



Cioran's Insomnia

Author(s): Willis G. Regier

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Willis G. Regier

A career insomniac, Cioran made insomnia a laboratory, no easy place to work in well. In 1970 he told François Bondy that “I have never been able to write except in the melancholy of insomniac nights.” In 1994 he told Michael Jakob that he considered his insomnia to be “the greatest experience” of his life. Cioran described “a tragedy that has lasted many years and which has marked me for the rest of my days. All that I have written, all that I have thought, all that I have worked out, all my divagations find their origin in this tragedy. When I was about twenty I stopped sleeping and I consider that the grandest tragedy that could occur. At all hours I walked the streets like some kind of phantom. All that I have written much later has been worked out during those nights.”¹

Adam Gopnik reported that Cioran was reputed not to have slept for fifty years. “This claim, the doctors and commonsense agree, was a poetic exaggeration; he just worried too much to get a good night’s rest. But his insistence on wearing his pajamas as a hair shirt, on making his insomnia absolute—a kind of symbolic state of mind—was, in a country as fond of absolutes as France, irresistible.” Insomnia became a signature for him, a transcendental theme that connected him to other great insomniacs; in the course of his career he named Hitler, Nero, and Mallarmé. “For Mallarmé, who claimed he was doomed to permanent insomnia, sleep was not a ‘real need’ but a ‘favor.’ Only a great poet could allow himself the luxury of such an insanity.”²

When in 1947 he abandoned Romanian and determined to make his career in French, Cioran ceased political writing. By then he had much to be mum about. His university studies in Nazi Berlin, his term

in the Romanian army, his fondness for the Iron Guard, and his fame as nationalist writer debuting in Bucharest were prudently unremarked. With much hushed up and doubt already his companion, Cioran brought his insomnia to Paris.

Cioran considered his books to be masked autobiographies, but his insomnia is the one of the few personal facts his books explore. In Paris he devoured biographies, memoirs, and volumes of letters, then deduced: "It is a misfortune for a writer to be understood." He reminisced about his paradisaical childhood, wrote freely about his anguish and antipathies, but until late in life, when he gave a series of interviews, he was reticent about the details of his adult life. "What you write gives only an incomplete image of what you are, because the words loom up and come to life only when you are at the highest or lowest point of yourself." He converted this notion into "a golden rule": "to leave an incomplete image of oneself."³

Refraining from writing about love affairs (though he had them), political struggles (when young, he was a sucker for them), and war stories (while Romania died for the Reich he eked out a living in occupied Paris), Cioran treated insomnia as his defining experience and insignia. He lifted insomnia to the level of a love, a passion play, and heroic battlefield. "Insomnia is a form of heroism because it transforms each new day into a combat lost in advance." "Insomnia is truly the moment when one is *totally* alone in the universe. *Totally*. . . . During insomniac nights I have truly understood the mystical, ultimate states, because in the depth that is fascinating in the mystic, the depth conceived in ultimate states, there is nothing more than madness. You are in the midst of night, everything has cleared off, but the God who is not arises, and one has the impression of a mysterious presence."⁴

Cioran earned his place in the literature of insomnia well aware of its precedents. He confided to his *Cahiers* that Chekhov's "A Dull Story" is one of the best things ever written on the effects of insomnia.⁵ Cioran adored Shakespeare and Dostoevsky, and identified with their characters: Macbeth (who "does murder sleep"), Hamlet (in whose heart was a fight "that would not let me sleep"), nightstalking Stavrogin, the suicide Kirilov, and homicidal Raskolnikov, drowsily dreaming.

Early Cioran (the author of the Romanian books) presented insomnia as a noble affliction, a disease of hyper-consciousness. Middle Cioran (the first six books he published in French) put insomnia aside to deal with other things. Late Cioran (his last four

books: *De l'inconvénient d'être né*, 1973; *Ecartèlement*, 1979; *Exercices d'admiration*, 1986; and *Aveux et Anathèmes*, 1987) restored insomnia to glory. "To save the word 'grandeur' from officialdom, we should use it only apropos of insomnia or heresy." The progress of insomnia through Cioran's writings, as topic and influence, moves slowly with almost imperceptible change. Insomnia suited his dominant moods: pity, disgust, desolation, horror, nostalgia, and regret.⁶ It fit other favorite topics: ennui, solitude, infirmity, and suicide. It rotated the axis of Cioran's "vertical" and "horizontal" points of view. When sleep did not return his love and would not come to bed, he gave himself to insomnia, which stayed up with him at all hours, beloved and berated. Insomnia was his demon, his mate, his cruel muse.

Early Cioran

In his first book, *Pe culmile disperării* (1934), Cioran professed, "On the heights of despair, nobody has the right to sleep," and from his own sleeplessness wrote the book. "I wandered all night through the streets, like a phantom. Then the idea came to me of howling my distress. Thus was born *On the Heights of Despair*."⁷

One of the decade's disciples of Zarathustra, Cioran indulged in an effusive and "absolute" lyricism he would later regret. He would retain some lyrical habits: heroic bravado, hyperbole, oxymorons, and optatives. He would repeat formulas: splits into twos, nostalgia for Eden, and contrasting mankind to other animals. "I am tempted to define man as the animal who cannot sleep." From the start Cioran set forth the themes he would elaborate for sixty years: the pains and ecstasies of solitude; the religious despair of the unbeliever; the temptations of suicide; the enchantments of music; contempt for history; the skeptic tradition; the bounties of suffering; the insights of insomnia; and an obsession with death. They mixed like poison. Insomnia leaves you "prey to your private obsessions. . . . Death itself, although still hideous, acquires in the night a sort of impalpable transparency, an illusory and musical character." Cioran explained his insomnia as a consequence of his recognition of mortality. "*The most perverse feeling is the feeling of death*. Imagine that there are people who cannot sleep because of their perverse obsession with death! How I wish I did not know anything about myself and this world!"⁸

Between the ages of twenty and twenty-five, his sleeplessness found no cure, so his mother tried to pray it away. His doctors attributed insomnia—like genius, talent, and melancholy—to masturbation and

syphilis. Since Cioran also exhibited genius, talent, and melancholy, the diagnosis looked like a clinical recurrence of Nietzsche, a similarity he reinforced by citing Nietzsche frequently. In "Man, the Insomniac Animal" Cioran struck a death-defying pose. "I am absolute contradiction, climax of antinomies, the last limit of tension; in me anything is possible, for I am he who at the supreme moment, in front of absolute nothingness, will laugh."⁹

For his second book, *Cartea Amăgirilor* (1936), Cioran favored night thoughts, thoughts with "a mysterious precision and troubling laconicism." However laconic it is in pieces, in aggregate *Cartea Amăgirilor* is long, diffuse, and repetitive. It contains Cioran's only extended discursions on erotic love, a subject for which he claims expertise and which, predictably for a late Romantic, leads directly to death. In his quest for the Absolute, he flirts with heroism, declares an end to philosophy (a gesture he would repeat several times), makes a trope of temptation, identifies with Job, and declares his affection for Baudelaire, Buddha, Dostoyevsky, Pascal, and Rilke. His reading was beginning to show. His praise of suffering is devout: "sickness is a revelation."¹⁰

Revelation was what he wanted. "The fact of the loss of sleep has been for me a revelation." His third book, *Lacrimi și sfinți* (1937), exalted insomnia into sanctifying pain. Involuntary sleeplessness gave Cioran the same raw sensitivity that vigilance brought to the saints. If sleeplessness makes a saint, an insomniac is well on the way to bliss. Young Cioran swooned in insomnia's "melodious dissolution." Insomnia keeps numb communion with "God's insomniacs" because saintliness is "a systematic insomnia, a heart perpetually awake." Rose of Lima nailed her hair to the wall to keep her on her feet and awake.¹¹

Cioran's fourth book, his most notorious, *Schimbarea la Față a României* (1937), was addressed to Romania and there he left it. "He remembers being born somewhere, having believed in native errors, having proposed principles and preached inflammatory stupidities. He blushes for it."¹² Cioran was too embarrassed by the book to want it translated, and later excused it as the rantings of a madman. He had written it when still in the grip of insomnia, and insomnia makes a man "another man, or not even a man."¹³

For his fifth book, *Amurgul gândurilor* (1940), Cioran ignored Europe at war and instead bewailed "pitiless insomnia," to float "on the melody of white nights." In the infinite nights of insomnia, "time creeps in the bones and unhappiness in the veins." Insomnia was "a veritable diving suit for plunging into time. One descends, one

descends.”¹⁴ Addressed *à la* Baudelaire to “mes semblables,” *Amurgul gândurilor* ingratiates with sips and morsels. By now insomnia had ceased to be merely a topic, and influenced Cioran’s choice of genres and styles. He showed no inclination to try any narrative form longer than anecdote. His dedication to pith was consistent with his preoccupation with absolutes and essences and fit the physical limits imposed by lack of sleep. He compensated for concision with an explosive vocabulary, packing the resources of slogans and blasphemy into epithets and aphorisms.

Cioran kept his sixth book, *Îndreptar pătimas*, in manuscript until it was translated into French and published as *Brevaire des vaincus* in 1993, after his reputation was established and after he ceased to publish new books. (The last five books Cioran published in France were translations of Romanian books written half a century earlier. He did not translate them himself.) Although his lyricism had begun to fade, he spent nights “drifting on melodies of insomnia” and botanizing its torments. “Seeds of leprosy sprout in you. In your flesh tormented by insomnia, stench boils that make the buds vomit sweet sap.”¹⁵ Five books earlier he had written gaily about despair and disappointment; now he knew better what these were, how they gouge, canker, and accumulate. His need for words with acid and sharp edges was greater than ever.

The Transition to French

Cioran’s French debut, *Précis de décomposition* (1949), begins as a retreat into classical skepticism, with nods to Diogenes and Pyrrho. Within a few pages Cioran drops the pretense of skeptical indifference to resume explorations of contempt, melancholy, and spite. *Précis* follows the form of *Pe culmile disperării*, a series of short titled essays typically reduced to three or four paragraphs, its sections bundled rather than connected. (Cioran had also practiced short forms in *Cartea Amăgirilor*, a fact beyond the horizon of French readers.) The themes that beset him when he wrote in Romanian marched out in long lines of polished French. Cioran again disdained philosophy, condemned history, exalted suffering, recalled Eden, vaunted solitude, and hallowed insomnia, suicide, and death. He again specified insomnia as a distinguishing trait that separates mankind from other animals. “True knowledge comes down to vigils in the darkness: the sum of our insomnias alone distinguishes us from the animals and from our kind. What rich or strange idea was ever the work of a sleeper?”¹⁶

Well aware of the stakes of publishing in French, he revised *Précis* four times, taking as much as a year between versions to read writers of the eighteenth century very carefully.¹⁷ *Précis* announces composition principles that served him well, such as “*originality is reduced to the torment of the adjective and to the suggestive impropriety of metaphor*” (his emphasis). (Already a problem, originality would vex him more and more as he recapitulated themes in later works.) The section entitled “The Second-Hand Thinker” is Cioran’s largest self-portrait: “I have loved only the elucubrations of the great invalids, the ruminations of insomnia, the flashes of an incurable fear, and the doubts intersected by sighs.” Cioran versus Cioran, a combat that characterizes his work, shine like steel in “*V’êlan contre l’êlan*” that Sanda Stolojan admired. In a section on “The Demon,” Cioran declared, “He shares—murderous tenant—my bed, my oblivions, and my insomnias; to lose him, my own loss is necessary.” He urged readers to judge thinkers by the number of their sleepless nights.¹⁸

As *Précis* nears its end, Cioran introduces his French readers to his lifelong drama: the advent of insomnia when he was seventeen. He lays down motifs he would repeat thereafter, regarding insomnia as a curse, a blessing, a personified companion, and induction to a secret society of solitary thinkers. “Each night was like the others, each night was eternal. And I felt one with all those who cannot sleep, with all those unknown brothers. Like the corrupt and the fanatical, I had a secret; like them I belonged to a clan to which everything could be excused, given, sacrificed: the clan of the sleepless.”¹⁹

Cioran invoked insomnia like a transfiguring love:

When you came, Insomnia, to shake my flesh and my pride, you who transform the childish brute, give nuance to the instincts, focus to dreams, you who in a single night grant more knowledge than days spent in repose, and, to reddened eyelids, reveal yourself a more important event than the nameless diseases or the disaster of time! You made me hear the snore of health, human beings plunged into sonorous oblivion, while my solitude engrossed the surrounding dark and became huger than the night.²⁰

Cultivated and investigated, insomnia had its uses. “To keep the mind vigilant, there is only coffee, disease, insomnia, or the obsession of death.”²¹ Cioran alerted his readers that he believed that “All inspiration proceeds from a faculty of exaggeration,” and proved that insomnia was inspirational.

You will suffer from everything, and to excess: the winds will seem gales; every touch a dagger; smiles, slaps; trifles, cataclysms. Waking may come to

an end, but its light survives within you; one does not see in the dark with impunity, one does not gather its lessons without danger; there are eyes which can no longer learn anything from the sun, and souls afflicted by nights from which they will never recover.²²

Insomnia pushed him to the limits of his endurance: "There is no idea which comforts in the dark, no system which resists those vigils. The analyses of insomnia undo all certainties. Weary of such destruction, I came to the point of telling myself: no more vacillation, sleep or die."²³

Précis won the Prix Rivarol in 1950 for the best book written by a non-French author (Elie Wiesel and Cioran's friend Piotr Rawicz were later recipients). *Précis* is Cioran's longest book in French, and has become one of his most successful, but Cioran was not happy with it. "How it deceived me! I found it murky, full of redundancies, burdened under appearances of alarms, overdone, too lyrical, and tiresomely 'Late Romantic.'" After he wrote it he "had only one ambition: to overcome lyricism, to evolve toward *prose*."²⁴

Two years later he published *Syllogismes d'amertume*, his first book of French aphorisms. His prior aphoristic collections had lyricism to spare, but lyricism was banished from *Syllogismes*. He proposed his "Models of style: the swearword, the telegram, the epitaph."²⁵ His friends worried that the book was a mistake because the form was not serious enough, but he knew what he was doing. Cioran's interest in aphorism shortened the distance between him and his beloved Pascal and begged for comparison with apothegmatic Nietzsche.

Trimming down, Cioran deflated his pretenses. Rather than rant on the heights of despair, he spoke from more common ground. "Insomnia is the only form of heroism compatible with the bed." The solitude of the insomniac who stalks the carpet and street is lost in a nasty crowd. "Who provokes catastrophes? Those possessed by restlessness, the impotent, the insomniacs, the failed artists who have worn a crown, a uniform, or a saber, and worst of all, the optimists, those who hope on other's backs." The theological phosphorus he sprinkled on his works dimly lit his unhappy nights: "Woe to the unbeliever who, confronting his insomnias, possesses only a limited stock of prayers!"²⁶ Would more prayers help? Empty religion enclosed him like a tomb, and who but the dead can sleep in a tomb?

The strife between insomnia and death was subdued in *Syllogismes*, but still there: "The desire to die was my one and only concern; to it I have sacrificed everything, even death." Asked why he did not kill

himself, Cioran answered, "The answer is found in my book *Syllogismes d'amertume*: without the idea of suicide I would certainly have killed myself." This directly echoes Nietzsche who wrote: "The thought of suicide is a powerful comfort: it helps one through many a dreadful night." Cioran later made the connection explicit: "When I was eighteen or twenty years old, I was suicidal. I had insomnia. It is the worst sickness. . . . The idea of suicide got me from one day to another."²⁷

The lean rigor Cioran learned writing *Syllogismes* benefited his essays, the genre that would fill all or most of his next four books, *La Tentation d'exister* (1956), *Histoire et utopie* (1960), *La Chute dans le temps* (1964), and *Le Mauvais D miurge* (1969). Susan Sontag likely meant to compliment *La Tentation d'exister* when she called it "lyrical," and Cioran had by no means cast off his lyrical habits in his longer prose, but he was retraining them. The informing influence of insomnia receded as Cioran took up new topics that sleeplessness could not illumine. Cioran was still conducting his affair with a dictionary, writing French with painstaking difficulty, still drawing on the reservoir of work published in Bucharest, but he was not merely translating and restating earlier thoughts, he was reconsidering them. He had pursued some subjects long enough to come to the end of them. In *Pe culmile disper rii* he dreamt of being a flower. In *La Tentation d'exister* he preferred to be a stone: "After having assumed the insomnia of the sap and the blood, the panic which traverses the animate, must we not return to somnolence and to the non-knowledge of our earliest solitudes? And while a world anterior to our waking solicits us, we envy the indifference, the perfect apoplexy of the mineral, free of the tribulations that lie in wait for the living, for all condemned souls. Sure of itself, the stone claims nothing."²⁸

Cioran spent the last, best years of his youth studying philosophy, and though he regretted it, he is respected by some as a philosopher still. Sontag places him in the tradition of Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Wittgenstein. Cioran batted down the comparison with Nietzsche, except for their common insomnia.²⁹ With better reason, Fernando Savater admired Cioran as a skeptic, and thus necessarily a renegade. Cioran was an avowed skeptic, a better skeptic than Kierkegaard was a Lutheran. Cioran had doubts about the importance, or even possibility, of philosophic innovation. A thorough skeptic distrusts skepticism, and Cioran was thorough: "Nothing slakes my thirst for doubts." His contributions to skepticism are primarily attributable to

other novelties toward which his skepticism could be directed. In *Pe culmile disperării*, he claimed, “I do not believe in anything,” in *La Tentation d'exister* he declares, “I must have Reality at any price.”³⁰

La Tentation d'exister is titled and posed as philosophy. Read against its magisterial contemporaries—Sartre’s *Critique de la raison dialectique*, or Arendt’s *The Life of the Mind*—it expresses a temper and point of view that stake nothing on hope, and for all its bitterness, it is easier to digest. Engaging big ideas like national destinies and the history of the Jews, Cioran had little opportunity to make much of his sleeplessness. He was more willing to allow that his personal failings could be generalized as ordinary foolishness. In *Histoire et utopie*, he vented the frustrations of insomnia in harmless revenge. “We spend the prime of our sleepless nights in mentally mangling our enemies, rending their entrails, wringing their veins, trampling each organ to mush, and charitably leaving them the skeleton to enjoy. Whereupon we forbear, overcome by fatigue, and drop off to sleep.”³¹

Insomnia nearly vanishes until resurfacing in the aphorisms that conclude *Le Mauvais Démon*. “During my insomnia I tell myself, as a kind of consolation, that these hours I am so conscious of I am wresting from nothingness, and that if I were asleep they would never have belonged to me, they would never even have existed.” He told himself that, but could not quite believe opinions which, because sleepless, were suspect. Because insomnia led the sleepless to cruel thoughts, it fed a vicious circle, both cause and consequence. Reviewing “insomnia’s role in history, from Caligula to Hitler,” he asked, “Is the impossibility of sleeping the consequence of cruelty? The tyrant *lies awake*—that is what defines him.”³²

Late Cioran

As Cioran grew older he noticed how age changed his mind. “At twenty we rage against the heavens and the filth they hide; then we grow tired of it.” His aphorisms reveal that he recognized how universals alter as one ages. “If, as we grow older, we scrutinize our own past at the expense of ‘problems,’ it is simply because we handle memories more readily than ideas.” Byronic outbursts were well and good when he was twenty, but now he imparted the wisdom of the cane and café. “Aging, one learns to swap one’s terrors for one’s sneers.” Great passions paled. “I observe, in terror, the diminution of my hatred of mankind, the loosening of the last link uniting me with it.” The surprise of a book entitled *Exercices d'admiration* (1986), the

model for this essay, cried out for his *Aveux et Anathèmes* (1987) to rebuff reproof that he'd gone soft. Insomnia returned in his last works like an outraged in-law, spitting grievances and contradictions.

Cioran began *De l'inconvénient d'être né* (1973) with a bitter aphorism written at three in the morning. The link between sleeplessness and aphorism reappeared in *Écartèlement* (1978): "If there is ever a moment when you must burst out laughing, it comes on those nights of intolerable discomfort, when you get up without knowing if you will write your last will or confine yourself to some wretched aphorism." In *Aveux et Anathèmes*, he reminds readers that insomnia has a golden lining: "The light of dawn is the true, primordial light. Each time I observe it, I bless my sleepless nights, which afford me an occasion to witness the spectacle of the Beginning. Yeats calls it 'sensuous'—a fine discovery, and anything but obvious."³³

The posthumous publication of Cioran's *Cahiers 1957–1972* (1997) revealed much about him that was veiled or invisible in his books and interviews. Despite his reputation as a recluse, he visited galleries, attended lectures, dined with dear friends, worried about his family, endured visits from aspiring authors, and humored admirers from abroad. Despite his published praises for the fruits of insomnia, the *Cahiers* show that for long stretches he could write nothing at all. He recorded "white nights," "excruciating nights," "dreadful nights," haunting him year after year, but he fought back. The *Cahiers* reveal that in his fifties Cioran inserted morphine suppositories to help him sleep.³⁴

Late Cioran brushed off the dust from earlier comments on insomnia and offered new ones. Again he connected the sufferings of insomniacs to those of saints, writing that insomnia required endurance "of which a martyr would be jealous." Insomnia was once again a demon: "To discern in the depths of oneself a bad principle that is not powerful enough to show itself in daylight or weak enough to keep still, a kind of insomniac demon, obsessed by all the evil it has dreamed of, by all the horrors it has not perpetrated."³⁵

Since insomnia magnifies doubts and pain, it favors exaggeration, a trope Cioran favored, too. In his last decades, insomnia was Cioran's cross; he carried it everywhere. "What is that one crucifixion compared to the daily kind any insomniac endures?"³⁶

Again he inserted insomnia as the divider between humans and other animals. "Insomnia seems to spare the animals. If we kept them from sleeping for a few weeks, a radical change would occur in their nature and their behavior. They would experience hitherto unknown

sensations, the kind that seemed to be specifically human. Let us wreck the animal kingdom, if we want it to overtake and replace us." Again and again he remarked on the insights insomnia allowed. "If there is so much discomfort and ambiguity in lucidity, it is because lucidity is the result of the poor use to which we have put our sleepless nights," he wrote. "Thoughts are generally the fruit of sleeplessness, consequently of darkness." Sustaining his penchant for dualism he wrote, "Human beings are divided into *sleepers* and *wakers*, two specimens of beings, forever heterogeneous, with nothing but their physical aspect in common." This bore reiteration: "Two kinds of mind: daylight and nocturnal. They have neither the same method nor the same morality. . . . After midnight begins the intoxication of pernicious truths."³⁷

In his seventies, apropos the insomniac F. Scott Fitzgerald, Cioran recapitulated his unhappy attachment to insomnia and insomnia's truths. "Insomnia sheds a light on us which we do not desire but to which, unconsciously, we tend. We demand it in spite of ourselves. From it, and at the expense of our health, we seek something else: dangerous, harmful truths, everything that sleep has kept us from glimpsing. Yet our insomnia liberates us from our facility and our fictions only to confront us with a blocked horizon: *it illuminates our impasses*. It dooms us while it delivers us: an ambiguity inseparable from the experience of the night."³⁸

He considered it a privileged obsession. "Impossible to spend sleepless nights and accomplish anything: if, in my youth, my parents had not *financed* my insomnias, I should surely have killed myself." Privilege beget pride. "Getting up in the middle of the night, I walked around my room with the certainty of being chosen and criminal, a double privilege natural to the sleepless, revolting or incomprehensible for the captives of daytime logic."³⁹

Insomnia opened his eyes and kept them open, to gape in wonder at abysses. "In my youth there would be weeks during which I never closed my eyes. I lived in the un-lived world. I had the sense that Time, with all its moments, had concentrated itself within me, where it culminated, where it triumphed. I moved it onward, of course, I was its promoter and bearer, its cause and its substance, and it was as an agent and accomplice that I participated in its apotheosis. When sleep departs from us, the unheard-of becomes everyday, easy: we enter it with preparations, inhabit it, wallow in it."⁴⁰ But that was youth.

In his mid-fifties Cioran wrote, "The only thing about which one

cannot speak if one has not experienced it, is insomnia." The occasional insomniac barely tastes the despair, entrapment, and vertigo of the chronically sleepless. Nicole Parfait understood Cioran's misery, noting how "insomnia feeds on the fear of insomnia, an evil without remedy."⁴¹ Insomnia is not just tossing and turning on a bad night, it is sleeplessness night after night, a brain in revolt, a body twisted by hunger for sleep, a kind of starvation. Sixty-year-old Cioran wrote: "There are nights that the most ingenious torturers could not have invented. We emerge from them in pieces, stupid, dazed, with neither memories nor anticipations, and without even knowing who we are. And it is then that the day seems useless, light pernicious, even more oppressive than the darkness." In his seventies: "Insomnia . . . enlarges the slightest vexation and converts it into a blow of fate, stands vigil over our wounds and keeps them from flagging."⁴²

Insomnia tracks Cioran's departure from lyric enthusiasm to taut prose, from the agitation of an archangel fomenting holy war to the protests of abject Job, sick, tired, and misunderstood. Cioran's lifelong battle with a God who never slept took bitter inspiration from his sleeplessness. Sassy young Cioran bragged about insomnia as a ladder down to God, a blessed affliction that brought him closer to the ecstasy of saints. When young, he thought insomnia made him heroic; when old, he understood that to be insomnia's writer hero only tickled his vanity. "He calls me in the middle of the night to tell me he can't sleep. I give him a good lecture on this variety of disaster, which is, in reality, disaster itself. At the end I am so pleased with my performance that I go back to bed feeling like a hero, proud to confront the hours separating me from daylight."⁴³ When he grew older and more susceptible to fatigue and stomach trouble, insomnia lost its charm. Then sleep was the most intelligent thing he could do.

Cioran could vaunt his insomnia heroically because he had survived it, and more than that, made something of it. That insomnia plays such a large role in his last, best books is reassuring to insomniacs who read him for solitary fellowship. There is little he says about insomnia to add to our knowledge about it, no advice that would help sleep come beyond the all too obvious: "When you waken with a start and long to get back to sleep, you must dismiss every impulse of thought, any shadow of an idea. For it is the formulated idea, the distinct idea, that is sleep's worst enemy."⁴⁴ It is advice he did not take, instead formulating idea after idea into essays and aphorisms as sharp and serrated as flint.

Cioran wrote that he clung to the world like "a ring on a skeleton's

finger.”⁴⁵ He died in 1995. Now he sleeps the sleep that kept him awake in terror and dread, the sleep that inspires insomnia, makes it miserable, and makes it dearer than sleep.

University of Illinois

NOTES

Thanks to William Kohlhaase and Warren Motte for reading an earlier version of this essay and for their suggestions for improvements. English translations are my own except as cited.

- 1 “Je n’ai jamais pu écrire autrement que dans le *cafard* des nuits d’insomnie” (*Entretiens*, 10). “Je considère que les nuits blanches sont la plus grande expérience que l’on peut faire dans la vie” (*Entretiens*, 291). “Un drame qui a duré plusieurs années et qui m’a marqué pour le reste de mes jours. Tout ce que j’ai écrit, tout ce que j’ai pensé, tout ce que j’ai élaboré, toutes mes divagations trouvent leur origine dans ce drame. C’est qu’à peu près à vingt ans j’ai perdu le sommeil et je considère cela comme le plus grand drame qui puisse arriver. . . . J’errais pendant des heures dans les rues, comme une sorte de fantôme et tout ce que j’ai écrit plus tard a été élaboré pendant ces nuits-là” (*Entretiens*, 287).
- 2 Gopnik, “The Get-Ready Man,” 172. “Pour Mallarmé, condamné, prendait-il, à veiller vingt-quatre heures dur vingt-quatre, le sommeil n’était pas un ‘vrai besoin’ mais une ‘faveur.’ Seul un grand poète pouvait se permettre le luxe d’une telle insanité” (*Aveux*, 52; *Oeuvres*, 1668–69; *Anathemas*, 111).
- 3 “Au fond, tous mes livres sont autobiographiques, mais d’une autobiographie masquée” (“Entretiens avec Lea Vergine” [1984], *Entretiens*, 129). On the misfortune of being understood, see *Exercices*, 13, 75, and 116; *Oeuvres*, 1520, 1560, and 1583; *Anathemas*, 24, 90, and 157. “Ce qu’on écrit ne donne qu’une image incomplète de ce qu’on est, pour la raison que les mots ne surgissent et ne s’animent que lorsqu’on est au plus haut ou au plus bas de soi-même” (*Ecartèlement*, 130; *Oeuvres*, 1476; *Drawn*, 129). “Règle d’or: laisser une image incomplète de soi” (*De l’inconvénient*, 206; *Oeuvres*, 1379; *Trouble*, 177). For what can be gleaned from his writings and interviews about his Romanian career, see Bollon, *Cioran l’hérétique*, 78–96.
- 4 “L’insomnie est une forme d’héroïsme, car elle transforme chaque nouvelle journée en un combat perdu d’avance” (Cioran to Liiceanu, “Continents,” 92). “L’insomnie, c’est vraiment le moment où l’on est *totalelement* seul dans l’univers. *Totalelement*. . . . Pendant ces nuits d’insomnie que j’ai compris vraiment la mystique, les états ultimes, parce que au fond ce qui est fascinant dans la mystique, c’est qu’elle conçoit les états ultimes, il n’y a plus rien après que la folie. Vous êtes en pleine nuit, tout a foutu le camp, mais ce Dieu qui n’en est pas un surgit, et on a l’impression d’un presence mystérieuse” (“Entretien avec Léo Gillet” [1982], *Entretiens*, 89).
- 5 *Cahiers*, 360. By comparison with Cioran and his chosen precedents, the selections on insomnia in Joyce Carol Oates’s *Night Walks* are warm milk.
- 6 “Pour sauver le mot ‘grandeur’ du pompiérisme, il ne faudrait s’en servir qu’à propos de insomnie ou de l’hérésie” (*De l’inconvénient*, 101; *Oeuvres*, 1320; *Trouble*, 81). “Mes états habituels, disons, prédominants: pitié, dégoût, désolation, horreur, nostalgia, regrets en série” (*Cahiers*, 357).

- 7 “Je déambulais la nuit par les rues, tel un fantôme. C’est alors que m’est venue l’idée de hurler mon désarroi. Ainsi naquit *Sur les cimes du désespoir*” (“Entretiens avec Gerd Bergfleth” [1985], *Entretiens*, 147).
- 8 “Sur les cimes du désespoir, nul n’a plus droit au sommeil” (*Cimes*, 45; *Oeuvres*, 44; *Heights* 37). “Je me demande si l’homme ne serait pas un animal inapte au sommeil” (*Cimes*, 92; *Oeuvres*, 77; *Heights*, 85). “La morte elle-même, sans cesser d’être hideuse, surgit dans cette immensité nocturne, dont la transparence évanescence, quoique illusoire, n’en est pas moins musicale” (*Cimes*, 90; *Oeuvres*, 76; *Heights*, 83). “*Le sentiment le plus pervers de tous est celui de la mort. Et dire qu’il est des gens que l’obsession perverse de la mort empêche de dormir! Comme j’aimerais perdre toute conscience de moi-même et de ce monde!*” (*Cimes*, 22; *Oeuvres*, 28; *Heights*, 17).
- 9 “Dans ma jeunesse, en Roumanie, le dérangement mental, l’insomnie, les singularités, la mélancholie, le génie et même le talent, si insignifiant fût-il,—on les expliquait invariablement soit par la masturbation, soit par la syphilis” (*Cahiers*, 508). “Je suis la contradiction absolue, le paroxysme des antinomies et la limite des tensions; en moi tout est possible, car je suis l’homme qui rira au moment suprême, à l’agonie finale, à l’heure de la dernière tristesse” (*Cimes*, 93; *Oeuvres*, 78; *Heights*, 85).
- 10 “J’ai commencé le combat ainsi: ou moi, ou l’existence. . . Il n’y a de pensées que dans la nuit. Là, elles nont une précision mystérieuse et un laconisme troublant” (*Lourres*, 175; *Oeuvres*, 222); “la maladie est une révélation” (*Lourres*, 195; *Oeuvres*, 235).
- 11 “Le fait de perdre le sommeil a été pour moi une révélation” (Cioran to Liiceanu, “Continents,” 92). “Dissolution musicale” (*Oeuvres*, 298; *Tears*, 46). God’s insomniacs, “systematic insomnia,” and Rose of Lima were deleted from the French translation (*Tears*, 10, 48, 60, 95). For the French translation of *Lacrimi și sfinți* Cioran radically abridged and rearranged the text, since he already plundered the text for parts of *Précis de décomposition*, *Syllogismes d’Amertume*, and *Écartèlement*.
- 12 “Il se rappelle être né quelque part, avoir cru aux erreurs natales, proposé des principes et prôné de bêtises enfammées. Il en rougit” (*Précis*, 91; *Oeuvres*, 635; *Short History*, 61).
- 13 “Vous devez bien savoir ce que c’est qu’une insomnie, on est un autre homme, on n’est pas même un homme” (“Entretien avec Fritz J. Raddatz” [1986], *Entretiens*, 174–75).
- 14 “impitoyable insomnie,” “la mélodie des nuits blanches” (*Crépuscule*, 147, 251; *Oeuvres*, 434, 502); “Dans les nuits infinies, le temps monte dans les os et le malheur croupit dans les veines. Aucun sommeil n’arrête la moisissure du temps, aucune aurore n’adoucit la fermentation du tourment” (*Crépuscule*, 162; *Oeuvres*, 444); “un véritable scaphandrier du temps. On descend, on descend” (*Crépuscule*, 22; *Oeuvres*, 346).
- 15 “Voguant sur les mélodies de l’insomnie” (*Brévaire*, 59; *Oeuvres*, 541); “Des grains de lèpre lèvent en toi. Dans ta chair rongée par l’insomnie, bouillent des puanteurs qui font vomir aux bourgeons la douce sève” (*Brévaire*, 85; *Oeuvres*, 556).
- 16 “Le véritable savoir se réduit aux veilles dans les ténèbres: la somme de nos insomnies nous distingue seule des bêtes et de nos semblables. Quelle idée riche ou étrange fut jamais le fruit d’un dormeur?” (*Précis*, 206; *Oeuvres*, 708; *Short History*, 147); see also *Précis*, 40; *Oeuvres*, 601–02; *Short History*, 25.
- 17 On his four versions, see *Entretiens*, 45 and 73.

- 18 “*L’originalité se réduit à la torture de l’adjectif et à une impropriété suggestive de la métaphore*” (*Précis*, 131; *Oeuvres*, 663; *Short History*, 90). “N’ai-je aimé que les élucubrations des grands malades, les ruminations de l’insomnie, les éclairs d’une frayeur incurable et les doutes traversés de soupirs” (*Précis*, 137; *Oeuvres*, 666; *Short History*, 95). Stolojan, *Au balcon*, 188–89. “Il partage—locataire assassin—ma couche, mes oublis et mes veilles; pour le perdre, ma perte m’est nécessaire” (*Précis*, 99; *Oeuvres*, 641; *Short History*, 66). On confronting thinkers by their “white nights,” *Précis*, 137; *Oeuvres*, 666; *Short History*, 95.
- 19 “Chaque nuit était pareille aux autres, chaque nuit était éternelle. Et je me sentais solidaire de tous ceux qui ne peuvent dormir, de tous ces frères inconnus. Comme les vicieux et les fanatiques, j’avais un secret; comme eux, j’eusse constitué un clan, à qui tout excuser, tout donner, tout sacrifier: le clan de sans-sommeil” (*Précis*, 236; *Oeuvres*, 727; *Short History*, 169–70).
- 20 “Lorsque tu vins, Insomnie, secouer ma chair et mon orgueil, toi qui changes la brute juvénile, en nuances les instincts, en attises les rêves, toi qui, en une seule nuit, dispenses plus de savoir que les jours conclus dans le repos, et, à des paupières endolories, te découvres événement plus important que les maladies sans nom ou les désastres du temps! Tu me fis entendre le ronflement de la santé, les humains plongés dans l’oubli sonore, tandis que ma solitude englobait le noir d’alentour et devenait plus vaste que lui” (*Précis*, 236; *Oeuvres*, 726; *Short History*, 169).
- 21 “Pour tenir l’esprit en éveil, il n’y a pas que le café, la maladie, l’insomnie ou l’obsession de la mort” (*Précis*, 234; *Oeuvres*, 725; *Short History*, 168).
- 22 “Toute inspiration procède d’une faculté d’exagération” (*Précis*, 97; *Oeuvres*, 639; *Short History*, 65). “Vous souffrirez de tout, et démesurément: les brises vous paraîtront des bourrasques; les attouchements, des poignards; les sourires, des gifles; les bagatelles, des cataclysmes. — C’est que les veilles peuvent cesser; mais leur lumière survit en vous: on ne voit pas impunément dans les ténèbres, on n’en recueille pas sans danger l’enseignement; il y a des yeux qui ne pourront plus rien apprendre du soleil, et des âmes malades de nuits don’t elles ne guériront jamais” (*Précis*, 237; *Oeuvres*, 727; *Short History*, 170).
- 23 “Mais point d’idée qui console dans le noir, point de système qui résiste aux veilles. Les analyses de l’insomnie défont les certitudes. Las d’une telle destruction, j’en étais à me dire: plus d’hésitation: dormir ou mourir” (*Précis*, 237; *Oeuvres*, 727; *Short History*, 170).
- 24 “Combien il me déçoit! Je le trouve emmerdant, plein de redites, lourd sous apparences alertes, ‘dépassé,’ trop lyrique, et fâcheusement ‘Spätromantik’” (*Cahiers*, 318); “Depuis que j’ai écrit le *Précis*, je n’ai eu qu’une ambition: surmonter le lyrisme, évoluer vers la *prose*” (*Cahiers*, 288). See also *Cahiers*, 417.
- 25 “Modèles de style: le juron, le télégramme et l’épithète” (*Syllogismes*, 15; *Oeuvres*, 748; *Gall*, 8).
- 26 “L’insomnie est la seule forme d’héroïsme compatible avec le lit” (*Syllogismes*, 172; *Oeuvres*, 809; *Gall*, 141). “Qui provoque les catastrophes? Les possédés de la bougeotte, les impuissants, les insomniaques, les artistes ratés qui one porté couronne, sabre ou uniforme, et, plus qu’eux tous, les optimistes, ceux qui *espèrent* sur le dos des autres” (*Syllogismes*, 109; *Oeuvres*, 784; *Gall*, 62). “Malheur à l’incroyant qui, face à ses insomnies, ne dipose que d’un stock réduit de prières!” (*Syllogismes*, 109; *Oeuvres*, 784; *Gall*, 88).
- 27 “Le désir de mourir fut mon seul et unique souci; je lui ai tout sacrifié, même la mort” (*Syllogismes*, 93; *Oeuvres*, 777, *Gall*, 74). “La réponse se trouve dans mon livre *Syllogisme d’amertume*. sans l’idée du suicide je me serais certainement tué”

- (“Entretien avec Fritz J. Raddatz” [1986], *Entretiens*, 175). “Sans l’idée du suicide, je me serais tué depuis toujours” (*Syllogismes*, 87; *Oeuvres*, 775; *Gall*, 69). “Der Gedanke an den Selbstermord ist ein starkes Trostmittel: mit ihm kommt man gut über manche böse Nacht hinweg” (Nietzsche, *Jenseits von Gut und Böse*, §157). “Quand j’avais dix-huit ou vingt ans, j’étais suicidaire. J’avais des insomnies. C’est la pire maladie. . . . L’idée de suicide me passa d’un jour à l’autre” (“Entretien avec Benjamin Ivry” [1989], *Entretiens*, 213).
- 28 Sontag, “Introduction” to *The Temptation to Exist*, 11. For Cioran’s wish to be a flower see *Oeuvres*, 65; *Heights*, 68. “Après avoir assumé l’insomnie de la sève et du sang, la panique qui traverse l’animé, ne devrions-nous pas revenir à l’assoupissement et au savoir nul de la plus ancienne de nos solitudes? Et tandis que nous requiert un monde antérieur aux veilles, nous envions l’indifférence, l’apoplexie parfaite du minéral, indemne des tribulations qui guettent les vivants, tous condamnés à l’âme. Sûre d’elle, la pierre ne revendique rien” (*Tentation*, 180–81; *Oeuvres*, 934; *Temptation*, 177).
- 29 Sontag, “Introduction” to *The Temptation to Exist*, 11. For Cioran on Sontag, see his “Entretien avec Fritz J. Raddatz” [1986], *Entretiens*, 167–68. For Cioran, suffering from insomnia “pareil au Nietzsche,” see “Entretien avec Gerd Bergfleth” (1985), *Entretiens*, 151, and Cioran’s remark to Fritz J. Raddatz that “Il y a, si j’ose dire, une ressemblance de temperament entre Nietzsche et moi: nous sommes l’un et l’autre des insomniaques,” *Entretiens*, 167.
- 30 Savater, *Ensayo sobre Cioran*, 62. “Le scepticisme est le sadisme des âmes ulcérées” (*Histoire*, 132; *Oeuvres*, 1034; *History*, 79). “Rien n’étanche ma soif de doutes” (*Syllogismes*, 33; *Oeuvres*, 755; *Gall*, 23). “Je n’ai rien en quoi je puisse croire” (*Oeuvres*, 52; *Heights*, 50); “Il me faut du réel à tout prix” (*Tentation*, 229; *Oeuvres*, 966; *Temptation*, 217).
- 31 “Nous employons le plus clair de nos veilles à dépecer en pensée nos ennemis, à leur arracher les yeux et les entrailles, à presser et vider leurs veines, à piétiner et broyer chacun de leurs organes, tout en leur laissant par charité la jouissance de leur squelette. Cette concession faite, nous nous calmons, et, recrus de fatigue, glissons dans le sommeil” (*Histoire*, 99; *Oeuvres*, 1018; *History*, 57).
- 32 “Pendant l’insomnie, je me dis, en guise de consolation, que ces heures dont je prends conscience, je les arrache au néant, et que, si je dormais, elles ne m’auraient jamais appartenu, elles n’auraient même, jamais existé” (*Démiurge*, 159; *Oeuvres*, 1247; *New Gods*, 106); “Le rôle de l’insomnie dans l’histoire, de Caligula à Hitler. L’impossibilité de dormir est-elle cause ou conséquence de la cruauté? Le tyran veille—c’est ce qui le définit en propre” (*Démiurge*, 137; *Oeuvres*, 1235; *New Gods*, 91); see also *Cahiers*, 146, and *Crépuscule*, 228; *Oeuvres*, 487.
- 33 “S’il est un instant où l’on devrait pouffer de rire, c’est lorsque, sous l’effet d’un intolérable malaise nocturne, on se lève sans savoir si on rédigera ses dernières volontés ou si l’on se bornera à quelque misérable aphorisme” (*Écartèlement*, 77–78; *Oeuvres*, 1448; *Drawn and Quartered*, 74). “La lumière de l’aube est la vraie lumière, la lumière primordiale. Chaque fois que je la contemple, je bénis mes mauvaises nuits qui m’offrent l’occasion d’assister au spectacle du Commencement. Yeats la qualifie de ‘lascive.’—Belle trouvaille inévidente” (*Aveux*, 57; *Oeuvres*, 1672; *Anathemas*, 115).
- 34 *Cahiers*, 283.
- 35 “Vous avez beau avoir subi des veilles dont un martyr serait jaloux” (*Aveux*, 89; *Oeuvres*, 1691; *Anathemas*, 146). “Déceler au plus profond de soi un mauvais principe qui n’est pas assez fort pour se manifester au grand jour ni assez faible pour se tenir tranquille, quelque chose comme un démon insomniaque, hanté par

- tout le mal dont il a rêvé, par toutes les horreurs qu'il n'a pas perpétrées" (*Écartèlement*, 124; *Oeuvres*, 1473; *Drawn*, 123).
- 36 "Qu'est-ce qu'une crucifixion unique, auprès de celle, quotidienne, qu'endure l'insomniaque" (*De l'inconvénient*, 22; *Oeuvres*, 1279; *Trouble*, 14).
- 37 "L'insomnie semble épargner les bêtes. Si nous les empêchions de dormir pendant quelques semaines, un changement radical surviendrait dans leur nature et leur comportement. Elles éprouveraient des sensations inconnues jusqu'alors, et qui passaient pour nous appartenir en propre. Détraquons le règne animal, si nous voulons qu'il nous rattrape et nous remplace" (*Aveux*, 52; *Oeuvres*, 1669; *Anathemas*, 111). "S'il entre dans la lucidité tant d'ambiguïté et de trouble, c'est qu'elle est le résultat du mauvais usage que nous avons fait de nos veilles" (*De l'inconvénient*, 16; *Oeuvres*, 1275; *Trouble*, 9). "Les pensées sont en général fruit de veilles, partant d'obscurité" (*De l'inconvénient*, 140; *Oeuvres*, 1342; *Trouble*, 116); "les humains se partagent en dormeurs et en veilleurs, deux spécimens d'êtres, à jamais hétérogènes, qui n'ont en commun que leur aspect physique" (*Aveux*, 92; *Oeuvres*, 1693; *Anathemas*, 149). "Deux sortes d'esprits: diurnes et nocturnes. Ils n'ont ni la même méthode ni la même éthique. . . . Après minuit commence la griserie des vérités pernicieuses" (*De l'inconvénient*, 26; *Oeuvres*, 1281; *Trouble*, 17).
- 38 "L'insomnie nous dispense une lumière que nous ne souhaitons pas, mais à laquelle, inconsciemment, nous tendons. Nous la réclamons malgré nous, contre nous. À travers elle—et aux dépens de notre santé—nous cherchons autre chose, des vérités dangereuses, nuisibles, tout ce que le sommeil nous a empêché d'entrevoir. Cependant nos insomnies ne nous libèrent de nos facilités et de nos fictions, que pour nous mettre devant un horizon bouché: elles éclairent nos impasses. Elles nous condamnent tandis qu'elles nous délivrent: équivoque inséparable de l'expérience de la nuit" (*Exercices*, 181; *Oeuvres*, 1614–15; *Anathemas*, 235–36).
- 39 "Il est impossible de passer des nuits blanches et d'exercer un métier: si, dans ma jeunesse, mes parents n'avaient pas financé mes insomnies, je me serais sûrement tué" (*Aveux*, 17; *Oeuvres*, 1648; *Anathemas*, 9); see also *Entretiens*, 87. "Debout, au milieu de la nuit, je tournais dans ma chambre avec la certitude d'être un élu et un scélérat, double privilège, naturel pour celui qui veille, révoltant ou incompréhensible pour les captifs de la logique diurne" (*L'inconvénient*, 233; *Oeuvres*, 1392; *Trouble*, 200).
- 40 "Dans ma jeunesse il m'arrivait de ne pas fermer l'œil pendant des semaines. Je vivais dans le jamais vécu, j'avais le sentiment que le temps de toujours, avec l'ensemble de ses instants, s'était ramassé et concentré en moi, où il culminait, où il triomphait. Je le faisais, bien entendu, avancer, j'en étais le promoteur et le porteur, la cause et la substance, et c'est en agent et en complice que je participais à son apothéose. Dès que le sommeil s'en va, l'inoui devient quotidien, facile: on y entre sans préparatifs, on s'y installe, on s'y vautre" (*De l'inconvénient*, 131–32; *Oeuvres*, 1337; *Trouble*, 109).
- 41 "La seule chose dont on ne puisse parler si on ne l'a pas connue, c'est l'insomnie" (*Cahiers*, 283). "L'insomnie, se nourrissant de la crainte de l'insomnie, est un mal sans recours" (Parfait, *Cioran ou le défi de l'être*, 25).
- 42 "Il est des nuits que le plus ingénieux des tortionnaires n'aurait pu inventer. On en sort en miettes, stupide, égaré, sans souvenirs ni pressentiments, et sans même savoir qui on est. Et c'est alors que le jour paraît inutile, la lumière pernicieuse, et plus oppressante encore que les ténèbres" (*De l'inconvénient*, 42; *Oeuvres*, 1289; *Trouble*, 31). See also *Cahiers*, 76. "L'insomnie . . . grossit la moindre contrariété et la convertit en coup du sort, veille sur nos blessures et les empêche de dépérir" (*Aveux*, 81; *Oeuvres*, 1686; *Anathemas*, 140).

- 43 “Il m’appelle en pleine nuit pour m’annoncer qu’il ne peut dormir. Je lui fais un véritable cours sur cette variété de malheur qui est, en réalité, le malheur même. À la fin je suis si content de ma performance que je regagne mon lit comme un héros, fier de braver les heures qui me séparent du jour” (*Aveux*, 100; *Oeuvres*, 1697; *Anathemas*, 161–62). “*Dormir*: la chose la plus intelligente qu’on puisse faire” (*Cahiers*, 451).
- 44 “Quand on se réveille en sursaut, si on veut se rendormir, il faut écarter toute velléité de pensée, toute ébauche d’idée. Car c’est l’idée formulée, l’idée nette qui est le pire ennemi du sommeil” (*Aveux*, 139; *Oeuvres*, 1720; *Anathemas*, 199).
- 45 “J’ai traîné tous les oui dans la boue, et ne colle pas plus au monde que l’anneau au doigt du squelette” (*Tentation*, 207; *Oeuvres*, 952; *Temptation*, 199).

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