, of coward wisdom that favors everything except tragedy."³⁴

"The anxiety" or the agonistic tragic heroism of some exceptional personalities, possessed by the metaphysical calling, is in Cioran's view a temporary solution to compensate the "natural" urge of the Romanian to fail his ethnic destiny: "The metaphysical neutrality of the Romanian", says Cioran, "must find a compensation in the anxiety of some of us." And his original exercise of adulation could be suspected of a bit of mockery, after all ironic as far as Eliade is concerned: "So many objected to Eliade's decision not to stay in India. Yet we should be glad because he accepted to compromise himself here, along with us. We ought to understand this renunciation, greater than his renunciation to contemplation. The acceptance of history seems to me the greater possible heroism."³⁵

The constant agreement of the Romanian spirit with the intrinsic nobility of the tragic could have been fulfilled, as some members of the generation advance, through the defeat of the Balkan-like inactivity. The typically Romanian metaphysical neutrality could have been compensated for through the adoption of a heroic, combative dynamism. Such a dynamic heroism was to have extraordinary cultural effects, on one hand, but on the other hand it also resulted in catastrophic consequences on the political level, because of Right Wing ideological excesses.

Here are some of the most relevant combative exultations, taken from Eliade's *Spiritual Itinerary*: "We will not confess to be serious adults, forever conserved under the crust of the 'system', of one political idea, or of our personal belief. We cannot leave so soon the most dangerous and delightful line of the battlefield - where the putrid, sadistic, savage ideas are our enemies - in order to look for shelter somewhere else."³⁶

On the other hand, the autobiographical character in Eliade's novel *Gaudeamus* confesses a similar propensity towards the combative heroism: "We wanted the endless unlimited combat that inserts within our soul the aroma of both the deity and the devil."³⁷ Speaking of an *imperative of discontinuity* between different generations, Cioran invokes, in order to legitimate the combative bursts of his and his colleagues' generation alike, the necessity of a metaphysical foundation of their action: "The action fatally limits the horizon, and we are warriors only to the extent we lend to the contingent gesture an absolute outline."³⁸

Set under metaphysical signs, the tragic sense of the generation of '27, to be clearly seen in the writers' outrageous political evolution, has though a dynamic and somehow constructive cultural and spiritual dimension. The agonic component, equally claimed by Eliade, Cioran and Eugen Ionescu, renders the tragic a sense of a heroic self accomplishment. I would like to call to remembrance in this respect the thesis of Miguel de Unamuno, one of the idols of this generation, about the tragic feeling of being. This feeling, metaphysically based, would reside in the permanent agony between the belief in the irrational immortality, as an emotional projection of the fatally mortal being, and the rational acceptance of the finite human condition.

How did it happen that the tragic sense of the generation of '27 became disintegrated, even though this type of tragic was considered a crest of spiritual nobility, capable of creating a cultural identity and a historic *destiny* for the Romanian people? As far as the collective destiny is concerned, with its extremist ideological and political implications, the tragic seemed to have been unavoidable. Few members of the generation - among them, Eugen Ionescu, Mihail Sebastian, and Petru Comarnescu - were left untouched by the revolutionary plague, or by any kind of "becoming in the state of rhinoceros."³⁹ On an individual level, though, the way out of the tragic, be it only temporary, seems to have been found sometimes, either actively, or passively.

The activism, first of all, is a main characteristic of the generation's leader, Mircea Eliade. His attitude counterbalances the tragic, beyond anything, through a pompous obsession for heroism (the hero being, in Bela Grunberger's definition, "the one who does not want to owe his life to anybody"⁴⁰). It is the case of the autobiographical character in Eliade's *Romanul adolescentului miop* [*The Novel of the Nearsighted Adolescent*], fascinated by the Papini-like "masculinity". At times, as for the characters in *Huliganii* [*The Hooligans*], another novel by Eliade, the heroism gets vulgarized and becomes hooligan revolt, keeping a certain 'virile' and offensive tone: "There is a single fertile debut in life: the hooligan experience. Respect nothing; believe only in yourself, in your youth, in your biology, if you feel like it".

Another active attitude of assuming and then surpassing the tragic is formulated by Eliade in a small essay entitled *Justificarea bucuriei* [*The Justification of Joy*], published on the 30th of April, 1933 in *Floarea de foc* [*The Flower of Fire*] and later integrated within the 1934 volume, *Oceanografie* [*Oceanography*].⁴¹ Referring to “the tragic sense of spirituality” and to “the revaluation of the agony as a supreme justification of spiritual life”, the philosopher of religions actually argues with the somber and negative vision of Cioran. In Eliade’s vision, the pain is not a catalyst of a nihilistic perspective, but “a necessary moment in the making of knowledge”. Agony, then, becomes “a necessary experience in the making of joy”. Consequently, says Eliade, “despair and agony can be mere steps, but not centers”. This argument reminds one of D.D. Roșca’s *Existența tragică* [*The Tragic Existence*], a book that appeared the very same year as *Nu și Pe culmile disperării* [*On the Edges of Despair*] (1934). For the pre-existentialist D.D. Roșca, tragic existence does not imply sterile despair and defeatist fatalism, but the *intellectual heroism* of any free creation of values; in other words, a lucid, dynamic and positive attitude towards life, that is to be accepted along with a whole number of contradictions.

Instead, the passive exit out of the tragic condition places Eugen Ionescu and Emil Cioran in similar positions for one more time. First of all, as compared to the integrating, affirmative and somewhat representative (both for the polemic and combative approaches of his generation) ego of Eliade, Cioran’s and Ionescu’s egos are doomed to embrace the revelations of the void. Those “revelațiile durerii”, in Cioran’s words, testify for their common damnation to a proud and lonely place within the generation. The obsession of the *fall*, for example, the archetypal trauma of the primary sin, is shared by both of them: “I believe that even more pertinent is the theory of the primordial sin - says Cioran, the philosopher of decomposition, in a conversation with Fernando Savater - even if you strip it of the religious connotations, and leave it on a purely anthropological level. There was an irretrievable fall, a loss that can never be compensated by anything.”⁴²

In the letter sent to Tudor Vianu, sent from Vichy, on the 20th of February 1944, Eugen Ionescu has the vision of an obsessive, repeating ontological fall: “We are falling with a ‘geometrically progressive’ speed: and yet, the last second is long. Long. It doesn’t end anymore... Never again. I have the feeling of a void. Of something irreparable that is happening. Since we fell ‘out of heaven’, we have been doing nothing else but falling. We repeat the gesture: it is an obsession. Humanity has the obsession of failure. You can imagine: ‘the primordial sin’, what a formidable traumatic moment.”⁴³

In spite of a peculiar tragic charge in the metaphysical visions of both Ionescu and Cioran, the two writers experience a paradoxical exorcism through their way of living on the edge of despair and negation. For Emil Cioran, the depressive moods, endowed with the greatest revealing capacity, would lead to the progressive departing of the ego from the world. A tragic beyond the tragic is thus being reached. In the paroxysm of pain, the depressive mood “is being distilled into despair”, as Cioran says.⁴⁴ He also insists over the privileged state of *enchantment*, produced by the “assimilation in the *nadve* rhythm of existence”. We find the same nihilistic author exalting the “easiness of grace”, the state of transparency and immateriality, in his book *Pe culmile disperării* [*On the Edges of Despair*]: “I would still like a warm bath of light to emerge from me and then transform the whole world, a bath that would not resemble the strain of the ecstasy, but would preserve the calm of a luminous eternity.”⁴⁵

In the chapter called *Esența grației* [*The Essence of Grace*], the latter is praised as “an escape from the beastly claws of the demoniac urges of life” and defined as the

reverse of the nihilistic tragic: "The transcendence of negativity is an essential note of the graceful feeling of life."⁴⁶ Although he desires to experience the sacred and to reach the paradise-like state of grace, the skeptical Cioran is being refused all these, only being able to live some sort of ecstasy, emptied by the mystical perception of God. Through ecstatic *rapture*, as a passive reverse of the immanent tragic of life, Cioran claims that one could get purified of anything contingent and hazardous. Plus, the metaphysical feeling of being, which allowed the acknowledgement of the tragic, has its roots, according to Cioran, in a form of ecstatic rapture, too. It is that ecstasy that can only be achieved after the living of the full despair, an ecstatic despair, actually, close to the state of Dionysian exaltation.

A correspondent of Cioranian rapture could be Eugene Ionesco's almost mystical *amazement*, associated with love, a lyrical and imponderable state of mind. It is what Eugen Ionescu, who later became the playwright Eugene Ionesco, would call *l'étonnement d'être*. Approaching this *étonnement* through the tragic and comic anxiety of his theatre, Ionesco tends to induce a very special type of *catharsis*. As in the case of Antonin Artaud's plea for the theatre of *cruelty*, one should notice, with Ionesco, his nostalgia for reviving the very soul of authentic tragedy. Returning for now to the period of the Romanian writings of Ionescu, more precisely to the article from 1930, about the rhetorical poetry of Walt Whitman, the young critic defines poetry as "love and amazement for yourself, felt as if you were another; and for another, seen as if he were you."⁴⁷ A few years later, in 1938, Eugen Ionescu has once again the lyrical vision of universal decomposition, where the detachment of the individual self is brought along by an almost musical contemplative ecstasy: "When I sometimes walk on the street, I remember that the world is not as I see it, as I smell it, as I hear it. An inner bell tolls, and everything seems to break into waves. An immaterial vibration! I fall into chaos, into a sea, I keep on falling."⁴⁸

In spite of his refusal to be considered a member of the Criterion generation, Eugen Ionescu affirms, most of the time implicitly and involuntarily, the structural affinities to the other criterionists. This is true as far as Emil Cioran, the other agonist and avid negativist, is concerned. And the spiritual affinities of the two go beyond the eschatological revelations of despair, surpassing these by reaching for the ecstatic contemplation and amazement before the "immaterial universal vibration". The ecstasy of despair, or the despair of rapture, and ingénue childish amazement are accomplished by both of them.

The tensed oscillation between the somber despair of death and the sublime ecstasy before the miracle of life can be associated with the complex duality despair-beatitude, theorized by André Comte-Sponville. Despair would be, in his opinion, more of a force of the soul, freed from hope. The existentialist trajectory of the mythical Icarus is symptomatic for the philosopher. Thus, after a frenzied wandering through the labyrinth, the mythical hero would come to understand that his agitation is mad and vain, his struggle is futile and all hope is mere illusion. And this is when he would stop, exhausted by despair, beyond the tops or abysses of despair, living in a permanent state of beatitude: "Et soudain la sérénité étrange qui le saisit. L'angoisse qui s'annule à l'extrême d'elle-même. Le désespoir."⁴⁹

The philosophical and lyrical phrases of Comte-Sponville, comprised in the section dedicated to the myth of Icarus in his book *Traité du désespoir et de la béatitude*, are relevant for the spiritually related destinies of Cioran and Ionesco alike, to a certain extent.⁵⁰ But they seem an echo, over time, of the earlier thesis of Eliade, formulated in

the fourth decade of the last century. According to Mircea Eliade, there is an almost tonic “tragic sense of spirituality”, an antidote to skepticism.

Notes:

1 Throughout my present study on Eliade and his generation, I have translated into English the fragments taken from the Romanian essays of young Mircea Eliade. The article *Moment nespirtual*, from the series *Scrisori către un provincial*, was published in *Cuvântul*, June 3, 1933, being included by Eliade himself, one year later, in 1934, in his volume *Oceanografie*; see also *Drumul spre centru*, anthology by Gabriel Liiceanu and Andrei Pleșu, București, Ed. Univers, 1991, pp. 72-73.

2 Petru Comarnescu, *Falsa poziție a celor de dreapta*, in *Stânga*, II, January 22, 1933.

3 See Z. Ornea, *Anii treizeci. Extrema dreaptă românească*, București, Ed. Fundației Culturale Române, 1996, p. 202. Z. Ornea makes reference to the article *O revoluție creștină*, published by Mircea Eliade in *Buna Vestire*, I, 100, June 27, 1937.

4 *Scrisori către Tudor Vianu*, II (1936-1949), Edition by Maria Alexandrescu Vianu and Vlad Alexandrescu. Notes by Vlad Alexandrescu, București, Ed. Minerva, 1994, p. 274.

5 *Ibidem*.

6 *Ibidem*, p. 275.

7 *Ibidem*, p. 131.

8 See Fr. André Scrima, *Cuvinte târzii și nepotrivite despre Nae Ionescu*, in *Prodromos*, no. 10, 1970, p. 25.

9 Emil Cioran, *Revelațiile durerii. Essays*, Edition by Mariana Vartic and Aurel Sasu. Foreword by Dan C. Mihăilescu, Cluj, Ed. Echinoc, 1990, p. 170.

10 Emil Cioran, *Pe culmile disperării*, București, Ed. Humanitas, 1990, p. 32.

11 Eugen Ionescu, *Război cu toată lumea. Romanian journalism*, vol. I, edition and bibliography by Mariana Vartic and Aurel Sasu, București, Ed. Humanitas, 1992, p. 24.

12 See *Revelațiile durerii*, p. 107.

13 See Fr. André Scrima, the above-quoted article, p. 26.

14 Ion Ianoși, *O istorie a filosofiei românești - în relația ei cu literatura*, Cluj, Biblioteca Apostrof, 1996, p. 154.

15 See Petru Comarnescu, *Semnalizări. Între estetism și experiențialism, două fenomene ale culturii tinere românești*, in *Vremea*, V, 220, January 10, 1932. Also see *Atitudini și polemici în presa literară interbelică. Studies and anthology* (volume published by the Institute of Literary History and Theory “G. Călinescu”), București, 1994, pp. 368-369. Petru Comarnescu distinguishes between two directions of young Romanian culture at the time: the intellectual and artistic aestheticism, in poetry and literary criticism (main representatives: Serban Cioculescu, Mihail Sebastian, A.D. Broșteanu și Dan Botta), and the experientialism, expressed mainly in the writing of novels and philosophical essays (main representatives: Mircea Eliade, Mircea Vulcănescu, Sandu Tudor, Haig Acterian - the poet Mihail).

16 Dan C. Mihăilescu, *Prefață* [Foreword] for Emil Cioran, *Revelațiile durerii*, p. 11.

17 Eugen Ionescu, *În loc de cronică literară. Despre “generația în pulbere”*, in *Război cu toată lumea. Romanian journalism*, vol. I, edition and bibliography by Mariana Vartic and Aurel Sasu, București, Ed. Humanitas, 1992, pp. 94, 96.

18 See N. Steinhardt (Antisthius), *În genul lui Cioran, Noica, Eliade...*, with an Afterword by Dan C. Mihăilescu, București, Ed. Humanitas, 1996.

19 Mircea Vulcănescu, *Pentru Eugen Ionescu*, Afterword for Eugen Ionescu, *Nu*, București, Ed. Humanitas, 1991, p. 217. Vulcănescu's text first appeared in *Familia*, no. 5-6, September-October 1934, under the title *Manifest pentru Eugen Ionescu*.

20 Cioran, *12 scrisori de pe culmile disperării*, followed by 12 older letters and other texts, anthology by Ion Vartic, in *Apostrof*, 12, 1995, pp. 48-49.

21 *Ibidem*, pp. 17, 19.

22 Emil Cioran, *Imperativul discontinuității*, in *Revelațiile durerii*, p. 174.

23 M. Vulcănescu, *Spiritualitate*, in *Criterion*, nr. 1, 15 October 1934.

24 See Cioran, *12 scrisori de pe culmile disperării...*, pp. 49-50.

25 Eugen Ionescu, *Contra literaturii*, in *Război cu toată lumea*, I, p. 26.

26 Cioran, *Căderea în timp*, translation from French by Irina Mavrodin, București, Ed. Humanitas, 1994, pp. 75-76.

27 Emil Cioran, *Nae Ionescu și drama lucidității*, in *Revelațiile durerii*, pp. 166, 168.

28 Idem, *Revelațiile durerii*, p. 90.

29 *Ibidem*, p. 98.

30 *Ibidem*, p. 95.

31 Mircea Eliade, *Profetism românesc*, 2, *România în eternitate*, București, Ed. "Roza vânturilor", 1990, p. 198-199.

32 Mihai D. Ralea, *Misiunea unei generații*, in *Viața românească*, XX, 1, January 1928, p. 120.

33 Mircea Vulcănescu, *Dimensiunea românească a existenței - schiță fenomenologică*, in *Caiete critice*, 1-2, 1983, pp. 169-185 (text republished from *Izvoare de filozofie*, vol. II, 1943). See mainly pp. 179, 185.

34 Emil Cioran, *Mircea Eliade și dezamăgirile sale*, in *Revelațiile durerii*, p. 149.

35 *Ibidem*, pp. 150-151.

36 Mircea Eliade, *Profetism românesc*, 1, *Itinerariu spiritual*, pp. 35-36.

37 Idem, *Romanul adolescentului miop*. Text edition, foreword and chronological list by Mircea Handoca, vol. II [*Gaudeamus*], București, Ed. Minerva, 1989, p. 259.

38 Emil Cioran, *Imperativul discontinuității*, in *Revelațiile durerii*, p. 172.

39 As far as the political and ethical significance of Ionesco's play *Rhinoceros* and of the process of "becoming rhinoceros", see also Matei Călinescu, *Ionesco and Rhinoceros: Personal and Political Backgrounds*, in *East European Politics and Societies*, vol. 9, 1995, pp. 393-432.

40 The definition given by Bela Grunberger to heroism, in the book *Le narcissisme* (Paris, Payot, 1971), is commented upon by Jean Bellemin-Noël as well, in his *Psychanalyse et Littérature*, Paris, PUF, 1989 (1re éd. 1978), p. 68.

41 Eliade's brilliant fragments or essays in *Oceanografie* are to be interpreted, in the opinion of his important American biographer, Mac Linscott Ricketts, as "expressions of Eliade's 'philosophy' that found the deep problems of life not in the 'ocean depths', but near the surface in commonplace things, in matters ordinarily taken for granted. Herein lies the explanation for the book's title, which was first the title of an essay". See Mac Linscott Ricketts, *Mircea Eliade. The Romanian Roots. 1907-1945*, New York, East European Monographs, Boulder, distributed by Columbia University Press, 1988, p. 584.

42 See *Convorbiri cu Cioran*, București, Ed. Humanitas, 1993, p. 27.

43 *Scrisori către Tudor Vianu*, II, p. 235.

44 See Emil Cioran, *Revelațiile durerii*, pp. 89-96.

45 Idem, *Pe culmile disperării*, p. 30-31.

46 *Ibidem*, p. 93.

47 Eugen Ionescu, *Război cu toată lumea*, I, p. 19.

48 *Ibidem*, p. 109.

49 André Comte-Sponville, *Traité du désespoir et de la béatitude*: 1. *Le mythe d'Icare*; 2. *Vivre*, Paris, PUF, 1990, p. 12.

50 The structural affinities with his generation did not cause Ionesco, as Alexandra Laignel-Lavastine falsely maintains (in her book *Cioran, Eliade, Ionesco. L'oubli du fascisme*, Paris, PUF, 2002), to approve of the extremist deviationist options of his colleagues. On the contrary, Ionesco always stuck to his anti-totalitarian ideas.