

E. M. Cioran & Jason Weiss *

A keen stylist and rigorous thinker, concerned with the most fundamental issues of being, E. M. Cioran has often been compared with such writers as Beckett and Borges. Though he might have been better known had he written fiction or plays rather than his very particular essays and aphorisms, Cioran's books reach across great distances: those within the self as well as those between people.

*Cioran insists that he's not a writer; his fifteen books would appear to prove otherwise. Even his titles provoke a look inside: A Short History of Decay, The Temptation to Exist, The Fall into Time, The New Gods, The Trouble with Being Born, Drawn and Quartered, and History and Utopia. Of this last, which was originally published in 1960, he says, 'I wanted to make an apology of utopia, but when I read different utopias, I said this isn't possible.' Among the other books in French, *Syllogismes de l'amertume* (1952) bears special note; it was his second book, but the first of aphorisms. At the time of the interview he was working on a new collection of aphorisms, provisionally called *Ce maudit moi* and later published as *Aveux et anathèmes* (1987).*

*A native of Rumania, son of a priest, 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-two he could almost be a survivor of himself, though his fatigue seems more existential than physical. Yet Cioran's ready humor 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?'*

*Known to be very private, Cioran has never given an interview to the French literary press, being too close to home, or to the American press (except for some moments with a *Time* magazine correspondent years ago). The following interview took place over two mornings in mid-August, 1983, in his Latin Quarter apartment where he has lived since the early 1960s, though he has been in Paris since before the Second World War.*

Jason Weiss You've said that Sartre and others, by using a German style of discourse, did some harm to philosophical language. Can you elaborate on this?

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 use 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 who had a bearing on philosophy all the same, wrote a very pure language; he detested philosophical language. That jargon gives you a sense of superiority over everybody. And philosophical pride is the worst that exists, it's very contagious. In any rate, the German influence in France was disastrous on that whole level, I find. 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 style. And then it's the influence of Heidegger, who was very big in France. For example, when he's speaking about death, he uses such complicated language to say very simple things, and I understand how one could be tempted by that 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 as a young man and very pleased 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—La Rochefoucauld, Chamfort, and all that—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 was happy to break quite early with the university, which I consider 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. 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, he was more: a temperament. So, I read him but never systematically. Now and then I'd read things by him, but really I don't read him anymore. What I consider his most authentic work is his letters, because in them he's truthful, while in this other work he's a prisoner of his vision. In his letters one sees that he's just a poor guy, 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 naïve."

EMC That's a bit excessive, yes. It's because that whole vision, of the will to power and all that, he imposed that grandiose vision on himself because he was a pathetic 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 pitiful, it's very touching, like a character out of Chekhov. I was attached to him in my youth, but not later on. 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, I think. But it is 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, my disillusionment with 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 How did your severe insomnia affect this attitude at the time?

EMC It was really the big reason for my break with philosophy. I realized that in moments of great despair philosophy is no help at all, that it holds absolutely no answers. And so I turned to poetry and literature, where I found no answers either but states that were analogous to my own. I can say that the white nights, the sleepless nights, brought about the break with my idolatry of philosophy.

JW When did these sleepless nights begin?

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

JW Do you still suffer from it?

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 almost begins a new life the next day. It's not simply another day, it's another life. And so, he can undertake things, he can manifest himself, he has a present, a future, and so on. But for someone who doesn't sleep, from the time of going to bed at night to waking up in the morning it's all continuous, there's no interruption. Which means there is no suppression of consciousness. It all revolves around that. So, instead of starting a new life, at eight in the morning you're like you were at eight the evening before. The nightmare continues uninterrupted in a way, and in the morning, start what? Since there's no difference from the night before. That new life doesn't exist. The whole day is a trial, it's the continuity of the trial. Well, while everyone rushes toward the future, you are on the outside. So, when that's stretched out for months and years, it causes your sense of things, your conception of life, to be forcibly changed. You do not see what future to look toward, 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 who is awake. Right away I'm not a part of humanity, I live in another world. And it requires an extraordinary will to not succumb.

JW Succumb to what, madness?

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, no matter what it was. 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, that it all 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 opposite, it's consciousness which is our advantage. I arrived at the

conclusion that no, the fact of being conscious, of not being oblivious, that is the great catastrophe. Because I was conscious twenty-four hours a day. One can be conscious several hours a day, five minutes, but not all day, all night. People are conscious by intervals, but there it's a matter of acuteness, all the time.

JW Have you met other insomniacs through the years 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, I should say, was to go for walks at night. Curiously enough, I did that in Paris as well, 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 just go out for a walk like that at four in the morning. I liked to go all over the place. I'd wait until people were going to work, and then I'd come home and sleep a little. But I was doing better by then.

JW That helped calm you a little.

EMC Yes, I'll tell you, speaking of that, this period of deep insomnia came to an end in France, and you know how? The bicycle. This is quite a curious phenomenon, I was a bit like someone suffering hallucinations; I'd been in Paris a few months, and one day on the boulevard Saint Michel someone offered to sell me a bicycle. It was a racing bicycle, not expensive at all. 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 from the French government to do a thesis for several years, from 1937 until the war, until 1940. To do a thesis in philosophy... which I certainly did not do! I never went to the Sorbonne, I lied. But with that I'd cover kilometers and kilometers, for months, I went all through the Pyrenees. I'd do a hundred kilometers a day. And it's this physical effort that allowed me to sleep. I remember, 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 morning till night. When you do a hundred kilometers a day, there's no way you're not going to sleep, it's out of the question. So, it wasn't thanks to medicine. Because, unfortunately for me, I had seen a lot of doctors in Rumania and in France, and they all gave me 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. And then I'd

have a headache all day, it was horrible. I was poisoned from sleeping pills. I don't take them anymore. And so, this providential bicycle saved me.

JW Did other insomniacs recognize the cure you found?

EMC Yes. You see, there is a gang of insomniacs, there is a sort of solidarity, right, like people who have the same illness. We understand each other right away, because we know that drama. The drama of insomnia is this: it's that time doesn't pass. You're stretched out in the middle of the night and you are no longer in time. You're not in eternity either. The 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 there in that book. That is, people fall into time and fall further down than time. I feel it to be one of my points of originality, if you like. It's that you also are conscious of time. Normally people are not. Someone who acts, who is involved in doing something, doesn't think about time, that's absurd. But the consciousness of time proves that you are outside of time, that you've been ejected. One could really call it a philosophical, a metaphysical, experience. Now I'll tell you, I recall the first occasion in my life 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 becoming conscious of time, because the time does not pass. So, I was destined a bit to that consciousness of time, insomnia only accelerated it.

JW Were there other people around at that moment when you were five?

EMC No, I was absolutely alone. I wasn't able to formulate it, obviously, but I know it was that. 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, I'd 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 strong 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 recognized these sensations, because I've received a lot of letters. They hadn't formulated it perhaps, but they said, "I lived the same thing," they have the same feeling of existence.

JW Speaking of your insomnia, I noticed you wrote that you had a very happy childhood.

EMC A wonderful childhood. I believe I was unhappy in my life as punishment for having had such an extraordinarily happy childhood. I'm talking about early childhood, until the age of seven or eight, no more. Later was a catastrophe. Because I was born in a mountain village, very primitive, I was always outside in the open air. I lived like I was out in the wilds. I have wonderful memories of that time.

JW And you remained in that village until what age?

EMC Until I was ten. And there we had a garden next to the cemetery, which also played a role in my life because I was a friend of the gravedigger. I was always around the cemetery, all the time I was seeing the disinterred, the skeletons, the cadavers. For me death was something so obvious that it was truly a part of my daily life. I didn't start acting like Hamlet, but it is true that after that I began to be obsessed with skeletons and even the phenomenon of death. And that had an effect on my insomnia. Which means that for someone to have an obsession with death, one already has a sense of the unreality of life. It's there, the process. It's not the obsession with death that makes you discover that life is unreal, 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 role in my life. I was about twenty-two and one day I was in a terrible state. We were living in Sibiu, a city in the provinces where I spent my whole youth, and where my father was the priest of the city. That day only my mother and I were 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 said, “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 this was said by my mother! At the time, abortion didn’t exist. But that proves that individual life is an accident and it is. Well, you can say, “But everyone knows that.” Everyone knows that, but only now and then. It’s another thing to know it morning and night, that’s why it’s maddening. So when we speak of these things, we absolutely must speak of the frequency and the duration. It’s the fact of having that feeling constantly.

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, how much did you begin reading French writers like Baudelaire, who spoke of comparable states?

EMC I sort of worshipped Baudelaire. He is a great poet, yet Mallarmé is greater, so is Rimbaud, they’re more original than he is. But that’s in the deep sentiments. I’ve written somewhere that there are two writers whom I always think about, and whom I don’t often read: they are Pascal and Baudelaire. They have been constant companions. It’s not a matter of pride, it’s simply an inner affinity, as if we’re part of the same family. In a book about his youth, Pascal’s sister, Madame Perier—you know that Pascal was ill all his life, he died relatively young, at the age of thirty-nine—she said her brother told her one day that from the age of seventeen he knew not a single day without suffering. I was in a public library in Rumania, in Bucharest, and when I read that it made such an impression on me that I wanted to cry out, and I put my hand in my mouth so as not to. I told myself that’s what’s going to happen in my own life, it was a presentiment of a sort of disaster, but even outside of that, Pascal and Baudelaire were the two who spoke most profoundly about the crucial experience of ennui. My life is inconceivable without ennui. Though I get bored now less than before.

JW Why's that?

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

JW But don't you find there are things that gain in intensity with old age?

EMC No. One doesn't become better on the moral plane with old age. Or wiser. Contrary to what people think. One gains nothing in getting old. But as one is more tired, one gives the impression of 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 With the insomnia, were you able to use it in a way, to go deeper with your thinking?

EMC Certainly. Whether or not everything I've thought was due to insomnia, 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 much through 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 trade for a year, I was a high-school teacher in Rumania. But since then, I've never practiced a trade. I've lived just like that, like a sort of student and such. And that I consider the greatest success of my life. My life hasn't been a failure because I succeeded in doing nothing.

JW And that's difficult.

EMC It's extremely difficult, but I consider that 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 talking about my books for the last three years, really. To tell you quite simply, they talked about me for a few months in 1950, regarding *A Short History of Decay*, and then, for thirty years, hardly at all. Really. I wasn't known, a few people in literary circles knew me. But everything changed a few years ago with the paperback editions.

JW Yes, you were explaining how when *Syllogismes de l'amertume* came out in paperback, it was a big success.

EMC That's the one. In more than twenty years it sold only two thousand copies. So it was my good luck to have been able to spend almost thirty years in a sort of oblivion. For me the tragedy of a writer is being famous when you're young, that's extremely bad. It forces everything, because most writers, when they're known fairly young, they 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 really has no reality, it's only a book. Everything I've written, I wrote to escape a sense of oppression, 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 with the practice of writing? The act of thinking, of following through certain ideas, is one thing, but the writing remains something else.

EMC Yes, but you see, even so, there is another aspect to all that in my life because I changed languages. And for me that was a very important event. Because 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 in the intellectual circles. Everyone knew French, everyone read it. And it was very humiliating for me, I spoke French very poorly. My peers knew French quite well, especially among the bourgeoisie, of course. I read French, naturally, but I didn't speak it. And so I came to France in '37, I was twenty-six, and instead of setting about to write in French, I wrote in Rumanian up until '47, but without 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 this 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, "You have to renounce your native tongue." I came back to Paris with the idea of writing in French and set right to 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 a hundred or a hundred and 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 get serious about it. And I threw myself into the French language like a crazy person, 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 one 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 revenge in a way on all those folks in Rumania who knew French, but it wasn't conscious. And also, I had a complex about being a foreigner.

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

EMC No. And especially not in intellectual circles. I didn't know writers at all, I didn't hang out with them. 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, who said that he wanted to meet some writers. I said, "You shouldn't hang out with writers. It's more important when you come from abroad to speak with a cab driver or a whore than with a writer." He got mad, started insulting me. He didn't understand what I meant.

JW There are certain passages in your books where you take up the cause of bums, as if they have the right attitude about things.

EMC But that's due to the fact that I had a friend who was a bum, who was very interesting. He'd play his instruments in loads of cafés, he'd pass the hat. I saw him four or five times a year, or he'd come to visit me. He's the one 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-Élysées to that big café, Fouquet's, he 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 you mind going to 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 reason as well, 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. But yes, I think there are certain affinities.

JW So it was only after you'd published some books that you got to know writers much?

EMC Yes. But the only writer I still see, really, is Michaux. I stopped frequenting literary circles. But 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 such, and I was very poor. I was invited by rich ladies who had parties. I could drink and eat, I was invited to dinners, I'd go three times a week to different people's places. I accepted practically any dinner, because I was dependent on that. And so, I was often at a salon where I met lots of people, but that's a long time ago, the mid-1950s. I can't go to parties anymore, it's absolutely impossible. And then too, I don't drink anymore.

JW I read that. "Years now without coffee, without alcohol, without tobacco," you wrote. 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 buy some more. It was a comedy that lasted five years. When I stopped smoking, I felt like 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 afterward, 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's always made me think of a story Dostoyevsky speaks about. In Siberia there was an

anarchist at the time who was sentenced to eighteen years in prison. And one day they cut off his tobacco. Right away he gave a declaration that he was renouncing all his ideas and everything at the feet of the tsar. When I read that in my youth, I hadn't understood it. And I 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 dove into the water and started swimming. I said, "If this German can do that 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!

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

EMC Ah yes. A writer mustn'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 go into depth with a subject, 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 it is rather French. The Germans, for example, only have Lichtenberg and Nietzsche, who got 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, *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 because I've sunk back into fatigue—why bother? And so, the aphorism is scorned by "serious" people, professors look down upon it.

JW Because professors can't do anything with an aphorist.

EMC Absolutely not. When they read a book of aphorisms, they say, "Oh, look what this guy said ten pages back, now he's saying the contrary. He's not serious." 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. It's always set in motion by an encounter, an incident, a fit of temper, but they all have a cause. It's not at all gratuitous.

JW For a book like *Syllogismes*, did you select which aphorisms would go into each section?

EMC I organized them into chapters more or less. It wasn't written like that, not systematically. But in the end all that does inevitably have a unity because it is the same vision of things.

JW Because it seems that with each book the title is very appropriate.

EMC Yes, it's justified. For *The Trouble with Being Born*, though, I wanted to write a whole book on that. It wasn't possible, that's true. But the starting point was that.

JW Do you have particular writing habits or conditions when you 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 preferably, I write in a state of semi-depression. There has to be something that's not right. Because I find that when one is neutral, why write? Why declare things? And so, perhaps as they've said, there is a bit of a morbid aspect to what I write. And it is true, I've noticed, that the people who react the 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 you write them?

EMC Most of the books were written just like that, off the cuff. The only ones where I had the idea beforehand were *The Fall into Time* and *History and Utopia*, 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 singular encounters, people I've seen only once. When I published my first book, *A Short History of Decay*, it got a very passionate reaction, I received a lot of letters. But the most extraordinary 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 this is what it's like, 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 repeat because I’m not mentioning her name and she’s a lot 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 it was over by then. But I realized it’s not worth seeing a girl like that again, it wouldn’t make any sense. But I was really struck by this story.

All right, the second story. For two years I received letters from a woman who was absolutely crazy. It was more like 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, the middle of the summer. I was very depressed, feeling that I was worthless. I said, “I’d like to see someone who has a good opinion of me.” Who liked me. I’d been receiving letters from this woman for more than a year, and I hadn’t replied much to them. I call her up, it was six or seven in the evening, 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 taxi, be at your house in an hour.” A very pretty voice, see. At eight o’clock, I had gotten 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 to a restaurant with this woman.”

JW So what did you do?

EMC I invited her in, “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 I had had a tape recorder! I sat there, I said practically nothing. She set to 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 had said to her, “But, Miss, this isn’t where you should go. You should go to Saint Anne’s.” That was the lunatic asylum. And she was the one who was telling me this. She was rich, she had several homes in Paris. And she’d read a fair amount. She knew my books by heart, she kept quoting passages. At midnight I decided that four hours of entertainment was enough, and I saw her to the door.

JW But you do consider these single encounters important. Are there others?

EMC A few years ago, there was a friend of mine who told me that he'd met a twenty-five-year-old engineer 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 such, and finally he said to me, "Do you know why I wanted to meet you? It's because I read your books, and I saw that you're interested in suicide. I'd like to tell you about my case." And so he explained to me that he had a good job, he earned a lot. He said, "In the last two or three years, I've begun to be obsessed with suicide. I'm in the prime 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—I am still—obsessed by it, I consider suicide as the only solution, but, I told him, my theory is this: 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 not see each other again, because there wouldn't be any point.

JW In an encounter like that, have you had the feeling of saving him a little?

EMC Yes, a little. That's happened to me several times, with young women particularly. I've always prevented them from committing suicide. I've always tried to tell them that, since you can kill yourself anytime, you should put it off. But you should not abandon this idea.

JW But you do feel a certain responsibility to such people.

EMC Yes, I can't avoid it. Because 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. So, it's something else, but they've attacked me, saying this fellow makes the argument for suicide and doesn't do it himself. But I haven't made such an argument. I say that we have only this recourse in life, that the only consolation is that we can quit this life when we want to. So, it's a positive idea. Christianity is guilty of leading a campaign 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 by way of this idea of suicide. It's in *Syllogismes* where I wrote that sentence: "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 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 in that phrase.

JW But you were considering suicide when you yourself were quite young. What made you decide to go on?

EMC Because I considered life as a delaying of suicide. I had thought I wasn’t going to live past thirty. But it wasn’t from cowardice, I was always postponing my suicide, see. I exploited this idea, I was the parasite of it. But at the same time this appetite for existing was very strong in me too.

JW I wonder if there were people in whom you could see their impending suicide. I think 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 Ecoles. But later, we saw each other a lot less, he had moved. With him it really was a very serious illness which hastened his end. At the time that I met him I could never have imagined that he would kill himself. Except that sometimes he was very violent, he 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 attack made him ill. He took everything to heart. He suffered from an extraordinary vulnerability, and that’s what aggravated his case. I believe that he really killed himself because it wasn’t possible otherwise. 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 with 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, 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 has been therapeutic, an anodyne. I’m not a skeptic by temperament, if you like, because I’m a bit frenetic. Perhaps I’m a false skeptic. I’ll tell you an

unbelievable story, a bit of German silliness. They phone me from Munich one day, this was just 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 that unheard-of, by telephone, like one calls a doctor, a specialist. I could put that down as my profession: Skeptic. Besides, 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, I read everything about him I could find. He fascinated me. During certain periods 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. But in return I read. So I consider that I’ve done my duty all the same. 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 At various times in your books you’ve expressed your interest in biographies.

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

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

EMC I’ve got a really crazy story about that. As I said, I only worked in a profession for one 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 I was also reading a lot of Shakespeare. It’s very odd because they have nothing in common. I was so caught up with Shakespeare I thought all the rest were imbeciles. And so I made the decision on my own, I said, “I’m not speaking with anyone but Shakespeare.” That had a troublesome consequence, because it was a provincial city. I was in a café where I often went, and 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, “What do you mean? 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. What an idea!” “Seriously? You’re not Shakespeare? Then get out!” He went immediately to the school and declared that I’d 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 totally aware. 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 who Shakespeare was for me, I had such 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? Wasn't it mainly English ones?

EMC For me the English were the greatest poets. Emily Dickinson, too, in America, she's terrific. During the war here, I had 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 the 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 got very interested in the minor poets of the nineties, Ernest Dowson and others.

JW What was your situation under the Occupation?

EMC Very bad, because I was called up for 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 under German escort." I said, "If you do that, I'll kill myself." It was the Rumanians 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 say, "You'll be sent under German escort!" I said, "You're a colonel. *You* go there, not me. I am incapable of holding a rifle! This war is lost, you don't need me." He made me sick, he kept threatening me with summonses until the end of the war. And then I discovered something amazing. Someone told me, "One of your friends demanded that you be sent to the Russian front." Because he was jealous of me. He was an intellectual who was doing a thesis at the Sorbonne, and he was the one who had done everything! I'd thought he was a friend. And it was his best friend who came to tell me. That's what life is. The fundamental human sentiment is envy. Especially people who are the closest to you. You see, the whole history of humanity is really in the Bible, in the fall from paradise and then the two brothers, Cain and Abel. It's all there. So that every success automatically gains 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 much?

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, I have no religious conviction, but I yield to certain religious explanations for 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 the God is afraid of man, that's what is so fantastic. He realized that this guy is dangerous, that man is a monster, and history has proved it. Man is a being apart, extremely gifted, but harmful. There is an amazing thing in the Koran, that 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 dove down to the bottom of the water and the vulture flew away into the sky. Man is accursed. History is at once demonic 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 what's been going on up 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 either.

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 morality is rather a good one. 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 opened that book with a denunciation of fanaticism and what I call the temptation of fanaticism. Because it is very tempting, especially in one's youth. And one of the profound reasons why I consider skepticism a truly interesting attitude, and perhaps the only valid one, is the spectacle of world history. The only conclusion from that is skepticism, so anti-fanaticism. But fanaticism is no accident, because it's an emanation of man, of his instincts, of his will, his pride, everything. That's in the Bible as well. Why did the angels revolt? Lucifer was ambitious, he didn't want a chief, a God. Well, one could say that the whole history of the world is him. You know, in Christianity they say that until the Last Judgment it's

Satan who is the chief, who rules over the earth. That Christ will not be able to do anything here, that he has no influence. That Satan is their king.
JW How did you get interested in Spain? 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 it begin for me? For personal reasons, because I've always been attracted by countries that had grandiose dreams and then failed. Well, I consider the example of Spain the most terrific failure, the illustrious failure. As a student I had read a book about the Spanish national character, and I came upon 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 who 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. Of course I read the work 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 Was there any romantic or exotic image in this for you, being rather far from Spain?

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

JW Were you interested much in previous epochs of Spain, in the Moorish presence there?

EMC Enormously. The whole origins of the Arabic invasion and everything and also the tragedy of the Jews in Spain. For example, one of the things that moved me the most was what happened in Segovia when they were beginning to leave and they went to bow over their parents' graves to say good-bye. The Dominicans came into this cemetery, with their cross, saying, “Convert!” The people were crying, because they loved Spain, it had been one of the most beautiful periods in Judaism. And the priests with their cross coming in there to make them convert to Christianity immediately, it's heartbreaking. Moreover, Spain fell apart chasing out the Jews. It was suicide. That's exactly what Germany did, that sort of madness. It is the Jews' tragedy that they have been chased from

countries they were particularly attached to. They paid very dearly for considering Spain and later Germany a home. To be punished by what one loves, that's the mystery of Jewish destiny.

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

EMC Yes, but the Jews took things deeper. For example, in Germany they gave a livelier turn to things. They didn't have that German heaviness. They had the same depth, but with a lot of spirit and humor. It was a fruitful encounter, in every domain. But that itself was an ominous sign. Yet in spite of it all, there is an extraordinary Jewish optimism. They are the only tragic people who are 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 one has to have roots, for a writer too.

EMC For a writer maybe, but I'm not a writer. For a novelist, yes, in a certain sense. Even for a poet as well, 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 extremely good in this environment. I always hated what was intellectually provincial.

JW What was the cultural orientation for you in Rumania?

EMC The Rumanians, in 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. And as for folk music, it's Hungarian gypsy music that I prefer from that part of the world, I like it a lot. For example, one of the composers I love is Brahms, for his gypsy side.

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

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

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

EMC I know Isou very well, I see him often. He lives near here, he goes to the Luxembourg Gardens every day. I used to see Ionesco a lot, he's a very good friend. He is as interesting a man as he is a writer. He has loads of humor in life and is never banal. And it's funny, we're more friends here than we were in Rumania.

JW You knew him well there?

EMC Since we were students together in Bucharest, except he was in French and I was in philosophy. He's a profoundly unhappy man, success has only aggravated it. Which is what I like about him. Instead of coming to terms with life, he's never been in so much despair as since he's been famous. He was very poor in Paris before getting known as a writer. For years we'd talk on the phone almost every day. You can die laughing with him, even when he's in despair. He's a man who is haunted by the idea of death, much more than I am. Because with age, for me, that obsession has grown weaker. But with him, it's the contrary. It's not that he's afraid to die. He has the sense of the ephemeral, of things not lasting, and his work is an expression of that. One could even say that his humor is somewhat the disconsolation of dying. That obsession with death pushes 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 the East.

JW But you write that the future is Russia's.

EMC The immediate future, that's all.

JW In *History and Utopia* 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 with Russian culture. It goes back to when I was about fifteen. My parents had settled in Sibiu, my father had become the 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. So, as a teenager I was 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 inevitability.

JW Historically.

EMC Yes. I believe in a Russian destiny which we cannot escape. It's obvious that all the peoples in 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 toward the West.

JW But you feel that Russia will take over all of Europe.

EMC Yes, but not even by war. By a sort of pressure. One feels Russia is weighing on Europe. And the Russians are doing something stupid, because the Russian dream was to compete with the West, obviously, to take its place, but that was when the West was still powerful. There is no danger for the Russians now, but their dream continues—instead of leaving the West in peace. They're afraid of Germany, that's 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 was brought in by the West, the West having given up. Someone had to take over for them, America was forced by Europe's weakness. Russia has always been carried away by a dream of universal domination. And it will burst one day from this dream, but as the result of a catastrophe beyond words.

JW Is there a political regime that you prefer?

EMC I believe the ideal regime is a left without rigid dogmas, a left exempt from fanaticism.

JW Is it all the same to you, for example, that the Socialists won in Spain?

EMC In Spain a leftist government is absolutely indispensable. For an intellectual it's obvious that, at the stage in history we've arrived at, the ideal is an intelligent leftist government, but on the condition that it doesn't run aground. Freedom is an ideal, but still, freedom must be dominated. Man is a diabolical animal, and he tends to make poor use of freedom, that's undeniable. And Socialist governments don't know that. 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 there were prejudices. English prejudices were very strong, they contained the people. They were stupid prejudices but that doesn't matter. They gave a sort of consistence to society, they provided limits that one was not to go beyond.

So, the problem of freedom is at once philosophical and political: to what point can the human animal be free without perishing?

JW In *Syllogismes* as well you had written: "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, for example, was not intolerant at all. He was very humane. He concerned himself with people—because he wanted to be a lawyer and he couldn't in Austria-Hungary. He took his profession seriously; he had the habit for instance of saying a prayer before eating. And every time, I'd disappear; I'd go to the bathroom and wait until he finished. From about the age of thirteen or fourteen, when I started to read, I was against it, I thought it too stupid. I had a sort of repulsion against it. My philosophical awakening was an anti-Christian one. Then something happened anyway, a little later: I was about eighteen, I began to get interested not in religion itself but in the mystics. Not because of their religious faith but for their excess, their passion, for their inner violence. So, I began to read the great mystics, and I understood early on that I could not have faith. But it interested me because the mystics lived a more intense life than others. And also the fact of a sort of extraordinary pride: me and God, God and me.

JW You yourself weren't tempted to follow the mystic's path, though?

EMC No. But I had my insomnia, which gives you amazingly ecstatic states. You see, 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, the whole universe is centered on you. What is called ecstasy has diverse forms, according to the conceptions you have. I knew these states, which are frequent for epileptics. I was never epileptic, but because of this amazing nervous tension I knew 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 particularly.

EMC Yes, inevitably. Saint Teresa of Avila, Saint John of the Cross, all of them. So, my interest in the mystics wasn't abstract, intellectual, it came from my own experiences.

JW But what did you do with the Christian side of them?

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

JW Which religion lends a language to.

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 all the women saints very much.

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

JW But why did you stop loving them?

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

JW You seem hardly to speak at all, though, about atheism.

EMC But I've always been attacked as being 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 Though atheism is perhaps too much a certainty.

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 speak so often of God—it's true for these last twenty years. Each person, obviously, knows extreme states of solitude, where nothing exists anymore, especially at night when one is absolutely alone, thus there is the difficulty of speaking with oneself all the time. So, I've defined God like that, as the partner in moments of extreme solitude. One thinks of God when one can think of nothing else anymore, of no other person. So, 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 Though for many people that question of certainty 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 us who don't believe is that when one doesn't know whom to speak with 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 a lot.

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

JW When did that interest start?

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 Buddhist considers anger as that which most hinders salvation. Well, I'm very irritable, it's stronger than me, I'll get into a fit of anger. 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 also seem to deny the possibility for Westerners to really even be Buddhists.

EMC Absolutely. Because 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 fatalist side comes in, that 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! 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. So, 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 didn't manage to, 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.

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 or, rather, arrogant. Inevitably, in becoming much more lucid one sees how one was undeserving of precisely the image one had of oneself. All my life I've had the feeling of this unworthiness, of having stopped short of what I could 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 having said certain things that can count, not only for oneself but for others. But I should say this, that in everything I've written I never thought of others. I wrote for myself. But "the man I would have liked to be" is not at all who I could have been. What I wanted is to have comprehended things, to have understood, 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, the religion won't disappear overnight. But my idea is this: that Christianity is like a cadaver that drags on, it no longer has any spiritual force. It can try, obviously, but Christianity can't renew itself from within anymore. It has 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. Because it makes up part of his essence.

JW In your books you return quite often to the idea that we cannot cry enough. Where does that come from?

EMC From personal experience. I've suffered, like all melancholics, from a sort of need to cry without being able to. I've experienced that very

often in my life, because the only thing that could liberate you in these states is to cry, and I can't then. It may be neo-Romantic or something, but it's real. It's the need to cry 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 with respect to the whole movement of existentialism and the absurd in France?

EMC Normally I would say I'm quite close to it. It's a way of thinking that is not foreign to me. But, with Sartre all that became a sort of fashionable philosophy, very unpleasant. Sartre was an extremely gifted fellow. He was 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 speak with him much?

EMC No, no. I was right next to him quite often at the Café de Flore, for whole days at a time. I never spoke with 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, for example, 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 nearly sure. I wrote a portrait of him in *A Short History of Decay*, without mentioning his name, called "On an Entrepreneur of Ideas." It was kind of sympathetic in spite of everything. What I would most reproach Sartre for is 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, finally. 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 then, when you stop listening, you fall back into time and wonder, "Well,

what is it? What state was I in?" You 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. Until 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 done, why meet him?

JW Have you ever written while listening to music?

EMC No, but I'm starting to now a little. There are people, for example, Lévi-Strauss writes while listening to music, nearly all his 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 interested in contemporary music a lot. But later I abandoned it for rather specific reasons. I didn't want to meet people anymore, I was tired of society, of receptions, and with that I stopped going to the concerts. But I like the music of Schönberg a lot and his contemporaries. And I know Stockhausen's work. But I'm not a 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?

EMC Yes, *The Trouble with Being Born* and *Syllogismes de l'amertume*, because they are fragments.

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 of man in general there, the destiny of man. That everything we do we end up by being punished for it. If we want to know happiness in life, it's to not do anything, to not accomplish anything, to 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 separated from the whole creation.

JW In the same book there was a line concluding a certain passage that touched me a lot, where you write, "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 we all fail to realize our full potential, and this failure is not only inevitable but desirable.