

Cioran as an Ascetic and “Hunger Artist”. An Assessment of Sloterdijk’s Interpretation

Abstract: The Western philosophy depicts during the 80s a process that I would qualify as an authentic *performative* turn that regards the human subject as nothing more than the “vector” of its series of exercises, foldings, repetitions. The recent work of P. Sloterdijk is located in this framework of “antropotechnics”. I shall focus my attention on two of the texts where Sloterdijk is discussing Cioran. First, I shall do an assessment of the interpretation advanced by Sloterdijk of the notorious paragraph on “flesh” (*Paleontology*), a text by Cioran which seems at the same time phenomenological and anti-phenomenological, metaphysical and anti-metaphysical. Then, I shall discuss Sloterdijk’s understanding of Cioran’s self-writing as a *sui generis* asceticism involving a daily exercise in erasing any “infection” epicenter of firm belief and commitment, any kind of faith in the future or in oneself, adding that it is also a paradoxical testimony for the “miracle” of every living moment. This way, Cioran as an ascetic, “autopatographer” and “hunger artist” becomes a key figure in this gallery of the new “arts of living”, an important link in the historical process of “the informalization of spirituality”. He is the “anti-stoic” and pseudo-Buddhist master of demobilization, “the first master of not-getting-anywhere”.

Keywords: Cioran, Sloterdijk, metaphysics, Nihilism, asceticism, spirituality, art of living

1. A General Hypothesis Concerning the Performative Subject

This paper is placed under the sign of a general hypothesis that at a first view may seem to engage no direct reference to Cioran’s work, but the developing argument will hopefully make such an option clear. I hold that Western philosophy registers during the 80s an authentic *performative* turn, according to which the human subject amounts to being conceived as nothing more than the “vector” of its series of exercises, foldings, repetitions¹. I am well aware of the fact that such a statement may seem a bit extravagant if one is not familiar with a particular kind of philosophical literature. This is why I shall try to clarify it by starting from a well-known motif of continental philosophy. The notorious “death of the subject”, in its

* PhD Associate Professor, Faculty of Philosophy, University of Bucharest; email: cristian.iftode@filosofie.unibuc.ro

diverse figures (as Author, as Citizen, as Artist, etc.), constituted not only a central theme of 20th century reflections and discourses, but also the background, the framework itself for expressing philosophical questions and constructing alternatives during the decades following World War II. What I depict as the *performative* turn is then the manner in which the so-called “death of the death of the subject” (Hudis 2004) took place in contemporary thinking. This comeback followed the long decades of radical destruction of the notion of modern, “Cartesian” subject, the undeniable center of experience and action, through the combined attack conducted by Nietzsche’s or Heidegger’s supporters, by the structuralists from the 50s and the 60s, by the post-structuralists from the 60s and the 70s, as well as by the social and linguistic constructivism or the analytic philosophy embracing a reductionist view of personal identity.

But the subject that has returned is not the same as the one that “died”. Since the beginning of the 80s, a conception of the human subject not as something *given* in its essential constitution, but merely as a principle of *practical* reflection, becomes more and more popular among philosophers: “a subject that constructs itself, that gives itself rules of living and of conduct, that forms itself through exercises, practices, and techniques” (Gros 2005, 697-698). It is a subject that makes itself in a particular way through all of its actions and makings; a subject that is socially tamed and thus “folded” by way of bending to rules, but one that also holds the possibility of altering its habits, the power of “turning the power of repetition against repetition” (Sloterdijk 2013, 197)². Acknowledging the idea of self-change and self-perfectioning through repetition, by way of training, means rediscovering the stake of traditional virtue ethics. The subject becomes the combined effect or result of *disciplinary* techniques and *subjectivation* practices through which particular rules are “inscribed in our flesh” (if we want to make use of the troubling image depicted by Kafka in the seminal short story “In the Penal Colony”). We might also speak of a philosophical delayed recovery of the core artistic commitment of the Avant-Garde and Neo-Avant-Garde movements: the indistinctness between *poiesis* and *praxis* (Bourriaud 1999; Shusterman 1992), in the context of a radical critique of the art institution in the age of capitalism and Fordist production line.

This strategic reorientation of philosophical concerns towards the eminently practical, formative dimension of philosophy goes beyond the existentialist reactions to academic philosophy’s estrangement from daily life: in other words, it searches for effective techniques for converting the rhetoric of self-choosing into actual self-practice. This search also involves alternative re-readings of the pre-Christian and non-religious roots of asceticism, spiritual practices and “technology of the self” (Foucault 1988). We are speaking here of the “final” Foucault, inspired by the work of Pierre Hadot (1995), but we might also point to the rediscovery of spiritual

exercises in a therapeutic context, once philosophical counselling was established in the beginning of the 80s. We might as well address the "somaesthetic" turn of American pragmatism towards the "art of living", or discuss the more or less free styles according to which popular philosophers of our times such as M. Onfray, A. de Botton or L. Ferry are making use of the ancient ethical doctrines.

In the same framework of "antropotechnics" we can locate the recent work of one of the most influential contemporary thinkers, P. Sloterdijk, which is also one of the most important promoters of Cioran's work in the German cultural space and throughout the world. Putting together these two judgments about Sloterdijk is not something accidental: in fact, it indicates the precise way in which the German philosopher is reading Cioran, as a forerunner in a large-scale process of contemporary re-configuration of the meaning of asceticism. In what follows, I focus my investigation on two of the texts where Sloterdijk is discussing Cioran.

2. *Askêsis* and Flesh: Stepping Outside Western Metaphysics

Sloterdijk's short book *Eurotaoismus* (1989; 2004), a reading of the modern age as an era of general mobilization, comprises an interpretation of Cioran's notorious paragraph on "flesh" (*Paleontology*), from his praised book *Le Mauvais D emiurge* (Cioran 1995; 2002). Here we encounter one of Cioran's exemplary pages, a text that I would qualify as being at the same time phenomenological and anti-phenomenological, metaphysical and anti-metaphysical.

According to Sloterdijk, the "post-historical culture of panic" reacted to the "culture of historical mobilization" that instantiates the *activism* of modern Western thinking by restoring two old alternatives: metaphysics and *poiesis* (the making, the production, with its modern correspondent, the "art": an art that Sloterdijk conceives, following Heidegger, as being essentially vital, as giving-birth, in opposition to "technology"). The German philosopher calls on Cioran's text "Paleontology" in relation to the first alternative: in his reading, this is a text that states "the shiver felt before the flesh by an unredeemed metaphysician" (Sloterdijk 2004, 59).

An unforeseen shower, one autumn day, drove me into the Museum of Natural History for a while. I was to remain there, as a matter of fact, for an hour, two hours, perhaps three (...) Nowhere is one better served with respect to the past (...) One gets the impression that the flesh was eclipsed upon its advent, that in fact it never existed at all, that it could not have been fastened to bones so stately, so imbued with themselves. The flesh appears as an imposture, a fraud, a disguise which masks nothing (...) The flesh, so *obvious*, is yet an anomaly. The more we consider it, the more aghast we turn away, and, by dint of such

weighing, we tend toward the mineral – we grow *petrified*. In order to endure the sight or the idea, we require much more than courage: we require cynicism (...) The flesh is neither strange nor shadowy, but *perishable* to the point of indecency, to the point of madness. It is not only the seat of disease, it is itself a disease, incurable nothingness, a fiction which has degenerated into a calamity. The vision I have of it is the vision of a gravedigger infected with metaphysics (...) That is why I am so comfortable in this museum where everything encourages the euphoria of a universe swept clean of the flesh, the jubilation of an after-life. (Cioran 2002; 1995, 1192-1193)

I believe we should amend Sloterdijk's interpretation or at least supplement it. We should not neglect the fact that Cioran published this text entailing the repudiation of history and the revolutionary marches in 1969, in the context of the great protest movements that had just taken place in Paris. Simultaneously, we have to be aware of the French philosophical context, where an important point of reference was, at that time, the phenomenological approach that Merleau-Ponty had proposed, following Husserl, as a way of envisaging the primordially of the "flesh" (*chair*), of the phenomenological body, in forming the experience of the world and the intersubjectivity (Merleau-Ponty 1960; 1964). This way, the "phenomenological touch" or the embodied consciousness was turned against the Platonic, disembodied "theoretical gaze".

But Cioran's gesture was not simply a retaliation of the metaphysics of the *bones* – the skeleton of metaphysics, with its hierarchical, opposite structure (intelligible vs. sensible, eternal vs. ephemeral) – against the phenomenology of the *flesh*. It was a gesture in itself ambivalent, because the act of asserting the eternity of bones as opposed to the perishability of flesh and the trickery of historical mobilization was an act accomplished through a phenomenological experience *sui generis*. It is a gesture involving the factual position of an embodied subject that realizes this "eidetic reduction" of humanity to its skeleton cleaned of flesh in a particular existential situation, one that triggers the entire process. So the "view from above" that Cioran gains is not the privilege of metaphysical thinking, not even of an Aristotelian aporetic. It is not the product of rational "cold" reflection or speculative endeavor, but rather the sudden effect or precipitate of a life experience, following the Existentialist axis Kierkegaard – Nietzsche.

Let us now turn to the *practical* dimension of this disgust for the flesh. If we separate "Paleontology" from the totality of Cioran's writings, we are well justified in claiming that this Neo-Gnostic Romanian thinker expresses here a clear ascetic vein in the traditional Platonic and Christian way of self-renunciation and letting go of the passing world. This would be a very different meaning of asceticism when compared to the pre-Christian one, which Nietzsche was trying to resurrect: an *askēsis* involving a training that

aims at the fortification of the self and the enhancement of our vitality and creativity.

A few general remarks about the different meanings of asceticism may prove beneficial for the developing argument. First of all, it is clear that a modern genealogy of asceticism, suggesting the historical existence of two distinct kinds of *askésis* – renunciation vs. fortification – is directly connected to Nietzsche's project: "I also want to make asceticism natural again: in place of the aim of denial, the aim of strengthening" (Nietzsche 1968, 483). The German philosopher is also the thinker that inspired Foucault and Deleuze when they advanced the idea of *subjectivation* of rules, a notion that proves essential, in my view, for this new performative turn in philosophy (I speak about a new performative turn, because the Hellenistic and Roman Antiquity seems to have registered a similar process). This kind of *becoming* of an ethical subject is presented as the historical alternative to the objectivation of a subject, of its inner drives and secret desires, through confession (another possibility would be to envisage the "avowal of the flesh"³ as a particular type of subjectivation, the Christian "hermeneutics of the self", responding to the general injunction of "telling all" – Foucault 2005, 408-409).

In a certain sense, the whole of asceticism belongs here: a few ideas are to be rendered inextinguishable, ever-present, unforgettable, "fixed," with the aim of hypnotizing the entire nervous and intellectual system with these "fixed ideas" – and ascetic procedures and modes of life are means of freeing these ideas from the competition of all other ideas, so as to make them "unforgettable." (Nietzsche 1989, 61)

I should only add that Nietzsche's idea of two kinds of asceticism is elaborated in Foucault's final course from 1984 as a fundamental difference between two "aesthetics of existence" or two distinct teleologies of the ethical subject: on the one hand, the *purification* of the soul (*psukhê*), which is the main Platonic and Christian understanding of self-care; on the other hand, the *stylistics* of life (*bios*), in its (pre-)Socratic and Cynic understanding (Foucault 2011, 160-162). To put it briefly, we strive for the purification of our souls in order to get access to an "afterlife", or we train ourselves in leading another kind of life here on earth, one that is freed from a whole range of illusions, misconceptions and social conventions that come to define our "normality".

At this point, it becomes clear that the Nihilist Cioran was not pleading for the purification of the soul, like a well-behaved metaphysician, but rather for *self-writing* conceived as a *stylization* of existence: in other words, for an autobiography that was equivalent to the daily recording of the "sickness of living".

3. Cioran's Spiritual Exercises: Autopatography and Nihilist Miracle

Once we advance in understanding Cioran's peculiar practice of the self, the interpretation that Sloterdijk has suggested in his impressive book *Du must dein Leben ändern: Über Anthropotechnik* (2009), twenty years after publishing *Eurotaoismus*, seems a brilliant one. We know that basically Cioran's entire work is based upon his daily notations covering a small number of existentially pessimistic themes, notes that he was selectively publishing, preserving their aphoristic, anti-systemic character. We then have strong reasons for understanding Cioran's self-writing practice as a *sui generis* asceticism involving a daily exercise in erasing any "infection" epicenter of firm belief and commitment, any kind of faith in the future or in oneself, as Sloterdijk is suggesting⁴. But I think we have to add that Cioran's work is also a paradoxical manner of giving testimony for the "miracle" of every living moment. It would be enough, in this regard, to remember the famous aphorism that closes *The New Gods*: "We are all deep in a hell each moment of which is a miracle" (*Nous sommes tous au fond d'un enfer dont chaque instant est un miracle*) (Cioran 2002; 1995, 1259). The "lesson" would be that life as a personal history (or narrative web), same as history understood as the life of humanity, adds up to a "hell": yet, the moment is *worthy* of living. Even if it is something that Cioran acknowledges only in an oblique fashion, *sous rature*, it remains nonetheless the key stance that we guess behind the delight caused by this imaginary "montage" of his own suicide, reenacted mentally again and again, yet always postponed⁵.

My thesis is the following: what Cioran actually does is *self-writing* in its precise spiritual sense⁶. I realized elsewhere (Iftode 2016) a brief history of the different ages of self-writing. We may start with the Stoics' daily notations (*hypomnēmata*, which involved the writing down, for personal use, of brief quotes or reflections entailed by particular existential episodes, kept for the goal of periodical re-reading and constant meditation) and the philosophical epistolary discussions between master and disciple. Then we go through the Christian confessional writing (and inside this species, from the Augustinian model, to the tradition of spiritual journals). Further we reach the modern, expressivist age of self-writing (Rousseau), the Romantic cult for authenticity, and, through a time leap, we may get to the digital expressivism that is nowadays encouraged on social networking sites: a mixture of self-display, self-invention, and self-advertising tools.

In his own way, Cioran is also an *expressivist* – however, one of a very different kind than the ones mentioned above. Surely he doesn't believe in an authentic self that needs to be revealed and expressed as such, in its essential unity. Nonetheless, he permanently feels the need to expose his own weaknesses, defects, disillusionments, to write them down, to express them and make them public with such a disarming, "parrhesiastic" honesty (that is

cynical in the ancient sense of the word). Through this kind of self-writing, Cioran elegantly assumes the condition of "madness" as "the absence of an oeuvre" (Foucault 2006): the paradoxical state of an author that is no longer "able" and no longer "willing" to believe (Sloterdijk 2013, 78) – neither in personal redemption, nor in the perfection of an oeuvre. Fully embracing his "aggressive-depressive" mood as his fundamental way of being-in-the-world (Heidegger might have called it Cioran's *Grundstimmung*), what this Romanian dark thinker actually accomplishes, following Sloterdijk's interpretation, is an *autopatography*: the daily recording of his sickness, of everything he lacks – and he lacks "everything" (Sloterdijk 2013, 74; 76). So we are entitled to read his aphorisms as real *hypomnēmata* serving to an opposite purpose than those of the Stoics: engraving into our minds the very fact that there is no ideal Self, nor a hidden Order of the world!

However, by means of this daily exorcism performed over his ailing obsessions, we have to acknowledge the fact that Cioran puts forth a peculiar kind of *therapy*. The young Cioran had already stated it in an eloquent manner:

Writing holds any value and justification only as a release from obsessions, a way of postponing destruction and fall.

Writing holds only a therapeutic value and it has to be interesting for a person in so far as he can save himself through it. (Cioran 1995, 236; 239)⁷

I should only add the fact that Cioran provides us with something more than a mere recipe for survival or a paradoxical yet "effective form of suicide prevention for numerous readers" (Sloterdijk 2013, 82): his writing encapsulates a training for fully reconnecting ourselves to the miracle of the living moment.

In this way, Cioran is rediscovered as an *ascetic* of a different kind: he really is an "autopatographer" and a "hunger artist" (Sloterdijk 2013, 78). The link to Kafka's notorious text (1924), which Sloterdijk advances, seems more than appropriate. The indistinctness between *poiesis* and *praxis* that is the trademark of the artistic avant-garde is depicted through this Kafkaian image that stands, in my view, as a kind of supreme metaphor for performance art. Moreover, Kafka's short story might be read as a categorical assertion of the fact that "existence as such is an acrobatic achievement" (Sloterdijk 2013, 63) and that art in its pure form is "the art of living". The hunger artist is the acrobat that no longer trains for the leap into transcendence. Yet, this does not make his *askēsis* a less strenuous one than in the case of the old religious asceticism, though we might argue that such an artistic *askēsis* is no longer animated by anything more than a "will to power" aiming at its continuous intensification. If we read into this using Nietzschean lenses, the aim of "always-wanting-to-be-less" is itself a perverse, resentful form of the "will to power" (Sloterdijk 2013, 65).

As a radical and antimetabolic art of living that goes against any social habitus or custom, the avant-garde practice of the hunger artist cannot hold on to the goal of “reconciling” with reality. It rather strives for transforming its subject “into a virtuoso of the inability to live” (Sloterdijk 2013, 68) – namely, to live “normally”. *Askēsis* for its own sake, not with the goal of redemption, becomes the *art* of fasting, the nihilistic art of hunger: “I couldn’t find the food I liked. If I had found it, believe me, I should have made no fuss and stuffed myself like you or anyone else”, says Kafka’s character (Sloterdijk 2013, 70). And this is how a post-Christian asceticism that is different from the pre-Christian, vitalist, strengthening one that Nietzsche was dreaming about is destined to reveal

what remains of metaphysical desire when its transcendent goal is eliminated. What transpires is a form of beheaded asceticism in which the supposed tensile strain from above proves to be an aversive tension from within. (Sloterdijk 2013, 71)

To conclude this argument, I should quote Sloterdijk’s precise verdict: “In his own way, Cioran too is a hunger artist: a man who fasts metaphorically by abstaining from solid food for identity”; “Like Kafka’s hunger artist, he turns his aversion into a virtuoso performance” (Sloterdijk 2013, 73; 78)⁸. His work becomes the full expression of *self-loathing*. Even if he wants his personal calendar to be dated “after Nietzsche” (Sloterdijk 2013, 74), Cioran strongly rejects the affirmative side of Nietzsche’s thinking, which involved saying “Yes” to the play of the world, to the innocence of becoming, and to the advent of the *Übermensch*: all of this is merely a hoax in Cioran’s view. This is how the Romanian aphorist becomes, in Sloterdijk’s original reading, a key figure in the gallery of the new “arts of living”, an important link in the historical process of “the secularization of asceticisms and the informalization of spirituality” (Sloterdijk 2013, 75). Existentialist of a peculiar kind – instead of overcompensation or resistance, he commits to “an endless series of acts of disengagement”, namely to “an existentialism of incurability” (Sloterdijk 2013, 76-77) – Cioran is the “anti-stoic” and pseudo-buddhist¹⁰ master of demobilization, “the first master of not-getting-anywhere” (Sloterdijk 2013, 78)¹¹.

Notes

¹ “The over-discussed question of the subject is reduced to this compact formulation: a subject is someone who is active as the carrier (*Träger*) of a sequence of exercises.” (Sloterdijk 2013, 156; 2009, 248)

² This would explain the paradoxical shape that antropotechnics may take in extreme cases, such as the practice of *heteronyms* in Pessoa (“I reread some of the pages that together will form my book of random impressions. And they give off, like a familiar smell, an arid

impression of monotony. Even while saying that I'm always different, I feel that I've always said the same thing; that I resemble myself more than I'd like to admit" – Pessoa 2001, 442), or, in order to anticipate what I am about to show, Cioran's nihilist therapy.

³ *Les Aveux de la chair* (*The Confession of the Flesh*) is actually the title of Foucault's fourth volume of *History of Sexuality*, finally due to appear at the beginning of 2018.

⁴ "[T]he crutches he wanted to break... were those of identity, belonging and consistency. Only one basic principle convinced him: to be convinced by nothing." (Sloterdijk 2013, 76)

⁵ We should also add this decisive aspect about Cioran, highlighted by Sloterdijk: "Even if his prevailing mood was that of a 'passive-aggressive bastard' (...) his ethos was that of a man of exercises (...) who turned despair into an Apollonian discipline (...). The effective history of Cioran's books shows that he was immediately recognized as a paradoxical master of exercises (...). There was a secret readiness in him to give advice to the despairing who were even more helpless than himself – and a far less concealed inclination to become famous for his exercises in escape from the world." (Sloterdijk 2013, 81)

⁶ "Comme élément de l'entraînement de soi, l'écriture a, pour utiliser une expression qu'on trouve chez Plutarque, une fonction *éthopoiétique*: elle est un opérateur de la transformation de la vérité en *éthos*." (Foucault 2001, 1237)

⁷ For an excellent alternative interpretation of the essentially therapeutic dimension of Cioran's work, which amounts to a powerful criticism of the trend of "positive thinking" so influential nowadays, see Pătrașcu (2014).

⁸ Let us remember Cioran's exact words from his first book published in French, *Précis de décomposition*: "All our humiliations come from the fact that we cannot bring ourselves to die of hunger" (Cioran 1990, 168). In direct connection to this ascetical dimension of Cioran's work, we also have to keep in mind the fact that the initial title chosen for this book was actually *Exercices négatives*.

⁹ A philosophy well fitted for imperial civil servants and, nowadays, for corporate employees, the Stoicism assures us that everything is "in order", that everything happens the way it should be happening, according to a necessary chain confirming the perfection of the Cosmos (see Sloterdijk 2013, 79).

¹⁰ "Though he felt drawn to Buddhism, Cioran did not want to subscribe to its ontology. He not only loathed the reality of the world, but also intended to take advantage of it; he therefore had to accept the reality of reality, even if it was only sophistically." All said and done, Cioran rejects any kind of final salvation, as long as everything he writes "is a complaint about the imposition of requiring salvation" (Sloterdijk 2013, 77).

¹¹ "Cioran is a new type of practicing person whose originality and representative nature are evident in the fact that he practises rejecting every goal-directed way of practising" (Sloterdijk 2013, 77), as well as any explicit teleology.

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