

Emil Cioran

THE BEAUTY OF FLAMES

Ten Essays



APOPHASIS

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Emil Cioran

Translated from the Romanian
by Ilinca Zarifopol-Johnston

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APOPHASIS

THE BEAUTY OF FLAMES

The beauty of flames lies in their strange play, beyond all proportion and harmony. Their diaphanous flare symbolizes at once grace and tragedy, innocence and despair, sadness and voluptuousness. Their burning transparence has something of the lightness of great purifications. I wish the fiery transcendence would carry me up and throw me into a sea of flames, where, consumed by their delicate and insidious tongues, I would die an ecstatic death. The beauty of flames creates the illusion of a pure, sublime death similar to the light of dawn. Immaterial, death in flames is like a burning of light, graceful wings. Do only butterflies die in flames? What about those devoured by the flames within them?

THE RETURN TO CHAOS

Let us return to original chaos! Let us imagine the primordial din, the original vortex! Let us throw ourselves into the whirlwind which has preceded the creation of form. Let our being tremble with effort and madness in the fiery abyss! Let everything be wiped out so that, surrounded by confusion and disequilibrium, we participate fully in the general delirium, retracing our way back from cosmos to chaos, from form to swirling gyres. The disintegration of the world is creation in reverse: an apocalypse upside down but sprung from similar impulses. Nobody desires to return to chaos without having first experienced an apocalyptic vertigo.

How great my terror and my joy at the thought of being dragged into the vortex of initial chaos, that pandemonium of paradoxical symmetry — the unique geometry of chaos, devoid of sense or form!

In every whirlwind hides a potential for form, just as in chaos there is a potential cosmos. Let me possess an infinite number of unrealized, potential forms! Let everything vibrate in me with the universal anxiety of the beginning, just awakening from nothingness!

I can only live at the beginning or the end of this world.

THE FLIGHT FROM THE CROSS

I do not like prophets any more than I like fanatics who have never doubted their mission. I measure prophets' value by their ability to doubt, the frequency of their moments of lucidity. Doubt makes them truly human, but their doubt is more impressive than that of ordinary people. Everything else in them is nothing but absolutism, preaching, moral didacticism. They want to teach others, bring them salvation, show them the truth, change their destinies, as if their truths were better than those of the others. Only doubt can distinguish prophets from maniacs. But isn't it too late for them to doubt? The one who thought he was the son of God only doubted at the last moment. Christ really doubted not on the mountain but on the cross. I am convinced that on the cross Jesus envied the destiny of anonymous men and, had he been able to, would have retreated to the most obscure corner of the world, where no one would have begged him for hope or salvation. I can imagine

him alone with the Roman soldiers, imploring them to take him off the cross, pull out the nails, and let him escape to where the echo of human suffering would no longer reach him. Not because he would suddenly have ceased to believe in his mission — he was too enlightened to be a skeptic — but because death for others is harder to bear than one's own death. Jesus suffered crucifixion because he knew that his ideas could triumph only through his own sacrifice.

People say: for us to believe in you, you must renounce everything that is yours and also yourself. They want your death as a warranty for the authenticity of your beliefs. Why do they admire works written in blood? Because such works spare them any suffering while at the same time preserving the illusion of suffering. They want to see the blood and tears behind your lines. The crowd's admiration is sadistic.

Had Jesus not died on the cross, Christianity would not have triumphed. Mortals doubt everything except death. Christ's death was for them the ultimate proof of the validity of Christian principles. Jesus could have easily

escaped crucifixion or could have given in to the Devil! He who has not made a pact with the Devil should not live, because the Devil symbolizes life better than God. If I have any regrets, it is that the Devil has rarely tempted me . . . but then neither has God loved me. Christians have not yet understood that God is farther removed from them than they are from Him. I can very well imagine God being bored with men who only know how to beg, exasperated by the triviality of his creation, equally disgusted with both heaven and earth. And I see him taking flight into nothingness, like Jesus escaping from the cross. . . . What would have happened if the Roman soldiers had listened to Jesus' plea, had taken him off the cross and let him escape? He would certainly not have gone to some other part of the world to preach but only to die, alone, without people's sympathy and tears. And even supposing that, because of his pride, he did not beg for freedom, I find it difficult to believe that this thought did not obsess him. He must

have truly believed that he was the son of God. His belief notwithstanding, he could not have helped doubting or being gripped by the fear of death at the moment of his supreme sacrifice. On the cross, Jesus had moments when, if he did not doubt that he was the son of God, he regretted it. He accepted death uniquely so that his ideas would triumph.

It may very well be that Jesus was simpler than I imagine him, that he had fewer doubts and fewer regrets, for he doubted his divine origin only at his death. We, on the other hand, have so many doubts and regrets that not one among us would dare dream that he is the son of a god. I hate Jesus for his preachings, his morality, his ideas, and his faith. I love him for his moments of doubt and regret, the only truly tragic ones in his life, though neither the most interesting nor the most painful, for if we had to judge from their suffering, how many before him would also be entitled to call themselves sons of God!

TRANSFIGURATION OF BANALITY

Since I will not die right away, nor regain my innocence, going through the same routine motions every day is sheer madness. Banality must be overcome at all costs and the way cleared for transfiguration. How sad to see men bypass themselves, neglect their own destiny instead of rekindling the light they carry within them or getting drunk on their abysmal darkness! Why not wrench from suffering all that it can yield, why not tend a smile until we have reached all the way back to its vital springs? We all have hands, yet no one thinks of using them to convey absolute expression through their delicate movements. We admire hands in paintings, we love to talk about their meaning, but if they must express our own inner tragedy, they remain stiff and awkward. To have a spectral hand, transparent like an immaterial reflection, nervous, tense as if in a final spasm . . . ! Or, if not, then a heavy, threatening hand, cruel and hard! Hands should tell us more than words or sighs, a smile or a prayer. The gift of absolute expression, offspring of

continuous transfiguration, will transform us into a center of light more powerful than the sun itself if not only our hands but also our face and everything else that is stamped with our individuality will participate in it. The presence of some people means for others overexcitement, lassitude, or illumination. Such people know neither void nor discontinuity, but only the communion through which heights become equally pleasurable and vertiginous.

I FEEL IN ME a strange restlessness, growing and dilating like a regret, taking roots like sadness. Is it fear of my problematic future, or is it fear of my own anxiety? I am overcome by anxiety about my own fatality. Could I go on living with these obsessions? Is all of this life or an absurd dream? In me is wrought the grotesque fantasy of a demon. The demonic character of this world is concentrated in my anxiety — a mingling of regrets, twilight dreams, sadness, and unreality. It will not be the perfume of flowers that I scatter on the earth, but smoke and dust as after a great cataclysm!

THE BURDEN OF SADNESS

Is there another sadness besides that of death? Definitely not, because true sadness is black, devoid of charms, and dreamless. There is greater weariness in sadness than in melancholy, and it drives one to disgust with life, to acute depression. The difference between sadness and pain: the former is dominated by reflexivity while the latter is weighed down by the fatal materiality of sensation. They both lead only to death, never to love or erotic exaltation. Eros means unmediated living in the secret necessity of life which — given the essential innocence of any erotic experience — creates the illusion of liberty. To be sad or suffering, on the other hand, means to be incapable of participating directly and organically in the flux of life. Sadness as well as suffering reveals existence for us, for only through them do we acquire consciousness of our separation from the objective world, that anxiety which confers a tragic character upon our existence.

AN INDIRECT ANIMAL

All men have the same defect: they wait to live, for they have not the courage of each instant. Why not invest enough passion in each moment to make it an eternity? We all learn to live only when we no longer have anything to expect, because we do not live in the living present but in a vague and distant future. We should not wait for anything except the immediate promptings of the moment. We should wait without the consciousness of time. There's no salvation without the immediate. But man is a being who no longer knows the immediate. He is an indirect animal.

LOVE IN BRIEF

Love of mankind springing from suffering resembles wisdom sprung from misfortune. In both cases, the roots are rotten and the sources poisoned. Only spontaneous love flowing with sincere generosity and self-abnegation can fertilize the soul of others. Love born in suffering hides too many tears and sighs not to have its rays stained by a bitter clarity. There is too much torment, renunciation, and anxiety in this love for it to be anything but infinite forbearance. You forgive everything, you accept everything, you justify everything. But is this still love? How can one love when one is removed from everything? This kind of love reveals the void of a soul suspended between all and nothing just as becoming a Don Juan is the only remedy for a broken heart. As for Christianity, it knows no love: it only knows forbearance or compassion, allusions to love rather than love itself.

FACING SILENCE

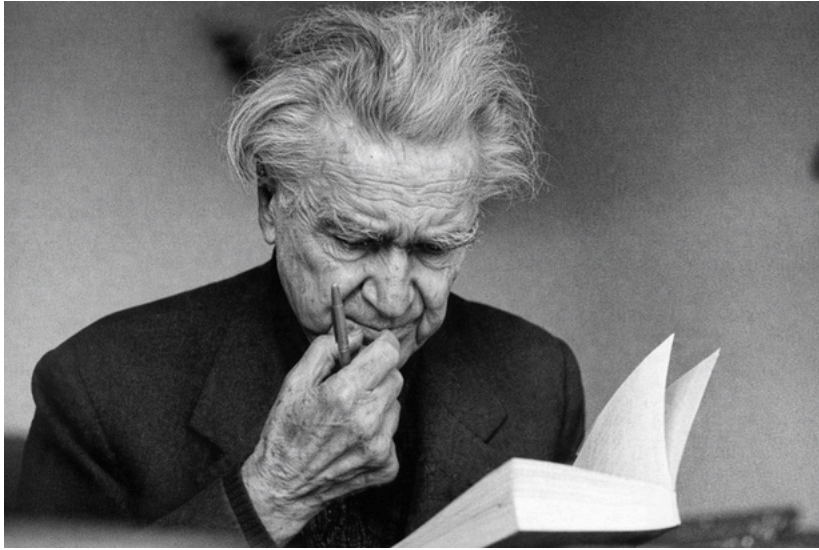
Once you have come to set great store by silence, you have hit upon a fundamental expression of life in the margins. The reverence for silence of great solitaires and founders of religions has far deeper roots than we think. Men's presence must have been unendurable and their complex problems disgusting for one not to care about anything except silence. Chronic fatigue predisposes to a love of silence, for in it words lose their meaning and strike the ear with the hollow sonority of mechanical hammers; concepts weaken, expressions lose their force, the word grows barren as the wilderness. The ebb and flow of the outside is like a distant monotonous murmur unable to stir interest or curiosity. Then you will think it useless to express an opinion, to take a stand, to make an impression; the noises you have renounced increase the anxiety of your soul. After having struggled madly to solve all problems, after having suffered on the heights of despair, in the supreme hour of revelation, you will find that the only answer, the only reality, is silence.

THE PAUCITY OF WISDOM

I hate wise men because they are lazy, cowardly, and prudent. To the philosophers' equanimity, which makes them indifferent to both pleasure and pain, I prefer devouring passions. The sage knows neither the tragedy of passion, nor the fear of death, nor risk and enthusiasm, nor barbaric, grotesque, or sublime heroism. He talks in proverbs and gives advice. He does not live, feel, desire, wait for anything. He levels down all the incongruities of life and then suffers the consequences. So much more complex is the man who suffers from limitless anxiety. The wise man's life is empty and sterile, for it is free from contradiction and despair. An existence full of irreconcilable contradictions is so much richer and creative. The wise man's resignation springs from inner void, not inner fire. I would rather die of fire than of void.

NONSENSE

When the ticking of a watch breaks the silence of eternity, arousing you out of serene contemplation, how can you help resenting the absurdity of time, its march into the future, and all the nonsense about evolution and progress? Why go forward, why live in time? The sudden revelation of time at such moments, conferring upon it a crushing preeminence otherwise nonexistent, is the fruit of a strong contempt for life, an unwillingness to go on. If this revelation happens at night, the sensation of unutterable loneliness is added to the absurdity of time, because then, far from the crowd, you face time alone, the two of you caught in an irreducible duality. Time, in this nocturnal desolation, is no longer populated with actions and objects: it becomes an ever-growing nothingness, a dilating void, a threat from beyond. Silence resounds then with the mournful clamor of bells knelling for a dead universe. Only he who has separated time from existence lives this drama: fleeing the latter, he is crushed by the former. And he feels how time, like death, gains ground.



Emil Cioran (1911-1995) was a Romanian-born French essayist and philosopher. Samuel Beckett wrote to Cioran saying of his book *Démiurge*, "in your ruins I find shelter." And indeed, a Cioran text is nothing if not language, value, and meaning in ruins. Nonetheless, in this booklet, some readers may discover essays permeated by a strange aliveness, one that has been sensitized by life's seemingly inevitable failures and disappointments.

I would rather die of fire than of void.

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