

Philosophers: Visionary of Darkness

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Every night, during the "May Days" of the Sorbonne revolt, a greying, middle-aged man descended from his Left Bank attic flat and ambled over to the student-occupied Théâtre de L'Odéon. There he listened with amused interest as youthful nihilists denounced the entire span of French history as irrelevant. Their harsh judgment did not surprise him. In five slim volumes of pellucid, painfully distilled essays, Rumanian-born Philosopher E. M. Cioran, 57, has argued the terrible futility of human history. More originally than any other living thinker, he has defined the case for total pessimism. "Human history is an immense cul-de-sac," he says. "For me, life is a passionate emptiness, an intriguing nothingness."

Cioran's first book published in the U.S., *The Temptation to Exist* (Quadrangle; \$5), presents his dark vision in a series of highly personal, paradoxical meditations that almost defy criticism and can only be categorically accepted or rejected. An unsystematic thinker who refers to his essays as "fragments," Cioran (pronounced Cho-ran) presents his arguments in ironic, aphoristic prose (see box). It is rather as if Dostoevsky had written *Notes from Underground* in the style of Pascal's *Pensees*. Although his gloom has affinities, with existentialism, Cioran is hard to pigeon hole; his eclectic thought contains echoes of all philosophic history, from the pre-Socratics to the mystics of the Eastern church.

Partly because of his obsession with privacy—he refuses to reveal his first name, rarely gives interviews, shuns Parisian literary circles—Cioran is hardly better known in Europe than in the U.S. Yet there are impressive testimonials to his significance. Critic Susan Sontag, in her introduction to *The Temptation to Exist*, calls him "the most distinguished figure writing today in the tradition of Kierkegaard, Nietzsche and Wittgenstein." And Nobel prizewinning poet, Saint-John Perse, hails Cioran as "one of the greatest French writers to honor our language since the death of Paul Valery. His lofty thought is one of the most rigorous, independent and interesting in Europe today."

In part, Cioran's independence derives from the fact that he is, literally, an exile without a country. Educated in Rumania by his father, a Greek Orthodox priest, he went to Paris at the age of 26 and studied fitfully at the Sorbonne for 13 years, refusing to acquire an advanced degree. Plagued by chronic

insomnia, he developed his profound sense of despair during one long nuit blanche (sleepless night) after another. Unmarried, he earns most of his modest income from part-time work as a translator and manuscript reader. "I don't make a living," he told TIME Correspondent Paul Ress last week. "I eke one out. But I don't wish to be well off." Cioran has not returned to Rumania in more than 30 years, and is a citizen of no country at all.

To Cioran, life is at once absurd and fascinating. "Everything that a man does turns against him," he explains. "You will be punished for everything. That is the tragedy of human destiny." Mocked by life, mankind becomes "a race of convulsionaries at the center of a cosmic farce." Since philosophical systems inevitably fail, Cioran is led to denounce reason as "the rust of our vitality" and the study of history as "the terror of chronology," both of which lead men to separate consciousness from reality. To Cioran, all truth is ultimately hoax, all certainties no more than "functioning lies."

Cioran believes that Western civilization is today at a stage of helpless paralysis. Modern man, he writes, is aware that every action eventually negates itself, every profound idea will give rise to another refuting it, and that every revolution leads to inevitable counterrevolution. Even nihilism and atheism are false options, since they too involve a commitment that will eventually crumble. "At our limits a God appears, or something that serves his turn," says Cioran, who is at once an unbeliever and a profoundly religious man. "I fall back on God, if only out of a desire to trample my doubts underfoot." Yet Cioran rejects faith as just another self-deception. "I write to rid myself of my obsessions, of my anguish," he says. "But I believe in nothing."

Confronting futility, Cioran neither yields to the absurd nor makes a sudden leap to faith. Instead, he adopts a perilous, intentionally irrational balance designed to sever the roots of reason. Since all life is futility, he contends, then the decision to exist must be the most irrational act of all. For once man sees through his fictions, there can be no rational basis for living, a judgment that recalls Camus' point: the only philosophical question is suicide. "I subsist and act insofar as I am a raving maniac," Cioran writes. "It is by undermining the idea of reason, of order, of harmony, that we gain consciousness of ourselves."

Cioran contends that the only common ground between men—believers and nonbelievers alike—is the illogical temptation to exist, to resist the acceptance of nothingness. The difficult duty of man then becomes to combat both his doubts and certitudes, and to hurl himself toward a silent, detached state of unreason. He sees the philosopher's task not as pointing out the truth but rather as showing the way toward freedom through acceptance of futility,

the only tenable stance for the conscious man. "After the banality of the abyss, what miracles in being!" Cioran writes. "To exist is a habit I do not despair of acquiring."