

# DEATH WITHOUT DEATH: KIERKEGAARD AND CIORAN ABOUT AGONY<sup>1</sup>

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***Abstract:** The following paper is concerned with the description of “agony” at Kierkegaard and Cioran. Taking into consideration that both authors have common traits as marginal philosophers and advocates of a mixture of existentialism and nihilism, I have compared Kierkegaard’s notion of “sickness unto death” (a powerful term, that combines the prestige of several other keywords such as “torture”, “death”, “anxiety” and so on) with Cioran’s description of “agony” from his first Romanian work, *On The Heights of Despair*. Both Kierkegaard and Cioran, with their emphasis on existential death seem to make a powerful case against Schopenhauer’s equation that pain and death are opposed, therefore imagining damnation to an immanent hell for the modern subject.*

***Keywords:** agony, existentialism, nihilism, immanent hell.*

## Two marginal philosophers

The visionary Danish thinker Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) anticipated in his 19<sup>th</sup> century oeuvre almost all the tenets of existentialism. One can say that most of the existential philosophers (Lev Shestov, Karl Jaspers, Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, Simone de Beauvoir, Paul Tillich, and others) have a deep connection with Kierkegaardian issues such as: anxiety, death, religious authenticity, spiritual freedom or the absurd. On the other hand, Emil Cioran (1911-1995) is arguably the greatest proponent of nihilism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The Romanian writer, like his Danish forerunner, can be described as crucified between a series of

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contradictions: he is a poet disguised in a philosopher, a mystic under the guise of anarchism and rebellion, a formidable stylist who transfigures his screams and writes with his blood, a musician describing the vibrations of impending apocalypse, a suicidal in passionate love with life. Not unlike Nietzsche, and even much more than him, Cioran uses philosophical essays and aphorisms to express his extremely pessimistic doctrine. Because he is writing at the margins of philosophy, his work is more accessible and perhaps more attractive. His philosophical “journal” can be read as a Post-Romantic poem or as a very intimate novel describing the intense horror of existence. One can compare the works of S. Kierkegaard and E. Cioran from at least three points of views:

a) Kierkegaard’s philosophy is oriented towards the religious sphere and Cioran’s work can be read as a Post-Nietzschean protest against religion. However, this protest is combined with a subterranean mystical approach, which makes his nihilism more ambiguous. His special type of atheism does not resemble the materialistic philosophy of French Enlightenment or Sartre’s critique of religious experience. The distinguishable heretical tone (we have here Gnostic, Catharist and Manichean influences) introduces a religious dualism, exploring the conflict between two enemies, who both share positive and negative traits. On one hand, we can follow the confrontation between the evil Demiurge and the Gnostic hidden God, who refrains from the creatural appetite. On the other, we can observe the duality of a Nihilist transgressor, who wants to annihilate creation and pierce the almighty divine eye (imagined by Romantics such as Jean Paul). From the reverse point of view of divinity, this duality highlights the competition between the authoritarian creator and his rival, and we should immediately note that divinity seems more than able to obliterate any transgression and to discourage any attempt to predefined order. In other words, Kierkegaard builds his entire work emphasizing the supremacy of the religious sphere, while Cioran, as “a believer who couldn’t believe” (Zarifopol-Johnston 2009, 185) is a “retired” anti-theist<sup>2</sup>.

b) Kierkegaard uses the Hegelian method of dialectic to investigate new subjects in philosophy (for instance anxiety and despair) and his entire oeuvre stands at the interdisciplinary confluence of philosophy, psychology, theology and literary criticism. Alastair Hannay calls him a “paraphilosopher” (Hannay 1982, 10-12), stressing upon the marginality of his philosophical position and the novelty of his approach. And if we read Cioran, we would consider that Nietzsche and Kierkegaard excel through discipline and systematization. It is highly difficult to isolate and deconstruct Cioran’s

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<sup>2</sup> If the atheist were indifferent towards a God *who never existed*, the anti-theist would be resentful and spiteful in a universe constructed *after the death of God*.

ideas, because his entire work (especially his youth writings) seem to emulate the literary anarchism of Lautréamont or Marinetti. “He often reads like a Nietzsche filtered through Oscar Wilde” (Zarifopol-Johnston 2009, 72), writes one of his first biographers. If the Danish writer were “a kind of philosopher” or even “a paraphilosopher”, Cioran would be a philosopher who writes against philosophy, a sort of *anti-philosopher*.

c) While Kierkegaard is considered to be the first existentialist, Cioran can be seen either as a marginal existentialist, or a nihilist in the “genealogical” line of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche. We can say about his work the same thing Terry Eagleton affirms about Samuel Beckett’s writings, that it oscillates between modernism and postmodernism. Keeping in mind that Cioran is a *marginal existentialist*, one can find in his work *four types of existentialism*: “the defiant German existentialism”, “the derivated French existentialism, which Cioran despised as a simple vogue”, “the ailing Crypto-Romanian and Dacian-Bogomilic existentialism” and the “Asian non-existentialism” (Sloterdijk 2011, 124).

### Agony as a deathless death

I will sketch a comparison between Kierkegaard and Cioran, starting from an essential fragment from Kierkegaard’s *Sickness unto Death* (1849), which influenced Cioran’s first published book, *On The Heights of Despair* (1934):

This concept, the sickness unto death, must... be understood in a particular way. Literally it means a sickness of which the end and the result are death. Therefore we use the expression ‘fatal sickness’ as synonymous with the sickness unto death. In that sense, despair cannot be called the sickness unto death. Christianly understood, death itself is a passing into life. Thus, from a Christian point of view, no earthly, physical sickness is the sickness unto death, for death is indeed the end of the sickness, but death is not the end. If there is to be any question of a sickness unto death in the strictest sense, it must be a sickness of which the end is death and death is the end. This is precisely what despair is. (Kierkegaard 1980, 17)

Kierkegaard starts from the religious postulate of the *eternal life* which transcends physical death: from a religious perspective, death is only a way station to another world. We quickly note that Nietzsche will deconstruct at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century this mixture of Christianity and Platonism, orientating his philosophy towards faithfulness to the earth and to *this* immanent world. From Kierkegaard’s quote, we should extract this first

idea: despair = death + end (despair is “a sickness of which the end is death and death is the end”).

This idea has two derivations:

a) A combination of *death+end* is not redundant, as we shall see later. *Death* and the *end* are powerful notions that become even stronger, when one combines them. Examples of these conjunctions: “the end of death”, “the end of the end”, “death without end”, “continuous end”. Kierkegaard is a paraphilosopher, because the intention of his text is not only to dismantle paradoxes but to explore the inherent tension of seemingly contradictory concepts.

b) If despair were the sickness unto death, then the combination *death+end* would be facilitated by the *purity* of the agony (we will come back to that).

[I]n another sense despair is even more definitely the sickness unto death. Literally speaking, there is not the slightest possibility that anyone will die from this sickness or that it will end in physical death. On the contrary, the torment of despair is precisely this inability to die. Thus it has more in common with the situation of a mortally ill person when he lies struggling with death and yet cannot die. Thus to be sick *unto* death is to be unable to die, yet not as if there were hope of life; no, the hopelessness is that there is not even the ultimate hope, death. (Kierkegaard 1980, 17-18)

The purity of the agony consists of the possibility of a *deathless death*, a continuous death that knows no end. A similar agony would be pure torture. If from a commonsensical perspective, death is the antithesis of pain and from a Schopenhauerian perspective, when the sum of pains is bigger than the sum of pleasures, death is to be preferred—*pure* agony points out that pain and death operate on the same level. This is another way of claiming that death and life (symbolized here through pain) aren't contradictory notions but different aspects of the same phenomenon. As Cioran and Heidegger would state later, death is immanent into life or death is *existential*. Death, seen as a torture without end, is similar to a sufferance, which grows along with the imminence of death (if death were transcendent to life, the pains would decrease when death approached). Because the tortured subject is unable to intervene and choose simple *death* over extreme *pain*, this *end without end* can be compared to Nietzsche's description of damnation, disclosed by the German philosopher through the idea of the eternal return of nothingness:

Duration ‘in vain,’ without end or aim, is the most paralyzing idea, particularly when one understands that one is being fooled and yet lacks the power not to be fooled... Let us think this thought in its most terrible form:

existence as it is, without meaning or aim, yet recurring inevitably without any finale of nothingness: *'the eternal recurrence.'* This is the most extreme form of nihilism: the nothing (the 'meaningless'), eternally! (Nietzsche 1968, 35-36)

We might even say that Kierkegaard's description of agony, which consists of the impossibility of the end and the intensification of pain, is a metaphor of the existential inferno (an immanent inferno that awaits us here and now). Moreover, it's highly probable that the existentialist text of the Danish philosopher veers towards the nihilism later proposed by Cioran. A major trait of Kierkegaard's description of the existential inferno is the equalization between death and the "ultimate hope": we can conceive death as a hope, only when torture is the law of existence and the only conceivable consolation is the transcendent ending of torture, i.e. death. The hope to die and the wish for death enter the stage only when the Schopenhauerian equation *life = pain* is incontestable.

We can easily see that the term "agony" is much more powerful than the concept of "death" (i.e. transcendent death, which offers an exit, a definite ending of the road). This term implies mortification not foreign to the violence of pain (although traditionally death and pain are contrary notions), acting like *an end without end* or like a nightmare, for which there is no awakening. One should admit that the Danish philosopher proposes a perfect torture or an ideal nightmare and one must acknowledge the sophistication of a torture, which maximizes pain and avoids the transcendence of death. Is that even possible, one might ask? We could imagine this terrible affliction in psychology (severe mental illness) or even in theology (the myth of damnation). From a philosophical point of view, we can observe aesthetically the paradox of an *endless ending* in the Greek tragedy but from a logical perspective it is difficult to imagine a pain so pure, that grows in the imminence of death and that remains forever immanent.

[D]esperair is the sickness unto death, this tormenting contradiction, this sickness of the self, *perpetually to be dying, to die and yet not die, to die death.* For to die signifies that it is all over, but to die death means to experience dying, and if this is experienced for one single moment, one thereby experiences it forever. (Kierkegaard, 1980, 18)

To simplify we have here two conceptions of death:

a) Death seen as an interruption to life (what we easily may call transcendent or external death). This vulgar interpretation of death, which believes that death is external to the structure of subjectivity, is very common ("when one dies, everything ends").

b) Existential death: each growth and development of life brings a converse sophistication of death, which becomes as complex as the existential subject. “To die death” means “to experience dying” or to *live dying*: more exactly to experience the *dying of death* (immanent death which consists in mortification and devitalization). *Dying* is the essence of death without the tranquilization of transcendence or of interruption. To experience *dying* means to go through the pains of death while one is still alive. *Pure* agony is a sufferance similar to damnation. We remember Teresa of Ávila’s vision of hell:

I experienced a fire in the soul that I don't know how I could describe. The bodily pains were so unbearable that though I had suffered excruciating ones in this life... these were all nothing in comparison with the ones I experienced there. I saw furthermore that they would go on without end and without ever ceasing. This, however, was nothing next to the soul's agonizing: a constriction, a suffocation, an affliction so keenly felt and with such a despairing and tormenting unhappiness that I don't know how to word it strongly enough. To say the experience is as though the soul were continually being wrested from the body would be insufficient, for it would make you think somebody else is taking away the life, whereas here it is the soul itself that tears itself in pieces... (Ávila 2008, 224-225).

As we have seen, Kierkegaard’s account of agony (which intensifies pain and mortifies at the same time) probably symbolizes an immanent existential inferno, which we all must experience: in extreme sickness or psychological pain, acute feeling of loss, anxiety of death, depression, etc. This “endless” torture could really last a few moments; but an instant of pure pain has the quality of eternity and is brought back by the memory of the trauma, being able to literally poison existence.

### **Cioran's inferno: torture, pain and death**

The preeminence of agony, which cannot be absent through the experimentation of death, prepares the way for the young Cioran, who proceeds from the Kierkegaardian statement from *The Sickness unto Death* and synthesizes the intuitions of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, who attack in the different directions the themes of death, sufferance and agony. To all these we should add the perspective of a *zeitgeist*, which blends the German philosophy of existence, philosophy of life and certain surrealism traits, from Dada to futurism:

I cannot contribute anything to this world because I only have one method: agony. You complain that people are mean, vengeful, ungrateful, and

hypocritical? I propose the agony method to rid you of all these imperfections. Apply it to every generation and its effects will soon be evident. Maybe in this way I too could become useful to mankind! (Cioran 1992, 14-15)

The reader may quickly observe the irony of the combination *method+agony*; *methodos* originally meaning “way” and “path” and *agon* being another word for “fight”, “struggle”. (In the same line of thought, the Kierkegaardian combination between *concept* and *anxiety* might have been even more shocking.) *Method*, scientific concept with various applications at Descartes, Galileo and Kant, is confronted with *agony*, term with Greek warlike implications. The mixing is almost Dadaist: we have a term with scientific and philosophical denotation and another with a lyrical and literary value. The irony goes even further. If we listened to Cioran’s tone once we eliminated his obvious cynicism, the text would provide a parody of a *self-improvement* manual: “Do you have small depressions? Are your friends always complaining? I offer you the perfect solution: try *agony 2.0!* New and improved *method!*” Moreover, through avant-garde lenses, the fragment seems to be providing a parody of the stoic concept of *self-care*. The author can be “useful to mankind” in a nihilist fashion, suggesting a treatment that would obliterate the patient along with the sickness. How would the young writer describe the *method of agony*, which seems to be invented by Tzara, Marinetti or Raoul Hausmann?

Bring every man to the agony of life’s last moments by whip, fire, or injections, and through terrible torture he will undergo the great purification afforded by a vision of death. Then free him and let him run in a fright until he falls exhausted. I warrant you that the effect is incomparably greater than any obtained through normal means. If I could, I would drive the entire world to agony to achieve a radical purification of life; I would set a fire burning insidiously at the roots of life, not to destroy them but to give them a new and different sap, a new heat. The fire I would set to the world would not bring ruin but cosmic transfiguration. (Cioran 1992, 15)

This text has many layers. The first one belongs to the avant-garde, reminding of the apocalyptic anti-humanism of Lautréamont and the farces of Jarry and Ionesco. The second layer reveals the literary extremism of Cioran’s zeitgeist, which was a consequence of Nietzsche’s and Rimbaud’s nihilism (Ionescu 1990, 190) and a mirror of the political extremism of the 1930’s—we should mention here the consubstantiality between lyricism and totalitarianism (Zarifopol-Johnston 2009, 144-146). The third one is the layer of the metaphor: it’s probable that the “method” proposed by Cioran could be the subject of a dystopia similar to *The World Without Women* by

Virgilio Martini. I believe that the text of the Romanian philosopher is so radical, that it is almost impossible to read it with objective lenses, although such a hallucinatory intention might have pleased the young Cioran.

The fragment emphasizes the similarity between sufferance and death (not their traditional opposition), initiating agony through torture (this is the individual level, which has strange and unfortunate liaisons with the Nazi and Stalinist practices). Moving on from particular to universal, the excerpt has theological nuances: Cioran's *fire* (metonymy for *torture*) intends not to destroy the world but to purify it. Not death but "cosmic transfiguration" is the goal. If we move on past the surrealist and metaphoric dimensions of the text and we interpret Cioran's description in a "realistic" fashion, we might see it as an eugenical experiment, which intends to create alpha human beings or a new type of *cyborgs* with unlimited powers, similar to the *meta-men*, the human beings of the future, who will supposedly have mechanical and digital features. One might also add that in the process of creating a new transfigured species of humans a significant percent of "experimental material" would be obliterated by "whip, fire, or injections".

Torture, death, agony and especially an intense pain that has the total power of transfiguration, remind us of Schelling's reflections:

Pain is something universal and necessary in all life, the inevitable point of transition to freedom... Suffering is generally the way to glory, not only with regard to man, but also in respect to the creator. God leads human nature through no other course than through which his own nature must pass. Participation in everything blind, dark, and suffering of God's nature is necessary in order to raise him to highest consciousness. Each being must learn to know its own depths; this is impossible without suffering. Pain comes only from being... (Schelling 1942, 225)

The pain explored by both Schelling and Cioran goes against utilitarianism and hedonism, which establish as ultimate purpose the avoidance of pain (and simultaneous pursuit of pleasure). Moreover, though starting with different intentions, the two philosophers criticize the ideal of *anesthesia* (indifference, passivity and apathy), which we so much appreciate on a daily basis. Schelling shows that our true depth is disclosed only through sufferance and that if we didn't explore pain, we wouldn't know our true selves. Like Kierkegaard, the German philosopher relies on the Christian model of a God that suffered a terrible ordeal. Cioran makes it obvious that sufferance is not only a method of transgression and transformation but also a *method of self-help*, which brings us in the proximity of *fundamental experiences* and which eliminates the usual daily fears, depressions, conflicts that may fall through their inherent mean

contingency. Like death, anxiety and illness, sufferance and pain transport us beyond the sphere of *they-self*. One can easily see that once we interpret sufferance this way, it does not hold exclusively negative values: it becomes an instrument of initiation and a form of consciousness. Cioran goes on:

The true meaning of agony, which is not a struggle of pure passion or gratuitous fantasy, but life's hopeless struggle in the claws of death, is revealed in this feeling of great weariness [*sfirșeală*]. One cannot separate the thought of agony from that of weariness and death. Agony as struggle? But with whom and for what? The interpretation of agony as an ardor exalted by its own futility, or as a battle whose aim is itself, is absolutely false. In fact, agony means a battle [*frământare*] between life and death. Since death is immanent in life, almost all of life is an agony. I call agonic only those dramatic moments in the battle between life and death when the presence of death is experienced consciously and painfully. True agony occurs when you pass into nothingness through death, when a feeling of weariness consumes you irrevocably and death wins. In every true agony there is a triumph of death, even though you may continue to live after those moments of weariness. (Cioran 1992, 16-17)

In the original Romanian *sfirșeală* (translated here as *weariness*) comes from *sfirșit*, which means *end*. *Sfirșeală* denotes not only exhaustion or disgust but could be interpreted phenomenologically as an affect which explores the state of mind of one who anticipates death, more exactly the nausea and boredom of one who is sick with life and has nothing else to hope than his or her destruction. This *weariness* is reminiscent of Kierkegaard's description of mortification (a death which one lives and *dies*) from the *Sickness unto Death*. Cioran defines agony as a battle [*frământare*] between life and death. In Romanian, *frământare* is only a metaphor of the battle and has a more visceral meaning: unrest, torture, anxiety, agitation, concern. It is better to understand *agony* as a territory between life and death, where one cannot live and cannot die either, where one must despair. The Romanian writer observes also that because life and death occupy the same space during our existence, from a logical point of view life and agony are synonyms, a point which reminds us of the German philosophy of existence. However, the author understands agony as a means of transportation directly into nothingness through devitalization and mortification, when life fights a losing battle. We must make two observations:

a) Cioran is interested in the intensity, climax or *the zero hour*, the moment when death triumphs over life (*a zero hour* still suggesting the impression of *eternal hell*), the moment of eternal damnation and the nihilist momentum, when pain makes us transcend the space of our daily concerns

and when death, even if in its retreat, leaves behind irreparable damages and psychologically triumphs through its “clones”, anxiety and sickness.

b) Cioran’s message becomes more obvious if we read his early work as a *protest against good health* and an *apology of illness*: “Healthy, normal, mediocre people cannot experience either agony or death” (Cioran 1992, 23). Illness, like sufferance, goes against the forces of life, being a way of knowledge and a method of initiation. The inferno of here and now makes its presence felt in illness, anxiety and pain, marking our very own subjectivity. Even when our vitality overcomes illness and death, the implacable destiny of the human being is to be colonized by death, at first symbolically in the experience of sickness. Emulating Shakespeare’s coward (Shakespeare 2009, 73), we will experience this triumph of death many times before our demise.

The main thesis of the Romanian-French author (and we see Heidegger’s influence and the contrast with Sartre’s and Epicurus’ position) is that death is not external to human consciousness and existence; more exactly, death is immanent in life and being alive one can “know” everything about death through the “agony method”. “[T]he true sense of agony seems to me to lie in the revelation of death’s immanence in life” (Cioran 1992, 23). It is a known fact that the Existential psychotherapy emphasizes the acknowledgement of death, which has the liberating capacity of making us more appreciative of our lives: when we accept our own mortality, we realize that life becomes a precious gift, which should not be wasted. The Romanian-French philosopher is familiar with these intuitions; however, he seems fascinated with the nihilist “revelation” of nonbeing, which shows that life receives a demonic character through constitutive infestation with death. Therefore, to experience life means to experience death in life.

To see how death spreads over this world, how it kills a tree and how it penetrates dreams, how it withers a flower or a civilization, how it gnaws on the individual and on culture like a destructive blight, means to be beyond tears and regrets, beyond system and form. Whoever has not experienced the awful agony of death, rising and spreading like a surge of blood, like the choking grasp of a snake which provokes terrifying hallucinations, does not know the demonic character of life and the state of inner effervescence from which great transfigurations arise. Such a state of black drunkenness is a necessary prerequisite to understanding why one wishes the immediate end of this world. (Cioran 1992, 23)

The “portrait” of death seems to bear the influence of Pieter Bruegel the Elder, Hieronymus Bosch or Otto Dix. Death becomes a force able to transcend all categories and all forms, a true Nihilist super-divinity,

comparable to the one described in the poem *Memento mori* (1872) written by the Romanian poet Mihai Eminescu:

May death expand its colossal wings upon the world:/ Only darkness is the coat of buried waste./ A lingering star extinguishes its small spring./ Deathlike time spreads its arms and becomes eternity./ When nothing will persist on the barren landscape/ I will ask: What of your power, Man?— Nothing!!<sup>3</sup> (Eminescu 1993, 125-126)

Cioran uses expressions from the Post-romantic vocabulary with an Expressionist intentionality (“destructive blight”, “awful agony”, “terrifying hallucinations”, “black drunkenness”), which remind us of E. A. Poe, Charles Baudelaire and Gottfried Benn. The keyword of this fragment is death’s *domination*, which requires man’s submission and obedience, and which is able to obliterate all resistance. If we transferred Cioran’s description of death in the field of political science, we would have a single hegemonic power, which controls and rules not only the entire world, but the entire universe. However, if we understood Cioran correctly, the relationship between individual and the dictatorship of death should follow Max Stirner’s indication: “It would be foolish to assert that there is no power above mine. Only the attitude that I take toward it will be [the following]: I shall be the enemy of every higher power...” (Stirner 2000, 165). Although M. Stirner is one of the most radical proponents of anarchism, creating his entire theoretical masterpiece (*The Ego and Its Own*) around the idea of philosophical egoism, and Cioran can be best described as a 20<sup>th</sup> century nihilist continuing the tradition of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, the Romanian philosopher has one distinct anarchistic feature. Unlike the anarchist, the nihilist does not believe that his calling is to transmute doctrine into action (Barzun 2000, 630). He does not feel obliged to act, because nihilism is an affair between the ego and his self, loathing alterity and inter-subjectivity. However, both nihilists and anarchists constellate a paternal complex, fighting against any form of authority. Therefore, Cioran, like Bakunin and Stirner, could declare: *non serviam* (“I shall not serve”).

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<sup>3</sup> My translation.

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