

On Pessoa's Involvement with the Birth Theme in Cioran's *De l'inconvénient d'être né*

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Keywords

Fernando Pessoa, Emil Cioran, Birth, Non-birth, Pretemporality.

Abstract

The birth theme in Cioran's oeuvre occurs only once, in *De l'inconvénient d'être né* (1973), and is never treated in his work again. In my article I wish to show by means of studying several manuscripts from the Cioranian archives how the topic first came about as well as how it evolved. Furthermore I want to look at what the topic's rather sudden appearance in the early 1970s might owe to Cioran's discovery of Fernando Pessoa's poetical works, a part of which he had read in Armand Guibert's translation into French. It shall be shown that on the background of his reading of Pessoa, Cioran creates the notion of 'non-birth' and develops the idea of pretemporality.

Palavras-chave

Fernando Pessoa, Emil Cioran, Nascimento, Não-Nascimento, Pré-temporalidade.

Resumo

O tema do nascimento na obra de Cioran aflora apenas uma vez, em *De l'inconvénient d'être né* (1973), não sendo nunca mais abordado. Neste ensaio tento mostrar como o tópico surgiu e evoluiu através do estudo de vários manuscritos conservados nos arquivos de Cioran. Além disso desejo analisar a súbita aparição do tema no princípio da década de 70 e como isso se pode dever ao descobrimento da obra poética de Fernando Pessoa por Cioran, que ele leu, em parte, na tradução francesa de Armand Guibert. Sustento o argumento de que é na base de tal leitura que Cioran cria a noção de 'não-nascimento' e desenvolve o conceito de 'pré-temporalidade'.

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In a laconic entry for the 2nd of February 1970 in his diary-like notebooks, a journal similar in character and length to Leopardi's *Zibaldone*, Cioran leaves us with a riddle. Two words, forced, almost modeled into the paper, catch the reader's eye as soon as the page is opened. Standing out from a background of blue ink notes, mostly fragments ready to see the light of publication, is a name inscribed in thick red ink: **Fernando Pessoa**.¹

A landmark, a signal? Or just a reminder? This elliptical note was, no doubt, meant to speak for itself. Relegated to a private sphere of presupposition, it did not require any syntactic embedding, perfectly succinct in its simplicity: a name, a dot – and the intimidating aura of significance gathering about the two words' bogus immediacy.

Contemporaries for a quarter of a century only, E. M. Cioran (1911-1995) and Fernando Pessoa (1888-1935) never met. In fact, Cioran began writing as Pessoa drew his last breath. Similarly obsessive personalities, thematic proximity and a multilingual oeuvre seem reason enough to compare the works of these two professional insomniacs. Yet neither their common *idées fixes*, such as universal failure, futility or fate, nor their shared passion for Shakespeare and general anglophile tendencies concerning literature have occasioned any comparative study, receiving instead only little recognition. That Pessoa exerted a concrete influence on Cioran's writing has not been considered to date.

Whereas Pessoa most certainly never heard Cioran's name, the latter, on the contrary, appears to have been well aware of a kind of congeniality of mind and spirit connecting him with the Portuguese poet. Both, Cioran and Pessoa were *Möglichkeitsmenschen* in a Musilian sense of the word, "persons of possibility", exploring likelihoods and potentials. If we assume that it was not Cioran's "goût du désastre personnel" (C, p. 689) in terms of writers that somewhat intuitively lead him towards Pessoa, it might have been through his friend Alain Bosquet that the Romanian-French essayist became acquainted with Pessoa's works, all the more so as Bosquet's article on "Fernando Pessoa ou les délices du doute"² helped

¹ Quoted after Cioran's notebooks, item CRN.Ms.822⁶⁷ of the Fonds Cioran, Bibliothèque littéraire Jacques Doucet, Paris. Presumably, Pessoa's name was not written at the same time as the rest of the page. Rather it seems to have been introduced some time later. Its expressive colouring signals not only its importance, but also that it was added after the text's initial composition during the revision process. In the quotations following from Cioran's manuscripts (Fonds Cioran), the signs used are: [a simple strike through] '---': deletion or deletion without replacement; '<>': addition or addition after deletion.

² Although he did not go any further than hinting at their affinities, it was Alain Bosquet who as early as 1961 (at a time when neither Pessoa nor Cioran were known beyond a small circle of cognoscenti) cautiously attempted a comparison between the Transilvanian-born "private thinker" Cioran and Pessoa, whom he perceived to be "un impitoyable dilettante du néant, qu'on pourrait rapprocher [...] d'un essayiste comme E.M. Cioran" (Alain Bosquet, 1961, p. 176). In 1983, Bosquet dedicated a study to Cioran, the title of which reminds one of the one chosen for his essay on Pessoa: "Les délices de l'absurde". The authors have been mentioned together several times, as, for

to introduce Pessoa to the French public, along with essays by Pierre Hourcade (1952), Armand Guibert (1955) and Robert Bréchon (1969). The philosopher Mircea Eliade, who had been Cioran's friend from University years, could also have been the first to mention Pessoa's name to Cioran as from 1941 on he had spent four years in Lisbon and heard of Pessoa while living there already by 1942.³

Whether Cioran's enthusiasm for the Portuguese poet was kindled by one of his friends' suggestions or not⁴, his interest in Pessoa's works coincides clearly with the appearance of Gallimard's 1968 bilingual edition of Pessoa-Álvaro de Campos's poems.⁵ It was during the years following this edition that Cioran read Pessoa and here and there borrowed his words or employed his ideas. There is evidence from excerpts and implicit references among Cioran's texts and notes that he was reading Pessoa between 1969 and 1972. He considered not only the poetical works, but also the letters.

Quite probably Cioran had not read Pessoa before the end of 1968, for there are no traces of any contact with Pessoa's writings, although it cannot be excluded, of course, that he heard the poet's name earlier. It is chiefly in the first chapter of *De l'inconvénient d'être né* (1973), a collection of aphorism-like fragments conceived in the Sixties, and its satellite texts, such as *L'horreur d'être né* (1970) and *Hantise de la naissance* (1971), that Pessoa's traces can be identified, which is why in the following a short introduction to the book seems necessary.

In the period of *De l'inconvénient d'être né* Cioran's thought is focused on one single question: "Pourquoi la naissance de quoi que ce soit?" (CRN.Ms. 836⁹)⁶. An ancient problem resurfaces here which appears all through the Gnostics, through Aquinas, Leibniz or Schelling and was regarded by Heidegger as fundamentally underlying all metaphysics: Why did existence suddenly disturb the serenity of

instance, in Octavio Paz's early essay on Pessoa (1962).

³ Cf. Mircea Eliade, *Jurnalul portughez și alte scrieri* (2006). In 1942 the Lisbon publishing house Ática began to publish Pessoa's works.

⁴ Besides Bosquet and Eliade, it might also have been another exiled writer living in Paris, namely the Mexican poet Octavio Paz, who revealed Pessoa's works to Cioran. Although Paz's text on Pessoa (*Fernando Pessoa, l'inconnu personnel*) was not published in France until it appeared in 1968 in Roger Munier's translation from Spanish, Cioran might have known about it earlier for it was written already in 1961, that is, in the same year as Bosquet's short essay. Paz and Cioran exchanged a considerable number of books and were furthermore, parallel to Bosquet's case, linked by a fervent epistolary friendship. The entire correspondence is preserved in the Cioranian estate. Cioran alludes to their friendship several times in his journal: C, p. 699 (Paz); C, p. 792 (Bosquet), C, p. 742 (Bosquet as "A[lain] B[osquet]"), C, p. 743 (Bosquet as "A[lain] B[osquet]"). There is reason to believe that the writers spoke of their current projects and readings. Cioran was connected by friendship also with Paz's translator Roger Munier; cf. C, p. 934 or p. 956.

⁵ Fernando Pessoa, *Poésies d'Alvaro de Campos* (1968). Cioran must have consulted another edition, too, for not all the poems he quotes from or alludes to are to be found in this edition.

⁶ In the book's opening lines, the same question is put in a more abstract manner: "Pourquoi tout cela?" (I, p. 1271sq.)

non-being? Or, more pointedly, using a celebrated formula: "Why is there anything, rather than just nothing at all?" That *nihil est sine ratione* was Leibniz's response to the question, commented upon in Heidegger's *Der Satz vom Grund* [*The Principle Reason*]. Whereas the latter and his predecessors offered a multitude of different, usually prolix answers, Cioran offers nothing but the above question, testifying by its reductionist appearance the absurdity of any possible answer. Fragments follow it, revolving around the phenomenon of birth and, as shall be shown, around several nuances of its negation.

Owing to its provocative title, *De l'inconvénient d'être né* figures as one of Cioran's most notorious writings. Its author admitted "adhering to each word of this book" (Cioran, 1995: 233). Among his titles, *De l'inconvénient d'être né* was the one he was most attached to (1995: 233), while *inconvénient* was among those words he was "most fond of" ("que j'affectionne le plus", C, p. 841.). Actually, the book's title is applicable only to its first and most prominent chapter.⁷ Regarding the phases of its conception, none of Cioran's other texts seems to have been documented in as much detail in his journal⁸. Neither did any other piece of work seem to have such outrageously hubristic intentions: Cioran had hoped for an impact which would "tear the universe to pieces" (C, p. 235: "mettrait l'univers en pièces"), aspiring to say "something unique, terrible, definite about birth" (C, p. 807: "quelque chose d'unique, de terrible, de définitif sur la naissance"), "something unheard of, extraordinary" (CRN.Ms.823¹⁹: "quelque chose d'inouï, d'extraordinaire") and as significant as to 'cut history in two, making life, death – everything impossible' (CRN.Ms.823¹⁹: "quelque chose qui coupe l'Histoire en deux et rende impossible et la vie et la mort, et tout!").

A remarkable variety of expressions were put to test in diverse short texts and fragments before an appropriate title was found. The first time that the phrase "l'inconvénient d'être né" appears in Cioran's notebooks is on the 16th of May 1968 (C, p. 572.)⁹. Several expressions were tried out, including "l'inconvénient d'être vivant" (CRN.Ms.821⁴¹), "l'aberration d'être né" (CRN.Ms.821⁶¹), "le malheur de naître" (CRN.Ms.821⁶²), "le bonheur de n'être pas né" (CRN.Ms.822⁶), "l'inopportunité de naître" (CRN.Ms.835¹¹), "L'erreur de naître"¹⁰, "l'inconvénient

⁷ As in Cioran's previous work, *Le mauvais demiurge* (1969), it seems that once again "the first chapter has given the title to the book" (C, p. 662).

⁸ From 1957 onwards the journal accompanies the works with diverse comments, contexts and additions of different kinds. Not all of it is available to the reader yet. Published mainly posthumously, about 70% of the notes have found their way into Simone Boué's edition of *Cahiers*. The as yet unpublished remainder is kept in the Cioranian estate at the Bibliothèque littéraire Jacques Doucet in Paris. Moreover, some parts of the notebooks are inaccessible. In February 2005 unknown manuscripts appeared: apart from four versions of *De l'inconvénient d'être né* (herein quoted as "I", in *Ceuvres*, 1995; all following quotations are based on this edition of the text), a large part of them seems to belong to *Cahiers*, covering the years 1972-1989.

⁹ Cf. for variations CRN.Ms.814⁶³.

¹⁰ As noted in *Cahiers*, this former title of the book's first chapter is reconsidered as a title for the

d'être né" (formerly without "de", CRN.Ms.814⁶³), among others¹¹. In fact, *De l'inconvénient*, as Cioran sometimes used to abbreviate the title when speaking about his work in later years (C, p. 985), has similarities to Nietzsche's *Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Historie für das Leben* [On the Use and Abuse of History for Life], the second part of *Unzeitgemäße Betrachtungen* [Untimely Meditations]. Indeed, elements of the title such as *de l'inconvénient* are equally present in Nietzsche's title. Thus we cannot be fully certain as to whether Cioran's intensive study of the thought and style of Friedrich Nietzsche, whom he particularly admired among the German philosophers during his University years, ultimately triggered the choice of the book's title. But it is nevertheless probable, all the more so as Cioran kept rereading Nietzsche while preparing his book.¹²

Notes taken by the end of the 1960s contain hints at the book's conception and subject. Cioran had just finished working on a collection of essays and aphorisms, entitled *Le mauvais démiurge* (1969), when his new subject of interest occurred to him. The very moment of the choice of topic is described in a note taken on the 14th of June 1969:

J'ai promis il y a quelques jours à Marcel Arland un article pour la *N.R.F.* Je ne savais pas à vrai dire sur quoi il porterait. En attendant [...], j'ai feuilleté [...] le dernier numéro de la *Quinzaine*. Un article méchant de Gandillac sur *Hermès* où entre autres il cite un bout de phrase de ma façon: "la douceur d'avant la naissance". Eh bien, me suis-je dit, je vais traiter [...] de la *naissance*, de ce que j'ai appelé un jour la *catastrophe* de la naissance...

(C, p. 741)¹³

Seizing Arland's invitation to submit an article of yet indefinite content for publication in that "old and useless" (C, p. 684: "vieille et inutile") *Nouvelle Revue Française*, Cioran immersed himself in the new project right away. Six weeks later, however, he did not even "see the article taking shape before his mind's eye" (C, p. 743: "je ne le vois pas, il ne se dessine pas encore dans mon esprit")¹⁴, resulting in him discarding his "useless notes" (C, p. 746: "inutilisables et à côté de la

entire compilation of fragments written between 1957 and 1972, cf. C, p. 949.

¹¹ Cioran also tried "Les suites de la naissance" and "Le gouffre de la naissance". Both expressions are to be found in the Parisian Auction House Drouot's catalogue of auction.

¹² In the period of conception of *De l'inconvénient d'être né*, Nietzsche's name appears several times in Cioran's journal. See, for instance: C, p. 569, 752, 753 (implicit).

¹³ Cioran refers to Gandillac's "L'expérience créatrice du vide" (1969), written in reaction to the publication of a volume of *Hermès*, entitled "Le Vide, expérience spirituelle en Occident et en Orient" (ed. Lilian Silburn). Cioran participated in the latter with "L'indélibéré", an article that became part of *Le mauvais démiurge* (1969).

¹⁴ Cioran sums up his progress – or rather the lack of it – in his journal as follows: "Il faut que je me débarrasse de cette obsession ~~désastreuse~~ <qui ne mène à rien>: à quoi bon se lamenter sur le fait d'être né! Goût de l'impossibilité, de l'impasse, de l'irréparable, du tourment illimité et gratuit" (CRN.Ms.822⁵⁰). See also CRN.Ms.821⁴: "Il faut que je laisse tomber [...] ce projet d'article, puisque, au bout de six semaines de rumination, je ne suis arrivé à aucun résultat".

question"). Although an experienced, seasoned writer, he did not know how to tackle his diffuse "problem"¹⁵. The crisis reached its peak when he began to remind himself of some of his "rules of writing" in his journal:

Sur la naissance, il faudrait écrire dans un style oraculaire, essayer de ne rien expliquer, entretenir des clairs-obscur, l'équivoque; comme on le fait toutes les fois qu'on écrit sur un sujet qu'on n'a pas bien démêlé [...].

(C, p. 746)

Unfortunately, these constructive ideas did not lead to progress in the writing of the text. At least it was clear that Cioran was not dealing with writer's block. The troubles were of a different kind. Cioran had discovered that a sort of perversion was an important factor sustaining the problem: To question one's own birth appeared to be a "betrayal of himself", a "crime", the committing of which needed the sort of punishment he was presently receiving.¹⁶ He recognized it to be a metaphysical problem responsible for what announced itself to become a failure:

Si je n'ai pas réussi à terminer l'essai ~~sur la naissance~~ <sur l'inopportunité de naître>, c'est que le sujet ne se prête pas aux développements et qu'à maints égards il doit être faux, c'est-à-dire non-nécessaire, ~~sans justification réelle~~ <et inélucidable>. On ne peut faire que ce qui a été ne soit pas, on ne peut réfermer [sic] ou annuler l'origine, – tout au plus on peut s'y résigner [...].

(CRN.Ms.835¹¹)¹⁷

The ultimate irreversibility of being and the impossibility of reintegrating the "non-born", remarked here in the last sentence, seemed to be the decisive arguments against all of Cioran's attempts to write on birth. At the latest since their recognition in the quoted passage, Cioran could not stop complaining about his topic's complexity and came close to abandoning the project. He was certain that the theme of birth was the most "inextricable" and "insolvable" among those he had treated so far (CRN.Ms.822⁵⁷) and an "impossible subject" (C, p. 793): "Un mauvais sujet" (C, p. 746), it appeared "sterile" (C, p. 744) instead of inspiring. He accused himself of having taken "une mauvaise piste" (C, p. 746); soon, his theme seemed "not to be a theme at all" (C, p. 746: "[l]e thème de la naissance n'en est pas

¹⁵ Birth is frequently considered as a "problem", cf. CRN.Ms. 814⁶¹; 821⁴; 822¹²; 822⁵⁷; 823⁴⁷; 823⁶¹; 824⁴² / C, p. 820 as "faux problème"; CRN.Ms. 837⁷.

¹⁶ "Depuis que j'écris sur la naissance, je n'ai jamais rencontré tant de difficultés à traiter un sujet. [...] Pourquoi ce malaise quand j'en parle, pourquoi cet air de non-conviction? mieux, de trahison? – C'est qu'il est anti-naturel, anti-soi-même, de s'en prendre à ses commencements, de mettre en cause ses origines. [...] On peut se défaire sans peine de Dieu, de l'origine, mais non de sa propre naissance [...]. C'est pourquoi toutes les fois que je m'attaque à ma naissance, j'ai la sensation de perpétrer un crime sans pareil [...]" (C, p. 773).

¹⁷ Or: 'On meurt, on peut se tuer mais on ne peut annuler un fait sur lequel nul n'a aucun pouvoir' (CRN.Ms.824⁴²).

un"). With all endeavours in vain, Cioran decided to give up writing¹⁸, declaring birth to be his last and biggest "impasse" (CRN.Ms.822⁵⁷).

In spite of the vacillations experienced, three texts finally emerged dedicated to the theme of birth. Two of them precede the publication of the first chapter of *De l'inconvénient d'être né* as drafts or sketches of it. In chronological order, the first one to be published was a short text called "L'horreur d'être né", stemming from a theatrical interpretation of extracts from Samuel Beckett's works that Cioran had seen. It appeared in *Le Monde* on the 13th of June 1970¹⁹, half a year before the article in the *N.R.F.* The essay is the clearest and most coherent of texts among the testimonies left concerning the topic of birth. It was renamed at some point *On a double chore*, a development retractable in the manuscript CRN.Ms.715¹⁻⁶ (*L'horreur d'être né <Sur une double corvée>*)²⁰.

"Hantise de la naissance", the second text written about birth, was initially intended by Cioran to be a mere complement (C, p. 741) to *Le mauvais démiurge* (1969). It was sent to the *N.R.F.* on the 16th of October 1970²¹, that is, sixteen months after the evoked encounter with Marcel Arland, the periodical's editor in chief at that time, whom Cioran had promised to collaborate already by mid-June 1969²². Although the text did not satisfy its author – apparently unable to improve its 25 pages of aphoristic fragments – it was published a few months later, in January 1971. Except for a few changes, "Hantise de la naissance" constitutes the first chapter (without title) of *De l'inconvénient d'être né*.

Pessoa's name is mentioned four times in Cioran's writings. With regard to this relatively low frequency of explicit references, Pessoa's works do not appear to have a major impact on Cioran's work and thought as it was the case, for instance, concerning Nietzsche, all the more so as their reception is in a limited time-frame. As shall be shown in the following, the poet's influence has nonetheless been considerable.

The table below lists the passages relevant to a study of the influence of

¹⁸ "Si j'ai cessé d'écrire, c'est en partie tout au moins parce que me suis enlisé dans cette rumination sur la naissance dont décidément je n'arrive pas à sortir. Et pourquoi, à vrai dire, en sortirais-je, alors qu'elle porte la seule chose qui compte: ne venir pas au monde, n'y avoir jamais été." (CRN.Ms.824¹⁴).

¹⁹ Cioran mentions this publication in C, p. 809, "Je suis allé au *Monde* corriger les épreuves..." , C, p. 810, 814, CRN.Ms.822⁵⁸, CRN.Ms.823⁶⁷.

²⁰ Cioran began writing this text after the 24th of April 1970 (cf. C, p. 803). Under the modified title "Sur une double corvée" it was published recently in *Cahiers de L'Herne (Cioran)* (2009).

²¹ "J'ai envoyé à M[arcel] A[rland] un texte sur la 'Naissance', qui ne me satisfait pas: pourquoi satisferait-il quelqu'un autre? J'attends un mot d'approbation, comme tous eux qui ne sont pas sûrs de leurs productions. Ce qui est grave en l'occurrence, c'est que, tout en étant mécontent de mon 'travail', il m'a été impossible de l'améliorer. La seule chose que je pouvais faire était de m'en débarrasser [...]" (C, p. 861).

²² Cf. C, p. 741 (note taken on the 14th of June 1969); see also CRN.Ms.820⁵⁵.

Pessoa on Cioran and gives an inventory of references to book pages and shelf-marks of manuscripts from the Cioranian estate, allowing a chronological perspective on the poet's influence:²³

REFERENCE	DATE OF TEXT / NOTE	KEYWORDS
C, p. 665 (P)	9 th -11 th Jan. 1969	Pessoa's "crise psíquica" ²⁴
CRN.Ms.817 ⁵⁴ (P) (ms.u.)	before 11 th Jan. 1969	Aniversário: "...je me survis..."
C, p. 684*	6 th -9 th Feb. 1969	"contemporain de Dieu"
C, p. 786 / CRN.Ms. 822 ⁵¹	16 th Jan. 1970	"être qch. d'une manière totale" ²⁵
C, p. 787 / CRN.Ms.817 ⁵³ (P)	19 th Jan. 1970	"Seja o que fôr..."
CRN.Ms.822 ⁶⁷ (P) (ms.u.)	2 nd Feb. 1970	"Fernando Pessoa."
CRN.Ms.822 ⁶⁷ (ms.u.)	2 nd Feb. 1970	"je me survis"
CRN.Ms.822 ⁶⁷ (ms.u.)	2 nd Feb. 1970	"ne pas naître..."
<i>Hantise...</i> , N.R.F, p. 5	Jan. 1971	"avoir commis tous les crimes"
I, p. 1237	1973	"avoir commis tous les crimes"

Cioran appears to focus on Pessoa's works more intensely during the winter months, that is, in January and February 1969, 1970 and 1971, each time with a pause of one year in between the readings, but continuously over three years. It is between 1969 to 1971 that the self-proclaimed Hispanophile suddenly turns himself towards Portuguese culture. Among all the known types of nostalgic sentiment, such as the English *yearning*, German *Sehnsucht*, Turkish *üzgün*, etc., according to him it seemed to be Portuguese *saudade* which came closest to what his natives experienced and celebrated in song as their fundamental *Lebensgefühl* named *dor* (Cioran, 1995: 230). (Cioran believed that only three peoples knew that

²³ The entry is marked with "(P)" where Pessoa's name appears. Unpublished references are indicated in the chart as such "(ms.u.)". The shelf-marks CRN.Ms.814sq. refer to items from Cioran's notebooks, kept in the Bibliothèque littéraire Jacques Doucet (Paris) since 1995. The asterisked entry could not be identified clearly as a reference to Pessoa, but seems nevertheless to have grown out of a Pessoaan context.

²⁴ Cioran retains an expression from Pessoa's letter which he comments upon: "Dans une lettre de Pessoa, le traducteur emploie l'expression, 'crise psychique' – il aurait fallu: 'crise morale', car il ne s'agissait pas d'un découragement quelconque mais d'une révision de son attitude envers ses semblables. Chez Pessoa, c'est presque la crise de Tolstoï. Une crise d'ordre moral donc" (C, p. 665; note taken between the 9th and the 11th of January 1969.) The reference has been shown to derive from Pessoa's letter, written on the 19th of January 1915, to Armando Côrtes-Rodrigues: "Meu querido Amigo: Ha tempos que lhe ando prometendo uma extensa carta. Não sei mesmo se, especificando, lhe não falei n'uma carta de género psychologico, a meu proprio respeito. Em todo o caso, é d'isso que se trata. Eu ando ha muito – desde que lhe prometti esta carta – com vontade de lhe falar intimamente e fraternalmente do meu 'caso', da natureza da *crise psychica* que ha tempos venho atravessando" (Pessoa, 2009: 353; my underlining; thanks to Jerónimo Pizarro for the reference.)

²⁵ The note "Être quelque chose d'une manière totale – c'est ce à quoi on devrait aspirer" undeniably reminds of Pessoa-Álvaro de Campos's celebrate line from "A Passagem das Horas": "Sentir tudo de todas as maneiras" ["Sentir tout de toutes les manières"]; cf. Pessoa (1968: 27).

sublime sensation: the Russians, the Hungarians and the Portuguese and confessed in his notebooks that he had always wanted to live among those "sad peoples"²⁶.)

Recently published letters written to his (Brazilian) Portuguese translator José Thomaz Brum confirm Cioran's appraisal of Portuguese culture, its language, writers, mystics²⁷, and music²⁸. Keen on everything that derived from hysteria or folly (C, p. 828), Cioran admired Pessoa for his "excesses and transgressions" as much as he saluted Antero de Quental for his absolute pessimism (Brum, 2008, p. 250). He had remarked "des points communs" between the Romanian and Portuguese idioms: although geographically remote, both were "particularly apt to translate all that yields to melancholy and failure" ("spécialement aptes à traduire tout ce qui relève de la mélancolie et de l'échec"²⁹).

When Cioran marks Pessoa's name in his journal, the theme is usually around birth.³⁰ This circumstance supposes a connection, which I would like to examine here, between the rather sudden apparition of birth in Cioran's writing and the reading of Pessoa's works. We learn from the notebooks that right before delving into the subject of birth, Cioran had worked on a text on "spiritual levels" ("des niveaux spirituels")³¹ and then rather suddenly turned towards the theme of birth. Whereas not completely absent from his writings, birth is not extensively treated before 1968/1969³²; death, however, or rather suicide as its counterpart appears frequently throughout the works. It does not reemerge after the early Seventies, neither in *Écartèlement* (1979), nor in *Exercices d'admiration* (1986) or

²⁶ "J'aurais aimé vivre au milieu de peuples tristes, ou tout au moins dont la musique est langoureuse ou déchirante: le fado, le tango, lamentations arabes, hongroises..." (C, p. 167).

²⁷ Cioran evokes reading himself through Portuguese mysticism, cf. C, p. 648.

²⁸ "Le fado me comble autant que la musique hongroise. Quelle nostalgie!" (C, p. 814).

²⁹ Facsimiles of letters written by Cioran to J. T. Brum, 25th of March 1988 and 11th of August 1989, in Brum (2008: 254sq).

³⁰ Cf. also CRN.Ms.822⁶⁷: "Naître est un événement dont on ne prend conscience que bien plus tard, et qui devient de plus en plus important, voire catastrophique <terrifiant> à mesure qu'on s'en éloigne". When editing the manuscripts left unpublished after the writer's death, Cioran's lifelong companion Simone Boué seems not to have regarded most notes concerning birth as noteworthy, which is why only very few of them appear in her edition of *Cahiers*. (As I have not had access to Simone Boué's typescript, I cannot tell at which point the deletion took place: it might well be that Gallimard deleted the quotes.)

³¹ See, for instance, C, p. 640, p. 645, p. 649, p. 741, p. 824. See also, among the manuscripts, CRN.Ms.816⁶². Never finished or rather never undertaken, there are hardly any fragments left in his estate to be associated with such a project.

³² Cf. *La Chute dans le Temps*, "Portrait d'un civilisé", p. 1092 ("le mal de naître") and "Les dangers de la sagesse", pp. 1149-1150 ("maudire sa naissance"), in Cioran, *Œuvres* (1995). See also C, p. 86: "Personne en Occident n'ose parler comme d'une évidence de 'l'abîme de la naissance', expression qui revient souvent dans les écrits bouddhiques. Et cependant la naissance est bien un abîme, un gouffre".

Aveux et anathèmes (1987), the three works following the birth-themed *De l'inconvénient d'être né*. However, the topic very quickly became another of what the author called his "obsessions" (C, p. 785; Cioran speaks of "hantise"), figuring sometimes as a "minor" (I, p. 1280: "obsession mineure"), but "cosmogonic" one (C, p. 787) and sometimes as *the* obsession of obsessions ("rarement obsession m'a dominé avec pareille force")³³, "at once loved and hated" (C, p. 787). In one of his notebooks Cioran wrote:

Depuis que je ne cesse de penser à la naissance, je suis en dehors et de la vie et de la mort. Où me placer? où est mon lieu dans l'être? Il s'agit bien d'être! ~~Je me survis <je me précède>~~
~~<vis dans ce qui précède la vie>~~ <je ne serai plus jamais> <['] existe avant d'exister>, je me précède, je...

(CRN.Ms.822⁶⁷)

Cioran himself comprehended the emergence of the topic of birth not only as a novelty in his thought, but saw it as a turning point in his work³⁴. Its apparition was perceived by him to be relieving, a "source of renewal" (C, p. 800: "source de renouvellement"), which, at least for a while, enabled respiration. Despite the topic's supposedly salutary effects on the author, birth itself was identified with the epitome of catastrophe (Cf. I, p. 1271)³⁵. Cioran called it "a calamity" (I, p. 1279), "a disaster" (Cioran, 2009: 298), "une provocation, un défi, un assaut" (CRN.Ms.837⁷), "the supreme indiscretion" (CRN.Ms.837⁷), "the scandal of scandals" (CRN.Ms.835¹¹), "the initial error" (CRN.Ms.837¹⁶), "the prelude to capitulation" (C, p. 978: "l'amorce d'une capitulation"), among other things. Due to convictions of this kind, all throughout his life he was opposed to procreation³⁶. He perceived every newborn to be a "maudit" (CRN.Ms.837⁷), "a virtual disaster" (*Œuvres*, 1995 : 1244)³⁷ and thus approved of the Thracians' habit of rejoicing at funerals and crying over the births of children (I, p. 1272, CRN.Ms.823⁸⁶; 823⁸⁸; 824¹⁶). According to him, humanity had always been in error in its belief that "le vrai mal" still lies before it as it progresses towards death: In reality, it lies behind.³⁸

³³ CRN.Ms.824⁴² or CRN.Ms. 836⁵. C, p. 787.

³⁴ "Quand on a usé l'intérêt que l'on prenait à la mort, et qu'on se figure n'avoir plus rien à en tirer, on se replie sur la naissance, on se met à affronter un gouffre autrement inépuisable..." (I, p. 1277). See also C, p. 750: "Celui qui a dépassé la peur de mourir en arrive à ne plus songer qu'à l'inutilité de naître". Elsewhere in *Cahiers*, it is the idea of suicide that is being substituted by birth, "obsession voisine" (C, p. 800).

³⁵ Birth as catastrophe also in C, p. 731 and C, p. 741, CRN.Ms.816⁶² ("La naissance comme ~~peché~~ <catastrophe majeure>").

³⁶ Cf. Cioran's essay "Le refus de procréer", in *Précis de décomposition*, in *Œuvres* (1995 : 691-693).

³⁷ Cf. Cioran, *Aveux et anathèmes*, in *Œuvres* (1995 : 1648): "Ces enfants dont je n'ai pas voulu, s'ils savaient le bonheur qu'ils me doivent!".

³⁸ I, p. 1271 : "Nous ne courons pas vers la mort, nous fuyons la catastrophe de la naissance [...]. Il nous répugne, il est vrai, de traiter la naissance de fléau: ne nous a-t-on pas inculqué qu'elle était le

Now looking closer at the crossed-out part of the above quote, one can observe in detail how Cioran adapts a Pessoaan idea and develops it. The expression '~~Je me survis~~' seems to echo a famous verse from Pessoa's "Aniversário" [Birthdate], a later Álvaro de Campos poem. Chronologically speaking, *Aniversário* was the first Pessoaan poem read by Cioran, as the chart above shows. I would like to point to the fact that the poem's expressive title not only coincides with Cioran's interest in the topic of birth discussed above, but might actually have been – although most certainly not exclusively – the origin to his preoccupation with the theme in the first place. That it is related can be shown by juxtaposing another journal entry from the non-edited part of Cioran's notebooks. Around the 11th of January 1969, Cioran notes:

"...je me survis à moi-même comme une allumette froide"

Fernando Pessoa

(CRN. Ms.817⁵⁴)³⁹

Leaving aside the interpretations of the above verse's meaning in the Pessoaan and Cioranian contexts, I wish to focus here solely on the structure of the sequence just cited of synonymical expressions from Cioran's note, decomposing it first into its components as they appeared one after the other in the creative process:

1. Je me survis
2. <je me précède>
3. <vis dans ce qui précède la vie,>
4. <je ne serai plus jamais>
5. <[J]'existe avant d'exister>, je me précède, je...

The journal entry is left incomplete and suspended ("..."). Either it has simply not culminated in a satisfying expression or, alternatively, was abandoned due to the abyss of the past opening up – a past memorable, for a secret self-anteriority or paradoxical pretemporality is conjured up in the line "je me précède". Following Pessoa's example, a five-fold cascade of phrases is developed step by step, translating from one turn to the other an obscure, time-transcending self. This entity is presented as "postself" in the first line ("je me survis") and becomes "foreself" in the second ("je me précède"). Between the first line and the first variation, a radical shift in direction takes place, attended by a complete

souverain bien, que le pire se situait à la fin et non au début de notre carrière? Le mal, le vrai mal est pourtant *derrière*". Cf. also C, p. 750: "L'idée de naître est bien plus terrible que celle de mourir car elle ajoute à la terreur de la mort la vision de l'inutilité de la naissance". C, p. 721: "Ce n'est pas la mort, c'est la naissance qui est l'heure de vérité".

³⁹ I assume that Cioran knew the verse only in a translation, as otherwise – like in most cases – he would have probably quoted the original.

delimitation of the speaking subject. Now if in the first line of the fragment quoted above the subject declares itself to be “beyond life and death” (“je suis en dehors et de la vie et de la mort”), the assertion of this dilemma is to be comprehended in a literal manner. Effectively two thresholds are exceeded in two different directions, prospectively the last one first, followed by the first one, while regressing: namely death by “je me survis”, birth by “je me précède”. In consequence, the self is lost somewhere in between.

A similar “foreself” as in the first line quoted here, acts in Pessoa’s eponymous poem written in 1913 (Pessoa: 1995: 406) as well as in some of his English sonnets. Paulo Borges’s essay “Beyond-God and beyond-being: uncreated and yearning in Fernando Pessoa” discusses the phenomenon in depth. In a Cioranian context, however, the idea seems rather strange and quaint. A “foreself” appears solely in the period of creation of *De l’inconvénient d’être né*. It is transformed into a more clear-cut “moi d’avant moi” or “moi antérieur au moi” (I, p. 1284) in the book’s first chapter. Whether the concept of anteriority or pretemporality occurs in Cioran’s writing as a result from his reading of Pessoa or not is a question that cannot be answered with certainty, for it appears widely also in the Zohar as well as in Jewish mysticism, both known to Cioran. But it is nonetheless striking that the topic appears in his texts only after his reading of Pessoa’s works.

A recurrent adverbial construction denoting pretemporality used, “d’avant”, that is “prior to” or “anterior to”, can be found in many among Cioran’s texts from that period. “Avant”⁴⁰ – without the “d’”, – “devant” and the verb “précéder” belong to the same semantic field and appear just as often in Cioran’s writings. Already in the last lines of “L’indélivré”, antepenultimate chapter of *Le mauvais démiurge*, the author speaks of “the sweetness prior to birth” (“la douceur d’avant la naissance”)⁴¹. He keeps evoking the nostalgia for the felicity “d’avant toute naissance” (C, p. 437), “d’avant la lumière, d’avant la parole” (C, p. 684-5), for man’s condition “d’avant la conscience” (C, p. 813), for a world “d’avant le désir” (C, p. 803), a space “d’avant la naissance, d’avant l’histoire [...] d’avant l’être” (Cioran, 2009: 299)⁴², a time “d’avant le temps” (I, p. 1281), “d’avant le cerveau” (C, p. 815), “d’avant les origines” (CRN.Ms.8377)⁴³, “l’ennui d’avant et après la naissance” (CRN.Ms.823⁴⁸) et cetera. In pitying “ce rien qui précède Dieu” as a lost

⁴⁰ Cf. “...une perplexité avant la connaissance...” (CRN.Ms.81471).

⁴¹ “Même si l’expérience du vide n’était qu’une tromperie, elle mériterait d’être tentée. [...] Sans elle, point de remède à l’infirmité d’être, ni d’espoir de réintégrer, ne fut-ce qu’en de brefs instants, la douceur d’avant la naissance, la lumière de la pure antériorité”. Cioran, *Le mauvais démiurge* (herein quoted as ‘MD’), in *Œuvres* (1995: 1229).

⁴² See also I, p. 1385.

⁴³ See also C, p. 962: “d’avant notre naissance”.

homeland⁴⁴, he wishes, following an idea expressed by Kafka⁴⁵, to be able to “barricade himself before birth” (CRN.Ms.823⁷⁸: “se barricader avant de naître”) and comprehends the refusal of birth to coincide with the nostalgia of a time before time⁴⁶. The adverbial construction appears several times in the following passage, riddled with expressions denoting negativity:

N’être jamais né: imaginer la vie *d’avant* la naissance comme un sommeil *sans commencement*, remontant en tout cas à quelque origine unimaginablement lointaine, un sommeil ‘infini’ dont on est fâché que l’on ait été arraché. La nostalgie de cette infinité d’avant n’est que le regret de voir interrompu un état où l’on pressentait l’être <la conscience> sans la désirer..., où la non-manifestation était une volupté, troublée malheureusement par l’immanence de l’être.

Pour moi la nostalgie <le désir> du non-né se ramène à un appétit de non-manifestation. J’ai horreur du *manifesté*. Je voudrais m’évanouir dans le non-manifesté, m’y évanouir? non, le rejoindre, car j’en dérive.

L’idolâtrie du virtuel, l’amour presque maladif de ce qui échappe à l’actualisation. *Le fétichisme de ce qui précède tout acte*.

~~Je voudrais n’avoir jamais été, et jouir de cet état d’avant moi et connaître <et jouir de> cette plénitude nulle d’un moi d’avant moi.~~

(C, p. 822)⁴⁷

An important fragment in the context of Cioran’s thought of the early Seventies, it is in the quoted passage that the author avows himself to the “idolatry of the virtual”, of the “non-manifested”, to the “fetishism of what precedes the Act”, what precedes life as such. Nothing seems to appeal more to Cioran in that period than to imagine the sphere of the “non-born” – a much more intriguing thought than birth or being⁴⁸ – and to wallow in it. Not what is (has been or will be), thus what is exposed to actual being and realization is of interest, but what remains hidden beyond the acts as the once possible; the aborted alternatives, suppressed and left behind in their non-existence. Cioran transforms his confession finally into a wish: never to have been born which in French comes along with a neologism. Whereas at the outset of his preoccupation with the theme of birth Cioran meant to treat of birth in the strict sense of the word (C, p. 861)⁴⁹, only when entering deeper into his subject does he perceive his real interest, namely its negation: the “non-born” (“[le] non-né”), “non-birth”⁵⁰ (“non-naissance”).

⁴⁴ C, p. 793: “Mon lieu, ma patrie est, comme pour les mystiques, ce rien qui *précède* Dieu”.

⁴⁵ Cioran notes on the 2nd Jan. 1969: “Ma vie est l’hésitation devant la naissance. Kafka” (C, p. 660).

⁴⁶ “Le refus de la naissance coïncide avec la nostalgie de ce temps d’avant le temps. Le refus de la naissance n’est rien d’autre” (C, p. 800).

⁴⁷ The last phrase has not entered *Cahiers*, but belongs to the manuscript (CRN.Ms.835^{15sq}). Written on the 1st of August, 1970.

⁴⁸ Cf. also I, p. 1272: “Jamais à l’aise dans l’immédiat, ne me séduit ce qui me précède, que ce qui m’éloigne d’ici, les instants sans nombre où je ne fus pas: *le non-né*” (I underline).

⁴⁹ “Naissance” appears in inverted commas and is written with a capital letter.

⁵⁰ “Mon obsession de la naissance, ou plus exactement, mon obsession de la non-naissance...” (CRN.Ms.836⁵, dated on the 2nd of August 1970).

The terms “non-born” and “non-birth” have several precursors and parallels in Cioran’s writings, all using the privative prefix “non-”, such as “non-commencé” (C, p. 32), “non-communication” (I, p. 1271), “non-manifestation” (or “non-manifesté”) (C, p. 822), “non-réalité” (I, p. 1276), “non-acte” (C, p. 605), “non-né” (I, p. 1272), “non-nécessaire” (CRN.Ms.835¹¹), “non-conviction” (C, p. 773). Compounds of this kind indicating negation emerge with particular frequency in the phase of conception of *De l'inconvénient d'être né*. Their composition seems somewhat to be modeled on German usage or, more precisely, that of the German mystics, notably Master Eckhart, who made extensive use of negative prefixes.⁵¹ However, the coinage of the term “non-né” is anticipated elsewhere, in a quotation among Cioran’s notes from Pessoa-Álvaro de Campos’s sensationist poem “A Passagem das Horas” (1916). Cioran remarks in one of his notebooks as follows:

J'ouvre les *Poésies* d'Álvaro de Campos (Pessoa), et je tombe sur “Seja o que fôr, era melhor não ter nascido”. Quoi qu'il en soit, mieux valait n'être pas né.

(C, p. 787)⁵²

To comprehend Cioran’s idea of “non-birth”, it seems indispensable to look at the poetical excerpt quoted, for it appears – at least partially – to have triggered Cioran’s idea. Extracted here by the author almost like an aphorism, the verse was deleted by Pessoa from most versions of “A Passagem das Horas”. This is interesting inasmuch as the version of the poem included in the aforementioned bilingual Pessoa edition from 1968 contains the verse, showing that Cioran probably had access to the volume named, all the more so as he renders the original Portuguese verse along with the exact wording used in Guibert’s translation into French.

This quotation, marked on the 19th of January 1970 is actually a quotation of a quotation and not, as it were, a Pessoaan “invention”. A Greek commonplace notion of tragic futility is reproduced here, as it is found in the writings of Herodotus, Euripides or Nietzsche, known as the “wisdom of Silenus”. Pessoa recalls Silenus’s answer to king Midas as it is related, for instance, in a celebrated passage from Nietzsche’s *The Birth of Tragedy*⁵³. Although it is almost certain that

⁵¹ An example is quoted by Cioran himself in *Cahiers*: “entwerden” – “de-become” if one was tempted to render the somewhat paradoxical word. “Entwerden, se soustraire au devenir, – le mot allemand le plus beau, le plus significatif que je connaisse” (C, p. 59).

⁵² Probably quoted after a French edition of Fernando Pessoa, *Poésies d'Álvaro de Campos / Poesias de Álvaro de Campos* (1968 : 28-29), translated by Armand Guibert.

⁵³ “There is an old legend that king Midas for a long time hunted the wise *Silenus*, the companion of Dionysus, in the forests, without catching him. When Silenus finally fell into the king’s hands, the king asked what was the best thing of all for men, the very finest. The daemon remained silent, motionless and inflexible, until, compelled by the king, he finally broke out into shrill laughter and said these words, ‘Suffering creature, born for a day, child of accident and toil, why are you forcing

Cioran, who was a fervent Nietzsche reader in his youth, knew the story from his Nietzsche readings, it is only through "A Passagem das Horas" that he became aware again of its existence. In his journal he remarks that he "came across" the sentence – "je tombe sur" suggesting that one happens upon something (possibly known before) while skimming the pages at random.

However, the idea of "non-birth" has been developed in Cioran's writing only after the author actually (re-)discovered the story mentioned through Pessoa's poem. To strengthen this argument, it seems important to point to the fact that Cioran admitted neither to have considered Pline⁵⁴, nor Nietzsche⁵⁵ when conceiving *Hantise de la naissance*, his first published draft to the introductory chapter of *De l'inconvénient d'être né*.

Now looking back at the sketches evoked here in the beginning, surrounding the note with Pessoa's name in Cioran's journal, the fragment preceding the poet's name reveals itself to be a reference to or even a retake of Pessoa's verse. Therein Cioran displays the supremacy of "non-being" or "not-being"⁵⁶, to use a Pessoaan term, over being:

Disparaître est sans doute une solution remarquable; ne pas naître ~~est encore~~ <vaut encore> mieux. Ne pas naître est la meilleure formule qui soit, et elle n'est à ~~la disposition~~ <la portée> de personne.

(CRN.Ms.822⁶⁶)⁵⁷

Although Pessoa is, of course, not the only influence on the voracious reader Cioran in that period, but one along with, for instance, Franz Kafka, Cesar Vallejo,

me to say what would give you the greatest pleasure not to hear? The very best thing for you is totally unreachable: not to have been born, not to *exist*, to be *nothing*. The second best thing for you, however, is this – to die soon" (Nietzsche, 1956: 29).

⁵⁴ With unambiguous clarity the writer relates on the 19th of June 1970 – he is about to conceive *Hantise de la naissance* – so far not to have read Pline: "Un provincial m'envoie un texte prétentieux contre ce qu'il appelle 'l'évasionisme métaphysique' et où il cite, à propos de mon petit article sur Beckett, le mot de Pline l'Ancien: 'Privés du bonheur de ne pas être nés, serons-nous donc privés aussi du bonheur de nous anéantir?' Il faudrait que je trouve la citation exacte. Je la connaissais, il va sans dire, mais [...] pas un seul instant je ne me la suis rappelée quand j'ai écrit *La Hantise de la Naissance*" (CRN.Ms.823⁷⁶).

⁵⁵ On the 9th of December 1969 Cioran noted that he wanted to look up the story of Midas and Silenus in Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* (C, p. 770; dated in CRN.Ms.822³). It was not until much later that he reread the book. Whereas the mention of "A Passagem das Horas" appears already in January 1970, Cioran quotes from Nietzsche in June 1970: "Silène dit au roi Midas de Phrygie: 'Mieux vaut pour l'homme n'être point né; s'il est né, de rentrer le plus tôt possible dans le royaume de la Nuit'" (CRN.Ms. 823⁸⁷).

⁵⁶ Cf. Pessoa's summary from 1906 of a never-written book called *The World as Power and as Not-being* (Pessoa, 1968: I, 55).

⁵⁷ Slightly diversified, the above fragment entered *De l'inconvénient d'être né*: "Ne pas naître est sans contredit la meilleure formule qui soit. Elle n'est malheureusement à la portée de personne" (I, p. 1400).

Cino da Pistoia, the Bhagavad-Gita and Buddhist thinking, constituting altogether the context of reference of *De l'inconvénient d'être né*, it seems to be Pessoa's "A Passagem das Horas" to have particularly influenced Cioran's rumination on the idea of never having been born. In fact, the poem not only set the frame for the book concerning its topic, but delivered Cioran even concrete expressions as the following verse from "A Passagem das Horas" alluded to by Cioran. If, in the vortex of total simultaneous experience, the virtually ubiquitous subject of Pessoa's "A Passagem das Horas" says:

J'ai commis tous les crimes,
J'ai vécu dans tous les crimes [...]

(Pessoa, 1968: 31; Guibert's translation)

Cioran echoes that idea – or rather responds to it, completing or complementing the verse in his own manner: "Avoir commis tous les crimes, hormis celui d'être père" (I, p. 1273)⁵⁸. Although we are dealing here almost with the same wording as in Pessoa-Álvaro de Campos's line, an essential modification is introduced, a grammatical nuance that brings about a shift in meaning and refines the idea proposed in the first part of Pessoa's verse into a paradoxical twist. Not to take someone's life, but to give life to someone is regarded as a crime. Instead of adapting the poetic subject ("j'ai commis", in the Portuguese original "cometi todos os crimes, / vivi dentro de todos os crimes..."), Cioran chose to suppress its explicit manifestation, rendering it passive by use of an abstract perfective infinitive ("avoir commis")⁵⁹. Hence, the statement appears innocuous, as if a mere experiment of thought, a test arrangement in virtuality, at least in what concerns the first part of the sentence. Although just as in Pessoa's verse a "completed" action is presented, the active factor "I" is excluded; it seems to have fallen prey to neutrality, typical of all aphoristic literature.

Yet it is not only the poetic subject, which has receded in the background. The act itself, namely the stated committing of crimes as such is withdrawn from the present and, so to speak, from the responsibility of the implicit subject by means of a sort of distance induction on a grammatical level, comprehensible only in relation to and on the background of the Pessoaan antetype presented. It is not for nothing that both auxiliary infinitives 'to have' ("avoir commis") and "to be" ("être") are used; as verbs with reduced action potential in most cases, they regularly need active complements. Not immersion – as in the poet's case –, but evasion operates here therefore in both, form and content, of the aphorism. Whereas the above verses deal with a subject that has surrendered completely to life and to being, partaking even in crime – and virtually *all* the crimes ever committed

⁵⁸ See also CRN.Ms.823, f°43 (May 1970).

⁵⁹ In a similar way Cioran suppresses the subject in the journal entry rendered in C, p. 786: "Être quelque chose d'une manière totale".

– as part of the totality of life, Cioran’s line seems entirely to refuse, to boycott being. With the final non-act, that is the insinuated conversation-withdrawal as a last consequence of the grammatical intervention, the author has fully become the “hero of retraction” (C, p. 219: “héros de la rétractation”) he wanted to be.

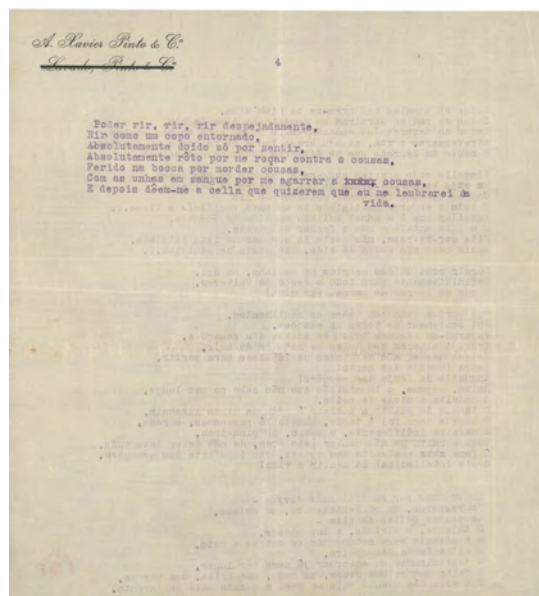
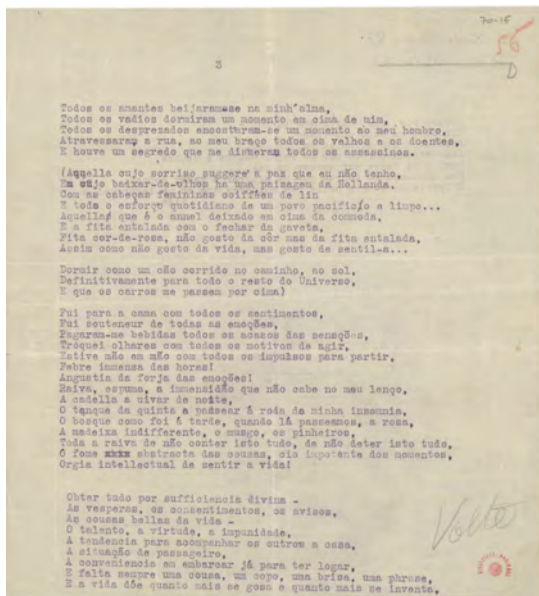
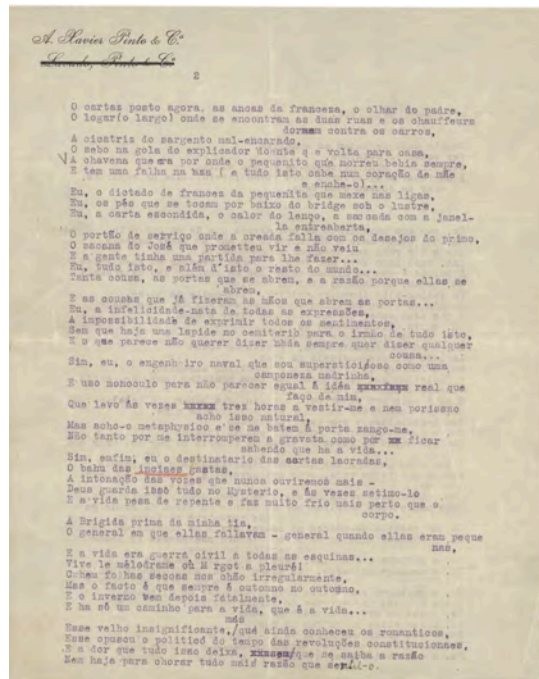
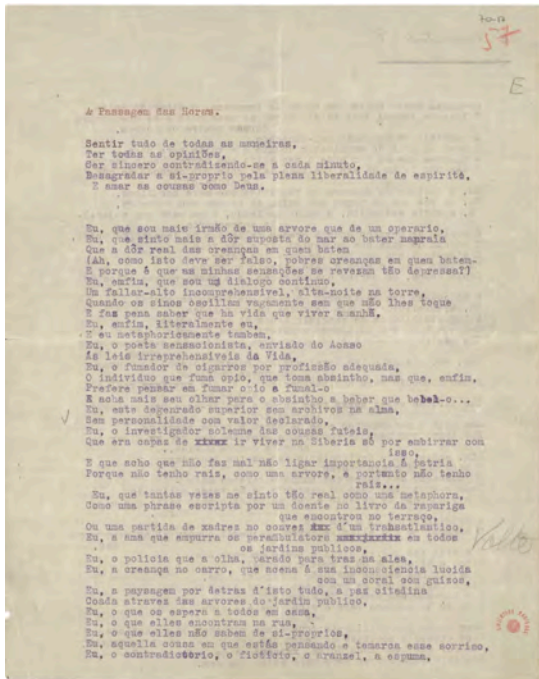


Fig. 1. Beginning of “A Passagem das Horas” (BNP/E3, 70-17 e 16).

The opening lines of *De l'inconvénient d'être né* could be read as an allusion to "A Passagem das Horas", or at least as an illustration of its title. Therein a Baudelairian insomniac draws up his "balance sheet for each minute" ("le bilan de chaque minute"). He claims to "see the hours pass" (I, p. 1273: "je vois les heures passer"), regretting their "primultimacy" (Vladimir Jankélévitch). A paradoxically posthumous existence – another "postself" – is introduced in the book's first lines. It anticipates all possible future moments as if they had virtually already passed, destituted beforehand of a present (I, p. 1273). The theme of time – not only through the above mentioned idea of "pretemporality" – is a major thread in the web of Cioran's text. It continuously preoccupied both writers. We witness to these two contrary attempts of time evasion: Whereas in Pessoa's "A Passagem das Horas" time is "extasised" into an absolute, universal present, where all the once possible as well as all the ever possible is focused in one spot, in one conscience, Cioran's vision of time in *De l'inconvénient d'être né* strives by means of regression in time to undermine time's flow and to suspend it at its origin or rather beyond it, namely where 'time had not fallen into time yet', where time did not yet equate temporality:

Remonter au-delà de l'homme vers ces périodes qui le nient, se rendre complice de la matière, et de sa répugnance à se glisser vers la vie [...]. Pureté des commencements, temps non contaminé par la temporalité, temps qui ne tombait pas dans le temps †<> temps fidèle à lui-même, hostile à trahir son essence, à profaner son éternelle virtualité. [...] [J]e voudrais bien sauter en arrière vers ce temps auquel je me sens lié par un secret [...].

(CRN.Ms. 836^o)

As is frequent in Cioran's writing, it is not a completed action or thought which is introduced here, but a potential one. The text is not written in indicative speech, but uses linguistic means that seem to share similar functions with the subjunctive mood, in the sense that a degree of potentiality is induced. Again, infinitives are used such as "remonter", "se rendre", "se glisser", "trahir", "profaner". Due to their temporal and modal openness they refer to possibility, virtuality, even irreality. It is as if again a cognitive experiment were being proposed. The passage finishes with a wish: the subject asserts it would like to leap backwards ("je voudrais bien sauter en arrière") into "the time before all time".

The movement back in time depicted here could be compared with a *descensus ad limbum*. It is not, however, a descent into an afterworld beyond death as in the Christian idea of limbo, but such into a kind of intermediate state preceding birth, where time was just about to evolve. To suspend the course of evolution at that very point, leaving it there to its "eternal virtuality", and then to leap into it in order to disappear in a void space before birth, seems to be the trigger behind the Cioranian phantasies of regression. The leap backwards is also the lynchpin of a kind of inverted eschatology. Instead of searching for redemption

after death as it is the case with all the Christian religions according to Cioran, salvation can only be found before birth. However, to “all those who are” (CRN.Ms.837¹³: “quiconque est”) it shall forever be inaccessible, for it is always already “a life too late” for that (CRN.Ms.822⁵⁷). The origin cannot be “closed or annulled”.⁶⁰

In one of the most poetical fragments from *De l'inconvénient d'être né* the attempt of reintegrating the origins is presented in the light of the specific difficulties encountered:

Nos pensées, à la solde de notre panique, s'orientent vers le futur, suivent le chemin de toute crainte, débouchent sur la mort. Et c'est inverser leur cours, c'est les faire reculer, que de les diriger vers la naissance et de les obliger et s'y fixer. Elles perdent par là même cette vigueur, cette tension inapaisable qui gît au fond de l'horreur de la mort, et qui est utile à nos pensées si elles veulent se dilater, s'enrichir, gagner en force. On comprend alors pourquoi, en parcourant un trajet contraire, elles manquent d'allant, et sont si lasses quand elles butent enfin contre leur frontière primitive, qu'elles n'ont plus d'énergie pour regarder par-delà, vers le jamais-né.

(I, p. 1280)

The verve of thought diminishes when it approaches the origins, whereas it increases moving in opposite direction, because crawling back in time saps its strength. Nothing really enhances its course, for there does not seem to be any existential necessity in thinking about birth, as there is with death, the fear of which generates life's dynamics. On this background, the thought of birth becomes almost a forced and artificial undertaking. Exhausted before its aim is attained, thought has lost so much of its initial power, regressing in time, that eventually it is unable to do the leap over the last border (“frontière primitive”) which divides being from non-being, the actual from the possible, reality from virtuality. Ultimately, the “never-born” is never reached, far beyond the sphere of the Possible from which it once immersed.

Three points mark the regressive movement displayed in *De l'inconvénient d'être né*, triggered to a certain point by readings in Pessoa's oeuvre: 1. birth, 2. “non-birth” (“non-naissance”) or “the non-born” (“le non-né”) and 3. “the never-born” (I, p. 1280: “le jamais-né”) as the ultimate aim of the regression. This last term is a *hapax legomenon* in Cioran's work. It does not indicate any kind of superlative of “non-birth” – nonsensical, of course, as “non” cannot be compared. Through the “never” (*jamais*) it refers nonetheless to something that surpasses simple negation. Whereas ‘non-birth’ equates the mental manoeuvre of returning the Actual into the Possible prior to it, functioning only in relation to a concrete

⁶⁰ Cf. CRN.Ms.824⁴²: “[...] on ne peut réformer ou annuler l'origine, – tout au plus on peut s'y résigner”. Or, CRN.Ms.835¹¹: “On meurt, on peut se tuer mais on ne peut annuler un fait sur lequel nul n'a aucun pouvoir”.

subject, the idea of “the never-born” seems free from subjective manifestation and refers to non-being as such, pure and abstract, beyond negation and beyond the “uchronical” (Charles Renouvier) “as if”-situation installed in the first case. While “non-birth” seems thus still to refer to an individual past or at least to a virtual past before the past as it was conjured up in one of the above fragments, quoted from Cioran’s journal, “the never-born” belongs to the achronical sphere of being and denotes its total suspension. Being an absolute border, “the never-born” seems to come quite close to the Cusanian “wall of paradise”, which can be overleapt only for the price of the loss of the ratio. Beyond ‘non-birth’ the counterfactual illusion ends.

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