

TOWARD THE 'NEVER-BORN'. MAINLÄNDER AND CIORAN

ȘTEFAN BOLEA

Abstract. In his *Philosophy of Redemption* (1876) Philipp Mainländer transforms the Schopenhauerian will-to-life into his own concept of will-to-death, preceding Freud's investigations into the death drive in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920). Mainländer's post-Schopenhauerian conception that non-being is preferable to being anticipates Cioran's discussion of suicide from *A Short History of Decay* (1949) and his vision of the "catastrophe" of birth from *The Trouble with Being Born* (1973). If, from a Nietzschean perspective, Mainländer's and Cioran's obsession with death was a symptom of passive nihilism, their thanatophilia may resonate with our anxious crepuscular mentality, prefiguring contemporary Antinatalism.

Keywords: will-to-death, non-existence, suicide, never-born, nihilism.

1. THE SCHOPENHAUERIAN CONTEXT: FROM THE WILL-TO-LIVE TO THE WILL-TO-DEATH

Excessive rationalism is disproved by Schopenhauer's philosophy as an incorrect manner of interpreting the human being; furthermore, his irrational voluntarism prefigures psychoanalysis, especially the Freudian theory of the unconscious. Schopenhauer's will, a preliminary version of the Freudian *id* [*Es*], argues that we are not the true masters of our own house and that our deeper motivations are unconscious. We are not guided by spirit, reason (or the diurnal ego); on the contrary, we are maneuvered by a certain territory from our depths, which is incredibly vast and is not immediately accessible to our self-awareness.

According to Schopenhauer, the will is the essence of existence. The will is a metaphysical concept which makes its presence felt not only among humans, animals and plants, but also by acting as a basic force in physics and chemistry,

Ștefan Bolea ✉
University of Cluj
e-mail: stefan.bolea@gmail.com

influencing gravity, magnetism and crystallization¹. The will is constitutionally oriented towards life, therefore *will* and the *will-to-life* are practically synonymous². The human being is “one particular objectivation” of the will-to-life: that is why for us, life is a supreme value, and death the most hateful limit experience³. Because the inner essence of the unconscious nature of the will is “a continual striving, without goal and without rest”⁴ or, to put it another way, because will cannot stop willing, in Schopenhauer’s view, *life is suffering* [*alles Leben Leiden ist*]⁵.

Suffering temporarily ceases when we obtain the object of our desire, but almost simultaneously the will (comparable to an “unquenchable thirst”) targets another object and drives us to pursue it; and if this is not the case, satisfaction is followed by boredom, which is even a crueler suffering, being incurable⁶. If life is basically suffering, what would be the relationship between pain/suffering and death? They are “two quite different evils”, and we often “take refuge in death from pain”⁷. When death is negatively conceived as suffering, the path is prepared for a positive definition of death. Because the will-to-life is inserted in the core of the human being, “all people carry within themselves an unconquerable source of suffering”⁸. In other words, a condemnation to suffering is our birthright, according to the German pessimist.

Our lives are “meaninglessness” and “vacuous”: we are “like mechanical clocks that are wound up and go without knowing why”; every individual is “one more short dream of the infinite spirit of nature”, “one more fleeting image jotted playfully” by the will “on its infinite page ... before it is erased to free up room”⁹. Furthermore, the essence of Hamlet’s famous monologue can be summarized in this way: “our condition is so miserable that complete non-being would be decidedly preferable”¹⁰.

To put it differently, according to this pessimistic perspective, because of the *suffering of being*, non-existence is considered as preferable to existence. Nevertheless, and perhaps surprisingly, Schopenhauer argues that suicide is not a valid option, because he defines the individual as a particularization of cosmic will: the individual may destroy himself or herself, he or she can “break the chain” temporarily; nevertheless, the will is infinite and indestructible. The “willful destruction of one

¹ Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, volume I, translated and edited by Judith Norman, Alistair Welchman, Christopher Janaway, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2010, §21, pp. 134–5.

² *Ibidem*, §54, p. 301.

³ *Ibidem*, §54, p. 309.

⁴ *Ibidem*, §57, p. 338.

⁵ *Ibidem*, §56, p. 337.

⁶ *Ibidem*, §57, p. 338.

⁷ *Ibidem*, §54, p. 309.

⁸ *Ibidem*, §57, p. 344.

⁹ *Ibidem*, §58, p. 348.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, §59, pp. 350–1.

single appearance ... leaves the thing in itself untouched”¹¹. “A person who commits suicide stops living precisely because he cannot stop willing, and the will affirms itself here through the very abolition of its appearance, because it can no longer affirm itself in any other way”. Suicide exposes the will’s conflict with itself¹².

Schopenhauer’s discontent with previous Western philosophies is clearly visible in his radical criticism of optimism (from Leibniz to Hegel), which is seen not only as an “absurd”, but also as a “wicked” way thinking, because it is basically “a bitter mockery of the unspeakable sufferings of humanity”¹³. According to Schopenhauer, this world is Dante’s Inferno in disguise: “if we were to call everyone’s attention to the terrible pains and suffering their lives are constantly exposed to, they would be seized with horror: and if you led the most unrepentant optimist through the hospitals, military wards, and surgical theatres, through the prisons, torture chambers and slave stalls, through battlefields and places of judgement, and then open for him all the dark dwellings of misery that hide from cold curiosity, and finally let him peer into Ugolino’s starvation chamber”¹⁴, then he would agree that this is the worst of all possible worlds, because *suffering* and *existence* are one and the same thing.

It is not difficult to observe how Philipp Mainländer takes the Schopenhauerian pessimism to its logical consequences. According to Mainländer, who predates by well over forty years the Freudian theories concerning the death drive¹⁵, the Schopenhauerian will-to-life is nothing else than will-to-death: “We die incessantly; our life is a slow fight against death; everyday death defeats us, it harasses every single human being, until eventually it turns off life’s lights”¹⁶. In fact, the will uses life as bait for death¹⁷. The will-to-death does not only act at the individual level, but it is also a form of expression of divinity and of the cosmic forces, which “conspire” for the triumph of nonbeing¹⁸. Moreover, the “immanent” philosophers discover in the cosmos only “the deep desire of absolute destruction” and if one pays attention, one may hear a calling from the divine spheres: *Erlösung! Erlösung! Tod unserem Leben!* [“Salvation! Salvation! Death of our lives!”] and a consoling answer: *Ihr werdet alle die Vernichtung finden und erlöst werden* [„You will find annihilation and you will be saved”]¹⁹. According to Mainländer, not only the human beings, but also the animals and plants aspire to death; the whole of cosmos

¹¹ *Ibidem*, §69, p. 426.

¹² *Ibidem*, §69, p. 426.

¹³ *Ibidem*, §69, p. 352.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, §69, p. 426, §59, pp. 350–1.

¹⁵ Ludger Lütkehaus, *Nichts*, Frankfurt a.M., Zweitausendeins, 2003, p. 251.

¹⁶ Philipp Mainländer, *Philosophie der Erlösung*, edited by Ulrich Horstmann, Frankfurt a.M., Insel, 1989, p. 140.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 59.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 59.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 68.

desires self-annihilation. Even God killed Himself to give life to the world²⁰: he moved from the sphere of superbeing [*Übersein*] to that of nonbeing [*Nichtsein*]. After both levels (transcendent and immanent) will have collapsed, we will gaze “with horror or with deep satisfaction, after our nature, into absolute nothingness, into the absolute void, into *nihil negativum*”²¹.

Mainländer’s fragment reminds us of the last pages of *The World as Will and Representation*, where Schopenhauer operates with the Kantian distinction between *nihil privativum* (a concept of relative *nothing*, connected with a negated object: shadow as absence of the light, cold as absence of heat) and *nihil negativum* (absolute, pure *nothing*, which lends to the relative nothing something of its archetypal grandeur).²² The suppression of the will leads to the pure nothingness: “... along with the free negation, the abandonment, of the will, all those appearances are also abolished ... the will’s whole appearance and ultimately its universal forms as well, time and space, and also its final fundamental form, subject and object. No will: no representation, no world”²³. Furthermore, “for everyone who is still filled with the will, what remains after it is completely abolished is certainly nothing. But conversely, for those in whom the will has turned and negated itself, this world of ours which is so very real with all its suns and galaxies is – nothing”²⁴. Taking into account Schopenhauer’s pessimism from Mainländer’s perspective, one may say that the self-negating will leads to absolute nothingness, to *nihil negativum*, which does not target a particular object anymore, but the superbeing [*Übersein*] as a whole: the will-to-death has become universe.

Mainländer comments on the Schopenhauerian idea of existential inferno, claiming that “life is hell and the sweet silent night [*die süße stille Nacht*] of absolute death is the annihilation of hell”²⁵. Moreover, he anticipates contemporary Antinatalism, noting that rebirth through our own children is a chilling and desperate thought²⁶. If Schopenhauer argued that we may annihilate the will-to-be through chastity²⁷, Mainländer envisions virginity as a project of cosmic destruction (one wonders why he does not consider sex without reproduction). This naïve idea is dismissed by Nietzsche, who calls his forerunner “that mawkish apostle of virginity”²⁸.

In a Schopenhauerian fashion, Mainländer argues that “beyond the world there is neither a place of torment, nor a place of peace, but only nothingness. Whoever reaches that place is neither anxious, nor calm, he is unconditioned

²⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 38.

²¹ *Ibidem*, pp. 94–95.

²² See also Eugene Thacker, *In the Dust of This Planet*, Winchester: Zero Books, pp. 46–7.

²³ Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation I*, §71, p. 438.

²⁴ *Ibidem*, pp. 438–9.

²⁵ Philipp Mainländer, *Philosophie der Erlösung*, pp. 104–5.

²⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 109.

²⁷ Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation I*, p. 407.

²⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, ed. Bernard Williams, trans. Josefine Nauckhoff, Adrian del Caro, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001, §357, p. 220.

[*zustandlos*] as in sleep, with the great difference that even the unconditioning from sleep is absent: the will was utterly annihilated”²⁹. The nihilistic “gaze into the absolute void” [*der Blick in der absolute Leere*] gives him a sort of meontological ecstasy, which reminds us of ending of Eminescu’s philosophical poem, *Memento mori*: “Atheism ... knows no world before or after this ... Before it there was the transcendent being, afterwards, *nihil negativum* ... Nothing will be anymore, nothing, nothing, nothing ...”³⁰

Mainländer’s morbidity may be psychoanalytically explained through the Stockholm syndrome: we fall in love with our aggressor (i.e. death) to accept our situations of beings-toward-death. Rationalizing, we desire the undesirable. The ideas of cosmic death and of God’s suicide³¹ may be understood as projections of his own suicidal ideations: because he wants to die, so do the universe and God. The color of his own suicide is lent to universal death. It is true that there are individuals that seek their deaths incessantly according to their death wish. Individuals that, as we shall see in the second part of this paper, think of suicide as a transgression of life’s mediocrity or that are illuminated by Cioran’s “Death sun”. However, there are many other who do not require this “fixing” for their *Weltanschauung*.

Using a Feuerbachian idea, one may argue that Mainländer’s submissiveness in front the hegemony of death and the extreme acceptance of absolute nonbeing lends to the “servant” an aura of the authority of the master: it is almost as if the condemned dressed himself in the garments of the executioner. Setting all of this aside, we may ask ourselves: isn’t Mainländer’s argument of relevance to our contemporary ecological concerns of overpopulation, global warming, ozone depletion and so forth? Aren’t our planetary consumerism and profit rush a disguise of the will-to-death? Aren’t we in fact searching for the “still night of death” [*die stille Nacht des Todes*] from disgust, weariness, or as a cure to our “sickness unto death”? Suddenly the manic argumentation of the German philosopher resonates with our “moribund” mentality.

Another of Mainländer’s ideas prefigures our age, and that is the hegemonic conception of death. He argues in an allegoric fashion that the human being oscillates between faith in God (“The divine breath leads us as the wing of a butterfly from one flower to another”) and fear of God (“The divine breath ... may be a cold wind from the North or a terrible storm, which annihilates both flower and butterfly”)³². Mainländer goes on: “Does this man trust in God? He actually trusts his fear: his faith in God is nothing else than fear of God.”³³ But in a universe

²⁹ Philipp Mainländer, *Philosophie der Erlösung*, p. 145.

³⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 151.

³¹ Towards the end of his short life, Mainländer, like Nietzsche, experienced a mental breakdown which made him think that his own suicide symbolically amounts to a deicide.

³² Philipp Mainländer, *Philosophie der Erlösung*, p. 137.

³³ *Ibidem*, p. 137.

governed by the will to death, God loses his hegemonic position to Death (*contra* John Donne, gods die while death remains immortal). This hegemonic description of death anticipates Cioran's "portrayal" of "Death supreme", which grows and projects her immense shadow over our destitute and desolate world: "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"³⁴.

2. CIORAN: FROM THE PASSION OF SUICIDE TO THE PUNISHMENT OF BIRTH

According to Cioran, the human condition is, in a Gnostic manner, a cosmic imprisonment; therefore, the act of taking one's own life is a way of manifesting individual freedom. Echoing Kierkegaard and Stirner and disagreeing with Schopenhauer – for whom, as we have seen, the individual is only a particularization of the will –, individuality gains an absolute value for the Romanian French author. The imprisonment configured by Cioran has many characteristics. Firstly, he takes over from Schopenhauer the equation *life = suffering*. And if this equivalence was valid, a minus of suffering would correspond to death. Therefore, suicide gains positive value when the value of existence is negative. Secondly, the instinct of preservation is seen as an exceptional guard at the prison door. Consequently, the usual view that suicidals are cowards is utterly false: the guard incapsulated in our structure orients us towards being and finds nonbeing nauseating. To kill oneself does not only mean to rebel against life, but it also signifies to rebel against oneself: for the id, death is not an option, lingering in a limitless immortality. According to Cioran, the "man who has never imagined his own annihilation ... is a degraded galley slave or a worm crawling upon the cosmic carrion"³⁵. The Romanian French philosopher seems to argue that the one who feels comfortable in the cosmic prison is – from a Schopenhauerian perspective – unable to grasp that *life = suffering*.

Cioran seems to conceive suicide as a manner of "self-overcoming", reminding both to Nietzsche's *Selbstüberwindung* (one of *Übermensch*'s main abilities) and to

³⁴ E.M. Cioran, *On the Heights of Despair*, translated by Ilinca Zarifopol-Johnston, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1992, p. 23.

³⁵ E.M. Cioran, *A Short History of the Decay*, translated by Richard Howard, New York, Arcade, 2012, p. 37.

Mainländer's impression, who argued that at a certain level, in which the suicidal removes not only the phenomenal being, but also the noumenal being, *every* suicide is, in fact, a deicide. It is fair to say that the Church's disgust of suicidals ("Suicide is to die as a martyr for Satan", claimed St. Bruno) follows a similar reasoning: when one obliterates himself or herself, one destroys an inner territory traditionally belonging to God. Removing ourselves, we destroy the God within.

The Cioranian suicide is a sign of election, perhaps also because those who believe that life is worth living at any cost accept a mediocre and humiliating bargain. "No elect, I kept telling myself, but those who committed suicide. Even now, I have more esteem for a concierge who hangs himself than for a living poet. Man is provisionally exempt from suicide: that is his one glory, his one excuse. But he is not aware of it, and calls cowardice the courage of those who dared to raise themselves by death above themselves"³⁶. This observation from his French debut is mirrored by a reflection from the Romanian book *The Twilight of Thoughts*: "Whatever might be said about suicide, no one can take away from it the dignity of the absolute. Isn't it really a death which overcomes itself?"³⁷

According to Cioran, "[t]hat a man should survive his passion was enough to make him contemptible or abject in my eyes"³⁸: he advocates a *death on the heights*, which consecrates emotional intensity. He seems disgusted by the lukewarm temperature of everyday existences, which only "diminishes" us³⁹. The Romanian French writer chooses death over death-in-life. The last one is only the zombified existence of apathetic marionettes caught in the "inertia of misery"⁴⁰ or of living corpses estranged from the absolute of death.

Unlike the majority of human beings, who are "bribed" by the instinct of preservation to lead a dull, flat existence, devoid of vibration, foreign of passion, there are a few individuals who are dominated by what Mainländer called the *will-to-death*, or what Freud called the *death instinct* (which may seem counterintuitive from a biological perspective, but it is a psychological and cultural reality): "The assent to death is the greatest one of all. It can be expressed in several ways ... There are among us daylight ghosts, devoured by their absence, for whom life is one long aside. They walk our streets with muffled steps, and look at no one. No anxiety can be discovered in their eyes, no haste in their gestures. For them an outside world has ceased to exist, and they submit to every solitude ... Their smile suggests a thousand vanquished fears, the grace that triumphs over all things terrible: such beings can pass through matter itself. Have they overtaken their own origins? Discovered in themselves the very sources of light? No defeat, no victory disturbs them. Independent of the sun, they are self-sufficient: illuminated by

³⁶ *Ibidem*, pp. 166–7.

³⁷ Emil Cioran, *Amurgul gândurilor [Twilight of Thoughts]*, București, Humanitas, 1996, p. 84 (my translation).

³⁸ E.M. Cioran, *A Short History of the Decay*, p. 166.

³⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 166.

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 166.

Death.”⁴¹. Cioran’s view might be dismissed as a juvenile perspective, taking into account that Nietzsche’s philosophy was criticized in a similar manner. Nevertheless, in my opinion, this is only a condescending reproach, which minimizes the excruciating ordeal of a being who can no longer live. Suffering must be respected, treated with compassion and, eventually, comforted: furthermore, one cannot know if he or she does not possess a quantum of inner darkness which resonates with the “Death sun”.

If non-existence was positive and existence was negative, then absolute negativity would be the start of existence. “We do not rush toward death, we flee the catastrophe of birth, survivors struggling to forget it. Fear of death is merely the projection onto the future of a fear which dates back to our first moment of life”⁴², writes Cioran at the beginning of *The Trouble with Being Born*. The Romanian nihilist comments on a Buddhist idea, claiming that birth is the “source of every infirmity, every disaster”⁴³. If death was an elegant solution to pain, in general, or to terminal disease, in particular, the absence of birth would be the absolute cure to the suffering of existence. Not unlike Thomas Bernhard, Cioran argues that the instinct of procreation is murderous. “It’s a great crime to create a person, when you know he’ll be unhappy, certainly if there’s any unhappiness about. The unhappiness that exists momentarily is the whole of unhappiness. To produce solitude just because you don’t want to be alone anymore yourself is a crime ... The drive of nature is criminal, and to appeal to it is a pretext, just as everything people do is a pretext.”⁴⁴

In an aphorism reminding both of Lautréamont and Simone Weil, the Romanian French philosopher argues that “[u]nmaking, decreating, is the only task man may take upon himself, if he aspires, as everything suggests, to distinguish himself from the Creator”⁴⁵. “Unbirth” and suicide have a similar ontological status; the former is even superior because it spares us a weary detour of suffering. If suicide was an instrument of human autonomy, a breaking of the chain, “unbirth” would be absolute freedom: “I long to be free – desperately free. Free as the stillborn are free.”⁴⁶ In Cioran’s view, a certain *fear of life* has stronger effects than the *fear of death*: more precisely, the fear of falling in love with life’s poisonous sweetness, which makes us abandon *death on the heights*. Seduced by the sweetness of existence, we usually have recourse to dishonorable compromises.

⁴¹ E.M. Cioran, *The Temptation to Exist*, translated by Richard Howard, Chicago, Quadrangle Books, 1968, pp. 207–8.

⁴² E.M. Cioran, *The Trouble with Being Born*, translated by Richard Howard, New York, Arcade, 1998, p. 4.

⁴³ *Ibidem*, p. 4.

⁴⁴ Thomas Bernhard, *Frost*, translated by Michael Hoffmann, New York, Vintage Books, 2008, pp. 28–9.

⁴⁵ E.M. Cioran, *The Trouble with Being Born*, p. 6.

⁴⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 9.

If Sartre observed that death reduced us to pure past⁴⁷, Camus argued that “there is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide” and that “judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy”⁴⁸. When Camus imagines “Sisyphus happy”, claiming that the absurd hero “teaches the higher fidelity that negates the gods and raises rocks”⁴⁹, he makes the Nietzschean point, that life should be embraced, despite the fact that, through its hardships and its repetitive toils, it often may be described as an existential inferno. Cioran is much closer to Schopenhauer and would have probably maintained that choosing and accepting such an “absurd” eternal return is pure masochism.

The absence of birth would take us beyond the conventional categories of time to a sort of eternity of nonbeing similar to that before the Big Bang: “Our thoughts, in the pay of our panic, are oriented toward the future, follow the trail of all fear, open out onto death. And we invert their course, we send them backward when we direct them toward birth and force them to linger upon it ... Hence we see that, by taking a contrary trajectory, they lack the spirit and are so weary, when at last they come up against their initial frontier, that they no longer have the energy to look beyond, toward the ‘never-born’”⁵⁰. While Kierkegaard conceives anxiety as a future-oriented affected, the thought of “unbirth”, of an eternal-like past, is the most efficient anxiolytic: “Amid anxiety and distress, sudden calm at the thought of the foetus one has been”⁵¹. According to Cioran, the only form of ontological un-making is the potentiality of the “never born”: “*Not to have been born*, merely musing on that – what happiness, what freedom, what space!”⁵² In a Gnostic manner, the Romanian born philosopher feels a violent *horror creationis*, a powerful disgust for a fallen world where things “stooped to occurrence”⁵³.

Like in Schopenhauer’s and Mainländer’s philosophies, non-existence has a superior value to existence, because life is basically a nightmare. From a Nietzschean perspective, this certain view on existence, however, is symptomatic for its passive nihilism, which “no longer attacks”⁵⁴, being unable “to create new values”, and which chooses “resignation”, “indulging in the spectacle of universal emptiness”⁵⁵. Just like his forerunners (Buddha being the original reference of this train of thought), Cioran is, from a Nietzschean perspective, “preacher of death”, a “consumptive of

⁴⁷ Jean Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness. A Phenomenological Essay on Ontology*, translated by Hazel E. Barnes, New York, Pocket Books, 1978, p. 112.

⁴⁸ Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, translated by Justin O’Brien, New York, Penguin Books, 1979, p. 11.

⁴⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 111.

⁵⁰ E.M. Cioran, *The Trouble with Being Born*, pp. 15–16.

⁵¹ *Ibidem*, p. 20.

⁵² *Ibidem*, p. 22.

⁵³ *Ibidem*, p. 22.

⁵⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, translated by Walter Kaufmann, R.J. Hollingdale, edited by Walter Kaufmann, New York, Vintage Books, 1968, § 23, p. 18.

⁵⁵ Jean Granier, *Nietzsche*, Paris, PUF, 1982, p. 31.

the soul”⁵⁶, who is unable to move from a dark vision of existence to the affirmative test of eternal return⁵⁷: “There are preachers of death, and the earth is full of people to whom departure from life must be preached ... They encounter a sick or a very old person or a corpse, and right away they say ‘life is refuted!’ But only they are refuted and their eyes, which see only the one face of existence.”⁵⁸

The other way around, from a Cioranian perspective, the Nietzschean eternal return may be pure fiction, a trivial motivational story (just as the *Übermensch* is nothing more than a “chimera”⁵⁹), which may only temporarily hide the fact that time eats away at our evanescent personalities. Moreover, the presupposed move from nihilism to existentialism would also be illusory, because, along with Blanchot, Cioran may claim that “nihilism is tied to being”, and not to nothingness as we might think⁶⁰ and that instead of *Existenz*, Mainländer’s term of *Nihilenz* is more appropriate. In other words, the passing from nihilism to existentialism may be considered, in a cynical fashion, an illusory progression from the exploitation of nothing in itself to a valorization of being as nothing.

Futhermore, the presupposed Schopenhauerian superiority of non-existence (if life is a *minus* as pure pain and suffering, the *zero* of death receives a positive value), may be further criticized from another perspective. Existence and non-existence (basically life and death) are incommensurable phenomena: one may apply the “logic” of life to death, only if it shared its nature, only if death were another life. The living cannot either perceive or understand the dead: because we are biologically defined as existential beings, non-existence is for us a sort of an unsolvable riddle. Therefore, we should not allow our anxiety to paint a desolate Gothic picture, as long as death is outside our sight.

CODA

Schopenhauer’s shadow falls over not only Mainländer, Nietzsche and Cioran, but also Wagner’s *Tristan and Iseult* and Eminescu’s *Memento mori*, which may be seen a poetical reply to the project of universal death imagined by Schopenhauerian philosophers. The shadowy principles of Schopenhauerianism seem to know a certain resurgence in America, the stronghold of optimism and technological progress. Writers such as Eugene Thacker, Thomas Ligotti, Jim Crawford or Nic Pizzolatto entertain the subversive Schopenhauerian idea, according to which non-

⁵⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, edited by Adrian del Caro, Robert B. Pippin, translated by Adrian del Caro, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2006, p. 31.

⁵⁷ This may be a significant difference between nihilism and existentialism: the latter has transformative and therapeutic virtues, while a therapy based on the former would be valid only in the first phase, that of anarchic destruction.

⁵⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, pp. 31–2.

⁵⁹ E.M. Cioran, *The Trouble with Being Born*, p. 85.

⁶⁰ Maurice Blanchot, *Infinite Conversation*, translated by Susan Hanson, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1993, p. 149.

existence is preferable to existence. Common sense may find this hint ludicrous but what if depressive realism is less deceptive than everyday denial?

From another perspective, isn't the universal profit rush our burial vault? Whoever chooses money over life can only walk in king Midas's footsteps. Eugene Thacker's philosophy helps us see the world through a non-humanistic cosmology: as human beings, we are accustomed to overestimate ourselves, therefore we have a hard time acknowledging that we are contingent in the cosmic scheme. Maybe it won't be long until the will-to-death replaces the will-to-live. In Thomas Ligotti's words, "[o]ur self-removal from this planet would still be a magnificent move, a feat so luminous it would bedim the sun. What do we have to lose? No evil would attend our departure from this world, and the many evils we have known would go extinct along with us."⁶¹

⁶¹ Thomas Ligotti, *The Conspiracy against the Human Race. A Contrivance of Horror*, New York, Penguin Books, 2018, p. 36.

