An Interview with Cioran
Author(s): Jason Weiss and E. M. Cioran
Reviewed work(s):
Source: Grand Street, Vol. 5, No. 3 (Spring, 1986), pp. 105-140
Published by: Ben Sonnenberg
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/25006875
Accessed: 28/02/2012 12:54

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.
Regrettably, of the six books by E. M. Cioran that have appeared in English—all translated by Richard Howard—only the most recent, Drawn and Quartered, is still in print (Seaver Books). The others are: A Short History of Decay, The Temptation to Exist, The Fall into Time, The New Gods and The Trouble with Being Born. Two of the untranslated titles deserve special note, Syllogismes de l'Amertume (1952)—his second book, but the first one of aphorisms—and Histoire et Utopie (1960). Of the latter he says, “I wanted to make an apology for utopia, but when I read different utopias, I said this isn’t possible.” At present, occasionally, he is working on a new collection of writings, Ce Maudit Moi.

Cioran is not a systematic thinker, rather his mind advances with that “patience to go in circles, in other words, to deepen,” as he described in The New Gods. At seventy-four, he could almost be a survivor of himself, though his fatigue seems more existential than physical. Yet the ready humor of this Romanian émigré pierces even the gravest considerations with the wit of the condemned. Or as he once wrote, “In the blood an inexhaustible drop of vinegar: to what fairy do I owe it?”

Cioran has never given an interview to the French literary press nor to the American (except once with a Time correspondent). A brief interview with him was published some twenty years ago in German in the Zurich magazine DU, as well as others in the Spanish and Italian press in more recent years. The following interview took place over two mornings in mid-August, 1983, in the Latin Quarter apartment where Cioran has lived for the past twenty years.

JASON WEISS: You’ve said that Sartre and others, in employing a German mode of discourse, did some harm to the philosophical language. Can you elaborate on this?

* An essay from this volume, “Odyssey of Rancor,” begins on page 86.
GRAND STREET

E. M. CIORAN: Well, first I'll tell you that when I was quite young I myself was affected by this German jargon. I thought that philosophy wasn't supposed to be accessible to others, that the circle was closed, and that at all costs one had to employ this scholarly, laborious, complicated terminology. It was only little by little that I understood the impostor side of philosophical language. And I should say that the writer who helped me tremendously in this discovery is Valéry. Because Valéry, who wasn't a philosopher but had a bearing on philosophy all the same, wrote a very pure language, he had a horror of philosophical language. That jargon gives you a sense of superiority over everybody. And philosophical pride is the worst that exists, it's very contagious. At any rate, the German influence in France was disastrous on that whole level. The French can't say things simply anymore.

JW: But what are the causes?

EMC: I don't know. Obviously Sartre, by the enormous influence he had, contributed to generating this fashion. And then, it's the influence of Heidegger, which was very big in France. For example, when speaking about death, Heidegger employs so complicated a language to say very simple things that I well understand how one could be tempted by his style. But the danger of philosophical style is that one loses complete contact with reality. Philosophical language leads to megalomania. One creates an artificial world where one is God. I was very proud and pleased when I was young to know this jargon. But my stay in France totally cured me of that. I'm not a philosopher by profession, I'm not a philosopher at all, but my path was the reverse of Sartre's. That's why I turned to the French writers known as the moralists, such as La Rochefoucauld or Chamfort, who wrote for society ladies and whose style was simple, but who said very profound things.

JW: Was it philosophy you were first interested in?

EMC: I studied philosophy almost exclusively from the age of seventeen to twenty-one, and only the great philosophical systems. I disregarded most poetry and other literature. But I broke happily very soon with the university, which I consider to be a great intellectual misfortune, and even a danger.
JW: Were you reading Nietzsche then?
EMC: When I was studying philosophy I wasn't reading Nietzsche. I read serious philosophers. [Laughs.] It's when I finished studying it, at the point when I stopped believing in philosophy, that I began to read Nietzsche. Well, I realized that he wasn't a philosopher, but was more: a temperament. So, I read him but never systematically, now and then. But really I don't read him anymore. I consider his letters his most authentic work, because in them he's truthful, while in his other work he's prisoner to his vision. In his letters one sees that he's just a poor fellow, that he's ill, exactly the opposite of everything he claimed.

JW: You write in The Trouble with Being Born that you stopped reading him because you found him "too naive."
EMC: [Laughs.] That's a bit excessive, yes. It's because that whole grandiose vision of the will to power and all that, he imposed it on himself because he was a pitiful invalid. Its whole basis was false, nonexistent. His work is an unspeakable megalomania. When one reads the letters he wrote at the same time, one sees that he's lamentable, it's very touching, like a character out of Chekhov. I was attached to him in my youth, but not after. He's a great writer, though, a great stylist.

JW: Yet critics often compare you to him, saying you follow in his tracks.
EMC: No, that's a mistake, though it's obvious that his way of writing made an impression on me. He had things that other Germans didn't, because he read a lot of the French writers. That's very important.

JW: You've said that you also read a lot of poetry in your youth.
EMC: That was later. It was, if you like, the disappointment of philosophy that made me turn to literature. To tell the truth, it's from that point on that I realized that Dostoyevsky was much more important than a great philosopher. And that great poetry was something extraordinary.

JW: Did your severe insomnia affect this attitude at the time?
EMC: It was really the profound cause of my break with philosophy. I realized that in moments of great despair
philosophy is no help at all, and offers absolutely no answers. So I turned to poetry and literature, where I found no answers either, but states of mind analogous to my own. I can say that my sleepless nights brought about the break with my idolatry of philosophy.

JW: When did these sleepless nights begin?

EMC: They began in my youth, when I was about nineteen. It wasn't simply a medical problem, it was deeper, in fact the fundamental and most serious experience of my life. All the rest is secondary. Those sleepless nights opened my eyes, everything changed for me because of them.

JW: Do you still suffer from them?

EMC: A lot less. But that was a precise period, about six or seven years, when my whole perspective on the world changed. I think it's a very important problem, it happens like this. Normally, someone who goes to bed and sleeps all night begins the next day almost a new life. It's not simply another day, it's another life. And so he can undertake things, can manifest himself, he has a present, a future, and so on. But for someone who doesn't sleep, the time from going to bed at night to rising in the morning is all continuous, with no interruption, no suppression of consciousness. So, instead of starting a new life at eight in the morning, you're still as you were at eight the evening before. The nightmare continues uninterrupted and, in the morning, start what, since there's no difference since the night before? That new life doesn't exist. The whole day is a trial, it's the continuation of the trial. Well, while everyone rushes towards the future, you are left outside. So, when that's stretched out for months and years, it causes the sense of things, the conception of life, to be forcibly changed. You no longer see what future to look towards, because you don't have any future. And I really consider that the most terrible, most unsettling, in short the principal experience of my life. There's also the fact that you are alone with yourself. In the middle of the night, everyone's asleep, you are the only one awake. Right away I'm no longer a part of mankind, I live in another world. And it requires an extraordinary will to not succumb.

JW: Succumb to what, madness?
JASON WEISS

EMC: Yes. To the temptation of suicide. In my opinion, almost all suicides, about ninety percent, say, are due to insomnia. I can’t prove that, but I’m convinced.
JW: How did it affect you physically?
EMC: I was very tense, in a feverish state, and ready to explode. Everything took on another intensity, apropos of anything. I was far more violent, I quarreled with everyone. I couldn’t put up with anything. And I found everyone idiotic. Nobody understood what I understood. It was the feeling of not belonging. Then too, this feeling that everything is a comedy and makes no sense. The future was meaningless for me, the present as well. And so, philosophically, because one is always a philosopher, it’s a sort of exasperation, an intensification, of the state of being conscious. Not self-conscious, conscious. The state of consciousness as the great misfortune, and in my case the permanent misfortune. Normally, it’s the contrary, it’s consciousness which is man’s advantage. Me, I arrived at the conclusion that no, the fact of being conscious, of not being oblivious, is the great catastrophe. Because I was conscious twenty-four hours out of twenty-four. One can be conscious several hours a day, five minutes, but not all day, all night. People are conscious by intervals, but for me it was a matter of intensity, all the time.
JW: Have you met other insomniacs who suffered like that?
EMC: Not to that degree, no. Perhaps in a lunatic asylum one might. But I wasn’t crazy at all, that’s what’s interesting. What I often liked to do was to go for walks at night. Curiously enough, I did that in Paris too, until about ten years ago. Very often, in the middle of the night, if I couldn’t sleep, I’d get up and go walking through Paris for two or three hours. Now it’s become too dangerous to go and walk like that at four in the morning. I liked to go all over the place. I’d wait till people were going to work, and then I’d come home and sleep a little. But I was also doing better by then.
JW: That helped calm you down a little.
EMC: Yes. This period of deep insomnia came to a stop in France, and you know how? By the bicycle. It’s rather curious, this phenomenon, I was a bit like someone suffer-
ing hallucinations. I'd been in Paris a few months and, one day on the boulevard St. Michel, someone offered to sell me a bicycle. It was a racing bicycle, not expensive at all, and I said yes and bought it, which for me was a stroke of providence, unheard-of luck. I went all over France with that bicycle, I'd be gone for months. Because I had come here on a grant for several years from the French government to do a thesis, from 1937 until the war, till 1940, a thesis in philosophy. . . . Certainly not! I never went to the Sorbonne, I lied. But meanwhile I'd cover kilometers and kilometers, for months, I went all through the Pyrenees. I'd do one hundred kilometers a day. And it's this physical effort that allowed me to sleep. You know, France was very cheap before the war, I'd come into a village, I'd eat whatever I wanted, drink a bottle of wine, and then I'd go sleep in the fields. It was a very natural life, very healthy. Physical exercise from morning till night. When you do one hundred kilometers a day, there's no way you're not going to sleep, it's out of the question. So, it wasn't due to medicine. Because I had, unfortunately for me, seen a lot of doctors in Rumania and in France, and they all prescribed medications that messed up my stomach and everything, that was the big danger, and even with sleeping pills I only managed to sleep two or three hours at most. But then I'd have a headache all day, it was horrible. I was poisoned by sleeping pills. I don't take them anymore. And so this providential bicycle saved me.

JW: Did other insomniacs recognize your cure?
EMC: Yes. You see, there is a gang of insomniacs, with a sort of solidarity, like people who have the same illness. We understand each other right away, because we know that drama. The drama of insomnia is that time doesn't pass. You're lying down in the middle of the night and you are no longer in time. You're not in eternity either. Time passes so slowly that it becomes agonizing. All of us, being alive, are drawn along by time because we are in time. When you lie awake like that, you are outside of time. So, time passes outside of you, you can't catch up with it.

JW: In The Fall into Time, you wrote, "Other people
fall into time; I have fallen out of it.” Was that from insomnia?

EMC: No, but it does have a remote effect. I consider my best writing to be those few pages on time. Men fall into time and further down than time. I feel it to be one of my more original points, that you are also conscious of time. Normally people are not. A man who acts and is involved in doing something doesn’t think about time. That would be absurd. But consciousness of time proves that you are outside of time, that you’ve been ejected. One could really call it a philosophical or metaphysical experience. I recall the first occasion when I had a revelation of time. I was a child, I was five, and I remember exactly, it was an afternoon during the First World War. I can even say the hour, I remember it was three in the afternoon. Abruptly I felt that I was watching time pass, that I wasn’t a part of it, I was outside. And I consider this sensation that I had, which didn’t last even ten minutes, to be my first conscious experience of ennui, of boredom. Ennui is also a sort of taking consciousness of time, because then time does not pass. So I was predestined a bit to that consciousness of time, and insomnia only accelerated it.

JW: Were there others around at that moment when you were five?

EMC: No, I was absolutely alone. I wasn’t able to formulate the experience, obviously, but I know what it was. Because I’ve never forgotten it. I remember it like it was yesterday, yet it was a whole life away. I consider it was there that I ceased to be an animal. I had entered humanity and begun to have the experience of being human. So, I was predestined to lose sleep, because what is sleep? It is the return to unconsciousness, to animality, the return to the before-life, to oblivion. Insomnia is the worst illness.

JW: What happened to you on the level of dreams during your most severe insomnia?

EMC: Because of the sleeping pills I did manage to sleep two or three hours at most, but I had horrifying nightmares, absolutely horrifying. And so powerful that I woke up with my heart pounding.
JW: Have there been many responses to what you've written about this experience of feeling yourself outside of time?

EMC: I have met people who recognized themselves in what I said. They acknowledged these sensations and I've received a lot of letters from them. They hadn't formulated it, perhaps, but they admitted having had the same feeling of existence.

JW: In spite of your insomnia, you wrote that you had a very happy childhood.

EMC: A wonderful childhood. I believe I became unhappy in my life as punishment for having been so extraordinarily happy as a child. I'm talking of early childhood, up to the age of seven or eight, not more, after which my life was a catastrophe. I was born in a mountain village, very primitive, and I was always outside in the open air. I lived as if I were in the wilds. I have wonderful memories of that time.

JW: And you remained in that village till what age?

EMC: Until I was ten. We had a garden next to the cemetery, which also played a role in my life. I was a friend of the gravedigger and was always around the cemetery, all the time seeing the disinterred, the skeletons and corpses. For me death was something so evident that it was truly a part of my daily life. I didn't start acting like Hamlet, but after that I certainly began to be obsessed with skeletons and the phenomenon of death. All this had an effect on my insomnia. Anyone who is obsessed with death already has a sense of the unreality of life. It's not the obsession with death that makes you discover that life is unreal, but it's when you discover that life is without substance, that it's nothing at all, illusion, that the obsession with death settles in.

I'll tell you an anecdote that played a part in my life. We were living in Sibiu, a city in the provinces where I spent my whole youth, and where my father was the orthodox priest. I was about twenty-two and one day I was in a terrible state. Only my mother and I were at home, and—when I remember things, I remember them very precisely, I even remember the hour, it's very strange—I think it was around two in the afternoon, everyone else had gone out. All of a sudden, I had a fantastic fit of
despair, I threw myself on the sofa, and said, “I can’t take it anymore.” And my mother said this: “If I had known, I would have had an abortion.” That made an extraordinary impression on me. It didn’t hurt me, not at all. But later, I thought, “That was very important. I’m simply an accident. Why take it all so seriously?” Because, in effect, it’s all without substance.

JW: Which is interesting too, considering that your father was a priest.

EMC: Yes, but it was said by my mother! At the time, abortion didn’t exist. But it proved that individual life is an accident. Well, you can say, “But everyone knows that.” Yes, everyone is aware of it, but only occasionally. It’s another thing to know it morning, noon and night, and that’s why it’s maddening. So, when we speak of these things, we absolutely must speak of their frequency and duration. It’s the fact of having that feeling constantly that’s significant.

JW: You’ve said a number of times, as in Drawn and Quartered, that “we should change our name after each important experience.”

EMC: After certain experiences. We should change our names right away, but later there’s no point. Because you feel that you’re another individual, that in the end you’ve touched on something extraordinary, you’re not yourself anymore. So, another life has to be started. But that’s an illusion too. It’s an impression of the moment.

JW: Considering these experiences of yours, when did you begin reading French writers like Baudelaire, who spoke of comparable states?

EMC: I had a sort of cult for Baudelaire. He is a great poet, yet Mallarmé is greater, so is Rimbaud. They’re more original than he. But it’s in his deep sentiments that Baudelaire is a master. I’ve written somewhere that there are two writers whom I always think about but whom I don’t often read, Pascal and Baudelaire. They have been my constant companions. It’s not a matter of vanity on my part, but an inner affinity, as if we’re part of the same family. In a book about his youth, Pascal’s sister, Madame Périer—you know that Pascal was ill all his life and died relatively young, at the age of thirty-nine—wrote that her brother told her one day that, from the age of seven-
teen on, he never knew a single day without suffering. I was in a public library in Rumania, in Bucharest, when I read this, and it made such an impression on me that I wanted to cry out, and had to put my hand in my mouth so as not to. I told myself that this was what would happen in my own life. It was a presentiment of a sort of disaster, but Pascal and Baudelaire were in any case the two who spoke most profoundly about the crucial experience of ennui. My life is inconceivable without ennui. Though I get bored now less frequently.

JW: Why?

EMC: Because of old age. With old age things lose their intensity. Everything that's good and everything that's bad then gains in depth but not on the surface, if you like.

JW: Don't you find that some things accumulate intensity with old age?

EMC: No. One doesn't become better on the moral plane with old age. Nor wiser. Contrary to what people think. One gains nothing in getting old. But as one is more tired, one gives the impression of greater wisdom.

JW: In The Trouble with Being Born, you wrote: "What I know at sixty, I knew as well at twenty. Forty years of a long, a superfluous, labor of verification." Which surprised me a little, perhaps because I didn't want to believe it.

EMC: There is no progress in life. There are small changes, above all it's a question of intensity, as I said.

JW: Were you able to use your insomnia as a tool in the exploration of your philosophy?

EMC: Certainly. Whether everything I've thought was due to insomnia or not, it would have lacked a certain frenzy without it. That's undeniable. Through insomnia, all these things took on another dimension.

JW: Did you write at all during all those sleepless nights?

EMC: Yes, but not so much. You know, I've written very little, I never assumed it as a profession. I'm not a writer. I write these little books, that's nothing at all, it's not an oeuvre. I haven't done anything in my life. I only practiced a profession for a year, when I was a high-school teacher in Rumania. But since, I've never practiced a profession and have lived like a sort of student. I con-
sider this my greatest success, my life hasn't been a failure because I succeeded in doing nothing.

JW: That's difficult.

EMC: It's extremely difficult, but I consider it an immense success. I'm proud of it. I always found one scheme or another, I had grants, things like that.

JW: But your books have gained a lot of attention, haven't they?

EMC: They've only been speaking of my books for the last three years, really. To tell you quite simply, they spoke about me for a few months in 1950, after the publication of A Short History of Decay, and then, for thirty years, hardly at all. Really. I wasn't known, only a few people in literary circles knew me. But everything changed a few years ago with the paperback editions.


EMC: For more than twenty years it had sold only two thousand copies. It was my good luck to have been able to spend almost thirty years in a sort of oblivion. For me the drama of a writer is being famous when he's young, which is extremely bad, because most writers, if they become known fairly young, begin to write for their public. In my opinion, a book should be written without thinking of others. You shouldn't write for anyone, only for yourself. And one should never write a book just to write a book. Because that has no reality, it's only a book. Everything I've written, I wrote to escape a sense of oppression, of suffocation. It wasn't from inspiration, as they say. It was a sort of getting free, to be able to breathe.

JW: What then has been your relationship to the practice of writing? The fact of thinking, of following through certain ideas, is one thing, but writing remains something else.

EMC: Even so, there is another aspect to that in my life because I changed languages. For me, this was a very important event. I began writing in French at the age of thirty-six. One can change languages at fifteen or twenty . . .

JW: When did you start studying French?
EMC: I hadn’t studied it. In Rumania everyone knew a little French, not that they studied it. There were people who knew French extremely well, but that wasn’t my case. Because I was born in Austria-Hungary. My parents didn’t know a word of French, they spoke Rumanian and Hungarian. We had absolutely no French culture. But in Bucharest, French was the second language of the intellectual circles. Everyone knew French, everyone read it. I spoke French very poorly, which was very humiliating for me. My peers knew French quite well, especially among the bourgeoisie, of course. I read French, naturally, but I didn’t speak it. When I came to France in 1937, I was twenty-six and, instead of settling down to write in French, I wrote in Rumanian until 1947, though without yet publishing anything. I wrote lots of things. Then I was in a village in Normandy in 1947 and I was translating Mallarmé into Rumanian. All of a sudden it struck me that it made no sense. I’m in France, I’m not a poet to begin with, I translate poorly, why am I doing this? I didn’t want to go back to my own country, and that was a sort of illumination. I said to myself, “You have to renounce your native tongue.” I came back to Paris with the idea of writing in French, and set about to do it. But, it was much more difficult than I thought. It was even very difficult. I thought I’d just start writing like that. I wrote about one hundred or one hundred fifty pages and showed them to a friend, who said, “That’s not right, you’ll have to do it all over.” I was furious, but that made me become serious about it. And I threw myself into the French language like a madman, surrounded by dictionaries and everything. I did an enormous amount of work. I wrote the first book four times. Then, when I wrote the next after that, I couldn’t write anymore. Because the words disgusted me, why write? The Syllogismes de l’Amertume are little odds and ends, fragments. And now it’s the book of mine they read most in France.

JW: Did the first book change much, writing it four times?

EMC: Yes, the style, a lot. Really, I wanted to revenge myself in a way on all those fellows in Rumania who knew French, but this wasn’t conscious. And I also had the complex of being a foreigner.
JASON WEISS

JW: Did you know many people during your early years in Paris?

EMC: No. Especially not in intellectual circles. I didn’t know any writers. I was shy, I was totally unknown. I knew a lot of refugees who came to Paris, but not the French. I knew people who weren’t in literature, which is more interesting. Some years ago there was a Rumanian who came to Paris and said that he wanted to meet some writers. I told him he shouldn’t frequent writers. It’s more important for a foreigner to speak with a cabdriver or a whore than with a writer. He was angry and started insulting me. He didn’t understand what I meant.

JW: In some passages of your books you defend the cause of bums, as if they have the right attitude about things.

EMC: But that’s because I had a friend who was a bum and was very interesting. He’d play his instruments in a great many cafés and pass the hat. I saw him four or five times a year, or he’d come to visit me. It’s he who opened my eyes to the life of bums, because that’s the life he led. Well, he wasn’t a poor fellow, he did earn some money playing. But he was a fellow who thought about things, and everything he told me was amazing. A very original life. You know what he did one day? He went up to the Champs-Elysées to that big café, Fouquet’s, and played on his clarinet and people didn’t give him a thing. He said, “Since you’re poor, I’ll help you,” and he put some money down on every table. So, they called the police, he was wearing slippers, and he left his slippers there and went across to the other sidewalk. And there, he did something really extraordinary. There was a very elegant young woman passing by and he said to her, “The police have been bothering me, and I left my slippers over on the other sidewalk. Would it disturb you to go get them for me?” And she went and got them. He was always doing things like that. I spoke about him in my last book, Drawn and Quartered.

JW: For this, comparing you with Beckett, as Susan Sontag did, seems inevitable.

EMC: I like Beckett a lot, he’s charming, very refined. I know him well, though we haven’t seen each other in a long time. I wrote an essay about him. Yes, I think there are some affinities between us.
JW: So it was only after you'd published some books that you began to know other writers?
EMC: Yes. But the only writer whom I really still saw until his recent death was Michaux. I stopped frequenting the literary milieu. There was a period when I did have a real social life, and for very specific reasons. It was a time when I liked to drink, whiskey and so on, and I was very poor. I was invited by rich ladies who gave parties. I could drink and eat, I was invited to dinners, I'd go three times a week to different people's homes. I accepted practically any dinner, because I was dependent on that. And so I frequented a salon where I met lots of people, but that's a long time ago, in the mid-1950s. I can't go anymore to parties, it's absolutely impossible. Besides, I don't drink anymore.

JW: I read that you wrote, "Years now without coffee, without alcohol, without tobacco." Was it because of your health?
EMC: Yes, health. I had to choose. I was drinking coffee all the time, I'd drink seven cups of coffee in the morning, it was one or the other. But tobacco was the most difficult. I was a big smoker. It took me five years to quit smoking. And I was absolutely desperate each time I tried, I'd cry, I'd say, "I'm the vilest of men." It was an extraordinary struggle. In the middle of the night I'd throw the cigarettes out the window, first thing in the morning I'd go to buy some more. It was a comedy that lasted five years. When I stopped smoking, I felt as if I'd lost my soul. I made the decision, it was a question of honor, "Even if I don't write another line, I'm going to stop." Tobacco was absolutely tied up with my life. I couldn't make a phone call without a cigarette, I couldn't answer a letter, I couldn't look at a landscape without it.

JW: You felt better after, I hope.
EMC: Yes. When I'm depressed, I tell myself, "You did succeed in conquering tobacco." It was a struggle to the death, and that always made me think of a story Dostoyevsky speaks about. In Siberia, there was an anarchist who was sentenced to eighteen years in prison. And one day they cut off his tobacco. Immediately he declared that he was ready to renounce all his ideas at the feet of the czar. When I read this in my youth, I hadn't under-
stood it. I also remember *where* I smoked my last cigarette, about fourteen years ago. It was near Barcelona. It was seven in the morning, it was cold, the end of September, and there was a foolish German who dived into the sea and started swimming. I said, "If this German can do it at his age, I'm going to show that I can too." So I went in like that and I had the flu that night. [Laughs.]

JW: The first time we met, you were saying that a writer's education must remain incomplete.

EMC: Yes, a writer needn't know things in depth. If he speaks of something, he shouldn't know everything about it, only the things that go with his temperament. He should not be objective. One can discuss a subject in depth, but in a certain direction, not trying to cover the whole thing. For a writer the university is death.

JW: Could you speak about the evolution of your use of the aphorism? Where does it come from?

EMC: I'm not sure exactly. I think it was a phenomenon of laziness perhaps. You know, very often aphorisms have been the last sentence of a page. Aphorisms are conclusions, the development is suppressed, and they are what remains. It's a dubious genre, suspect, and rather French. The Germans, for example, only have Lichtenberg and Nietzsche, who derived it from Chamfort and the moralists. For me it was mostly due to my dislike of developing things.

JW: But what made you decide to use the aphorism for certain books and not others? Your second book, the *Syllogismes*, was all aphorisms, though the first wasn't; for the next twenty years you hardly use them in your books, and then *The Trouble with Being Born* is all aphorisms too, as is much of *Drawn and Quartered*.

EMC: Well, now I only write this kind of stuff, because explaining bores me terribly. That's why I say when I've written aphorisms it's that I've lapsed into fatigue. But the aphorism is scorned by "serious" people, and the professors look down upon it.

JW: Because the professors can't do anything with an aphorist?

EMC: Absolutely not. When they read a book of aphorisms, they say, "Oh, look what this fellow said ten pages back, now he's saying the contrary. He's not serious." But
I can put two aphorisms that are contradictory right next to each other. Aphorisms are also momentary truths. They're not decrees. And I could tell you in nearly every case why I wrote this or that phrase, and when. They're always set in motion by an encounter, an incident, a fit of temper, but they all have a cause. They're not at all gratuitous.

JW: In a book like Syllogismes, did you select which aphorisms to include?
EMC: I organized them into chapters more or less. It wasn't written like that, not systematically. But in the end it all has some unity, inevitably, because it all displays the same vision of things.

JW: With each one of your books the title feels very appropriate.
EMC: Yes, it's justified. In the case of The Trouble with Being Born, though, I wanted to write a whole book on that theme, but it wasn't possible, so that this theme was only my point of departure.

JW: Do you have particular writing habits or conditions when you can work?
EMC: I've never been able to write in a normal state. Even banal things, I've never been able to say, "Now I want to write." I always had to be either depressed or angry, furious or disgusted, but never in a normal state. And I write preferably in a state of semidepression. There has to be something that's not right. When one is in a neutral mood, why write? Why declare things? Perhaps, as has been said, there is a bit of a morbid aspect to what I write. It is true, I've noticed, that the people who react best to what I've written are the neurotics, the half-crazy, those who act out of passion.

JW: Do you have the idea for your books before writing them?
EMC: Most of my books were written just like that, off the cuff. The only ones where I had the idea beforehand were The Fall into Time and Histoire et Utopie, because they're all of a piece.

JW: What kind of responses have you had from readers?
EMC: I can give you a few examples, what I call "single encounters"—with people I've seen only once. When I
published my first book, *A Short History of Decay*, it produced a very passionate reaction. I received a lot of letters. But the most extraordinary one was from a girl who was about twenty. I was living in a hotel on rue Monsieur le Prince, I opened this letter, it drove me mad. I was completely unknown and suddenly I get this, where it says, "This book was written by me, not by you. It's our book," etcetera. So I said, "If it's like this, I won't write anymore." Because at any rate I would never try to be like that. Why continue? I didn't know what to do, because she wrote, "If you ever want to see me, I'll be coming to Paris for Easter." Finally I wrote her we could meet, I said, "I was very impressed by your letter. Tell me who you are." So, she told me an amazing story, which I can tell because I refrain from mentioning her name and she's much older by now. She said, "Well, my life isn't of much interest, except that I lived with my brother like man and wife for six months." He knew I was going to meet her and didn't want me to, at any rate I think that this relationship was over by then. But I realized that such a girl, well, it's not worth seeing her again, it wouldn't make any sense. But I was really struck by this story. All right, the second story. For two years I was receiving letters from a woman who was absolutely crazy. Rather, it was a sort of mixture of madness and intelligence. This was about three years ago. She kept insisting that she wanted to meet me. I said I didn't want to. Well, one day, about two years ago, I was depressed. It was an afternoon, in the middle of the summer. I was very depressed, feeling that I was worthless. I said to myself, "I'd like to see someone who has a good opinion of me." I'd been receiving letters from this woman for more than a year but hadn't replied much. I called her up, it was six or seven in the evening, and she answers the phone. I say, "Listen, I'd like to see you." She says, "Right away. I live in the suburbs, I'll take a cab and be at your house in an hour." A very pretty voice, see. At eight o'clock, I was all fixed up with a tie, I open the door, and when I open the door I explode with laughter. She was a monster! An old woman, seventy-five years old, nearly eighty, little and all twisted up, but horrible! Something unimaginable.
I went "Ha!", I couldn't stop myself. I'd put on a tie... what could I do? Because, really, I had invited her to dinner. I thought, I'm not going with this woman to a restaurant.

JW: So what did you do?

EMC: I invited her in, to have a seat. I thought, I can't speak of dinner now, it was impossible, there was nothing in the house. So I said to her, "But who are you?" If only I had had a tape recorder! I sat there, and I said practically nothing while she was telling me about her life. She told me everything, with details to make you vomit sometimes. She told me how, when she was a young girl, she'd gone into a church to confess, and the priest said to her, "But, Miss, it's not here you should go. It's to St. Anne's." That is the Paris lunatic asylum. She was confessing all this to me. At midnight, I found that as a four-hour entertainment it was enough, and I saw her to the door.

JW: But you do consider these single encounters important. Have there been others?

EMC: A few years ago, there was a friend of mine who told me that he'd met an engineer, a man of twenty-five, who wanted to meet me. Finally, I said all right, we'll go stroll around the Luxembourg Gardens nearby, it was a summer evening. We spoke about one thing and another, literature and all that, and finally he said to me, "Do you know why I wanted to meet you? I read your books, and I saw that you're interested in suicide. I'd like to tell you about my case." He explained to me that he had a good job and earned a lot. "In the last two or three years, I've begun to be obsessed with suicide. I'm in the full of life, and this idea has taken hold of me. I haven't been able to get rid of it." We talked for three hours about suicide, circling the Luxembourg Gardens. I explained to him how I was, and am still, obsessed with it, I consider suicide as the only solution, but, I told him, my theory is that suicide is the only idea that allows man to live. Suicide gives me the idea that I can leave this world when I want to, and that makes life bearable, instead of destroying it. So for three hours we discussed every aspect of this problem, and then I suggested that we refrain from meeting again as this would be pointless.

[122]
JASON WEISS

JW: In an encounter like that, have you had the feeling of saving him a little?
EMC: Yes, a little. I've had that feeling several times, with girls particularly. I've always prevented them from committing suicide. I've always tried to tell them that, since one can kill oneself anytime, they should put it off. But one should not abandon this idea.
JW: But you do feel a certain responsibility towards such people.
EMC: I can't avoid it. My theory of suicide is that one shouldn't kill oneself, one should make use of this idea in order to put up with life. But I've been attacked for offering an apology for suicide and not doing it myself. Yet I haven't offered such an apology. I say that we have only this recourse in life, and that our only consolation is that we can quit this life when we want to. So, it's a positive idea. Christianity is guilty of having fought against this idea. One should say to people: If you find life unbearable, tell yourself, "Well, I can give it up when I want to." One should live thanks to this idea of suicide. It's in the Syllogismes that I wrote, "Without the idea of suicide, I would have killed myself from the start."
JW: Even in your most recent writings you've written about suicide. In "Tares" [Flaws], the selection of aphorisms published in the review La Délirante, you were saying that the idea of suicide was natural and healthy for you, because you've lived with it nearly all your life, but that what was not natural and healthy was "the furious appetite for existing, a serious flaw, a flaw par excellence, my flaw."
EMC: Yes, it's a sort of avowal, because I've always kept in mind what Baudelaire said, "the ecstasy and the horror of life." For me, everything that I've experienced in this life is contained there.
JW: But you were considering suicide when you were still quite young. What made you decide to go on?
EMC: I considered life as a mere postponing of suicide. I had thought I wasn't going to live past the age of thirty. But it wasn't from cowardice that I was always postponing my suicide. I exploited this idea, I was its parasite. At the same time, this appetite for existing was also very strong in me.
JW: I wonder if there were people in whom you could see the idea of suicide progressing. I’m thinking of Paul Celan, for example, whom you knew quite well.

EMC: No, I couldn’t see it in him. You know, he translated my first book into German. When he arrived in Paris, at the start, I saw him often, he lived nearby on the rue des Écoles. But later, we saw each other a lot less after he had moved. With him, it really was a very serious illness, which hastened his end. At the time that I met him I would never have imagined that he would kill himself. Except that sometimes he was very violent and put up with all life’s troubles very poorly. In Germany, at the beginning, people didn’t know if he was a great poet or not, the least unfavorable criticism made him ill. He took everything to heart. He suffered from an extraordinary vulnerability, and that is what aggravated his case. I believe that he really killed himself. It wasn’t at all an accident. It was inevitable. One thing that moved me tremendously, one evening about eleven, it was raining a little, I was with a young man, we were talking, on the other side of the Luxembourg Gardens. It was November, there was nobody on the street, and I noticed someone coming in our direction, who was looking at the ground and making gestures, talking to himself. It was Paul Celan. And when I saw him, I was startled, frightened. I stopped and watched him, he didn’t even see me. He didn’t see anyone, while he was talking to himself. And it broke my heart because I understood, he’s not well. He was a man who was profoundly wounded. He was too tormented to take refuge in skepticism.

JW: You, on the other hand, have always been a skeptic. EMC: Skepticism has played an enormous role in my life. It’s been therapeutic, a painkiller. I’m not a skeptic by temperament, because I’m a bit frenetic. Perhaps I’m a false skeptic. I’ll illustrate this with a bit of German nonsense. They phone me from Munich one day, a few years ago: “Monsieur, we have invited a number of scholars for a conference on the future of humanity. There are physicists, philosophers, and so on, but we need a skeptic and we can’t find one. Would you be interested in participating?” I refused, I’m not a skeptic in the service of
the Western world. But I found it unbelievable to be summoned by telephone, like one calls a doctor. I could put skeptic down as my profession. But I'm not a skeptic all the time.

JW: At what point did you start reading Jonathan Swift?

EMC: After I came to France, I became profoundly interested in Swift and read everything about him I could find. At times he was extremely important for me. At any rate I can say that I’ve read a lot in my life, precisely because I was a man without an occupation, what the French call an idler, someone who doesn’t work. Being very poor, I lived like a rich man, without work. But in return I read. So I consider that all the same I’ve done my duty. But I read also in order not to think, to escape, to not be me. And too, I’ve always tried to find the defects in others, the flaws.

JW: You’ve often expressed in your books your interest in biographies.

EMC: Above all I like to see how people end. When you read about someone’s life, you see what illusions he started out with, and it’s very interesting to see how they fail him.

JW: You were also very taken with Shakespeare in your youth.

EMC: As I said, I only worked in a profession for a year in my life, I was a philosophy teacher in a high school when I was twenty-five. It was a period when I was going through a sort of religious crisis which resulted in nothing. I was reading a lot of mystics, but also reading a lot of Shakespeare. It’s very odd, because they have nothing in common. I was so involved with Shakespeare, I thought all my contemporaries were imbeciles and suddenly decided: “I’m not speaking with anyone but Shakespeare.” I was then living in a provincial city and was one day in a café where I often went. Someone who was a teacher in the same school came up and asked: “Can I sit at your table?” I said: “Yes. But who are you?” I knew him. He said: “But how’s that? You know me! I’m the gym teacher at the school.” I said, “Ah? You’re not Shakespeare?” “What do you mean? Of course I’m not Shakespeare.” “Seriously? You’re not Shakespeare? Then get out!”
GRAND STREET

gone mad.
JW: But you were completely conscious of what you were doing.
EMC: Naturally. Absolutely. Otherwise it would have been very serious, I would have been locked up. No, no, I was absolutely conscious. It was an absurd decision and I carried it through. It lasted for two or three days, that was enough. But I wanted to show how much Shakespeare meant for me, I had such an admiration for him. I think if I had had the genius, the work I would have liked to have written is Macbeth.
JW: Who were the poets you read? Weren't they English, above all?
EMC: For me the English were the greatest poets. Emily Dickinson too, in America, she's terrific. During the war, I had a sort of passion for Shelley, for the man, I read him a lot. Naturally, I read Keats, who is a greater poet. But also Blake. And then, I read the lesser poets. But the lesser poets in England would have been great poets in another culture. In my opinion, the English have no philosophy, no metaphysics, because their poetry replaced metaphysics. They said everything in their poetry. Then, I became very interested in the minor poets of the nineties, Ernest Dowson and others.
JW: What was your situation under the German Occupation of France?
EMC: Very bad, because I was called up to the Rumanian army, and I refused. They summoned me to the embassy and said: "If you don't go back to Rumania, you'll be sent there under German escort." I said, "If you do that, I'll kill myself." The Rumanians were fighting with the Germans against Russia. I said, "I don't want to be a soldier." There was a guy who drove me crazy, he was a military attaché who looked like a character out of Dostoyevsky. He'd summon me and repeat, "You'll be sent under German escort!" I said, "You're a colonel. You go there, not me. I'm incapable of holding a rifle! This war is lost, you don't need me." But he kept threatening me with summonses until the end of the war. Then I discovered something amazing. Someone told me: "One of your friends demanded that you be sent to the Russian front." He was
jealous of me. He was an intellectual who was doing a thesis at the Sorbonne, and it was he who had instigated the whole business. I’d thought he was a friend, and it was his own best friend who now came to tell me. That’s what life is. The basic sentiment of man is envy, especially in people who are close to you. You see, the whole history of humanity is really in the Bible, in the fall from Paradise and then in the two brothers, Cain and Abel. It’s all there, and every success automatically earns you the jealousy of people who know you. One sees envy right away, it expresses itself like admiration, the eyes light up.

JW: Did your experiences during the war enter into your first book?

EMC: Oh yes, inevitably, a lot. The book begins with a denunciation of fanaticism. Before the war, I wasn’t concerned with history. The phenomenon of history is only comprehensible if one admits the idea of original sin. I’m not a believer and have no religious conviction, but I rely on certain religious categories to explain things. History can only be interpreted if one admits that man has been marked by evil since the beginning. He is condemned, he’s cursed. The profoundest book that was ever written is the first book of the Old Testament, Genesis. Everything is said there. The whole vision of human destiny, of man. The very fact that God is afraid of man, that’s what is so fantastic. He realized that this fellow’s dangerous, that man is a monster, and history has proved it. Man is a being apart, extremely gifted, but harmful. There is an amazing story in the Koran: when man made his appearance on earth a fish came up out of the water and a vulture came down from the sky, and they said, “The danger has come,” the catastrophe. And the fish dived down to the bottom of the waters and the vulture flew away into the sky. Man is accursed. History is at once demoniac and tragic, the whole history of the world. Naturally, we know the events that we’ve lived through, but one has only to look at all that has been going on until now. That’s why I’m against ideologies: they’re either too silly or too generous. Because ideologies construct history, and history isn’t constructed, it’s there. All these moral concepts have no reality in history.
JW: But you don't seem to deny morality.
EMC: No, I don't, but that has nothing to do with history. And it's even characteristic that history speaks only of monsters. Why? Morality is a sort of criticism. In fact, take the case of Christianity, Christian ethics are relatively good, but Christianity has launched wars without precedent, unheard-of massacres. The Christian wars are the most terrible, the most intolerant, the most atrocious, and all in the name of God. So that's why I began my first book with a denunciation of fanaticism and what I call the temptation of fanaticism, because it is very tempting, especially in one's youth. One of the main reasons why I consider skepticism a truly interesting attitude, and perhaps the only valid one, is the spectacle of world history, which can lead only to one conclusion, that is skepticism or, rather, antifanaticism. But fanaticism is no accident. It's an emanation of man, of his instincts, his will, his pride, everything. It's in the Bible as well. Why did the angels revolt? Lucifer was ambitious, he wouldn't accept a chief, a God. Well, one could say that he illustrates the whole history of the world. Christianity teaches that, until the Last Judgment, Satan is the chief who rules over the earth, and that Christ shall be unable to achieve anything here, that he has no influence meanwhile.

JW: How did your interest in Spain develop? There are many references to Spain in your books.

EMC: The interest goes deep. It's the country in Europe that has most attracted me. I'd originally applied for a grant to go there, I wanted to study with Ortega y Gasset, before coming to Paris, but then the Civil War broke out. How did this interest first develop in me? For personal reasons, I've always been attracted to countries that had grandiose dreams and then failed. And I consider that Spain offers the example of the most terrific and illustrious failure. As a student I had read a book about the Spanish character, and I found there something that really struck me. A fellow is telling about his travels through Spain, in third class, and all of a sudden he sees a campesino, a peasant, who is carrying a sack and throws it on the ground, saying, "¡Qué lejos está todo!" How far everything is! I was so struck by this phrase that it became the
title of a chapter in my first book in Rumanian, which was never translated. Obviously I have read the works of Unamuno, his commentary on Don Quixote and the rest. Then, I was very impressed by the fact that around 1900 he learned Danish in order to read Kierkegaard in the original. Unamuno would call him "my brother," and I too was captivated by Kierkegaard.

JW: Did Spain suggest any romantic or exotic image to you, who came originally from Rumania, which is so far from Spain?

EMC: A little, inevitably. But it's not that, I don't think, it's rather the whole psychology of a people that is really quite different, and conscious of its difference. And then, the conquista, I've read a lot about that folly.

JW: Were you interested much in earlier periods of Spain, for instance in the Moorish presence there?

EMC: Enormously. The whole origins of the Arabic invasion and also the drama of the Jews in Spain. For example, one of the things that moved me the most was what happened in Segovia when the Jews were beginning to leave and went to bow over their parents' graves to say goodbye. The Dominicans came into the Jewish cemetery, with their cross, saying, "Convert!" The people were weeping, because they loved Spain and had lived there one of the most beautiful periods in Jewish history. And the priests with their cross coming in there to make them convert to Christianity immediately, it's heartbreaking. Moreover, it's the expulsion of the Jews that made Spain fall apart. It was suicide. That's exactly what Germany did, that sort of madness. It is the drama of the Jews that they have been chased from countries they were particularly attached to. For having considered Spain and later Germany a home, they paid very dearly. To be punished by what one loves, that's the mystery of Jewish destiny.

JW: The Jews have always mixed to some degree with the dominant culture, they've both given and taken a lot.

EMC: Yes, but the Jews went deeper. For example, in Germany they gave a livelier turn to things. They didn't have the German heaviness. They had the same depth, but with a lot of spirit and humor. It was a fruitful en-
counter, in every domain. But that in itself was an ominous sign. Yet in spite of it all, there is an extraordinary Jewish optimism. The Jews are the only tragic people that remain optimists.

JW: In *Drawn and Quartered* you say, “A self-respecting man is a man without a country.” Elsewhere you’ve written, “I have no nationality—the best possible status for an intellectual.” But most people say that one has to have roots, especially a writer.

EMC: Maybe, but I’m not a writer. For a novelist, yes, it’s true in a certain sense. Even for a poet, because he’s rooted in his language. But for me the fact of having lost my roots went with my conception of the intellectual without a country. In coming to Paris I became denationalized. What is so beautiful about Paris is that it’s a city of uprooted people, and I felt very much at home in this environment. I always hated what was intellectually provincial.

JW: What was your cultural orientation in Rumania?

EMC: The Rumanians within the Austro-Hungarian empire were a population kept in darkness. But I’m not anti-Hungarian, I have a lot of admiration for the Magyars. As far as folk music goes, it’s Hungarian gypsy music that I prefer from that part of the world. One of the composers I love is Brahms, for the gypsy element in his works.

JW: How did the folklore and the native character of the Rumanians affect you?

EMC: What I inherited from the Rumanian people, the peasants, is their fatalism. The Rumanians, I think, are the most fatalistic people in the world. I learned this as a child, because people would always say things like “There’s nothing a man can do” and “There’s only destiny,” and so on. That vision of life marked me, I can’t deny it, with a sort of philosophy of surrender. And these peasants are closer to Greek tragedy than those of the West. theirs is the same vision, that man is a sort of plaything of destiny.

JW: Among the many people that you came to know here in Paris, were there many Rumanians? I’m thinking particularly of writers, of Ionesco and of Isidore Isou.

EMC: I know Isou very well, I see him often. He lives near here and goes every day to the Luxembourg Gar-
dens. I used to see Ionesco a lot, he’s a very good friend. He is as interesting a man as he is a writer, with a great sense of humor in life and never banal. Oddly enough, we’re greater friends here than we were in Rumania.

JW: You knew him well there?
EMC: We were students together in Bucharest, though he was in French and I was in philosophy. He’s a profoundly unhappy man, and success has only aggravated his misery. Which is what I like about him. Instead of coming to terms with life, he has never despaired as much as since he’s been famous. He was very poor in Paris before becoming known as a writer. For years we spoke on the phone almost daily. One can die of laughter with him, even when he’s in despair. He’s a man who is haunted by the idea of death, much more than I. With age, for me, this obsession has grown weaker. With him, it’s the contrary. It’s not that he’s afraid to die. He has a sense of the ephemeral, of things not lasting, and his work is an expression of it. One might even say that his humor is somewhat the disconsolation of dying. His obsession with death drives him quite far, he travels a great deal. He’s been all over the world. It’s an escape.

JW: Is it true that Ionesco is obsessed with Russia?
EMC: Like all people from Eastern Europe.

JW: But you write that the future is Russia’s.
EMC: The immediate future, that’s all.

JW: In *Histoire et Utopie*, you wrote that Russia’s future will depend on “the bearing with which it spends its reserves of utopia.”

EMC: Listen, I’ve always been very taken up with Russian culture. It goes back to when I was about fifteen. My parents had settled in Sibiu and my father was the orthodox parish priest for the city and also a counselor to a very important fellow in the church hierarchy. This man was very cultivated, had a huge library, and he had everything on Russia. As a teenager I was thus able to read an enormous amount on Russia, and, since I was very passionate about Dostoyevsky, I became very taken with it. At the same time I conceived a great admiration for Russia and a great fear. To such a degree that I consider there is a Russian fatality.

JW: Historically.
EMC: Yes. I believe in a Russian destiny which we cannot escape. It’s obvious that all the peoples of the West have exhausted their sense of a mission. The English, the French, the Germans, it doesn’t interest them to play a role anymore, they all know it’s not worth the trouble to get caught up in history now. Each nation has a mission to carry out and that’s over for them. The Russians have only to wait, while looking towards the West.

JW: Do you feel that Russia will take over all of Europe?
EMC: Yes, but not necessarily by war. By a sort of pressure. One feels Russia is weighing on Europe. But the Russians are doing something stupid, because their dream was obviously to compete with the West, to take its place, though that was when the West was still powerful. Europe is no longer a danger for the Russians, but their dream continues—instead of leaving the West in peace. They’re afraid of Germany, which is ridiculous. The Germans have become a nation of tourists.

JW: But it’s between Russia and the United States now.
EMC: Naturally. The United States has not exhausted its historical role, but at the same time its mission has arisen because it’s been provoked from abroad, I believe. America became involved in this through Western Europe, which had given up. Someone had to take over, and America was forced by Europe’s weakness. Russia has always been carried away by a dream of universal domination. And it will explode some day because of this dream, though as the result of a catastrophe that defies words.

JW: Is there a political régime that you prefer?
EMC: I believe the ideal régime is of a Left without rigid dogmas, a Left exempt from fanaticism.

JW: Are you glad, for instance, that the Socialists won in Spain?
EMC: In Spain a Leftist government is absolutely indispensable. For an intellectual it’s obvious that, at this stage in history, the ideal is an intelligent Leftist government, but on condition that it doesn’t run aground. Freedom is an ideal, but man is a devilish animal and tends to make poor use of freedom, that’s undeniable. Socialist governments don’t know this. Freedom has to be controlled, unfortunately, because man can’t stop himself.
JW: In "A Short History of Decay," you defined freedom as "an ethical principle of demonic essence."

EMC: The best governments in the world have been ruined by uncontrolled freedom. Because man abuses it. Why was England one of the rare countries to have known freedom for so long? Because English prejudices were very strong and contained the people. They were stupid prejudices but that doesn't matter. They gave a sort of consistency to English society and provided limits that one was not to transgress. The problem of freedom is at once philosophical and political: to what point can the human animal be free without perishing?

JW: In "Syllogismes" too you wrote: "History, in effect, amounts to a classification of police; because what is the historian dealing with, if not the conception that men have had of the policeman through the ages?" Which seems even more so now.

EMC: That's unhappily true.

JW: About Christianity, then. First of all, having a father who was a Greek Orthodox priest, at what point did you begin to sense "the lugubrious stupidity of the Cross," as you put it in "A Short History of Decay?"

EMC: Rather early. I was terribly anti-Christian when I was young. My father wasn't intolerant at all, he was very humane and concerned himself with people—because he wanted originally to be a lawyer but couldn't in Austria-Hungary. He took his calling seriously and had the habit, for instance, of saying grace before eating, and then I would always disappear, going to the bathroom until he finished his prayer. From about the age of thirteen or fourteen, when I started to read, I was against it, I thought it too stupid. I felt a sort of repulsion for it. My philosophical awakening was anti-Christian. Then, all the same, something happened a little later, I was about eighteen, I developed an interest not so much in religion itself as in mystics. Not because of their religious faith but for their excess, their passion, their inner violence. So I began to read the great mystics, and I soon understood that I could not have faith. But it interested me because the mystics lived a more intense life than others. And too, because of their kind of extraordinary pride, me and God, God and me.
JW: You yourself weren’t tempted to follow the mystics’ path, though?
EMC: No, I had my insomnia, which gives one amazingly ecstatic states. When you’re under a great deal of nervous tension, there are moments—which Dostoyevsky speaks about in *The Possessed*, with Kirilov—when you’re suddenly seized with the feeling of truly being God, with the whole universe centered on you. Ecstasy thus offers diverse forms, according to one’s conceptions. I knew these states, which are frequent too for epileptics. I was never epileptic, but because of this amazing nervous tension I experienced what is called ecstasy. It manifests itself by a sort of sensation of extraordinary light, inside and outside. And it’s at that point that I really understood the mystics.

JW: You’re speaking of the Christian mystics in particular.

EMC: Yes, inevitably. St. Theresa of Avila, St. John of the Cross, all of them. So my interest in the mystics wasn’t abstract or intellectual, it came from my own experience.

JW: But what did you do about the Christian side of their experience?

EMC: That didn’t interest me, because I’ve always considered the mystics as practically outside of Christianity. They were all persecuted because the Church considered them dangerous, and they were often thrown in prison as heretics. Mysticism is the extreme state of religion.

JW: Religion lends it a language.

EMC: That’s right. The Church doesn’t know what to do with them, it accepts them finally, but while they are alive they’re persecuted.

JW: You also wrote in *A Short History of Decay* that you loved very much all the women saints.

EMC: Yes, that passion had a morbid aspect too. I was then about twenty-five.

JW: But why did you stop loving them?

EMC: It was like a passing madness. I read them all. It was a form of perverse eroticism. Certainly, there was a sick side to it.

JW: You seem hardly to speak at all about atheism.

EMC: Yet I’ve always been attacked as an atheist. I’m a
false believer and a false atheist. I can’t abide by religions, they’re institutions, but religion has interested me solely because of the mystics, these extreme cases.

JW: Atheism offers too much certitude perhaps.

EMC: It’s always very suspect. It’s absurd to say that God doesn’t exist, because one can’t define the concept of God. But I should explain why I have spoken so often of God in these last twenty years. Each one of us obviously knows extreme states of solitude, where nothing exists anymore, especially at night when one is absolutely alone and there is always the difficulty of speaking with oneself. So, I’ve defined God as the partner in moments of extreme solitude. One thinks of God when one can think of nothing else anymore, of no other person. It has nothing to do with faith in my case, it’s solely a pretext for dialogue. It’s a monologue, but because everything else has vanished, one clashes with God, the last companion in solitude.

JW: For many people that question of certitude is a big problem. They can’t really believe in God, but they’re not sure either that God doesn’t exist.

EMC: The existence of God doesn’t even interest me. The function he plays for those of us who don’t believe is that when one doesn’t know whom to speak to anymore, one speaks with him. It’s a sort of survival.

JW: You’ve studied the history of Christianity rather thoroughly, but you’ve also studied other religions.

EMC: Buddhism, above all. I was very interested in Buddhism, less now, I’m old. But Buddhism has played a big role in my life, since my youth.

JW: When did that interest first develop?

EMC: I was about twenty-four or twenty-five. If I had ever adopted a religion, it would have been Buddhism, I think. And for a long time I even boasted of being a Buddhist, until I realized that was absurd.

JW: You hadn’t actually taken on all the precepts.

EMC: No. You know, the Buddhists consider anger as that which most hinders salvation. Well, I’m very irritable, it’s stronger than me. And then there’s detachment. I’m incapable of attaining it, so I realized that I was a dubious Buddhist. What attracted me to Buddhism is the
statement that everything is illusion, that nothing is real. It's perhaps the negative aspect of Buddhism that I liked, the statements on life that it makes. But not the solutions, because if I know that nothing is real, I still react like other men, I love people, I hate them and so on.

JW: Well, in your writings you even seem to deny the possibility for Westerners to be real Buddhists.

EMC: Absolutely. It's not possible, for most people. My temperament hasn't changed, I wasn't made to be set free. What people don't realize is that it's one thing to like that form of wisdom and it's another to live it. That's where my fatalistic side comes in: we do not escape ourselves.

JW: Yet you often advise detachment in your books.

EMC: All the time.

JW: But in The Fall into Time, you write, "our sole recourse: to renounce not only the fruit of action, but action itself, to make a rule of nonproduction." Which brings up the old problem then, why write?

EMC: I try to be what I should be, see. I wrap myself up in those things because all my life I've had the feeling of nothingness, it's also done me a lot of good. It's helped me to put up with a lot of things, and also to understand Buddhism, but at bottom I'm much closer to certain Romantics. Finally I reached the conclusion that I was not to be saved, and that I was destined to torture myself. [Laughs.] The rest was desire.

JW: Though, as you've written, it was also a paradox for the mystics, that they wrote books.

EMC: Yes, why do they write, since they're writing for God. God doesn't read. One can't dwell on the ultimate consequences of an attitude, one would have to either become a monk or commit suicide. At bottom one has to admit that life is made of these contradictions, that's what's interesting. If I identified completely with what I've written, for example, I wouldn't have written. There's the whole problem. What should I have done? I should have been a sage, but I couldn't. I wanted to be one, but I couldn't manage it, so I wrote books. Everything I've done has been the result of a spiritual failure. But for me that is not necessarily a negative concept.
JASON WEISS

JW: In *The Trouble with Being Born*, you speak of "the man I would have liked to be," which is a phrase found elsewhere in your work as well. But who is that?

EMC: You know, in my youth I was extremely ambitious, arrogant rather. Inevitably, in becoming much more lucid one sees how one was undeserving precisely of the image one had of oneself. All my life I've had the feeling of this unworthiness, of having stopped short of what I might have been, though that too is an illusion. I've suffered from that, and then in the end it's all over and what does it matter, whether one produces a body of work or not. What's important, finally, is to have said certain things that can count, not only for oneself, but for others. But I should say this, that in nothing that I've written have I ever thought of others. I wrote for myself. But "the man I would have liked to be" is not at all who I might have been. What I wanted is to comprehend things, to understand, to not be fooled. My fear has always been of being a dupe, and so I tried to be less so than others. It's the fear of believing, in whatever it might be. For me every belief is trickery.

JW: You've said that Christianity's career is over. Yet a lot of new evangelical sects keep springing up, in the United States for example.

EMC: Listen, religion won't disappear overnight. But my idea is this, that Christianity is like a corpse that drags on, it no longer has any spiritual force. It can try, obviously, but Christianity can't renew itself from inside anymore. It's given all it can. It's a sort of survivor now, that could last a long time yet. However, I don't believe that the religious foundation that exists in man can ever disappear. It is a part of his essence.

JW: You return quite often in your books to the idea that we cannot weep enough. Where does that come from?

EMC: From personal experience. I've suffered, like all melancholics, from a sort of need to weep without being able to. I've experienced that very often in my life, because the only thing that could liberate one in such states is to weep, and I can't then. It may be neo-Romantic or something, but it's real. It's the need to weep as liberation. It comes too from that feeling of not belonging to the
world. You’re thrown into the world, but . . . what is it you’re looking for here?

JW: Where do you situate yourself in relationship to the whole movement of existentialism and the theory of the absurd in France?

EMC: Normally I would say I’m quite close to that. It’s a way of thinking that’s not alien to me. But, with Sartre, it all became a sort of fashionable philosophy and very unpleasant. Sartre was an extremely gifted fellow, in fact too gifted. I think that if he had had less ambition, it would have been a lot better. He was fascinated by world fame. To his misfortune, he became world-famous relatively young, almost immediately.

JW: Did you ever have much occasion to speak with him?

EMC: No. I sat next to him quite often at the Café de Flore, for whole days at a time. I never spoke to him, it was very strange, I ask myself why. It wasn’t from shyness either, even though he was very famous and I was completely unknown. But the Flore was the only heated café at the time of the Liberation, when it was freezing outside.

JW: But he probably knew your books later.

EMC: I don’t think so, frankly. Or else he would have mistrusted them, I’m almost sure. I wrote a portrait of him in A Short History of Decay, without mentioning his name, called “On an Entrepreneur of Ideas.” It expressed a kind of sympathy in spite of everything. The biggest reproach I would make was his total lack of humor. He had a Germanic, an Alsatian irony, very heavy, very insistent. But I don’t want to speak ill of him, absolutely not.

JW: Let’s get around to talking about music now. It seems that music would be capable of replacing philosophy for you.

EMC: Not only philosophy. Everything!

JW: In “Tares,” you write: “Outside of music, everything is a lie, even solitude, even ecstasy. It is precisely one and the other but better.”

EMC: I’ll tell you my view of music in taking up that formula again. If everything is a lie, is illusory, then music itself is a lie, but the superb lie. That’s how I would define music. Obviously, it’s very difficult to speak about it. As
long as you listen to it, you have the feeling that it is the whole universe, that everything ceases to exist, there is only music. But when one stops listening, one falls back into time and wonders, "Well, what is it? What state was I in?" One had felt it was everything, and then it all disappeared. So that is why I say music is the superb illusion.

JW: You said that you've listened to Brahms a lot, his chamber works. What other composers did you listen to?
EMC: My big passion in the beginning was Bach. Which brought about something very curious. Till the age of twenty, I had a profound contempt for my mother. I thought she was superficial. One day she told me, "You know, the only thing in the world that deeply moves me is Bach." And from that moment on, I completely changed my opinion of her. I understood that my image of her was false. Because of Bach. And two beings communicate extraordinarily when they listen to music together.

JW: You've also written that you scorn a person who has no taste for music.
EMC: I'll tell you, I never wanted to meet André Breton. Because Breton was totally impervious to music and to Dostoyevsky.

JW: Yes, you wrote that but without any name!
EMC: I would have conceded one of the two, but both of them, that's unpardonable. It doesn't matter what he might have achieved, why bother to meet him?

JW: Have you ever written while listening to music?
EMC: No, but I'm starting to now a little. Some people, for example Lévi-Strauss, write while listening to music, nearly all their work.

JW: Are there certain periods of music that you listen to? Do you like contemporary music at all?
EMC: Yes, for ten years I followed the concerts of the Domaine Musical here, which was directed by Pierre Boulez before he was very famous, from about 1955. So, I was very interested in contemporary music. But later I abandoned it for rather specific reasons, I didn't want to meet people anymore, it was a fatigue of society, of the receptions, and with that I stopped going to the concerts. But I like the music of Schoenberg and his contempo-
And I know Stockhausen’s work. But I’m no specialist, and I’ve never been systematic about it. And then I fell back into Romantic music, such as Schumann.

JW: On the other side of that, you speak quite often of the loss of silence.

EMC: It’s an obsession, I think. I consider the loss of silence extremely serious. For twenty-five years I lived in hotels in Paris, and the noise, I could have killed someone. I consider the disappearance of silence as one of the symptoms of the end of humanity.

JW: Are there certain of your books that remain closest to you now?


JW: In The Trouble with Being Born you wrote, “I have followed only one idea all the way—the idea that everything man achieves necessarily turns against him . . . I have lived it with a power of conviction.” But your books are achievements; have they turned against you?

EMC: I’m thinking there of man in general, of the destiny of man. Everything we do, we end up being punished for it. If we want to know happiness in life, we must not do anything, not accomplish anything, live and nothing more. I feel that man should not have thrown himself into this amazing adventure that is history. Everything that he does turns against him because he wasn’t made to do something, he was made solely to look and to live as the animals and the trees do. And I’ll go even further, man should not have existed, he should have remained a species like any other and not have broken away from the rest of Creation.

JW: In the same book there was a line concluding a certain passage that touched me a lot, where you wrote, “I ask those I love to be kind enough to grow old.”

EMC: That came about because of an old friend of mine who suffers from a youngish optimism and who had just reproached me saying that I hadn’t realized my potential in life. But everyone fails to realize his whole potential, and this failure is not only inevitable but desirable.