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EMIL CIORAN AND THE IDEA OF DECADENCE

Before looking at the way in which Cioran defines decadence, more precisely the concepts that he uses, we first need a specific thematic index. These themes are found in the decadent literature but also in the reflections regarding decadence and the decadent movement. And the themes are presented as opposite pairs. The decadent movement is defined not only by the respective theme but also the tension maintained through contrast. We can form a series of contrastive pairs: sterility vs creativity, artificiality vs naturalness, exhaustion vs vitality, refinement vs primitivism, civilisation vs barbarity, superficiality vs profundity, form vs fond, anormality vs normality, pessimism vs optimism, hedonism vs activism, reactionary vs revolutionary. Many researchers of the decadent movement, for example Richard Gilman in *Decadence. The Strange Life of an Epithet*, David Weir in *Decadence and The Making of Modernism*, Liz Constable, Matthew Potolsky, Dennis Denisoff in *Perennial Decay. On the Aesthetics and Politics of Decadence*, notice the difficulty in defining decadence. For Richard Gilman, decadence is “a chameleon changing colour while you stare at it.”,¹ “an unstable word and concept whose signification and weights continually change in response to shifts in moral, social and cultural attitudes, and even technologies”.² David Weir makes three fundamental observations:

a. We cannot talk about only one decadence. “What is decadence?” should be rephrased as “What are the varieties of decadence?”: for example we can consider decadence as: *social decay*, *historical pessimism*, *racial degeneration*, *cultural refinement*, and so on. Even though these domains can be connected through the term decadence, there is a special type of decadence in art, including fine arts and music and another type of decadence in the area of epistemology for which the term of degeneration made a career. **b.** The instability of meaning is not found outside the decadent phenomenon, it constitutes one of its features. **c.** “Decadence

represents a generic antonym. One way of defining decadence in a relativistic sense is to say that the word functions as a general or all-purpose antonym."³ For example: "When decadence is taken as an antonym of progress it connotes retrogression, decline, obsession with ancient, vanished civilizations".⁴

For Liz Constable, Matthew Potolsky and Dennis Denisoff, decadence is "a transdisciplinary concept", in any case, one which easily crosses frontiers between disciplines "settling in different contexts with distinct connotation and effects"⁵ which demands an interdisciplinary approach "to track the term's relocations, recontextualizations, and redefinitions across historical and geographical boundaries"⁶. However, decadence threatens, attacks, is subversive regarding those boundaries, national, biological, cultural, etc., which have a founding nature for any culture and civilisation. It is what Richard Gilman refers to as a *sense of transgression*. This is what makes the three researchers to assert that there is a perpetual decadence, a *perennial decay* - David Weir called it *ongoing decadence*. "We see this 'perennial decay' of boundaries – the insistence on at once mobilizing and undermining boundaries and differences (...)"⁷

First we must admit an extension of the concept of decadence, starting from its aesthetic relevance in literature. Norberto Bobbio assimilated decadence and in the area of philosophy, more specifically philosophy of culture.

(...) decadentism is not merely a literary movement, but a spiritual atmosphere, whose mark appears in poetry and art, thought and manners, and then by bringing out the special characteristic of the philosophy of existence through which it stands clearly – I would almost say schematically – revealed as a philosophy of poetic inspiration, with its emergence from a state of mind rather from a state of uncertainty, it is open and courageous acceptance of a style of language already compromised by poetic usage and therefore by the eminently aesthetic...⁸

Norberto Bobbio identifies two kinds of decadence, each becoming the expression of a decay. We avoid the term sterility, in this case, because the first decadence not necessarily evoke sterility, but a neurotic, anxious, agonizing vitality. Both meanings are present in Cioran's work. "There are, in fact, two ways in which essentially the effeteness of a culture is revealed; that of *decadentism*, in which the crisis is exalted, and that

of *mannerism* or rethoricism, in which the crisis is concealed in empty formulas which none believe."⁹

Considering the above observations, which represents a relevant selection from the numerous that exist, I place my research regarding the concept of decadence used by Emil Cioran starting from the following observations and premises:

Cioran operates with his own concept of decadence, but also with the *decadent vulgata*. It's about a series of specific themes which make up a paradigm of decadence and which open the possibility of a thematic criticism. At the same time, these themes help to identify and spread the decadence, especially because there is an important presence of this phenomenon in the consumer culture area, from literature to plastic arts, from theater to film. Inside the thematic baggage of decadence there is: the sexual pathology (sexual perversions), the morbidity, the ennui, the neurastheny, the refinement, the fascination for the splendor of antique cultures and civilizations, the artificiality, the progress as a destructive agent of modernity, Dadaism, Aestheticism, the stylization of all aspects of life, the cultivation of aesthetic eccentricity etc.. A series of symbolic, emblematic characters are recuperated in the decadent culture, characters such as Salome, Judith, Orpheus, Parsifal, Oedip etc.

Another current acceptance considers that the decadence characterizes the periods of cultural decline, mannerism, epigonism, absence of original notes, of contents in favour of formal aspects. The Kitsch and excessive stylization may also constitute the expressions of Decadentism in art.

There it refers to specific periods and styles in art and literature that are supposed to have been marked by debility and lack of original force in comparison to the health of immediately preceding epochs. All that could be named as Mannerist or epigone or kitsch. Applied this way the designation releases the idea of excess, loss of vigour, a concern with manner at the expense of substance, a drive to the deviant as positive principle.¹⁰

In this way, starting from the second part of my assertion a multitude of identifications can be made, relatively easy, from the thematic registre to a type of sensibility which characterizes its discourse. In other words, Cioran repeats common places which belong to the decadent discourse but also to the one about decadence, be it Spengler's morphology of culture, or the traditional baggage of themes and tropes of decadence. My study

focuses on the way in which Cioran enriches and touches the concept of decadence, in fact his own offcut of decadence.

Regarding what Liz Constable, Mathew Potolski, Dennis Denisov call *drama of differentiation*, a phenomenon through which the researcher determines the sanitary distance towards the negative charge which the culture of decadence entails (sexual perversions, degeneration, amorality, homeroticism etc), in the case of Cioran we are dealing with a *drama of identification*. Cioran considers himself a decadent, he metabolises decadence, just like Nietzsche metabolises disease. If it was noticed that Cioran is attached to the theme of decadence,¹¹ it assimilates the disease/diseases as a prolific environment for philosophy,¹² an essential fact has not been noticed. Cioran internalises decadence up to a possible statement: "I am decadence" or otherwise "I understand France well through everything that is rotten in me."¹³

In order to get out of this trap which he notices, David Weir tries to solve it with an equally vague concept, that of *dynamics of transition* which he identifies in Ortega y Gasset as *dehumanization*.

Again, Ortega y Gasset's concept of dehumanization aptly describes the decadent element in the transition from romanticism to modernism. What it meant by dehumanization, according to Ortega y Gasset, is a distortion of natural forms, an obscuring of recognizable, human element in art, such as straightforward, realistic presentations of human situations in the novel and drama.¹⁴

I gave a dialectical acceptance to the notion of decadence, assuming its founding ambiguity. Even Irina Mavrodin considers Cioran's style as "*a style of ambiguity and paradox*". Also, as I pointed out, a decadent feature acquires relevance only through the counter-weight of its opposite, only through a contradictory argument. This is what entitles me to talk about decadence in terms of metabolism of modernity, a way of administering *the negative categories* (Hugo Friedrich) of modernity from art to politics. In this way I depart from Matei Călinescu¹⁵ for whom decadence is only a *face of modernity* and from Antoine Compagnon for whom decadence is a *paradox of modernity*.¹⁶ Closer to the relevance of decadence as an extensive cultural phenomenon is the term *antimodernity*¹⁷ which he proposes, this "anti" is not formed in the patrimonial sphere of traditions, but also in that of modernity. Or as Michael O'Meara defines this concept:

Neither a reactionary nor an antiquarian, the anti-modernist is himself a product of modernity, but a “reluctant” one, modernity’s most severe critic, serving as its foremost counter-point, but at the same time representing what is most enduring and authentic in the modern. This makes the *antimoderne* the modern’s negation, its refutation, as well as its double and its most authentic representative. As such, it is inconceivable without the *moderne*, oscillating between pure refusal and engagement. The anti-modernist is not, then, anyone who opposes the modern, but rather those “modernists” at odds with the modern age who engage it and theorize it in ways that offer an alternative to it.¹⁸

From a literary point of view, a perspective which I did not take into account in this study, decadence can be discussed as being a *mutagen agent*,¹⁹ developing at the crossroads of very important literary movements with their own poetics and aesthetics: Romanticism, Naturalism, Avantgarde, Expressionism, Symbolism.

I’ll try to give a first answer to this question from the scale that Emil Cioran ranges cultures on Spenglerian basis. In *The Decline of the West*, Oswald Spengler starts from a series of observations including the following analogy: “Cultures are like organisms. Their general history is their biography.”²⁰ A second key observation is that an organism like every culture has a series of ages corresponding to the biological ones: 1. Birth of a culture or its spring consists in a process of individuation and responds to an insight through which a culture develops its “own physiognomy”. 2. maturity culture’s summer when it realizes their full potential 3. decline or decadence age, a culture becomes sterile, and is manifested only on a formal plan - in terms of styling or by means of what Spengler calls “recapitulation”. It must be said that this is especially true with “high cultures”. Spengler will introduce physiognomy as “the method of organic history and life, with everything it has as direction and destiny (...)” Every culture has its own destiny, another key concept to Spengler, destiny is “vague and reluctant for a primitive, clear and under the form of the intuitions of the universe (...) for a man within a high culture. “There is a soul of cultures, designated as the “idea of a being.” Spengler is focused on high cultures only where all stages of development are present. Cioran is interested in both high cultures, “ripe” ones, as the French or the ancient Greek cultures, in the intermediate or medium ocultures as Spanish or German or Russian and low lesser cultures, such as that from which it comes. Each corresponds to a particular type of decadence. In *Invertebrate Spain*, Ortega y Gasset will illustrate the intermediate culture. In regard

to decadence of great cultures, Cioran will discuss the case of French culture. He, by comparison, will handle lesser cultures, or by its terms, with the “tragedy of small cultures”, choosing as a case study Romanian culture, especially in volume *The Transfiguration of Romania*. Although Cioran remains more in the field of culture morphology, there are sufficient evidence in the theory to discuss a more extensive notion of the style of decadence and stylistic practices.

Another important fact, the term decadence is older, a cultural possession which from mythology to history is always present as the piece of evidence of each culture and civilisation. It becomes a major context and an important theme towards the end of the 19th century, with the appearance of the term *decadentism*, which represents a reconfiguration of decadence in the context of literature and fine arts. We can talk about an older specialisation of the term. A discussion of the term decadence in this context of this specialisation is beyond the scope of this study. It is worth remembering the moment when the term decadentism appeared, towards the end of the 19th century, *fin de siècle*. A new culture of decadence appears in this moment, whose tributary is not only Emil Cioran, but also Oswald Spengler, Ortega Y Gasset, Friedrich Nietzsche, Miguel de Unamuno, etc. The period of Emil Cioran’s formation is when this culture of decadence has suffered a series of mutations, and the decadent literary movement has emerged from the circuit of debates. But not decadence. Cioran is in another historical period and has at his disposal a multitude of themes, stereotypes, theories, in one word, a library. His options, in this case, are representative, they shape decadence as thought by Emil Cioran.

To Cioran France is an opportunity to reflect on an exemplar model, that of the exhaustion of a great culture and civilization by achieving its full potential. The philosopher gives credit to Oswald Spengler’s theoretical perspective on the decadence of the Western culture, presented in *The Decline of the West*, a book which Cioran read at the age of 18, and profoundly marked him. Actually, the latter attachment to the Spenglerian theory is also fully visible in Cioran’s book *The Transfiguration of Romania*, published in 1936. This exhaustion within a large cultures and civilizations may best lead to one of the paradoxes of decadentism that puts progress and decadence in a dialectical relationship. In this respect, in *Five Facets of Modernity*, Matei Calinescu is even more direct: “Once again, progress means decadence and decadence means progress.”²¹

The French Option

A very good speaker of German, a Humboldt scholarship grantee between 1933-1935, out loud attached to the legionary ideology, a position which he regretted later, Emil Cioran does not choose Germany but France as an adoptive homeland. Moreover, after a considerable period of literary gestation, Cioran reinvents himself as a French writer, as he is often perceived today. This is an existential choice with no reserve, which proves his affinity with the adopting culture. His first meeting with the Parisian environment occurs in 1937 when he receives a scholarship from the French Institute of Higher Studies in Bucharest; until June 1940 when the German troops enter Paris he will stay in France, and will thus become very familiar the French capital and its surroundings.

This option will mean a lifestyle with bohemian touches, but it will mostly remain a cultural option which cannot be read in the portrait he makes to this remarkable culture in his outstanding essay "On France". This essay is written in 1941 in German-occupied France, that reminds the French nation of their defeat in the 1870 war against Prussia, a defeat that triggered a strong wave of pessimism among the French intellectuals. Cioran is actually challenged by this defeat, but he will never mention this military failure in his writings. There are few words spread in one of his articles about the German invasion but the young philosopher see no connection between France decadence and German conquest, mostly a sincronicity in time and place.

One of the intimate springs for choosing France as a country of adoption is the very decline of France as a great political and cultural power, regarded, from the perspective of the philosophy of culture as a decline in culture and civilization, which becomes an expression of decadence. Among the features that define the decadence of the French culture and civilization is a Vulgate of Decadentism, perceived as a cultural phenomenon and its accompanying aesthetics specific to late nineteenth century. In the context of Emil Cioran's work, *On France* is a hinge text (*le livre charnière*), as Alain Paruit²² called it, a liminal text which made the transition to another stage of Emil Cioran's existence, the one in which he wrote in French and was about to become a "French writer". It is at the same time an "exercise of admiration", the first in a series which he will dedicate to the French culture. Cioran was already an author whose work was written in Romanian, his volumes, *On the Heights of Despair* (1934), *The Book of Delusions* (1935), *The Transfiguration of Romania*(1936),

Tears and Saints (1937), and in 1940, *The Dawn of Thoughts* is published in Sibiu and it also then that he begins writing *The Passionate Handbook*, which he only finishes in 1945 and which, until the discovery of the present book, was considered to be his last book written in Romanian. At the same time, there is between this Spenglerian influenced book and the one that made him famous in the Romanian space, *Schimbarea la față a României* (*The Transfiguration of Romania*), a profound reading, an almost symbiotic relationship. Cioran's reflections regarding the destiny of the different European cultures and civilizations reveal here their point of support in the future adoptive culture, the French culture. If we were to weigh the two accents, we could notice that, by comparison with *The Transfiguration of Romania*, from the publication of which several years had passed, the relation between the two cultures became more nuanced. The Romanian messianism gave way to a reserve in one could read the gradual retreat of Cioran from the land of utopia and militancy to a solution which he now grasps as he evaluates the French culture and civilization, which, in his opinion, are in a crepuscular stage. If in *The Transfiguration of Romania*, Cioran evaluated a field of possibilities into the transformation of a "small culture", by identifying desirable cultural models among which the French one situated itself at a distance that made it intangible, this time the theme of the transfiguration of Romania gives way to the theme of the transfiguration of Emil Cioran, more specifically he introduces this theme through the French score. Before getting absorbed entirely into the metabolism of a large culture which unfortunately could not serve as a model to the much too young and irrevocably "small" Romanian culture, Cioran evaluates it with an extraordinary acumen. The choice he makes crosses this moment of his settlement in the mirror of French culture and civilization which he has a profound affinity with, an affinity that exceeds the simple adherence to a viable and prestigious model.

There are at least two articles which anticipate Emil Cioran's deep attachment to France and particularly Paris, "Fragments of a Latin quarter"²³ and "The Provincial Paris"²⁴. What does Paris represent to Emil Cioran? In "The Provincial Paris", he assimilates it to a decadent topos, that of the metropolis of a great empire, the Ninive fortress and ancient Rome at the time of its dawn.

On the banks of the Seine, I was thinking of the dawn of the Roman-Greek world and I anticipated with a pleasant disillusionment the inevitable shadows of the Fortress (...). And while I lingered for hours, during the day

or the night, on its dreamy bridges, I comforted myself with the thought that I hadn't lived during the demise of ancient Rome.²⁵

The writer discovers in the Latin quarter this "irresponsible dawn", the decadent topos that Paris, "the point nearest to a melancholy Paradise" represents. In a way, Cioran who frequents the bohemian group consisting exclusively of "losers", an existential category that populates the decadent metropolis, is deliberately poisoned by this twilight urbanity.

For as much a nuisance as the incurable of consciousness represents, here you are *pleasantly* unhappy. This is the entire secret of Paris, the whole poetry which binds the wandering cursed from café to café, possessed with an avid boredom, this is the perfumed void of Paris. (...) You don't come here to die, but to convey more poetry to boredom, to abandon yourself aesthetically to unhappiness, to tastefully slide onto the dimension of your own loneliness.²⁶

And Cioran continues to accumulate new expressions, within the same register of a decadent sensitivity: "his pathetic twilight", "perfumed nihilism", "ruin of reflexes", "the supreme error of life" etc. Hedonism, flavor, plairism, aestheticism, and especially frenzy. Cioran absorbs through all his pores what Paris conveys to him, a "reflexive sadness", a *delectatio morosa*, a particular *état d'âme*. The abandon reclaims an essential fact for Cioran's state of emotions, forged at the school of the "Romanian prophetic", more specifically an instance of mediation, a distance from whatever is offered to the senses. To be "*pleasantly* unhappy", "to abandon yourself aesthetically to unhappiness", because everything *is savoured* here" constitute the premises of this aesthetic difference typical of the decadent sensitivity which introduces an *effect of sublimation*.

Before theorizing the specificity of French decadence, before radically changing the course of his existence, becoming a citizen of Paris for the rest of his life, herein lies a first explanation of a profound affinity, a first abandonment, an almost psychotropic intoxication. It is only with this article, "The Provincial Paris", that Cioran overcomes the stage of his eulogy to the bohemians of the Latin quarter and initiates a reflection regarding the decadence of the metropolis. The German presence in the city does not constitute for the writer the real motivation of the "demise" of Paris and implicitly, France. "Paris has *fallen* because it was meant

to fall. (...) For it has *existed* too much, it has been *too much*.”²⁷ The cause of the disaster lies not in a circumstantial, strategical, political error, but in decadence, which is a supreme form of error, a historical/biographical one. And here, Cioran introduces one of the paradoxes of decadence to which we will come back later. From an exorbitance, an *excess of existence*, a surplus of abundance, the city crumbles. To this excess another one is added, the *excess of lucidity* which is identified with the “phenomenon of decadence”. With these two articles, Cioran connects one of the fundamental themes of his philosophy, the theme of decadence, to the French culture and civilization and turns it into the motivation of a destiny option.

Indeed, the option which is configured now tackles an affinity for failure, a paradoxical one which makes a “barbarian” to adhere to and coincide with a culture that has reached a pinnacle of refinement and, at the same time, is in decline. Cioran formulates it in the note of a grandiloquent lyricism: “My wounds touching the wounds of France. What a *fatal* encounter (s.n)”.²⁸ Here the word “fatal” should be read as a destiny meeting, in which the young Cioran is revealed his *fatum*. As to Cioran’s approach to France in terms of a symbolical destiny equality, this fact speaks volumes about the ego of the writer. In fact, this common aspect, the profound affinity between France and Emil Cioran is revealed throughout the entire text and it bears a name: decadence. The decadent sensitivity makes possible the reflection regarding the destiny of French culture and civilization which is at its dawn and it partially cloaks a relation of identification. What role does Emil Cioran eventually take on apart from the French culture? Another fragment is revelatory in this sense:

My destiny is to envelop myself in the dross of civilizations. How could I prove my strength other than withholding in the midst of their mould? The proportion between barbarism and neurasthenia makes up the equilibrium of this formula. An aesthete of culture dawns, watching the dead waters of the spirit in storms and dreams... In the undisturbed silence of the Seine I suddenly reflect my lack of future, alongside the City, and I quench my shuddering tiredness in the empty river.²⁹

Obviously, Cioran assumes the role of a decadent aesthete, a role which is highlighted with the phrase which rings of royal dignity: “an aesthete of culture dawns”. In fact, he is not the only one, his gesture has nothing original, he is part of a typically decadent gesticulation and it is enough to

compare this gesture with a similarly prestigious and programmatic one. Paul Verlaine called himself in a poem which served as a decadent poetic art, the poem *Melancholy* (*Languer*, 1883), published in his volume *Jadis et naguère*, as “l’Empire à la fin de la décadence” :

Je suis l’Empire à la fin de la décadence, /Qui regarde passer les grands
Barbares blancs/En composant des acrostiches indolents/D’un style
d’or où la langueur du soleil danse. L’âme seulette a mal au coeur d’un
ennui dense./Là-bas on dit qu’il est de longs combats sanglants./O n’y
pouvoir, étant si faible aux vœux si lents,/O n’y vouloir fleurir un peu
cette existence!³⁰

Cioran inserts himself exactly in the middle of decadence, in his formulation of an expressiveness which will make him stand out, in “the middle of rot”, in the “dross” of civilisations. Another significant identification, more concentrated, narcissistic gesticulation projected into a thanatic reverie, Cioran reverberates together with the City, that is Paris, the shadow, in the waters of the Seine, a shadow representing the absence of a future.

Cioran, the French culture and civilisation and Paris, the quintessence of decadence, this is the isotopy which the author proposes. These identifications also represent certain qualifications. Where does the author extract his competence regarding crepuscularism? What entitles Cioran to adopt the posture of a decadent, an “aesthete of the sets of culture”? We must say that Cioran is aware of the scandal which his affiliation encompasses, the contrast created by the barbarian who came from a province of Europe in the most refined context of culture and civilisation. *Nota bene*, Verlaine can afford the luxury of being bored and also an aesthete, he is French. But what happens with the “barbarian” Emil Cioran? In what way can he assume such a role?

Coming from primitive lands, from the under-world of Wallachia, with the pessimism of youth into a mature civilisation, what stream of shivers in so much contrast! Without a past in an immense past; with the fear born in the final fatigue; with hubbub and vague longing in a country disgusted by the soul. From the fold to the saloon, from shepherd to Alcibiade! What jump above history and what dangerous pride! His ancestors crawled in tortures, the disdain seems action even to you, and irony, without the perfume of an abstract sadness, a vulgar concern.

Being able to live only in the country where each is touched by intelligence. A universe composed of agoras and saloons, an intersection of Elada and Paris, this is the absolute space of the exercise of the mind. The human becoming takes place between the two poles: sheperdness and the paradox. Culture means a sum of futility: the cult of the nuance, the complicity delicate with error, the subtle game fatal with abstraction, ugliness, the spell of dissipation. The rest is agriculture.³¹

I have given the entire fragment because it shows the complexity of such an option about destiny and aesthetics, option which incorporates a series of decadent themes. Cioran is deliberately situated at the core of a paradox constructed on the contingency or juxtaposition of a series of contrasts. The barbarian chooses the most refined formula of culture and civilisation, the spiritual exorbitance associates a *contemplatio morosa* to the rationalism deprived of touch, the absence of a prestigious past the overflow of past, cultural militancy, the devitalisation of the appeal to manner etc. The series of violent contrasts reclaims the formula of a decadent sensibility. The jump from the ethnographic, pastoral, folcloric agrarian cultures to the very erudite ones, in a process generated by stylisation is huge.

Cioran situates himself in the middle of this scandal, in fact, he institutes it by assuming the competence of an authentic decadent regarding decline. Between the barbaric and the decadent there is otherwise a dialectic relationship. The first overthrows the second, being that which induces the necessary vitality for resuming the growth process of a new civilization which it will refine until extinction. However, Cioran is an atypical barbarian, because despite being unassimilated he is more faithful than anyone to the decadence to which he serves as a herald and secretary and which he lives with all the cells of his being, with an extraordinary fervor. Cioran professed, transposed in life what Ian Fletcher called an *aesthetics of failure*.³² This fervor is articulated through a double failure, that of the culture and civilization where he comes from, which is incapable of creatively developping its vitality and that of the culture and civilization where he is integrated, which is incapable of providing the motivation for another burst of vitality. In other words, Cioran makes the leap from the inchoate state of a culture which didn't get to grow to an excess to that of a mannered, "effete" culture, which exhausted its vitality resources. What does such a specialization in decadence involve? In an interrogative-rhetorical manner, Cioran defines it thus: "But how many are

capable of tasting this over-fullness of decrease?! The overflowing void of the spiritual dawn, in order to spark it with vibration, demands not only an education of the historical sense, but also of our distance from the world, a certain erneronian feeling with *no madness*, a propensity for great shows, rare and dangerous emotions and daring inspirations."³³

Herein we have the portrait of a lucid contemplating man, who assumes the singularity of small series and the taste of pleasurable disasters. The distance from the world associated with the historical sense represents the adjustment of a relation between the stage, the show and the spectator, a *dramatization of history*. There is also in the "erneronian feeling", devoid of pathological residue, a feeling of grandeur within disaster, "a propensity for great shows", for whose staging he is not responsible, but whose irresponsibility and hazard he fully tastes. To this one might add the dowry of an aesthete, which is the penchant for "rare and dangerous emotions", a penchant which, alongside the taste of historical mise-en-scenes lies at the border with the decadent sensitivity. However, there is a reserve in assuming this role which nuances Cioran's decadence.

As much as you'd like the demise of a civilization, as long as your joints are still holding, you remain an aesthete with primary resources, because you're not ripe enough - only through your thoughts - to die and not rotten enough to sink, only proud enough to debase yourself with glorified enticements. Until you've laid down your weapons, until your vast look hasn't completely gnawed at your spine, you have the necessary strength for any show. A sort of dying fury lies in the aesthetes of decadence. But they love the sight of death better than death itself. The question is: how much are they chained to this fatal game, how much can they resist to its incurable attraction?³⁴

This reserve comes from the fact that, on the one hand, the writer stands outside the dawning culture and civilization which he completes, even if he keeps up with its decadence, and on the other hand, he is not willing to go all the way, a disagreement which Ilina Gregori correctly apprehended in her book, *Cioran. Sugestii pentru o biografie imposibilă* (*Cioran. Suggestions for an Impossible Biography*). Longevity betrays Cioran, the prophet of decadence and, with the risk of making a tautology, he is a prophet of existentialist nihilism.

A 'specialized' man from early on in the matters of death, who from the earliest youth was preoccupied by the same theme, which could be observed from adolescence, in any circumstance, already dead – even when he ate – a thanatologist of world renown doubled by an irretrievable thanatomaniac; and it is precisely one of these men who lives more than his common peers, despite his deathly lifestyle adopted early on and recommended to the entire mankind with strong arguments! Even to many of the admirers of Cioran's work the author's longevity poses many problems.³⁵

In other words, Cioran doesn't welcome the Western decadence already worn out, drained, wilted, but with a vitality whose resources seem to be continually renewing. Inside the decadent there is the barbarian with his entire energy, a conqueror who does not accede to the assault of ramparts but the assault of culture, Cioran's wage, that of becoming one of the remarkable stylists of French language and culture, remaining valid. These energy supplies compromise the standard decadence formula which enacts heroes that are already worn out, mannerists, bored from too much knowledge, too much culture and last but not least, sterile. What characterizes Emil Cioran's decadence is the mixture of vitality and weariness, primitivism/barbarity and refinement. The psychological-cultural profile of the "barbaric" Cioran is retrievable from the volume who consecrated him in Romania and who subsequently brought about a huge scandal in the Western world, *The Transfiguration of Romania*, a volume which appeared in 1936 at Vremea Publishing House. The barbarity-refinement dialectic is constitutive of the decadent culture, but what makes of Cioran a special case is this coexistence of the two instances in one and the same person, which explains the Cioran's unbearable tensions and his permanent schizoid breaks; thus, Cioran is disputed by his energy tremendous cultural erudition and intellectual excellence. We could say that the writer illustrates and embodies the metabolism of decadence, internalizes the tensions and intensities present in a culture of decadence. In other words, according to Verlaine's formula, Cioran can call himself "the empire at the end of decadence". We can find this ineluctable tension, this paradox melted in revealing, memorable formulas. Cioran is a "aesthete with primary resources", to wit, with a considerable dose of vitality, which he addresses to a "transfiguration of Romania", the volume being comparable to a huge explosion of militant energy. Where could all that violence, both destructive and life-giving have been absorbed, when the project of a transfigured Romania crumbled

after the failure of the legionary movement and especially after Romania was given over to the Bolshevik barbarity? Another paradoxical assertion, taking into account the profile of the typical decadent, is that which associates the "aesthetes of decadence" with a sort of "dying fury". Not the fury, which denotes an involvement, a contamination with a form of activism, is that which characterizes the attitude of the typical decadent, but the distance of aesthetic contemplation, present in Verlaine's formula, a jouissance associated with disaster and the futile effort of a stylization, an aporetic exercise: "*I am the Empire in the last of its decline, / That sees the tall, fair-haired Barbarians pass,—the while / Composing indolent acrostics, in a style / Of gold, with languid sunshine dancing in each line.*"³⁶, the perspective of the end, or better said the ends, *fin du monde, fin d'empire, fin de siècle, fin de race, finis latinorum*, etc. does not necessarily imply the radical solutions, among which suicidal. Decadence knows forms of almost religious seclusion into spaces destined to art, temples of art, decorated as such. To the contemplative attitude evoked in Verlaine's poem one might add the cultivation of his own taste in hermetically closed and elitist environments, which suits the decadent aesthete. Cioran's intuition is fundamental: "But they love the sight of death better than death itself." Like the subsequent interrogation: "(...) how much are they chained to this fatal game, how much can they resist to its incurable attraction?"³⁷ Indeed there is an aesthetic distance between biology and the one that contemplates it and this aesthetic distance is converted into representation. All that has to do with the details of decline, biologically, physically, socially, morally is converted into a painting, in presentation or even more it is aesthetically sublimated. The question which troubles the writer is not one which could get an answer from a typical decadent. The distance is always that of the show, the typically suicidal form for a decadent is that of a radical form of narcissism, and not that of a revolutionary investment, an unleashing of energy. The question is, nonetheless, fundamental for the metabolism of decadence that the writer internalizes. What are the limits aimed by the destructive and self-destructive drives, how far can they go? Cioran didn't have the courage to go too far, his existence, his longevity betrayed him in order to maintain the purity of his doctrine he needed his own sacrifice. And Cioran sacrificed everything, the country, the language, the relatives, the "distant acquaintances", his own culture, but not so much his life, whose entire energy was aesthetically sublimated. Here is the paradox of a barbarian converted to decadence, with a twilight vocation a decadent à *outrance*, somehow *malgré soi*.

Decadence: Definitions, Interpretations

How does Cioran define decadence? Just like *Tratat de descompunere (A Short History of Decay)*,³⁸ *On France* is exclusively dedicated to the theme of decadence as a phenomenon of the culture's morphology and not only. Let us isolate several phrases, which can be seen as definitions of decadence and which, unlike considerations where the circumscription basis is wider, try to catch in a simple manner a truth under the form of aphorisms or paradoxes. Many of them have decadence as a grammatical subject and are constructed on a formulation typical of a definition: "Decadence is/is not..." Here is a first example: "Decadence is nothing else than the inability to create in the circle of values which define you."³⁹

Here, decadence is mistaken for sterility, a feature recognised through the characteristics of decadence. In Cioran's writings the terms benefit from an ambivalence which force their permanent reappraisal, the relationship which the philosopher establishes between the opposite terms is a dialectical one, in the sense of using certain contradictory arguments in order to establish the truth. In this way sterility is a symptom of decadence, synonymous with devitalization, exhaustion and at the same time also a formal corrective. "One of France's depravity was the sterilization of perfection; (...)"⁴⁰ Synonymous with formal perfection, sterility becomes useful as a "school of limit", as a stifling of excess feelings, as a control on discourse. "(...) as a school of limit, common sense and good taste, as a guide not to fall in the derisory of great feelings and attitudes. Its measure is to heal us from pathetic and fatal wanderings. In this way, its *sterilized* action becomes salutary."⁴¹

A nation is creative as long as *life* is not the only value, but *values* are its criteria. Believing in the fiction of liberty and dying for it; going on an expedition for glory; considering the prestige of your country *necessary* to humanity; substitute yourself to it through your beliefs, these are the values. To value yourself more than an idea; to think with your stomach, to oscillate between horror and sensuousness; to believe that *to live* is more than anything, this is *life*.⁴²

"*To live* is a simple way for *to make*. In decadence it becomes a purpose. To live as such. That is the secret of ruin."⁴³ Another phrase seen as a definition is making of decadence the exclusive cult of life. "Their lack of vitality discovered their life. And Decadence is nothing but the exclusive cult of life."⁴⁴ Cioran uses a paradox, the lack of vitality is what

actually nourish life. The devitalization is one of the common features of decadence, it is associated with the idea of finishing the spiritual, creative resources. Cioran introduces a shade. For him vitality is not only a release of creative energy, but to put the values, ideas, identity fictions before instinct, that is, before life. This is something which, *nota bene*, does not mean lucidity, another disruptive agent of decadence. The ideas, values, fictions set what Cioran in *Transfiguration of Romania* refers to as the vital myths of a nation: "The myths of a nation are its vital truths."⁴⁵ Their manifestation is irrational, and it cannot be seen as the result of lucidity. Before being "thought over" the ideas, values, fictions are "lived", put on stage. On the same key of lucidity, decadence is the equivalent of the process through which myths become concepts. "Decadence is the opposite process of the era of grandeur: it is the transformation of myths into concepts."⁴⁶

The reflection regarding their rationale, the lucidity is counterproductive in Cioran's opinion and puts a culture under the sign of decadence. To live becomes the expression of decadence, when fervour is eliminated from experience, the commitment for a fiction, an idea. In this way we can understand why Cioran sees Don Quixote as an emblematic figure of decadence. "The seed of quixotism marks the inside possibilities of a nation."⁴⁷ Don Quixote represents, on a symbolic level, the irrational, the innocent source necessary for the assertion of a culture. Like most of the symbolic figures used by Cioran this one is an ambivalent one. In his heroic quest, he is followed by Sancho, a character who is a symbol of naivety and blind faith. Moreover, Don Quixote also stands for the transfiguration of reality, which Cioran proposes for a Romania ingrained in tradition, passivity, inertia, dominated by a regressive myth, that of Miorița.⁴⁸

Cioran proposes a new pair of contrastive terms, lucidity vs instinct, which can be recomposed as rationalism vs myth. From the same area of definitions we quote this one: "Decadence means collective lucidity: an expiration of the soul. To not have a soul."⁴⁹ Cioran puts lucidity in opposition with the soul, this being a spenglerian concept. The soul of a culture lies in its myths. According to Cioran, lucidity is what blocks the whole investment in an idea, however risky it might be, lucidity is the enemy of "frenzy" foreseen by Cioran in *Transfiguration of Romania*: "I love the history of Romania with a heavy hatred",⁵⁰ "I cannot love but a delirious Romania".⁵¹ There is another meaning which Cioran grants to life as an agent of decadence, that is leaving yourself to the senses which are culturally informed. It is not a regression to animalism, an expression

of an atavism, but exactly the opposite, of lifting the instinct, the nutrient and sexual ones, to a superior plan: "The second value of decadence in its relation with life lies in the 'cult of sensation' when 'the senses become religion'".⁵² "The phenomenon of decadence is inseparable of gastronomy."⁵³ The culinary art, an important part of French culture represents for Cioran an symptom of decadence, not in itself, but by the significance granted in culture, as a major role in the construction of a new way of life.

In Cioran's opinion, the main decadent inversion which the French culture operates is that of raising the minor/ secondary and the minor/ secondary arts (ambient, decorative, entertaining, etc) to the dignity of the major or the major arts (architecture, etc).

Since France sat down outside mission, the act of eating has reached the rank of ritual. What is revealing is not eating itself, but the act of contemplation, of speculation, to entertain for hours on it. The *consciousness* of this urge, the substitution of the *need* through *culture*, is a sign of weakening the instinct and attachment to values. (...) Nourishments replace ideas. The French *know* what they are eating for more than a century. (...) Turning an immediate need into a civilization phenomenon is a dangerous step forward and a serious symptom. The belly was the grave of the Roman Empire; it will be inevitably, the tomb of French intelligence.⁵⁴

In this case, the lucidity regarding a natural act, the insertion of this act in a cultural circuit where it acquires aesthetic relevance represents a symptom of decadence. Although the term is not used, it is about the artificiality which the culture puts on stage hijacking what is natural in favour of civilisation. What the philosopher points out is the transfer from the unconscious act to the consciousness put in act through its transformation into discourse. A sophisticated way of cooking is not actually a symptom of decadence, but the discourses around this act represents its expression. It is another way of saying that we can talk about decadence when the minor arts become the privileged expression of the soul of a culture.

As to existence itself, Cioran refers to a higher hedonism, a cult of pleasure, of the enjoyment, the empowerment through taste, which leads to a styling of everyday life, to a refinement of the banality, to writing their own gestures.

When a nation loves life, they implicitly give up their continuity. There is a total abyss between pleasure and family. The sexual sophistication means the death of a nation.

The maximum exploitation of instantaneous pleasure; its prolongation beyond nature; the conflict between the demand of the senses and the methods of intelligence are expressions of a decadent style (s.n.) which is defined by the individual's unhappy willingness to handle his own reflexes.⁵⁵

Cioran updates a defining theme of decadentism, i.e., sexual ambiguity accompanied by erotic refinement, often a form of digressive eroticism as Mario Praz points out in *Romantic Agony* "best typified by Sade."⁵⁶ The concern for life generates the styling of life, and goes as far as it records the smallest details subject to aesthetic conditioning. A certain sex drive refined to sterility and its transformation into pleasure and seduction, which means a style for which French eighteenth century provides all necessary references is accompanied by a gourmand spirit which put in theory accurately by Michel Onfray in *L'art de jouir: for hedonistic materialism*.⁵⁷ In this case, the subversion lies in a refinement through style of a biological necessity.

The Decadent Philosopher and the Disease

Constantin Noica identified six diseases of the contemporary spirit, the spirit being also able to be contaminated, or suffer like a true sick person. The diseases put forward by Constantin Noica had a spiritual body, but their physiological reflex was missing. It is essential that an important part of philosophy turns the experience of disease into profit.

Friedrich Nietzsche is perhaps the most representative, as he considers disease to be important for the philosophical knowledge, which he eloquently illustrates in his books *The Case of Wagner*, *Ecce Homo*, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, *The Antichrist* etc. Nietzsche also has a name for disease, *decadence*, and implicitly a philosophy of disease becomes a philosophy of decadence. Decadence is a central reflection theme in Nietzsche's philosophy, which the philosopher will reinterpret from different perspectives. Decadence piques Nietzsche's interest, insofar as it represents a theme of the époque, and his contemporaries can find it everywhere. In this sense, Wagner's music constitutes a disease of the

German spirit also contaminating Nietzsche who, *nota bene*, manages to cure himself, since it represents the decadence of the spirit. Hence, Wagner's work, wagnerism itself is a decadent art and the philosopher goes through this stage of decadence which is also the moment of fighting against the disease.

In *The Rhetoric of Sickness from Baudelaire to D'Annunzio*, Barbara Spackman observes the existence of what she calls "a rhetoric of decadence" which is at the same time, "rhetoric of sickness", a type of discourse which cause the proliferation of various aspects of the disease, without the interest being exclusively clinical. In this sense, convalescence becomes a way of artistically and philosophically taking advantage of the experience of the disease. "Convalescence as the scene of artistic and philosophic creation is an ideologeme of decadent texts, a narrative that lies between texts."⁵⁸ We notice that the term convalescence as Barbara Spackman uses it does not refer to the period which follows the disease but to the whole process which leads up to healing. In the case of decadence as disease, convalescence is not just a state of transit which presages healing, but a state which perpetuates indefinitely a state of disease which has never fully stopped from evolution. However, it is one of the meanings that Nietzsche ascribes to decadence in *Ecce Homo*, a long period of convalescence which is actually never finished. Convalescence entails the existence of disease in a dwindled, controlled and metabolized form: "A long, all too long series of years signifies recovery for me — unfortunately it also signifies at the same time relapse, decline, periods of a kind of decadence."⁵⁹

Nietzsche places decadence not on a physiological level with a weakened organism and also dissociates it from nervous diseases, from the degenerative phenomenon which is the key to the medical understanding of decadence at the end of the 19th century. Nietzsche intends to make decadence a disease in itself, a disease of philosophers but establishing that dialectics, for example, is "a symptom of decadence". The diseases that the philosopher suffers from are an environment favourable to philosophy, the power of thought, the refinement of ideas. Nietzsche calls himself a decadent, "I am a decadent", but at the same through a dialectical movement he declares himself its opponent.

The difference lies in the fact that unlike most decadents Nietzsche chooses to treat himself from "decadence" and in this way he picks the right treatment. In fact, his decadence is a particular one, aims only at a certain domain, it is not a comprehensive one. "My proof of this, among

other things, that I have always chosen the right means against bad conditions: while the *décadent* always chooses the means harmful to himself. As *summa summarum*, I was healthy, as an angle, as a specialty, I was *décadent*.”⁶⁰

A. E. Carter makes an interesting assertion about decadence which indicates even better the difference which Nietzsche draws between himself as a philosopher and actual decadents. It is about will, Nietzsche chooses to cure himself and can do it because *suma summarum* he is healthy, while decadents deliberately choose the blasphemous cult of decadence and their health is more often than not precarious.

The decadence which the philosopher claims for himself just like Cioran will claim it with the observation that Cioran does not want or cannot cure himself.

After all that, must I say that I am experienced in questions of decadence? I have spelled them out forwards and backwards. Even that filigree-art of prehension and comprehension in general, that finger for nuances, that psychology of “seeing round the corner,” and what ever else is characteristic of me, was acquired only then, is the true gift of that time in which everything became more refined for me, observation itself together with all the organs of observation. Looking out from a sick perspective toward healthier concepts and values, and again conversely, looking down out of the abundance and self-assurance of a rich life into the secret working of the instinct of decadence, that was my longest exercise, my true experience, if there be any at all in which I became master. I have it now in hand, I have a hand for it, reversing perspectives: prime reason why a “revaluation of values” is perhaps possible for me alone.⁶¹

Decadence teaches Nietzsche the art of nuance, the sophistication of thought, refinement, subtly, features which characterise the decadent sensibility. The movement is doubly oriented, disease, “the sick person’s optic” informs about these subtle registers as healing takes place and, conversely, vitality, the surplus of vitality constitutes a favourable vantage point for the investigation of decadence.

If this movement is metabolised, it describes the very metabolism of the decadent phenomenon. In the hypercivilised, hyperrefined, yet effete societies the surplus of vitality coming from the outside contributes to the quickening of their decline and offers the chance of the reconstruction of a new civilisation, a culture built on the ruins of the old one. The lack of vitality reclaims an “upending” caused by a revitalisation which

lies under the sign of the destruction of what is old and corrupt. The avantgardes assumed not just once this role in the European culture and civilisation much as the revolutions tried to play this role in the political arena. The metabolism of Nietzsche's philosophy simultaneously embraces decadence and dialectics as instruments that are necessary to the philosopher as long as he knows to implement them wisely.

Nietzsche makes Wagner an "artist of decadence", a "typical decadent", assimilating him to a disease, in relation to which the philosopher assumes a healing role. Wagner is one of the most representative "artists". Gilbert Durand chose the decadent subthemes from Wagner's work. Nietzsche brings into discussion some of the decadent themes from Wagner's work even if the chosen configuration is an individual one, hysteria, hypersensibility, hypersensitivity, neurosis, degenerescence, artificiality which he will also illustrate by making an interesting study on decadence in the art of Wagner.

The essential aspect is the association between modernity, decadence and pathology, a point in which Nietzsche makes from Wagner's work a paradigm of modernity where decadence, in Matei Călinescu's terms, is only a "facet".

I place this point of view first and foremost: Wagner's art is diseased. The problems he sets on the stage are all concerned with hysteria; the convulsiveness of his emotions, his over-excited sensitiveness, his taste which demands ever sharper condimentation, his erraticness which he togged out to look like principles, and, last but not least, his choice of heroes and heroines, considered as physiological types (— a hospital ward! —): the whole represents a morbid picture; of this there can be no doubt. Wagner est une névrose. Maybe, that nothing is better known to-day, or in any case the subject of greater study, than the Protean character of degeneration which has disguised itself here, both as an art and as an artist. In Wagner our medical men and physiologists have a most interesting case, or at least a very complete one. Owing to the very fact that nothing is more modern than this thorough morbidness, this dilatoriness and excessive irritability of the nervous machinery, Wagner is the modern artist par excellence, the Cagliostro of modernity. All that the world most needs to-day, is combined in the most seductive manner in his art, — the three great stimulants of exhausted people: brutality, artificiality and innocence (idiocy).⁶²

From this point of view Nietzsche is a precursor regarding Cioran's vision on disease as a constitutive part of a decadent sensibility but especially regarding the formation of a decadent philosophy.

Cioran – Decadence at its Beginnings

We must say that disease is an integral part of the decadent mode. The fact derives, in a first stage, from defining decadence as a final stage of an era, a historical moment, an artistic movement, etc. "Decadence is a moribund or late – not necessarily 'last' – corrupted stage of one or another aspect of civilized existence, a stage, also, in its widest application, of a civilization itself/ a lesser movement that accentuates elements of the greater one (e.g. a late romanticism for Konrad W. Swart, an altered naturalism, David Weir)."⁶³

The decadent incorporates the weaknesses, the exhaustion, devitalisation, the sterility, etc as an expression of decline. The lack of vital resources condemns him to sterility, to the grounding in mannerism, and extinction. Before he is diagnosed with a disease in the clinical sense, exhaustion represents the defining feature which accompanies all the other symptoms, an exhaustion which before being a disease of the body is a disease of the soul. Once identified, the disease becomes a fundamental trait which puts decadence into a clinical picture.

Not any disease confirms the decadent sensibility. Within this sensibility one can identify what Kraft-Ebbing names *pschycopatia sexualis* with the sublimated form of nervous diseases. The decadent literature (and the symbolist one by extension) is populated by anxious, neurotic, hysterical people and the decadent develops a hypersensibility correlated with a hypersensitivity which is better illustrated in the *fin de siècle* literature. The decadent heroes claim this hypersensitivity which will become the correlate of an unusual artistic endowment.

Des Esseintes, Andrea Sperelli, etc, are part of this elite of neurotics for whom the neurotic disease develops a sixth sense connected to their artistic sensibility even if it is only exercised at the level of the collector. Moreover, there is the idea that the disease can accelerate the cerebral function producing an excitation which allows the use of the entire creative potential. Within this perimeter there is also the idea that syphilis can stimulate an artistic vocation to the level of genius and in the illustrative era

there is also the magazine *Venera. Mare revistă de popularizare științifică și profilaxie socială*⁶⁴ for the cultural imaginary which speculates this disease.

The fact that this sample of decadent fiction is still valid at the border with serious scientific research is demonstrated by young Cioran who counts on a positive response at the medical examination confirming that he has syphilis. Cioran had read *The Genius and the Syphilis* by Similianici and was hoping for a contamination which might offer the condition of the genius: "I wanted to be syphilitic. My mother forced me to do a check-up of my blood. (...) I was in a contradictory state; on one side I would not have liked to miss this chance, on the other I wanted to miss it."⁶⁵

The disease is in general profitable for philosophy, however not any type of disease claims a decadent sensibility. Nietzsche talks in medical terms but also in metaphors about disease. Wagner disease is, first of all, not a cultural-spiritual one. In this way the disease itself becomes a good conductor, a vehicle for philosophy.

In this sense, Marta Petreu makes a case study regarding Cioran and his relationship with the disease or, more accurately, with the diseases; from rheumatism to rhinitis and neurosis we have a whole inventory of the diseases which the philosopher can handle. There is a qualitative difference between them. Roughly, the suffering caused by the disease becomes a stimulus for philosophy, but more closely, certain diseases influence Cioran's development as a philosopher. Insomnia is one of them and turns into neurosis. The condition of being a neurotic is found in one of Cioran's first writings, *Pe culmile disperării* (*On the Heights of Despair*), which Cioran claims it entirely from his convalescence experience and where we can notice a remarkable development of what Barbara Spackman calls a *rhetoric of sickness*.

Once again Cioran places himself in a cliché of the decadent vulgate when he considers himself as the offspring of a "degenerate stem". If the damned genius aspect, further authorised through syphilis or that of being the last representative of a race, or family is part of the decadent vulgate, the philosopher makes a leap towards a re-evaluation of decadence when he considers the disease to be an essential part for his training as a philosopher. Cioran goes further, considering that the disease is a part of anthropogenesis, the formation of man, so that "the spirit is the fruit of a life's disease, as man is nothing more than a sick animal."⁶⁶

Cioran delves into this relationship between the disease and philosophy and implicitly with any authentic form of knowledge, including a type of knowledge which involves transcendence, a metaphysical knowledge.

The real sickening states tie us to the metaphysical realities, which a sane man cannot possibly comprehend (...) It is obvious that there is a hierarchy between these diseases regarding their capacity to reveal themselves. (...) What is sure is that in this world the only authentic experiences are those coming from the disease.⁶⁷

Authenticity has been regarded as an obsessive idea, a *latent myth*, as Roger Bastide, of the generation '27, calls it. Mircea Eliade will theorise it and will try to use it in his novels from *Şantier (Work in Progress*, an "indirect novel") to *Huliganii (The Hooligans)*. Cioran gives it a metaphysical relevance. Essentially, Cioran rejects the aesthetic sublimation of the disease, even more he dissociates the aesthetic as not being authentic, artificial from the authenticity of the experience situated under the sign of the disease.

"The person who has the gracious feeling of life cannot realise or understand this torment of the supreme uneasiness which can only appear in a sickly environment. Everything that is profound in this world can only arise from disease. Which does not arise from disease has only an aesthetic, formal value. Being sick means living, willy-nilly on the heights."⁶⁸ Starting from *On the Heights of Dispair*, but also taking into consideration Emil Cioran's letters, Marta petreu considers that disease has played an essential role in the writing of his book/books, that "his poetic art is truly somatopsychic, (...) that he [Cioran] inspired himself from his body (...) "⁶⁹

What is still the shape of Cioran's philosophy of life, what is the stylistics of this experience? There are two opposed terms, *grace* and *lyricism*. The former tackles in a formal way the detachment, harmony, legerity.

The grace of humans does not lead to the climax of individuation, but to a harmonic feeling of naïve accomplishment, in which the human being never arrives to a feeling of loneliness and isolation. Formally, grace rejects loneliness, because the wavy movements through which they objectify express receptivity for life, an open and welcoming impetus for the seductions and the picturesque of the existence.⁷⁰

The latter represents a way of life which tends towards climax. Cioran's lyricism is primarily an existential one, and only by pure chance aesthetic.

Melancholy and Sadness – Decadent Sensibilities

The way in which Cioran defines melancholy in *Pe culmile disperării* (*On the Heights of Dispair*) places us in the context of decadent sensibilities. As the symbolist-decadent writers and artists, the philosopher works with *états d'âme* starting from an essential observation: "Because there is an intimate correspondence in all big and deep states, between the subjective and the objective levels."⁷¹ This system of correspondences allows for an interior, emotional "state" to find itself an expression, "a frame." Then, for Cioran there are "states", spiritually vitalistic experiences, manifestations of great intensity of life "a way of life", "an abundance of vitality": exuberance, enthusiasm, anger. Melancholy denounces a minus of vitality, whose expression is found in *fatigue*, doubled by the sensation of emptiness and dilatation towards nothings which originates in itself. Fatigue represents a key term for the decadent sensibility, associating a lack of vitality. Deitalization characterizes the decadent character who claims it genealogic as the last descendant of a race/family who has used his vital resources throughout centuries and has reached sterility and has aesthetically sublimated all the creative energies of the past. Des Esseintes, the character of a novel emblematic for decadence, *À rebours* (*Against the Grain*, 1884), by Karl-Joris Huysmans represents the last offspring of a French noble family, whose first representatives are depicted in family portraits as vital and bloomingly robust. At the end of the family tree lies the opposite of vitality, the last offspring, the result of what seems to be a process of degeneration. Another perspective which the decadent sensibility offers to fatigue is that of *spleen*, *taedium vitae*, a state of the absence of will, disgust which life creates in all its forms, to lose one's interest for the world and its manifestations. Depending on its intensity, the spleen can be a sickly state as it condemns to an extended convalescence, to inactivity, to a *contemplatio morosa*. This "monstre délicat" as Baudelaire calls it, is considered by Gilbert Durant to be one of the decadent subthemes.⁷²

The spleen is connected to this hypersensibility, to the neurosis which boosts the decadent sensibility, where we have a certain emotional pattern of the decadent: "resigned, indifferent, *blasé*, seeking, not a supreme emotion, but a new sensation; demanding not an ideal, but a fresh titillation for his jaded senses. Hence he is intellectual rather than sentimental, a creature almost logical in his manias."⁷³ The third decadent view of fatigue is represented by a state of incapacity (*impuissance*) which

translates through the incapacity to mobilize (itself) in order to pursue a purpose, through irresolution and sterility: "(...) that powerless sterility which plays such a role in the history of decadent sensibility and which later, when the doctors had looked at the patient, was to be diagnosed as *aboulie*, a sort of spiritual paraplegia, an inability for any kind of action."⁷⁴

Cioran transforms this fatigue in an instrument of knowledge opening the path of contemplation and offering a panoramic perspective: "Fatigue is the first organic determinate of knowledge, because it develops the indispensable conditions of a differentiation of man in the world; through it you get to that perspective which situates the world in front of man."⁷⁵ Fatigue associates itself a "prolonged reflection and a diffused reverie" and functions in a regime of vagueness. This reverie is the one which alleviates the "disproportion between the infinity of the world and the finiteness of man" which for Cioran represents the metaphysical conscience. For the philosopher, melancholy represents a form of aesthetically boosting the dismay, the metaphysical intensity, the conscience of nothingness.

Passed through the filter of melancholy, that is through a filter of dream, this revelation of the relation between human being and nothingness "ceases to be torturing, the world appearing in an eerie and sick beauty."⁷⁶ For Cioran, melancholy inscribes experience in an aesthetic dimension because it offers a detachment, because it inscribes the "revelations of pain" and puts it into perspective which is represented by the painting, the show and in a broad sense, of the representation. The aesthetic characteristic of melancholy is associated to a form of delight as it transforms life into a painting, show, representation. In this way, melancholy becomes a form of mediation, of aesthetically subliming the experience, through which it is eased, tamed, becoming more bearable.

The loneliness of melancholics has a less deep meaning; it sometimes even has an *aesthetic* characteristic. Do we talk about a sweet melancholy, a voluptuous melancholy? But even the melancholic attitude itself, through passivity and consideration, isn't it aesthetically coloured ?

The aesthetic attitude in front in life is characterised by a contemplative passivity which relishes from the real what is suitable for subjectivity, without any norm or criterion. The world is considered a show, and man as a spectator who passively assists as the display of some aspects. The spectacular conception of life removes the tragic and the antinomies inherent to existence, which once recognised and felt, catch you in a painful vortex in the drama of the world.⁷⁷

In the poem *Melancholy (Langueur)*, one of the decadent poetic arts, Paul Verlaine recalls this state as one of contemplative detachment in front of the world, of history transformed in a performance, a delightful disaster, an aesthetic reflex. Cioran sees this act as a reduction of life, as a reduction of living and through this an evacuation of the existential tragic, all the more, melancholy borrows delightness to the aesthetic perspective. "What is aesthetic in melancholy manifests itself in the tendency towards passivity, reverie and voluptuous delight."⁷⁸ Cioran inscribes melancholy on the coordinates of decadent sensibility, where experience is aesthetically sublimate, where life becomes an object of contemplation, where between the immediate experience or reality and subject an invisible screen interposes, characterised by Zola as *limpidité troublée*, which is that of aesthetic sensibility. The passivity used as a suspension of participation, of activism, of involvement, the reverie as an expression of imprecision, the delight as a form of abandonment, of diminishing the conscience, represents forms of outdistance which create the aesthetic effect.

Having a good intuition, Cioran assimilates the melancholic state or certain "poetical virtue" correctly associating it to literature in the attempt to identify "a formal plan". "Formally, in the case of sweet and voluptuous melancholy, but also in the case of black melancholy, there are the same frames of elements: internal emptiness, vagueness of sensations, reverie, sublimation, etc."⁷⁹ The symbolist-decadent aesthetics resorts to the same elements which for Cioran define in a formal plan melancholy, the philosopher being close to make a poetics of melancholy. Two more associations send us the the symbolist-decadent profile of melancholy, the association with melancholic landscapes, and implicitly with painting and with femininity through grace, even if Cioran does not exceed the boundary of associations. In *Pitoresc și melancolie (Picturesque and Melancholy)*, Andrei Pleșu noticed a constitutive ambiguity of melancholy: "It is simultaneously optical diligence and decommissioning, interest for things and a space out between them."⁸⁰ Andrei Pleșu sees this effect of outdistance as insolitude which melancholy presupposes, which generates a perspective effect. One of the differences which Andrei Pleșu establishes between sadness and melancholy is that the former comes as a reaction to fatigue, and the latter from the excess of leisure, one is the expression of exhaustion, the other is the fruit of contemplation, of a surplus which has not been consumed in a vital manner.

Melancholy is the optical encounter between two loneliness: of that who contemplates and of the contemplated performance. Melancholy is the *sensitive space* between two loneliness: it is the only form in which they can report one to another. If *homo faber* cannot be melancholic is because he feels one with the world. He cannot be sad, as he becomes tired quite often, and sadness is only a form of fatigue. Melancholy is rest in excess, overdue leisure without need or finality.⁸¹

Even for the philosopher who is consumed by extremely intense feelings, a distinction between melancholy and sadness is imposed. The first is close to the relevance of an aesthetic phenomenon, being the result of a fatigue – as in the case of sadness for Andrei Pleșu – and it almost disposes a recognisable poetic, recoverable in the context of symbolist and decadent sensibility even if Cioran does not place the relevance of melancholy straight into literature and arts, while the second is connected more to a metaphysical dimension, the only one which is authentic for the philosopher as it puts him into contact with the tragic and the antinomies of existence.

French Culture and its Style

The decline is, in theory, the result of achieving all the theoretical possibilities offered by progress. Decay would characterize only value-saturated cultures. Emil Cioran also considers France a culture of successive accomplishments, the expression of the deep achievements. An expression of decadence in the cultural space is the phenomenon of mannerism, which highlights stereotypes as blocking forms detrimental to content and results in a more pronounced tendency towards stylization in a broad sense.

Here Cioran shows concern not only for cultural epidermis with a preference for the ornament illustrated by artistic, literary, musical, architectural styles, but also for a lifestyle defined by refining the senses of taste and education. The French identity, according to Cioran, can be sooner recovered from this interstitial superficial space of frivolity, rather than in the area of Pascal's or Descartes's reflections.

One of the vices of France was the sterile perfection - which is nowhere more visible than in writing. The concern for the right phrasing, the care not to cripple the words and the song, to concatenate ideas in a harmonious

manner are all French obsessions. No other culture has shown greater concern for style and no other culture has provided more beautiful and flawless writings. No French citizen is able to produce irremediably bad writing. Everybody writes well, everyone can see the form before the idea. The style is a direct expression of culture. (...) Those who do not know how to find the best wording, despite having the best of intuitions, will be left at the outskirts of culture. Style represents the craftsmanship of the word. And this form of artistry is everything.⁸²

We can read this passage as the author's personal faith. The concern for style becomes fundamental to Cioran, and the philosopher has a preference for *artistic writing* in philosophy in an eccentric manner. But before being put into a system, his philosophy can be shaped as a form that states an identity complex through its stylistic marks. His option for the French culture and civilization is based also on the affinity that Emil Cioran has with the style of the adopting culture, especially with the same increased concern, which is defining for the style in the context of this culture.

Decadence with Style and the Style of Decadence

In his essay about France, the considerations on the style go back regularly and they finally configure a brand identity. The association with the superficial and deep surface requires both a lack of depth, the respect for form and formality, and also a great way to limit the imbalance of the great affective combustion, the massy deviations from the norm. "France does not offer great prospects, it guides you toward a certain form, it gives the right formula, but not breath."⁸³

In his study, *Style and civilization* (1957), A. E. Kroeber argues that the notion of style has the function of "concretization" of cultural totality, and great civilizations, (such as French civilization) are characterized by "super-styles", "style of style" or "total lifestyle". In his opinion

(...) La valeur totalisante du style résulte de la convergence tendancielle de formes propres à une culture. Le style est porteur d'une dynamique extensive ou expansive partagée par toute une société ou incarnée par une catégorie sociale ou un institution. (...) Cette temporalité close, cyclique et essentialiste du style est souvent placée au fondement de la dynamique comparée des cultures.⁸⁴

A.E.Kroeber identifies three meanings, three ways to conceive style within a culture:

1. Des styles qu'il designe comme «basique » « along terme », soubassement infra-structurelles des réalisations fonctionnelles ou symboliques,
2. Des styles qui relevent de superstructures idéologiques, apprehendés comme des modèles, des normes ou des canons,
3. De styles plus circonscrits, concrètement identifiable par des objets et des oeuvres⁸⁵

It is more than obvious that Cioran is interested in both the first and second category of styles.

What characterizes the identity profile of France does not regard a certain style, taxonomic registered, the Baroque, the Rococo's etc, but what Richard Shusterman calls lifestyle as an *individual style*. Shusterman carefully dissociates lifestyle as an individual style from the *taxonomy of style*, the use of a dedicated style, an artistic style, a style created by fashion.

(...) il nous faut rappeler la distinction bien connue entre le concept taxinomique de style et le concept de style individuel. En un sens évident mais peut-être trivial, si un individu manifeste du style au sens taxinomique du concept (par exemple, s'il a un mode de vie stoïcien ou épicurien, s'il peint dans un style baroque ou écrit dans le style du XVII^e siècle), alors il fait montre d'un certain style. Mais lorsque nous disons qu'un individu a du style, nous entendons par là quelque chose de plus, quelque chose de plus spécifique ou plus personnel, et qui sert à distinguer l'artiste de ceux avec lesquels il peut avoir en commun un style général; il s'agit de quelque chose qui, telle une signature, sert à le distinguer en tant qu'individu.⁸⁶

As far as Cioran is concerned, there is an apparent contradiction in the attempt to establish the marks of an identity complex not only to a certain style but to existence itself (behavior, gestures, habits, mind sets etc.), which requires complex stylization. Cioran does not refer to a particular individual style but to the characteristic tendency to ascribe a style to most mundane daily acts. In E. H. Gombrich's terms, this is identified with the analysis of a trend: "In judging a style, we judge a tendency."⁸⁷

According to Cioran, we are dealing with some effort to stylize existence itself, everyday practices, and this is an identity brand.

Mediocrity has reached such a style that it is hard to find examples of stupidity in the current individual, the man in the street. (...) Therefore, France is great through small things. It may be that, after all, civilization is not something other than the refinement of the banal, the polishing of small things and maintaining a grain of intelligence in the daily accident."⁸⁸

The concept of style put into everyday life reminds of one of Oscar Wilde's paradoxes: "I've put my genius into my life, I've put only my talent into my works."

Emil Cioran uses a paradox, too, when he invites us to appreciate the depth of the stylistics of the banal or the grandeur of small things. Superficiality is cited in fact as mere style, resulted after polishing and refining a prodigious culture that spreads the surface of existence: "Being superficial with style is harder than being deep. The former requires a lot of culture, the latter a simple imbalance of faculties."⁸⁹ The affinity Cioran has with the decadence of great empires corrupted by too much culture and civilization finds its reason in the philosopher's propensity towards styling, which he recognizes as an identity mark of the French culture. Regarding literature, decadentism advertises this very preeminence of style, artistic writing at the expense of plot and action.

Moreover, there is an effort to stylize even the decline as David Weir put it in *Decadence and the Making of Modernism*. In addition, decadentism manages at stylistic level what David Weir finds is true about Flaubert's novel *Salammô* "makes the superficial substantial."⁹⁰

Paul Bourget is the first to define a decadent style in *Essays in Contemporary Psychology*, as he notes that this style requires a dissolution of the text unity by means of successive focalization of the part at the expense of the whole. The sentence replaces the full text, the clause replaces the sentence, and the word replaces the clause.

One law governs both the development and the decadence of the organism which is language. A style of decadence is one in which the unity of the book breaks down to make place for the independence of the sentence, and in which the sentence breaks down to make place for the independence of the word.⁹¹

Paul Bourget has a styling effort that goes deeply into the text, disrupting the detail, the part, as an independent unit. Paul Bourget was perhaps the first to take a theoretical interest in literary decadence, establishing

“an analogy between the social evolution towards individualism and the individualistic manifestation of artistic language, which are typical of ‘le style de decadence’”. Writing in a similar way, Norberto Bobbio claims in *The Philosophy of Decadentism. A Study in Existentialism* that the style of decadence is characterized by a “triumph of the motif.”⁹²

Cioran identifies some features of decadent style, namely, highlighting the part at the expense of the whole, an excess of lucidity and this inner emptiness, which is both expressed and compensated in the concern for a stylistics of the existence, where the obstinate concern for the significant detail becomes a profession of faith. The stylization of existence is done around this existential emptiness, according to Cioran. “Collective lucidity is a sign of painstaking.” (...) The drama of the lucid man is the drama of a nation. Every citizen becomes a small exception, and these exceptions put together total up the historic deficit of this nation.”⁹³

In *Spania nevertebrată (Invertebrate Spain)*, Ortega y Gasset conceive the history of Spain bycyclic: one of growth, defined by a triple action, obedience, unification, incorporation, and one of decrease, of decline, of decadence characterised by the weakening of the centre’s power and the reappearance of secessionist forces. “The history of a nation is not that of its formative and ascending period: it is also the history of its decadence. And if that means rebuilding the lines of a progressive incorporation, the latter will describe the opposite process. The history of decadence of a nation is the history of a vast desintegration.”⁹⁴ The philosopher calls this desintegration *particularism* which is opposed to the process of *totalization*. “Desintegration is a reverse manifestation: the parts of the whole start to live as separate totalities. I call this phenomenon of the historical life *particularism*, and if I am asked what is the most profound and serious characteristic of the Spanish present, I would answer with this word.”⁹⁵ The definition which the Spanish philosopher gives to particularism evokes the definition which Paul Bourget gives to the decadent style as a rebellion, emancipation of the part against the whole, of the cell against the entire organism, of the individual against society, of the mass against the elite. In particular, Cioran is surprised that the Spanish are aware of the meaning of their decadence and can identify with precision the moment when the decline starts, with the reign of Phillip the 3rd, in 1580. As he says in a discussion with Hans-Jurgen Heinrichs, Cioran’s attachment towards Spain passes through his attachment to the obsession displayed by Spain for decadence. Spain is “the only country literally possessed by the obsession of decadence.”

With reference to Decadent art, John Reed offers a range of nuances in the representation in *Decadent Style*. "But the Decadent style, while retaining a realistic mode of rendering images, violated formal conventions by breaking up compositions into independent, even contending parts, the order and significance of which could be recovered only through an intellectual effort and comprehension."⁹⁶ But what brings John Reed's reflection on decadent style closer to Cioran's considerations on a style of decadence as an identity reflex in the French culture is another statement: "Often heavily ornamented [the paintings] they employed this ornament to mask a central void. Moreover, they were intensely self-conscious."⁹⁷ "What did France love? The styles, the pleasures of intelligence, the saloon, ration, the small perfections. Which means: Expression before Nature. We are in front of a culture of form, which covers the elementary forces and which above any passionate outburst covers the tinsel of refinement."⁹⁸ It is noticeable that Cioran does not refer to a particular style, even though he makes an analysis of the French gothic comparing it with the German one to highlight a series of significant differences. He is not interested in a taxonomic style, but style as practice, as a way of life, the style introduced in the mundane practice. Therefore not a style, nor styles, but a stylisation effort imposed on the small facts of existence, translated as "small imperfections".

For Cioran this stylisation effort becomes an auto-stylisation effort, to quote Richard Sushterman, constitutes the founding element for a decadent inversion. Artifice before nature. Cioran uses a synonym for artificiality, Expression. Oscar Wilde in *The Decay of Lying*, Baudelaire in *Eloge du maquillage (Eulogy on make-up)*, highlight the same thing "artificial life has replaced natural life" ("la vie factice a remplacé la vie naturelle"). Cioran does not go with this assessment beyond the 19th century, but we must mention that it does not have the voluntary power of the two in protecting the artificial against nature in order to develop what Camille Paglia in *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson* calls excess or "toomuchness" as the "hallmark" of decadence" and he refers to decadence as "a style of excess and extravagance".⁹⁹

The cult of the artificial recommends a decadent sensibility, but also a way of living in the middle of art descended in the details of modern life. Cioran introduces a nuance, a form which is particular to the decadent culture as a *culture of form*. Also, the philosopher and an essential contrast, the *cult of form* opposes to the *cult of passion*, of fervours and elementary forces. Cioran will also characterise the French culture as a

anti-dyonisiac culture. At the same time, this culture of form is, for Cioran, glued to the exercise of reflection, of the games of intelligence. What kind of intelligence is this and how can intelligence have a form, how does it acquire a style? We are talking about a saloon intelligence, a playful form which implies a dose of theatricality, artificiality, an intelligence of conversation. France is the country of dialogue (...).¹⁰⁰ Hence the permission of the paradox in conversation, in discourse and the rejection of paradox as situation.¹⁰¹ The paradox becomes a figure of discourse, a figure of style, but under no circumstance an experience. In this culture of form everything is exteriorized, everything excludes interiority, it is a culture of show, be it one of intelligence, having the saloon as a scene.

Decadence, Alexandrinism: Dying with Style

Emil Cioran uses two terms for decadence, that of decadence and that of alexandrinism. We can read in this term a synonym of the first, but, as Cioran is attentive at nuances, we identify in alexandrinism a tinting of the decadent movement especially toward the stylistic dimension of the phenomenon, in connection with the fact of style. Alexandrinism signifies the refined, subtle and erudite of art and philosophy in its periods of decline. But also a particular style, of the poets from the Alexandrine period, a style which is distinguished by obscurity, ornament, refinement, for example in Teocrit's romances. It is worth mentioning that for Cioran there are also vital negations, the ones proposed by the Russian culture. "The Russians can be negative, but they believe in negations, they do not taste them spectacularly."¹⁰² What makes of alexandrinism an expression of decadence is not necessary a culture of negation, but one of its style, of negation for the sake of negation. Cioran is more straightforward when he considers alexandrinism a fact of style „Alexandrinism – which is a style of culture built on the heroic sense – (...)."¹⁰³ Alexandrinism is not only a style of culture but also a style of life which is translated in attitudes. To be alexandrian, meaning lyric and cold, participating with all your soul, but objective; to pour out spectacularly."¹⁰⁴ Cioran follows this apparently contradictory formula, of a symbiosis between contrasts and which defines the decadent sensibility. Lyric and cold, subjective in the affectionate and objective sense, meaning detached. Here lies a paradox of decadence which puts on stage the clash of some contrasts. In this

lies the spectacular character, and also decadent, in the strictly aesthetic relevance of the clash of these contrasts.

What Cioran suggests for France is “a stylish end”. This movement from part to whole is defining, from being a stylish act to setting up a stylistic identity. At this point, decadence becomes more than just a style admitted individually, it becomes a lifestyle characterized by the *decadent* style of literature and art. Cioran proposes a utopian project of aesthetic behavior and existential gestures likely to lead to a stylistic unity. Cioran’s apocalypse is aesthetic, but decadent aesthetics and the philosopher recommends respect for the exemplar model with the accompanying style.

It cannot live up to the expectations other than by accepting a stylish end, building a culture of the West with artistry, dying out with intelligence and even grandeur - corrupting the freshness of the neighbors or of the world with decadent infiltration and dangerous insinuations. (...) France never missed a thing in its past. But by denying his Alexandrian destiny, it would miss its end.¹⁰⁵

Decadence is, according to Oswald Spengler in *The Decline of the West*, the final stage for an organic evolution of every culture and civilization. For Cioran, culture and civilization of France is the perfect illustration of the theory. Alexandrianism would end a perfect cycle of a culture that never missed a thing. Moreover, this end does not only have its own style, but requires, like any mannerism, style as a purpose and the utmost expression of decline. “Alexandrianism is the period of scholarly denial, it means refusal as a style of culture.”¹⁰⁶

The paradox with Cioran reflects a feature of decadentism, namely, that decline is always fertile. 1. for smaller cultures, in full swing of vitality and for whom the cult of form leads to better management of dormant content, in the magma of the preformatted 2. for the culture that reflects it, because it offers styling, better calligraphy of the content which has reached a museum stage. “Alexandrianism can be considered as a successful form of culture when it represents a form of maximum decrease. There are forms of fruitful disintegration and forms of sterile disintegration.”¹⁰⁷

Put it other words, Cioran draws a conclusion concerning the preeminence of style in the decadence stage of a certain culture, but he also considers another paradox, the coexistence of a vital enthusiasm, dynamic with styling as a form of closure, of giving it a fixed norm. “We

can no longer extract content from France; it is but a universe of patterns (...) . Will the future lead to a culture of formal revelry?"¹⁰⁸

Towards a Stylistics of Transfiguration

Cioran suddenly wonders about an identity stylistics that cannot be taken as a national style. Discussions on a national style had taken place in a frame increasingly theoretical since late nineteenth century. Architect Ion Mincu found in the NeoRomanian style a way to give value to folk elements within an architectural style that owed much to neoclassicism; theorists such as Leon Bachelin regarded the contribution that the folk element would bring to Art Nouveau¹⁰⁹ a style in vogue in Europe at the end of the century.

In terms of the morphology of culture that Cioran uses himself, philosopher Lucian Blaga prefigures a stylistic matrix of the Romanian identity in *Horizon and Style and the Mioritic Space* through what the philosopher calls "space of Miorita". The term is originally used in one of the most popular literary works emblematic for the definition of a Romanian identity, the *Miorita* ballad. Cioran refers to more than an artistic style, and vehemently refuses a new Romanian identity profile modeled after the model provided in this folk ballad.

First, the philosopher finds the absence of a particular style, of a stylistic identity that might allow it to be recorded in history.

Romania's weakness is that it has been considered for too long to have potential, it has failed systematically to become actuality in history. Under such circumstances, how can they create a profile? Where is our style?

Is there a single Romanian city with its own architectural brand? We stayed at farm level and we never knew that the village has never been recorded in history.¹¹⁰

The inaccuracies or omissions of the philosopher are less important than the ideas he transmits. Cioran excludes the possibility to have an identity profile out of the "profile" of popular culture as the philosopher Lucian Blaga, for example, does. He turns his back to most of his colleagues from the same generation, from Mircea Vulcanescu to Dan Botta, who praises the role played by the folk element and by the peasant society

in establishing an identity profile and a related stylistics. Instead, to the young philosopher, identity is circumscribed only to historical cultures.

Cioran operates with his own concept of style as a formal expression of existence, in other words, Cioran offers a definition of a lifestyle: "It [style] is an expression of the tendency of life to create form on a temporary basis, to become fixed in a limited structure, and to direct internal dynamism and raise a more understandable irrationality out of inner substance of life."¹¹¹

The drawbacks formulating the terms of morphology of culture according to Oswald Spengler prove again Cioran's emphasis on setting a stylistic identity. The absence of the Gothic as style is less relevant than the absence from the conscience, because "the Gothic is the vertical spirit. (...) The Gothic is a style of rapid ascendance and momentum, but a focused style, of transcendent becoming."¹¹²

Cioran considers an ascending sense, which the Gothic perfectly illustrates, stylistically relevant to the growth of Romania, but he notices that "The formal scheme of our fate is only horizontal."¹¹³ But the horizontal dimension has no matching style. Lucian Blaga will discover, in the harmonious alternation between hill and valley, a stylistic matrix that configures an identity profile. For Cioran, the horizontal transcribed in terms of abyssal psychology means "Passivity, skepticism, self-contempt, gentle contemplation, minor religiosity, year history, wisdom (...)"¹¹⁴

The considerations about identity stylistics go hand in hand with the reflection on decadence. The lucidity, that the philosopher will later regard as a symptom of French decadence, is considered as a way to block the vital momentum of small cultures and therefore vehemently rejected. Cioran distinguishes between "the inner conditions" which require a series of "formal pattern" or "the Romanian form of life" and a series of "specific psychological determinants" that generate "a brand and a certain individuality."

The last references are bequeathed from Radulescu-Motru's theories about energy personalism, published in *Romanian. The Catechism of a New Spirituality*¹¹⁵ the same year that *The Transfiguration of Romania* came to light. Cioran recommends this vital momentum, which must carry with it a new identity stylistics. Most privileged are the peak moments of a culture as a means to relieve its entire energy.

From this perspective, the philosopher recommends small cultures the "force cult" as a tonic. Apocalyptic images are simultaneous with consuming fervor in human hecatombs in an angry and aggressive release of energy. But Cioran has finer nuances when he recommends things that

give a contour, a shape and hence a style to history, a “stylish assault”, different from the barbarities unable to generate forms. One should note that the “stylish assault” that Cioran uses has its aesthetic counterpart in the avant-garde movements from early twentieth century, movements with a certain associated violence with old aesthetic canons, long established forms.

Marinetti’s Futurism, and Tristan Tzara’s Dadaism cultivate the same kind of destructive activism, the same aggressive energy. Cioran resorts to comparative stylistics, trying to identify the moment when it finds an identity complex and it gives universal value. The comparison with Russia, whose first generation of intellectuals “definitely marked the cultural style”,¹¹⁶ reveals a common starting point: messianism. This messianism takes the shape of transfiguration, changing the face of Romania the change of “our entire lifestyle” to impose a “cultural style.” We are entering the area of the logic of decadence, when Cioran suggests that with decadent empires, the small cultures will play the role of barbaric acts in full vital momentum. At the end of the nineteenth century, the iconic image of decadence was given by the decline of the Roman Empire, undermined from outside by barbarian invasions, and from inside by luxury and excessive refinement correlated with the dissolution of those strict virtues that had been the basis of the empire.

For the comparative scholar Jean de Palacio, the end of the nineteenth century decadence is fully Latin: “*Décadence, à la fin du XIXe siècle, est essentiellement conçue comme latine.*”¹¹⁷ The easternization of the Roman world is seen as a cause of the decadence of the empire, and for the Romanian culture the role of the eastern world is played by Byzantium and by its heritage of culture and civilization. According to Marie-France David-de Palacio, Byzantine decadence means a continuation and refinement of the Roman one: “*C’est que la Décadence trouve en Byzance une décadence de la décadence romaine, une principe d’éclatement, d’hétérogénéité poussé à l’extrême.*”¹¹⁸

Barbaric acts are regarded as the main instrument of extinction for a civilization that once it had reached its peak it went into a slow decline by corrupting morals and devitalizing its citizens. The Romanian philosopher sees the emancipation of Romania or its transfiguration possible by acquiring a hard identity, by assuming the role of the barbarian against these devitalized cultures. This model is identical to that of expanded and messianic Russia, a model that Cioran reveals in *Istorie și utopie* (*History and Utopia*). “They are the last primitive people of Europe, and

they may give it a new impetus, which will mean a final humiliation.”¹¹⁹ But the difference is crucial and it resides in the “stylish assault”. In this case, barbaric acts advertise a certain form, a certain style, a cultural style able to give shape to violent actions, but to also confer a cultural identity to the “aggressor”. “The affirmation of historically young people must affect the outward form of barbarism, but the exuberant burst of energy must obscure the germinal cult of an idea, the passion to individualize through a spiritual meaning. Otherwise, their aurora is not worthy of the others’ decadence.”¹²⁰

Conclusions

The works of Emil Cioran integrate a tradition of decadence and develops a reflection upon decadence. The specific themes of decadence are reinvested by the Romanian philosopher with new meanings in various contexts, nuanced and reevaluated from a perspective which reflects the destinal options of Emil Cioran. One of the fundamental works which will have marked the ulterior evolution of Emil Cioran is Oswald Spengler’s *The Decline of The West*, point in which he inserts himself inside the tradition of a reflection of decadence. An essential fact for the way in which the philosopher approaches decadence is that Cioran melts it in his own metabolism, integrates it in his own body before he turns it into an idea. Another element that confers particularity to the way in which Cioran analyzes the decadent phenomenon is represented by his confrontation with the theological fact. Another dimension of decadence, as Cioran interprets it, resides in the way he treats it as a fact of style from the perspective of the morphology of culture but as well as a way of life where Cioran considers himself a decadent. For the philosophical work of Emil Cioran, decadence is not a secondary fact but a fundamental theme, creational, thus his work may be systemized to a certain extent. From this perspective, Cioran integrates himself inside a prestigious series of decadent philosophers with an essential contribution in understanding the decadent phenomenon.

NOTES

- 1 Richard Gilman, *Decadence. The Strange Life of an Epithet*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 1979, p.9.
- 2 *Ibidem*, p.19.
- 3 David Weir, *Decadence and The Making of Modernism*, University of Massachusetts Press, Amherst, 1995, p.10.
- 4 *Ibidem*, p.11.
- 5 Liz Constable, Matthew Potolsky, Dennis Denisoff (edited by), *Perennial Decay. On the Aesthetics and Politics of Decadence*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998, p.21.
- 6 *Ibidem*, p.21.
- 7 *Ibidem*, p.21.
- 8 Norberto Bobbio, *The Philosophy of Decadentism*, translated by David Moore, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1948, p.15.
- 9 *Ibidem*, p.8.
- 10 Richard Gilman, *op.cit.*, p.15.
- 11 See Ion Vartic, *Cioran naiv și sentimental (Cioran Naïve and Sentimental)*, Editura Polirom, Iasi, 2011.
- 12 See Marta Petreu, *Despre bolile filosofilor. Cioran, (On Philosophers' Diseases. Cioran)* Ediția a II-a, revăzută, Editura Apostrof, Cluj-Napoca; Editura Polirom, Iasi, 2010.
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