Wakefulness and Obsession: An Interview with E.M. Cioran
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INTERVIEWER: MICHEL JAKOB

E.M. Cioran, born in 1911 in Rasinari, Rumania, arrived in Paris in 1937 and has produced over many years what Susan Sontag has called "a new kind of philosophizing [whose foremost exemplars are Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Wittgenstein]: personal..., aphoristic, lyrical, anti-systematic." His books include The Temptation To Exist, A Short History Of Decay, The Fall Into Time, The New Gods, and The Trouble With Being Born. The Nobel Prize-winning poet St.-John Perse has written that Cioran is "one of the greatest French writers to honor our language since the death of Paul Valery."

I: Emile Cioran, I am quite conscious of the difficulty of conducting a discussion with you, that is, of seeking a dialogue with someone who does not believe in dialogue and for whom—I hope I am quoting you in some measure correctly—each encounter represents a kind of crucifixion. But in spite of this reservation and in the spirit of it, I should like to try and to begin with something that lies far in the past, with Rumania, with your growing-up between nations, between Rumania, Hungary, and Germany.... Is anything of your childhood still present to you?

I: It is quite extraordinarily present to me. I was born in a village in the Carpathians, twelve kilometers distant from Sibiu-Hermannstadt, and I
An Interview

loved this village intensely. When I had to leave it at the age of ten to go
to the gymnasium in Sibiu, my world collapsed. I will never forget the day,
or, rather, the hour in which my father brought me to Sibiu: we had rented
a horse-drawn wagon for the purpose and I wept during the entire journey,
wept incessantly, for I had a sort of premonition that Paradise had been lost.
This village in the mountains, you see, had for me as a boy an enormous
advantage: after breakfast I could simply disappear until midday and an
hour after lunch I disappeared again. I wandered through the mountains,
went simply everywhere, and this state of affairs lasted until, as I said, my
tenth year. There was another “advantage”: when my parents, as Ruma-
nians, were deported by Hungary during the war, we children, my sister,
my brother, and I, stayed with my grandmother and with her we were really
completely free. It was an ideal epoch for me. During this time I loved the
peasants, the shepherds, more than anything. I had a real passion for them
and when I had to leave that world, I had the clear premonition that
something irretrievable had been destroyed. I wept and wept; I will never
be able to forget it as long as I live. Sibiu was just twelve, or at the most
fourteen, kilometers from my native village of Râsinari, but I knew quite
certainly that a catastrophe had occurred.

II: When one hears you speak like this, one has the impression that you
were completely ripped out of your native soil.

II: Not only from the soil, but also from that primitive world, which I loved
tremendously, and from the feeling of freedom that was, for me, tied up
with it. So I went to Sibiu, which at that time was a very important border-
city in imperial Hungary, with an infinite number of soldiers. It was above
all a city of three nationalities: Germans, Rumanians, and Hungarians,
who, I would say, lived together without drama. This situation, by the way,
marked me forever, so that I can live in no city in which only one language
is spoken; it would be impossible and I would be bored to death right away.
There in Sibiu I learned to cherish the differences among the three cultures
that existed side by side, although to be precise, one ought to say that the
principal culture was the German, and the Rumanian and Hungarian
limped behind as a kind of slave-culture. After the first World War these
cultures wanted to free themselves, which they could accomplish only
slowly, for they were still more or less in the throes of being formed. In Sibiu, then, I slowly found my way around and discovered there, among other things, a German library, which later, particularly during my student years, was to be of great significance. So I gradually became familiar with Sibiu and after Paris—except for my native village—it is the city that I love best in the world, or, more precisely, that I loved the best. And if the term “nostalgia” has any meaning at all, it means having to leave a city like Sibiu or one’s native village. Basically, the primitive world is a genuine world, a world in which everything is possible and nothing is actualized.

III: In this way you lost your homeland several times at once?

III: Yes, but not only that. For after the loss of my childhood I had to change my way of life in Sibiu from the ground up. There began the drama that was to be with me for many years and marked my entire life, everything that I have written, thought, and planned, simply everything. All my broodings have their origin in that drama:

When I was about twenty years old, I lost my sleep and I am of the opinion that this is the greatest tragedy that can befall someone. It is much worse than sitting in prison, a thousand times worse. On account of this painful discovery, however, the wakeful nights of Sibiu were among the most adventurous moments of my entire life. I roamed the streets of the city for hours on end—the city is, by the way, marvelously beautiful, a medieval German city—I went out of the house at about midnight or later and roamed through the alleys. And there were only a few lunatics and me, all alone in the entire city, in which absolute silence reigned. For hours I strayed like a kind of phantom through the streets and everything that I thought in consequence and later composed was “born” during those nights. At that time I also wrote my first book with the title *Per culmea disperârii*, that is, “At the Zenith, Despair.” This book was something of a twenty-two-year-old’s testament and I thought that, after this book, I would commit suicide. That it never came to that point has a specific reason: the fact that I had no profession kept me from it. Because I could not sleep at night and roamed about through the city, I was naturally useless during the day and could therefore practice no profession (which for me has always been very important). I had in fact ended my studies in philosophy, had an MA and so forth, but I could not teach. If one stays
awake all night, one cannot hold one's ground before students. The nights of Sibiu thus became the source of my view of the world.

IV: When you speak of suicide, of the most radical and uncompleted consequence of the book that you composed at twenty-two, the night side of your experience in Sibiu appears to me finally as positive, or shall we say, as transformed into a liberation. That is, it really revealed to you another, more candid world. You thus became familiar with the realm of night, as it is described by the romantics, the site of the Vigil of Bonaventura. In any case, this epoch was for you the decisive time....

IV: There is, in this context, another important experience that I had as a twenty-year-old. I must say beforehand that my mother was not religious, which perhaps had to do with my father's profession as a minister. She was, in any case, a much more independent spirit than my father. Anyway, I remember very precisely, and that I do shows how extraordinarily important this experience was for me and still is, that we, my mother and I, were alone in the house one afternoon and suddenly I threw myself on a sofa and said: "I cannot live any longer. I simply can't bear it," whereupon my mother replied, "Had I known that at the time, I would have aborted you." That made a tremendous impression on me; not, however, a negative impression in any way. Instead of being shocked, I merely smiled. The scene was a sort of revelation for me. The experience of having been an accident and not a necessity meant a certain liberation for me and this feeling has had a continuous effect to this day. My mother read, by the way, the things I wrote in Rumanian and she more or less accepted them, while my father was obviously very unhappy about them. He was a believer, not fanatical in his belief, to be sure, but it was a faith that his profession as a minister simply brought with it. Everything that I wrote bothered him and he didn't know how to react. But my mother understood me. Oddly enough, I almost despised my mother until the day she said to me that for her there was nothing in the world but Johann Sebastian Bach. From that moment on I knew that we were alike and I have in fact inherited some of her failings and with them, perhaps, other qualities as well.

Experiences like this leave their mark upon a life and there were of course other things of similar significance. So I wrote yet another book in Rumanian with the title Of Tears and the Saints, and it appeared in 1937.
Or rather, it didn’t really appear, for the publisher in Bucharest—I lived at that time in Brasov-Kronstadt—withdraw at the last minute. The book was almost in press when he called me to say that he wouldn’t publish it after all. At first, he just hadn’t read it, but when it was to come out, someone asked him what he thought of it and so he had to read it then. He told me (after a lecture) that he had made his fortune with God’s help and he didn’t want to spoil things with God. That’s Balkan, thoroughly Balkan! To that I retorted, “But the book is a deeply religious work.” He said only, “Possibly it is; but I won’t have it.” This happened at the same time that I got a fellowship to study in France, so that I was at sixes and sevens about leaving the country, but even this argument could not change his mind. So I went to a café in complete despair, because I was very attached to this little book, which was the fruit of a religious crisis. In the end I found another publisher, not a real one, but a printer, to publish it. And so I left Rumania and came to France. The book appeared in 1937 in my absence and was incredibly poorly received. Eliade, for example, wrote an exceptionally biting review and my parents found themselves in a pretty embarrassing position. My mother wrote to me in Paris at the time and said, “I understand your book, but you should not have published it during our lifetime, for you put your father in a very difficult position and me as well, since I am the president of the orthodox women in Sibiu. People are making fun of me.” They entreated me to withdraw the book, but that was unnecessary, because it wasn’t really published, as I said before. It wasn’t distributed at all and most of the copies had already been pulped. This is also a typical Balkan phenomenon that people in the West simply cannot understand. It is odd that it was my mother who really understood the book. She saw the inner strife in me, the blasphemy on the one hand, the religious nostalgia on the other. (It is actually idiotic to talk about one’s parents, though perhaps it has its purpose.)

This book was the result of a crisis that lasted seven years, seven years of sleeplessness. On account of it I always despised people who could sleep and that is naturally completely absurd, for I had but one wish and that was to sleep, but I could not do it. To be sure I understood at the time that the white nights were those moments that counted, that really had meaning. You see, life is basically quite simple: people get up in the morning, work, are tired after work and go to sleep, wake up again, and
begin a new day. The extraordinary thing about sleeplessness is that it affords no discontinuity. Sleep breaks up the state of waking life, but for the sleepless one, who remains lucid in the middle of the night, there is no difference between day and night. He lives in a kind of ceaseless, endless time. It is another time and another world. Life in essence can only be sustained because of the discontinuity. Why else does one sleep? Not to rest, but above all to forget. A person who wakes up after a night of unbroken sleep has the illusion of beginning something new. When one instead remains awake the whole night long, nothing new begins. At eight in the morning one is in the same condition as at eight at night and one's perspective on things is naturally completely different. I believe that the fact that I have never believed in progress, that I have never allowed myself to be seduced by "progress," has to do with that. One has simply a completely different attitude toward time: not time that passes, but time that will not go away. That alters a life, naturally. And on account of that I believe, now as then, that the greatest experiences one can have in life are white nights: they mark one forever, until death. That is of course understandable: in former times they tortured people by depriving them of sleep; after a few sleepless nights, one would admit to or sign anything. The secret of life is sleep; it makes life possible. If one could prevent mankind from sleeping, I am convinced that a massacre without end would ensue; it would mean the end of history.

In any event, this phenomenon opened my eyes once and for all and my vision of things is the result of this years-long wakefulness. I might almost call it, although it may sound pretentious, the wakefulness of the spirit. I should perhaps add that I had studied philosophy and loved philosophy more than anything. I even loved philosophical language; I was completely infatuated with philosophical terminology. And this naive superstitious belief in philosophy was simply washed away by sleeplessness, for I saw that there philosophy could not help me at all; it had no power to make my life more bearable. Thus I lost my belief in philosophy. Indeed, at the time I grasped that philosophy would not help, that philosophers were people who had nothing to say to me. Philosophers are constructors, positive men, positive, mind you, in a bad sense. I renounced the study of philosophy therefore, whereas earlier, for almost three years I had read practically nothing but philosophical works. And that is how I
discovered that they were no use to me. One of the philosophers who helped very much in this situation was Schestow. Schestow played a great part in my life, but I must by rights add that he was popular in Rumania, a fact that is unknown in the West. Even Fontane, to whom I told this at one point and who was a student of Schestow, didn’t know, but it is true. I don’t know where it comes from, although naturally there was a certain mutuality: the Russian side, another view of the world. Schestow was in any case my favorite philosopher. Above all, though, I discovered him at a time when I was disappointed with philosophy. And what is Schestow finally, judging by his whole system, but the insufficiency of philosophy itself. He indicted philosophy as a philosopher.

V: While you “saw through” philosophy in this fashion, you found at the same time new joy in literature, in particular Dostoievski, of course.

V: I love everything that Dostoievski produced. Dostoievski is for me by far the greatest genius, the greatest novelist by far—I cannot find enough superlatives for him. To tell the truth, at that time I loved only the great writers who were ill. A writer who is not in some way ill is for me almost automatically a writer of the second rank.

VI: Your book Of Tears and the Saints seems to me to be very Dostoievski-like. I’m thinking, for example, about the portrait of the woman—on one hand a prostitute, on the other a saint...

VI: Yes, that’s right. Wth this book about the saints a very unusual state of affairs developed in my life. I was at that time in Kronstadt-Brasov and it was the only year in my whole life that I went after a job. I taught philosophy in a gymnasium and thus all of a sudden had a profession, a position, which for me had appeared impossible. I constantly had but one idea in my head: to abandon the teaching profession, to go to France in order to escape from this impossible situation. For even though I had passed all the examinations to become a gymnasium teacher, my time in Brasov was a catastrophe. There were unbelievable altercations with students, colleagues, and the director of the school; in short, with all the world. And in this same year, 1937, in which I also underwent a religious
crisis, I wrote Of Tears and the Saints. It was a very important experience for me, for with this book I comprehended that there would be no future for me in religion; it became clear that religion was neither the spiritual nor the philosophical way for me. It was a defeat but it taught me that I was not made for religion. I felt, to be sure, a religious unease, a fermenting in myself, but I knew very well that I did not have faith and I also knew that I would never have it. I had read the mystics, of course, and what pleased me most about their works was their excessive and entirely personal nature, as well as the fact that the mystics spoke with God as man to man, so to speak. The fact that everything in the mystics is personal attracted me. But I understood at the same time that faith was impossible for me; torment myself as I might, there was nothing I could do about it. Thus this book attended an important period of my life. For that whole year I read, more than anything else, the saints, the mystics, and did not know whence it all tended. And it led, as I say, to a catastrophe. When the book finally appeared in Rumania in spite of the difficulties I’ve already mentioned, the whole world turned against me. Except that I remember very well a young seventeen-year-old Armenian girl, who wrote me quite an affecting letter. But the people did not understand me. For me it had to do with something fundamental, for I lost at that time a very decisive illusion. Even today I cannot quite insist that I was completely unreligious, but I am sure of one thing at least: the impossibility of being able to believe. It is an irreparable fact. I was simply not made for faith. Faith is basically a gift; one cannot will oneself to believe—that would be ridiculous. There are many people who are not clear about this or who do not wish to be clear, but for me it was a decisive discovery and it brought the necessary consequences with it.

VII: So at that time the mystics were much more important for you than, for example, Hegel or Kant?

VII: They were infinitely more important, without question. Someone who played a very significant role in my life was St. Teresa of Avila. The news of Edith Stein’s conversion gave me the incentive to read her work, and when I read it for the first time I was really deeply moved. Edith Stein’s conversion to Catholicism came about in the following manner: she went
to a friend of hers, who also studied philosophy, and this friend, who was not at home, had left her a note saying she would return at such-and-such an hour. Edith Stein grabbed a book that was lying about and never put it down again, she was so enchanted by it. It was the autobiography of St. Teresa and this reading became the source of her conversion. There are people who cannot understand that, who write articles about Edith Stein and marvel at it, who find it inexplicable; I myself understand it very well and I find it not at all strange. St. Teresa has a certain tone that stirs one to the depths. Although I learned of St. Teresa relatively late and although I felt no religious vocation in myself—nor have I converted—she taught me an unbelievable amount; I am stirred in the truest sense of the word by her. But, as I said, I could not believe— one is simply born with faith or not. In my life I have experienced every form of crisis but that of faith, which is also a kind of crisis; it is simply not my kind. And although I became acquainted with her more from the outside, I cherish an unbounded admiration for St. Teresa, for the personalness and the feverishness of her, for the illness. It was like a contagious disease, although, I repeat, I did not have this experience as a believer; in spite of that, I found that hers was a case of one of the most extraordinary spirits that ever lived. I went so far at the time as to make myself ridiculous "for her sake" and I spoke for a long time everywhere and to everyone only about her.

VIII: You never concealed your own passions?

VIII: I am actually less a passionate than a possessed type. In all things I must go to the end of possibility and it is not, finally, arguments that convince me to change my mind, but only exhaustion, that which is exhausted by passion. (This has connections with faith.) Because of this, personal encounters, seemingly small things in my life were full of decided significance. I was always very receptive to them; I have always, for example, spoken to strangers and many an encounter has given me a great deal. I have above all a weakness for people who are slightly disturbed. In Rumania, in Sibiu, a city with at least 60,000 inhabitants, I knew in one way or the other all the knocked-about people. The poets, too, who of course belong with them! The morbid attracts me, but morbid, what does that mean, anyway?
And then, still another type interests me more than anything else, the failure. A failure is mostly an extraordinarily gifted, very promising person who doesn’t complete anything. My most important friends in Rumania were not the writers, but the failures. One such failure exerted a great, an enormous influence on me. This fellow had studied theology and was to have become a minister and on the Sunday on which he was to be married—he could only become a minister if he was married—he stepped out of his house at eleven o’clock to go to the church and on the way he said to himself, “This is madness, what you’re about to do,” and he disappeared. He remained submerged for several months and of course everyone waited for him the entire Sunday in church. This man exercised a gigantic influence on me. I must add that he was actually uneducated and had absolutely no specific talent. He had no style, he read little, but he had one thing: he had an unbelievable understanding of human beings. He was a natural psychologist. I have never known him to be deceived in even the smallest detail. He was in general possessed of a quite extraordinary, almost criminal and aggressive lucidity, not only where his gift for observing people was concerned. I met him often. One of the most instructive memories that I carry with me is of a night we experienced together in Brasov. We stayed in the street until five in the morning and debated without a break and after five hours everything spun around me. I was dizzy, for we had destroyed everything in our talk, simply everything, and he was by far the stronger at it. We had quite simply negated everything and he told me that night all the secrets of his life, which I still remember. I won’t say that I learned very much from him, but he was a very important person for me to talk with, for I found out by his example how far one might go. He thrust himself almost to the last border of negation. For me it was chiefly a question of the experience of a hopeless and dangerous case of lucidity. Lucidity is not necessarily compatible with life, actually not at all. To me it was a question of an experience to a certain degree beyond suicide, an experience of nothingness, of the absolute consciousness of nothingness. Indeed, such a situation is not compatible with existence and either one becomes full of faith or one kills oneself or one does I don’t know what. It is an extreme situation, which I have suffered through a number of times in my life, though never with the intensity of this man. The funny thing about him was that he was a very
popular fellow, who looked well-off and well-cared for. One would have
thought of anything but of such nihilism. And he simply destroyed
everything before my eyes; he unmasked our common friends, destroyed
the whole world. He was not at all an evil man, no scoundrel, absolutely
not, but someone to whom it was plainly impossible to have even the
smallest illusion about anything whatsoever. This is also a form of
knowing, for what is knowing finally but putting something in question?
That kind of knowing, that understanding that pushes too far, is dangerous.
Basically—I speak of life as it is and not of abstract philosophical
constructs—life is only bearable because one does not go to the end; doing
something is only possible when one has particular illusions and that holds
also for friendships, for everything. The most perfect consciousness,
absolute lucidity, is nothingness. And this fellow was driven to that point.

I remember—and it shows the demonic in him very well—that I
was very much in love at that time. My friend saw that I was completely
possessed and he said to me, who was so mortally in love, “Have you had
a good look at the back of her neck?” I answered that I hadn’t paid attention
to it, but he persisted, “Get a good look at it!” I found, of course, his saying
something like that to me shamelessly tasteless, complete nonsense! And
I had a look and she had a pimple on the back of her neck and suddenly
everything was destroyed. That impressed me hugely. He was a demon. It
was absurd that he had originally wanted to become a minister. He must
also have sensed it, however unconsciously, so that he disappeared on the
day of his wedding. He had a completely negative view of life. As a way
of understanding, a negative Weltanschauung is not necessarily false, but
it is, as I said, not compatible with life.

IX: Was this kind of oddball in some way peculiar to the Balkans or
Russia?

IX: Yes, in his extravagance he certainly belonged to them. One simply
goes too far. And what, basically, is the West, what is the great French
civilization, the idea of courtesy, other than a boundary that one accepts on
account of reason: just do not go over the boundary; it doesn’t pay; it is bad
taste, etc. As for the Balkans, one really cannot speak of civilization; there
is no criterion for it; there, one is simply excessive. And Russian literature,
too, is marked by excess. I myself, for example, am very sensitive where boredom is concerned and I have been bored my whole life long. Everything in Russian literature revolves around boredom. It is the everyday nothingness. I have suffered through the phenomenon of boredom in an almost pathological way, I have been bored because I wanted to be bored. Indeed, if one is only bored, then everything is at an end. Boredom is connected naturally with time, with the horror of time, with the experience and the consciousness of time. Those who are not aware of time do not become bored. Basically life is only possible if one is not aware of time. If one should happen to want to experience consciously one of those moments that pass, one would be lost; life would become unbearable. The experience of boredom is the result of the despair of time.

X: When one considers the way you read yourself, it appears that you are always searching for the "subterranean voice."

X: As a rule, we know only the surface from our actions, only that which is formulated. But what is far more important is just that which cannot be formulated, the implicit, the secret behind an utterance, what is hidden therein. On that account, all judgments of others as well as those about the self are partially wrong. For the deepest part is hidden, but it is the more actual, the essential in humans and at the same time the most difficult of access. Novels often give one the best possibility to transpose oneself, to express without explaining oneself. The truly great writers are, in my view, those who have a feel for the subterranean; I am thinking above all of Dostoievski. He is interested in everything that is deep and apparently lowly, though it is not lowly, but tragic. The great novelists are the true psychologists. I know many people who have written novels and have failed at it. Even Eliade wrote several novels and he failed. Why? Because he could only reproduce superficial phenomena, without translating them from the depths, from the source. The source of an emotion is very difficult to grasp, but it comes to just that. That holds for all phenomena, for faith, etc. Why did it begin, how did it develop? and so forth—only he who has the gift of divination can perceive where it really comes from. But it is not accessible to reflection. Dostoievski is the only one who has pushed forward to the source of human dealings. One sees why his character does
this or that, though one does not notice it right away. Because most novels ignore this dimension, I cannot read them; they simply do not interest me. They treat only of the surface of things, of the surface of human dealings and say nothing about the deeper levels. That has nothing to do with a psychoanalytical interest; it is something quite different: the psychoanalyst wants to heal, but I seek for something quite different. I want to grasp the daemonic in mankind. What the secret of one's life is, one does not know oneself. This very secrecy, on the other hand, creates meaning in life, out of the communication between people. And if this were not the case, it would merely be a perpetual dialogue between marionettes. I would say that it revolves around the right tone; each person has a certain tone in everything that he does. Not only the musician has it; but sometimes that tone is lacking. It is something truly mysterious and actually, one cannot define it; one feels it, rather. One opens a book, reads a page that is quite cleverly written, and in spite of that, the whole thing says nothing, albeit it has something to say and is not exactly a zero. One does not know what it is a consequence of. There is a sort of unreality that reigns here in everything that literature is; one could perhaps describe it as a lack of necessity. How might one explain this lack of necessity? In daily life it is like this: one meets someone whom one has not seen for a long time, converses for an hour or so, and absolutely nothing comes of it; it is completely empty. And in another case one returns home from such an encounter completely overpowered. Therein lies the true originality of a man, which remains hidden within him yet influences him.

XI: Is it the same with music?

XI: Exactly the same. A person who tells me that music means nothing to him is straight-away liquidated for me. It is something very serious for me, for music stirs that most intimate region in human beings. I cannot have anything in common with someone who does not feel that; it is the heaviest of failings in my eyes, almost a curse, which—without knowing it clearly himself—overburdens such a person.

XII: The music that speaks to you most particularly is that of Johann Sebastian Bach?
XII: Bach is a god to me. Someone who does not understand Bach is lost; it is actually unimaginable, though it does happen. I believe that music is the only branch of art that has the capacity to construct a deep complicity between two human beings. Not poetry, only music. Someone who is insensitive to music suffers from an enormous handicap. That is simply the case and it is completely normal for music to construct a bond between people. It is unthinkable that they hear anything by Schumann or Bach, anything that they love, without being stirred. But I can understand how someone might dislike this or that poet.

XIII. When do you usually listen to music?

XIII. I listen to music all the time, especially now that I have stopped writing. I don't feel that it is worth the effort to continue, and music more than makes up for this dryness. To live without music would be a torment for me, an absurdity. One can very well not write. One ought not to write, because one desires, without admitting it, to bring about through words what only music can accomplish. An emotion whose origin is musical gets lost in verbal transposition, whereas in the music it reveals its sense directly. Why should one write anymore, in that case, and why write at all, why always want to add to the immense number of books, why want to become an author at any price? These days, too much has already been written. We live in a period of absurd and completely unnecessary overproduction. The whole world writes these days, especially in Paris. I myself originally thought that I would write only a little, but one allows oneself, unfortunately, to be seduced. Nevertheless, I now understand that I can no longer play out this comedy. Earlier on it had nothing to do with comedy; it was a kind of necessity for me. It offered me the possibility of acquitting myself, for the only way to simplify everything is to express oneself. As soon as one has written something down, it loses its secret at once, it gets lost, is killed: one has "killed" the thing and oneself. But writing has precisely this function. I have noticed, by the way, that those who do not write have more resources, because they store up everything within themselves. To have written something down means to have dragged it out of oneself, to have uttered definitively everything that came from inside. A writer is someone who gives away that which is most
original to him, finally losing, in this manner, his whole substance. That is why writers are so uninteresting as a rule and I mean that quite seriously: writers are people who have exhausted themselves. Only the dregs of themselves still exist; they are pitiful marionettes.

XIV. Had you already decided when you came to France that you would practice no profession there as well?

XIV. Yes, for I was very soon clear about the necessity not to do that. I knew that it would be better to accept any humiliation and suffering, to resist, rather than forfeit my freedom. I knew that it depended upon not being obliged to do anything that I did not love and that I could not love to distraction. On that account I was always ready to refuse any kind of impersonal work, except for physical activity. I could have easily accepted being a street sweeper, but never some kind of second-rate writing job, journalism and the like. Thus I had to do everything I could, as one might put it, not to earn my living. Every form of humiliation is preferable to loss of freedom and that has always been, by the way, something like the program of my way of life. I had accommodated my way of life in Paris to this demand very well, although it didn’t always work out just as I planned it. For example, I enrolled as a student at the Sorbonne for a year and could eat at the Mensa, until I was forty years old. When I turned forty, someone took me aside to tell me that there was an age limit of twenty-seven. With one blow, all my plans were brought to nothing. I lived at that time in a hotel not far from my present address, in a mansard room, which I liked very much, and when I came home after this news, I said to myself, “This is very serious,” because I didn’t have the means to eat in a restaurant and I really didn’t know which end was up. I won’t say that it finally represented a true turning point in my life, but it was an incident that complicated things, since I had sworn to myself to do anything not to have to work. I still had my hotel room, an exquisite lodging on rue Monsieur le Prince, which I loved to idolatry and really cost practically nothing. Nevertheless, as if that were not enough, I saw one day that all the renters were beginning to be thrown out, except for me, because I knew the owner and he simply didn’t dare to put me out on the street. I knew, though, that it would happen one day, and I decided to find something new without fail,
or it would have meant the end. This happened in 1960 and I had just published a book, with the title *History and Utopia*. I knew a lady who was in real estate and who had once promised to help me. I therefore sent this woman, whom I knew only fleetingly, my book and only three days later I had the apartment I am still living in, for a ridiculous monthly rent. It’s the old Paris rent system with frozen prices, and the owners simply can’t do anything about it, which is actually exceptionally unjust. But for me, who fears getting old, this was a very important thing and in this way I was able to solve a great problem without having to go near a regular job. For the younger generation of today, all this is impossible. Sometimes young people come to me and say, “We would like to live like you!” but it is too late, far too late! I came to Paris in another epoch, during a time when there were still hotel rooms to be had for nothing and more nothing. All that is gone and one is today simply “fichu.”

XV. But in spite of this special plan for your life, you have continued to write. You publish quite a lot, for example in the *N.R.F.*

XV. One doesn’t live altogether in Paradise—pardon me—as a parasite! Naturally I apprehended that I had to write, that it somehow answered a deeper requirement. I next published my first book in the French language, *Précis de décomposition*, and wasn’t sure whether I should actually write any more. Why should one continue, until at the most only one sentence remains in one? But on the other hand, the days are too long, and it almost becomes a necessity to manifest oneself. For thirty years I was, anyway, a complete unknown. My books didn’t sell at all and I had quite accepted the situation, which corresponded to my view of things. And then the situation slowly changed and suddenly my books came out in paperback. Paradoxically, I am for paperback books, because it is perhaps the only way to reach the reader who is really interested in one. With success and a literary career one becomes an unquestioning part of the mechanism, whereas the only truly important years are those in which one is unknown. Although to be unknown can sometimes also have something very bitter about it, it is fundamentally a blessing. At one time I liked to drink whiskey and because I naturally could not allow myself to buy a bottle, I went to literary salons, where I was introduced for years as the friend of Ionesco.
and Beckett. But it was a very pleasant situation and why then should one want to be famous?

XVI. Why did you suddenly decide to write in French?

XVI. The reason is the following: I had decided never to return to Rumania. It represented the past for me, something in the most absolute sense closed. I have already spoken several times of my decision and it really did work out that way. In the summer of 1936 I was in Dieppe, at the seashore, and I tried at that time to translate Mallarmé into Rumanian. All of a sudden it became clear to me that my undertaking was senseless, because I had no talent for translation. And almost in the same moment I undertook from then on to write only in French. Oddly, until that time I had neglected French in Paris. I had studied a lot of English and had also taken a number of courses in English literature. But my sudden decision to write in French turned out in the first instance to be much more difficult than I had originally thought. The work on my first book, Précis de décomposition, was a regular torture, not the first copy, of course, but the attempt to write the book. In the end I reworked it four times and thereby almost lost all pleasure in writing. After this book, I said to myself, all right, it just doesn’t pay to plague myself in this way, and I wrote Syllogisms of Bitterness, my next book, more out of exhaustion. It went on from there, but I must mention that Paulhan always wanted something new from me to bring out in the N.R.F. I agreed to it, mostly halfheartedly, and yet I still wanted to keep my promise and so it went on more or less from there. Nevertheless, I accepted being on the periphery without any fuss, and the years of being unknown seemed to me, as I said before, the really important ones. The writer who has no readers, whom only a few people know, is the true writer, for even though on the practical side this can be very unpleasant, one has the impression in such a case that one writes for oneself alone.

XVII. How do you see the relationship between the individual and society in the historical process? Is there a negotiation between them or does the individual live for himself alone, isolated despite his possible lucidity and temporary opposition to society?
XVII. The connection between the individual and history is in general very ill-determined and a feeling of uneasiness is characteristic of this relation. I would go as far as to assert that this feeling of uneasiness is still the highest to which the individual can aspire in modern society. Where lucidity is concerned, there is, as I said, a superfluity that makes life and the relationship to others impossible. Life is only possible when one does not grasp at the ultimate consequences.

XVIII. Can one escape from this lucidity, to which our conversation repeatedly returns (and I can hardly believe it to be by accident)? I am also thinking that you often speak of Buddhism in your most recent works, of far Eastern ways of thought and living, of Nirvana. Do you have a nostalgia for a philosophy of peace, for a philosophy, I might almost say, of healthful sleep?

XVIII. I have since put this phase of which you speak behind me, though it has indeed played a great role. My interest in these things reaches at least ten years back and I must admit that I was always somewhat inclined toward Buddhism, if one can be "somewhat" Buddhist. If I really had to decide upon one form of belief—let us say now and forever, under threat of death, etc.—then I would certainly opt for Buddhism. Buddhism is the religion, though, that best agrees with me; several aspects excepted, of course, it is in my opinion an acceptable and almost "comfortable" religion.

XIX. Surely one does not choose a religion in a lucid and calculated way?

XIX. There are, naturally, things that one accepts and others that one cannot agree with; for example, to accept the concept of transmigration certain assumptions are necessary. Thus the basis of Buddhism, what it asserts about suffering or death, is completely acceptable. The negative side of it compelled the Buddha to renounce the world. All that is acceptable, but we cannot accept many rules of Buddhist doctrine, which simply don't correspond to our style and our own tradition, for example metempsychosis, the conception of the diverse stages of preexistence, or existence, and so forth. Thus, though Buddhist doctrine, the dogma,
remains unacceptable, the spirit of Buddhism, that is, the system of thought
which the foundations of Buddhism set forth, can very well win us over.
And finally, Buddhism is the religion that requires the least investment of
faith, if I may put it so, quite different from Christianity and Judaism,
which both demand specific things. In those religions, if one cannot bear
to follow certain precepts, one is lost from the outset, and it makes no sense
to go on. Not so in Buddhism, which permits compromise. The conditions
that compelled Buddha to withdraw from the world can be carried out by
almost anyone and one can accept them without further ado, provided one
also has the courage to take on the associated consequences. Completely
different in Christian belief, wherein one must obey this and that com-
mand. Buddhism requires from a person not one bit of confession, and no
gratitude either; one must simply bring with one a certain vision, a certain
way of looking at things. And on that account Buddhism is in part on the
way to threatening Christian belief, at least here in France, where it is really
on the march. I know personally many people who say, "For me there is
only Buddhism," and it will continue in this way.

XX. If one knows your work, one says to oneself that Cioran is certainly
someone who does not travel. Is this assumption correct?

XX. You are right, I have not traveled much. I have undertaken very few
trips and visited only a few countries. And now I hardly travel at all. My
last trip took me to Greece, not exactly because I wanted to travel there, but
more because I was compelled to go, since someone else simply paid for
everything for me…. Nevertheless I have gotten around a little bit, because
a long time ago I had a great passion for bicycle riding—I even went to
England just to ride around there. Indeed, I was at that time a lot younger.
It was more than twenty years ago, and the bicycle still seems to me the
ideal means of transportation: one is "out of doors," one is in the country,
and at the same time one is underway, always in motion. I loved it chiefly
because I got to talk to strangers and on my bicycle tours through France
I spoke with an infinite number of people, obviously not with intellectuals.
I love talking to simple people, with common folk, if you like, and I still
do it and still chat now as before with anyone, regardless of intellectual
level. On the contrary, I like uneducated people much better and that is
obviously my Rumanian heritage. It may seem strange, but, you see, one can very well have a very consistent Weltanschauung and still behave in one's own life quite differently. One does things that are dictated by life itself and one actually behaves a certain way from the moment that one consents to breathe. One makes concessions and more concessions. It happens, then, that a person—though he may sometimes do grotesque, quite ridiculous and compromising things—remains honorable with regard to himself, so that he can say, “I do this, indeed, but at least I am conscious of it.” It is perhaps all too general a rule that as soon as one begins to live, one is damned, and so it continues....

XXI. Are you still such a great walker?

XXI. Yes.

XXII. And do you still walk about in cemeteries?

XXII. Yes, I have a weakness for cemeteries, though they aren't so beautiful anymore, because they are simply overpopulated! When I meet friends or people I know who are going through a difficult period, I usually have this advice for them: “Go for twenty minutes in a cemetery and you'll see that, though your worry won't disappear, you'll almost forget about it and you'll feel better.” Just a few days ago I told a young woman who was suffering fearfully from an unhappy love, “Since you don’t live far from Montparnasse, take a walk through the cemetery, just half an hour, and you will see that your misery will appear bearable.” In such a situation, it is much better to do that than to go to a doctor; there is no medicine that can help. To visit a cemetery in such a situation is a lesson, a lesson in wisdom! I have always practiced such methods, or recommended them, although it may not seem altogether serious, but it has been effective in every case. What can one say that is meaningful to someone in despair? Absolutely nothing, or almost nothing. My advice shows immediate results. I am, by the way, quite compassionate, which might sound surprising to many people, but I am very sensitive where the pain of my fellow man is concerned, and have always been that way. I have helped many people, many more than you might think. Someone unacquainted with despair
who is suddenly in the middle of it experiences from one moment to another something quite extreme. He understands absolutely nothing and can't even explain it to himself. I have always tried to explain new situations. I do not agree with those who say that one can never help, that one should simply leave people alone. But in such a situation what matters is to change one's perspective radically, and the only possible way to sustain life is, in the last analysis, to be conscious of nothingness. Otherwise life is not bearable. But when one possesses a perspective on nothingness, no one can hold anything against one, come what may. Even the most inimical things come to seem then somehow normal and one doesn't experience that painful deformity that absolute desperation bestows, which is always exaggerated....

XXIII. For a writer, isn't this desperation well nigh unbearable?

XXIII. I know several writers, young writers, who tried to publish something and were frustrated, whereupon they wanted to take their lives. I understand that in some way, but it is exceptionally difficult to comfort someone who is so far gone. The most shocking things in life are perhaps the great defeats, and there are many of them, for everyone. When one gets to know people in that situation, one experiences the most of them. I am very often visited by people in complete despair, mostly young, who feel that they have failed. It is quite an extraordinarily important lesson, for there are people for whom it is not easy to go through such a crisis; it is a matter of sensitivity, of nerves, possibly even something inherited. Nevertheless, there are these crises in every social sphere and one must say that, fundamentally, failure merely constitutes the experience of life. That is really not so bad for the one who comprehends everything—what can happen to him? But it hits the ambitious exceptionally hard, those who have a plan for their lives, who think about the future, who have a future. Just because they take everything so seriously, I say to these people, "Go to the cemetery!" and it is right, and the results prove it. It is the only weapon with which to minimize such an essentially tragic situation.... Best of all, go find the grave of a friend! It is perhaps absurd and yet it has not only meaning, but is, as I said, the only way to alleviate a personal drama. One learns in life just about everything but this, how to survive such
a crisis. And in literary circles, which are often afflicted in this regard, there is certainly a lot of disappointment.

XXIV. Even as a young man, as a very young person you had in a certain way, how shall I say it, anticipated death, the fatal nature of life, illness; in other words, your thought was from the start tragic. A tragic thinker of 21 years....

XXIV. That's certain, and in my first book, *Per culmea disperârii*, what was to come later is already there, everything that I later wrote. The book was, by the way, finally republished, in Rumanian in fact, although in quite a small edition of about 500 copies. It is a very poorly written book, without any style, a crazy book, but everything from later on is already there. It can't be translated, because it is written in such a bad "Rumanian" style, without any discipline, simply careless, but my central themes, like the obsession with suicide, etc., are already found in the work of that twenty-one-year-old. It is the book of an insomniac, a too-quickly-written work. I overcame insomnia, by the way, after only seven "wide-awake" years, in 1937, when I came to France. And it came about when I rode across France on my bicycle, as I said already. I was underway for a month and I passed the nights mostly in youth hostels, and the physical exertion of putting at least 100 km a day behind me cured me. When one rides 100 km a day, one must sleep; one cannot do otherwise, and in this way I overcame the crisis. That is, not through reflection, complaining, or the like, but solely by means of physical exertion, which suited me, I must admit. I was also always "out of doors" and there, for the first time, I really comprehended France, because I met many simple people, workers, young people, and so forth, and it was for me in that regard a very, very fruitful experience.

XXV. But your *Weltanschauung* was already marked by insomnia....

XXV. Yes, though the pathology had changed. My view of the thing had matured; indeed, it lost all of a sudden its morbid foundation, for from the moment that I could close my eyes and sleep, it was no longer a question of the same tension. The only advance that one can make in life is to live more intensively, but in the long run the intensive life becomes unbearable,
and the tense and especially intensive life that I had did in fact become unbearable to me.

XXVI. But you didn’t reach for drugs, like Michaux, to recover that intensity?

XXVI. Absolutely not. I never agreed with Michaux where his use of drugs was concerned, only to have certain visions. And basically I was against it, because in his case it was a question of very reasonable experiments without any risk, experiments he mounted only to be able to write about them. I was always against it and of the opinion that such an expenditure did not pay. This side of his work appears to me to be the most problematic and the most feeble. I never said it to his face, because we were very good friends and I really couldn’t say anything to him. Either one knows a certain state of consciousness by virtue of some fatal event or one gives up any claim to speak about it. It was artificial, but Michaux had something of the doctor about him, a strong scientific bent. He often went to see scientific films, really terrible films, and when he lived here in my neighborhood, I often went with him and found it terribly boring. Michaux would have made an outstanding chemist or a great physician. But I never agreed with his artificially bringing about certain morbid states; it was a great mistake on his part as a poet to go after scientific methods.

XXVII. You said that you no longer want to write; do you think you can keep this “promise”?

XXVII. I don’t know, but it’s very likely that I won’t write any more. All these books that come out constantly disgust me; the fact that each author publishes at least one book a year is unhealthy, false. I prefer not to write anymore, would like to be able to give it up, and now it pleases me less and less to write than it did earlier. In order to write, one needs a indispensable minimum of enthusiasm; one requires a certain expectation. When one approaches writing a book, there is a kind of complicity: the book is, as it were, “outside” of oneself and a certain conspiracy is necessary between the two. I have no interest in that anymore and I am also fed up with cursing at the world, at God; the whole thing is simply not worth it.
XXVIII. But in secret, in your thoughts, do the criticism and the cursing go on?

XXVIII. Much less, of necessity. The kind of resignation that is the result of age and weariness is now a very real fact. And then, one ought not want to say everything, to write everything down! One can certainly always write, but when one must obey no inner need to do it, then it is merely a question of literature. And I don't want that. I have always believed in what I wrote—it is perhaps naiveté on my part—and it is not very good for me and actually stands in contradiction to my Weltanschauung, so be it, that's the way it is now. One should not betray oneself, although, regarded absolutely, self-betrayal or not-betraying-oneself doesn't signify much. Understand that one is indeed able to live in the consciousness of nothingness, and in spite of it, one cannot foresee all the consequences. When one believes in nothing, it is naturally completely absurd and even ridiculous to write a book—write a book on whose account? And for whom? There are certainly inner needs that have nothing to do with this perception, needs of another, more intimate and secret kind, irrational, if you like. The consciousness of nothingness can be reconciled, of course, with nothing else at all, with no gesture; even the idea of authenticity signifies nothing. Every utterance becomes meaningless. But there is still this secret vitality that drives one to do something. And perhaps this proves true for life altogether, about which one usually uses so many big words: that one does things without really believing in them—something like that.

Translated from the German by Kate Greenspan