Chapter Seven

APHORISMS AND PESSIMISMS

1

The Aphoristic Form

> To collect one's thoughts, to polish up certain denuded truths—anyone can manage that, more or less; but the *edge*, without which a pithy shortcut is only a statement, a mere maxim, requires a touch of virtuosity, even of charlatanism.
> —Cioran, *DAQ* 169

THE APHORISM is not dead—but it *is* in danger of being misplaced. Is it not remarkable that aphorisms are not in use more widely? They seem so appropriate for our age, where the average attention span is rapidly diminishing. And yet, in a perverse way, this is probably the reason for their rarity in contemporary Anglophone philosophy. Thinking to fight against the banalization and abbreviation of our culture, philosophers write ever-longer, more serious, more studious tomes—while publishers beg them to write shorter, sexier ones. But while our culture may become truly simple, an aphorism merely appears so. Its gnomic quality has a purpose: it stimulates one to investigate, to *look into* it. To pause. Even to stop dead and look round for a moment. To stop dead: to take oneself out of the stream of life. To look up to the farthest reaches of one's circumstances: to the horizon. As noted previously, "aphorism" is from the Greek *ap-horeizen*, to set a horizon, a boundary, hence to define. A good aphorism sets a new horizon, which forces one to reconsider old ones.

The poet Frank O'Hara once claimed that a poem ought to be the chronicle of the creative act that produced it. While this may or may not hold true of poetry, something parallel to this could be claimed for the best aphorisms. Aphorisms are not epigrams or maxims. These two, which make a virtue of extreme brevity, are an attempt to encapsulate some piece of wisdom in one, two, or at most three sentences. They do not necessarily derive from a single experience and, indeed, are meant to have a broad, if not general, application. An aphorism, on the other hand, is an attempt to communicate to the reader not just the content, but the *experience* of the glance to the horizon, of stepping out of the stream of life, if only for a moment. Though it may be short, it may also be extended,

even to the length of a few pages, but no further. If it has not achieved its purpose by this point, it is a failure and there is no point in going on. The vista will remain the private experience of the writer, unavailable for others to call on.

To my mind, the maximum length of an aphorism is whatever can be written in one sitting. *Written*, not read—for many aphorisms may be taken in at once. An aphorism can be revised, of course, before it is released into the world. It may be improved, simplified, polished; but if it is complicated, if another train of thought is added, even one fully consequential to the first . . . then it is an essay, no matter how short. The reason is, so to speak, phenomenological. Deriving from one glance to the horizon, an aphorism can only contain as much as the eye can take in in a moment. This is more for some than for others, but not very much more. If its essence is not set down in one sitting, usually immediately, then it is lost.

The reader's capacity to take these in, then, depends on many things. Ordinarily, the moment that was so vivid to one is not necessarily so in its reproduction to another. The horizon of the reader and that of the writer do not initially coincide. And aphorisms, self-contained and hermetic in their moment of vision, appear to make little attempt to explain themselves. Hans-Georg Gadamer has suggested that every act of understanding is a result of the "fusing of horizons." That is, two worldviews truly come into contact only when their horizons can be made to connect, when their fundamental terms and categories of meaning can be related to one another. The efforts of both parties (here: writer and reader) are equally important to the success of this task. But even with such efforts, the necessary connection will be rare.

Think of the situation like this: we often wander through a museum—or a collection of aphorisms—taking in, in a few minutes, works that took considerably longer to create until by chance we arrive at the one work that strikes *us* dead, roots us to the spot, lifts us out of our ordinary relationship to the world. Some works do this to no one or almost no one; others only to certain people in certain moods; a few to nearly everyone (everyone at least who is willing to pick up a book or set foot in a museum). Aphorisms are like that.

2

Pessimism and Aphorism

Aphorisms and pessimism are fitted to one another. There can be little doubt that different philosophical orientations are particularly well-suited for certain formats of writing. When Theodor Adorno, in his own apho-

ristic work, wrote that "the presentation of philosophy is not an external matter of indifference to it but immanent to its idea" (1973, 18), he did not express an original idea but a very old one. The seemingly fragmentary form of the collection of aphorisms communicates, ahead of the content, the condition of disorder that pessimism as a whole describes in the world. While each aphorism of course has its own subject, the genre itself contains the perspective that all who use it partake of to some degree—just as Plato's use of the dialogue form communicates something about his outlook, even though Socrates and his companions express a bewildering variety of opinions within that form. Of course, not all aphorists are pessimists nor are all pessimists aphorists—but the constant recourse that pessimists have had to aphoristic writing is a clear indication that philosophical form and content have here a natural comfort with each other.

Plato's early dialogues are often characterized as "aporetic" in that they often fail to come to conclusions about the questions with which the conversation is initiated. But, on another level, the dialogues are often highly successful—Socrates usually succeeds in convincing his interlocutors to abandon their original positions and to join him in his condition of enlightened ignorance. In this sense, the dialogue form communicates the success of communication itself, even as it often documents the failure of inquiry. Plato's characters and readers are (with some exceptions) strengthened by the process of dialogue itself, as they grow to trust and appreciate one another and to gain mutual respect for systematic discussion.

But the aporia that early Platonic dialogues display only at the end is in evidence throughout a collection of aphorisms. This is in part an effect of the discontinuity that occurs between one aphorism and the next. But this also occurs within the individual aphorism when it reproduces the problem of temporality that I have claimed as the core of pessimism. In attempting to set a momentary experience into words, aphorisms attempt to render the transitory permanent. Inevitably they fail, and often comment on this failure. Thus F. H. Bradley, in his own book of aphorisms: "Our life experiences, fixed in aphorisms, stiffen into cold epigram."[1] That the aphorism has failed, in a sense, before it has begun is one of the elements of its pessimistic cast. When Derrida writes that "all writing is aphoristic," it is this quality of an attempt that documents its own failure that he has in mind (1967, 107).[2] From the beginning, the scholarly literature on aphorisms has emphasized their "discontinuous," "contradictory" nature (e.g., Fink 1934, 91). But it is also this experience of contradiction that the pessimistic writers, as we have seen in earlier chapters, have stressed as the constant effect of time-bound existence. The effects of temporality constantly undermine the value of any particular moment. So the attempt to hold on to any instant, even in written form, is futile. And yet if, as Bergson maintained, "discontinuity is thought itself, it is the thinkable in itself," then the documentation of failure that the aphorism produces is simultaneously the most direct and undistorted reflection possible of the time-bound mind (1907, 155).

[1] 1930, 25. Cited in Neumann 1976a, 3.

[2] In what appears to be a lapse by the translator, this sentence is missing in the English edition (Derrida 1978, 71). My attention was first called to this sentence by Lafond 1984, 117. Derrida appears here to be extending the thought of Bergson, quoted below.

The discontinuous form of writing is, from this perspective, the most realistic and even the most honest in its refusal to draw out ideas beyond their moment of appearance. "Who cares tomorrow," Cioran writes, "about an idea we had entertained the day before?—After any night, we are no longer the same, and we cheat when we play out the farce of continuity.—The *fragment*, no doubt a disappointing genre, but the only honest one" (*DAQ* 166). *Extending our thinking across time is false to our temporal experience of thought appearing (and disappearing) in the moment, but even more false to our temporal experience of being.* Not only do we not care about yesterday's thought, but "*we* are no longer the same." Yesterday's thought belonged to someone else; it *was* someone else. Today's is someone different. To draw these two, and many others, together into an artificial narrative is, as Cioran says, to cheat—to create the fictitious identity of a single author in place of the multiplicitous soul that is the origin of a series of contradictory thoughts. A collection of aphorisms therefore, not only documents the process of their creation, but the *variety* of processes and disjunctions that are their source, and the journey that a single body has taken through that variety. Aphoristic writing reveals the internal divisions of the mind, created by the flow of time, rather than pretending to the unity of spirit that Socratic philosophy tortuously urges us to attain.

As a result, rather than emphasizing community and identity, as a dialogue does, aphoristic wisdom tends to separate its reader from his or her self and from the group of which he or she is a part. The ironic and often openly sarcastic aphorisms of the early masters of this form throw a cold light on various common social and political hypocrisies. Indeed, the deflation of currently acclaimed values and habits has long been the particular task of the aphorist, a task for which this genre—brief, witty, frank, and (when successful) trenchant—is particularly well-made. If aphorisms belabor their points, they sound preachy and contrived. If they give up their humor, they sound schoolmarmish. As a group, their very disconnection from one another prevents them from acquiring the aspect of a rival hypocrisy to the one they pester. Yet their antisystematic form can still contain a view of the world that can inform its reader in positive as

well as negative ways. The aphorism stands at the greatest distance from that form of philosophy that attempts to depict a grand order to the universe and in so doing embodies the pessimistic attitude that freedom is to be found only with such distance. So Cioran writes: "Aristotle, Aquinas, Hegel—three enslavers of the mind. The worst form of despotism is the *system*, in philosophy and in everything" (*TBB* 117).

3

Maxims, Fragments, Poems

An extensive literature links the aphorism to the other *formes brèves* that have appeared in philosophy and literature: not only those mentioned above (the maxim and the fragment) but also the reflection, *pensée*, sentence, proverb, adage, remark, and, especially in literary criticism, the prose poem.[3] While this literature is in agreement on some of the obvious formal qualities of the aphorism (e.g., concision, wit, discontinuity), there is, nonetheless, an important debate about the aphorism's origins and essential character. If, on the one hand, we consider the aphorism to be most closely related to the maxim and the adage, then its history would have to be a very long one, starting perhaps with the Bible and at least with certain Greek and Roman authors and continuing through the *Tacitisme* of early modern writers to the *Maximes* of La Rochefoucauld and the other *moralistes* (Fricke 1984, chap. 2; Moret 1997, chap. 1). While some of the historical work done by defenders of this approach is very interesting, it has been hampered by the lack of an image of pessimism with which the aphorism could be connected. Thus, Phillippe Moret's excellent book (*Tradition et Modernité de L'Aphorisme*) acknowledges that there is a noticeable break between the premodern and modern aphorism, where the latter (starting in the eighteenth century) focuses more on the subjectivity of the author and throws into question the truths that the premodern version enunciated (Moret 1997, 393–99). But without a substantive philosophy to connect this change with, his account can only describe it in terms of a stylistic evolution or as a kind of incipient postmodernism. At the other historical extreme, it has been argued that the aphorism is best understood as a largely contemporary phenomenon, either as an expression of Surrealism (Berranger 1988) or postmodernism generally (*TE* 11).[4] But while these critics also have important things to say about twentieth-century philosophy, their framework simply cannot take meaningful account of earlier aphoristic writing, like that of Leopardi or Schopenhauer, which may be antisystematic but is hardly postmodern.

[3] See, e.g., Berranger 1988, Camprubí 1999, Fedler 1992, Fricke 1984, Helmich 1991, Moncelet 1998, Moret 1997, Neumann 1976a and 1976b, Ortemann 1998, and Spicker 1997, in addition to those cited above.

[4] In her introduction to Cioran's *Temptation to Exist*, Susan Sontag wrote: "The starting point for this modern post-philosophic tradition of philosophizing is the awareness that the traditional forms of philosophical discourse have been broken. What remain as leading possibilities are mutilated, incomplete discourse (the aphorism, the note or jotting)."

Closer to the mark, I think, are those commentators who have focused on the romantic concept of the "fragment" as developed by Novalis, the Schlegels, and Goethe (Spicker 1997, Neumann 1976a). Here, at least, the form of writing is tied to a philosophy that is distinctively modern (as opposed to classical or postmodern) and to an idea of subjectivity that explains why aphorisms often feel more like a personal expression of the author, even when they are phrased in highly abstract ways. But the pessimistic aphorism—the writing of those aphorists discussed in previous chapters—remains at some distance, I think, from the romantic fragment. For one thing, the fragmentary character of the fragment is intended as something provisional or temporary—the result of our fallen, temporal condition, but written in the hope that that condition can be cured. The fragment always looks *over* its own horizon, so to speak, to a prospective reunion with an imagined whole. The aphorism, by contrast, marks out boundaries and abides by them, self-contained. While it may lament the lack of sense or meaning in our everyday experiences, it refuses to compensate for that lack with reference to a natural or metaphysical totality. Still, were it not for the existence of important aphorists that predate romanticism, we might think of aphorisms as fragments that have lost their faith in a future completion and become self-subsistent in the present.

The self-containedness of aphorisms, however, can also be misunderstood. While individual aphorisms do not rely, in a direct argumentative way, on those that immediately precede or follow them, it is nonetheless wrong to consider them entirely apart from their presentational context. Aphorisms are almost always presented in a series or collection and their meaning often relies, at least in part, on the sequence of ideas or vistas presented therein, as well as the contradictions between them. Much violence can be done to aphoristic texts by assuming, as Arthur Danto did of Nietzsche, for example, that the individual items can be taken up more or less in any order (Danto 1965, 19). This is one further thing that distinguishes aphorisms from maxims and epigrams. These also often appear in collections, but they are meant to be quoted singly and the order in which they appear in a series may have little significance. That is to say, the discontinuity that a collection of aphorisms presents is not generic—it is not simply the space that appears between any two sentences, words,

or letters. Rather, the author of a collection of aphorisms may intend to guide us from point to point, as the designer of a trail might take us from vista to vista—intending as well that we should do the hard work of covering the distance from one spot to the next.

Aphorisms then, can reproduce for us the stations of a quest. They can, in recreating moments of experience, give us a sense for the path an individual mind has taken, even when that path is a contradictory one. But they can do so only, so to speak, with our consent. If we do not make an effort to reach a point of understanding with the text, it will remain lifeless. "Thoughts reduced to paper," Schopenhauer wrote, "are generally nothing more than the footprints of a man walking in the sand. It is true that we see the path he has taken, but to know what he saw on the way, we must use our own eyes" (*PP* 2:555). Part of that work, surely, involves coming to grips with the "contradictory" nature of the various perspectives that are presented, something only ascribable to the text as a whole, rather than to any single item.

Aphorism has also been considered a literary as well as a philosophical genre, even as a form of poetry (e.g., Fedler 1992, Moncelet 1998, Ortemann 1998). This is instructive because it helps to explain, simultaneously as it were, both what is distinctive about the aphorism and why its practitioners have so often been excluded from the canon of philosophy proper. Aphorisms are not just pieces of wisdom expressed in a sententious manner. They are subjective, but not merely so, not *simply* a report of an experience, like a journal entry. And more than the fragment, they aim at an aesthetic wholeness that reflects a vision of the world or some piece of it. In that sense, they do aspire to a certain kind of poetic achievement and, though they usually lack the sort of formal structure that we associate with poetry, it is not altogether a mistake to view them through such a lens. This, however, has also been a means of discrediting writers like Nietzsche or Cioran. Their writing, it is sometimes claimed, is *merely* literary rather than strictly philosophical. But this criticism mistakes the quest of the pessimistic aphorist to match the form of writing to its subject in the closest way possible for mere aestheticism. If, in taking on the characteristics of vision, subjectivity, discontinuity (and the other various elements discussed), aphoristic pessimism comes to resemble prose poetry, then it is because the time-bound existence that such writing depicts may strike us as poetic when aptly translated into written language. Perhaps this was the point Cioran had in mind when he wrote: "Even more than in the poem, it is in the aphorism that the word is god" (*DAQ* 165). Aphorisms do not aim to be "literary;" if it turns out that their truthfulness strikes us as beautiful, that is more than a coincidence—but other ears will hear their discontinuity as dissonance.

4

Aphorism and Mortality

La Rochefoucauld's most famous work is universally known as *The Maxims*, but that is not its full title. The complete title—*Réflexions ou sentences et maximes morales* —can be taken to mean that what is presented in the book is a miscellany of styles that do not all fit under a single genre.[5] Many of the entries are indeed maxims in the way I have been using the term, but this cannot be said for the famous last entry, which is worth quoting at some length.

> I want to speak about this contempt for death that the pagans boast of deriving from their own strength, without the hope of a better life. There is a difference between steadfastly enduring death and having contempt for it. The first is quite ordinary, but I believe that the other is never sincere. Yet, so much has been written in the attempt to persuade us that death is no evil; and the weakest men, as well as the heroes, have provided a thousand famous examples to establish this opinion. However, I doubt that anybody with good sense ever believed it; and the difficulty in persuading others and oneself of it shows well-enough that this undertaking is not easy. One can have various objects of disgust in life, but one is never right to have contempt for death. Those very people who willingly give themselves to death do not count it as so little a thing, and, when it comes to them by a way other than the one they have chosen, they are frightened by it and reject it like others do. The inequality that we notice in the courage of an infinite number of valiant men comes from death's revealing itself differently to their imaginations, and appearing there more vividly at one time than at another. Thus it happens that after having had contempt for what they do not know, they finally fear what they do know. It is necessary to avoid imagining it in all of

[5] It is hard to judge the degree of variety La Rochefoucauld intends by the title since the word "*morales*" could either be taken to modify one, two, or (perhaps) even three of the substantives, with very different effects, e.g., *Reflections or Moral Aphorisms and Maxims*, or *Reflections or Aphorisms and Moral Maxims*. I translate "*sentence*" here as "aphorism" since the English "sentence" is the equivalent of the French "*phrase*;" "*sentence*" in French refers to a pithy saying and could also be translated as "maxim" were that not redundant here—and since La Rochefoucauld obviously means to indicate something *other* than maxims. (In a prefacing note to the first edition, he refers to the book in an abbreviated way as *Réflexions ou Maximes morales*; in a note to the fifth edition, he calls it simply *Réflexions morales*—however, in both of these notes, La Rochefoucauld writes in the voice of the publisher, rather than the author, and it is hard to know how much weight to give these abbreviations of the full title, which, after all, he devised.) Warner's introduction to the text contains a discussion of some of these issues (La Rochefoucauld 2001, vii–xvi).

its particulars if one does not want to believe that it is the greatest of all evils. The most clever and the most brave are those who find more honest pretexts to prevent themselves from considering it. But any man who knows how to see it as it is finds that it is a dreadful thing. The necessity of dying caused all the constancy of philosophers. They believed that one had to go with good grace where one could not prevent oneself from going; and, unable to make their lives eternal, there was nothing they did not do to make their reputations eternal, and to save from the shipwreck that which cannot be guaranteed. Let us content ourselves in order to bear it well, not to tell ourselves all we think about it; and let us hope for more from our temperament than from that weak reasoning which makes us believe that we can approach death with indifference. The glory of dying with resolve, the hope of being regretted, the desire to leave a fine reputation, the assurance of being freed from the miseries of life, and not having to depend anymore on the caprices of fortune, are remedies that one should not cast away. But one should also not believe that these remedies are infallible. . . . We flatter ourselves when we believe that death appears to be from close-up what we judged it to be from afar, and that our sentiments, which are only weaknesses, are of a steely enough quality not to suffer a blow from the roughest of all trials. It is also to know badly the effects of vanity (*l'amour-propre*), to think that it can help us to consider as nothing that which must necessarily destroy it; and reason, in which one believes one finds so many resources, is too weak in this encounter to persuade us of what we want. On the contrary, it is reason which betrays us most often, and, which, instead of inspiring us with the contempt for death, helps us discover what is frightful and terrible to it. All reason can do for us is to advise us to turn our eyes away from death in order to have them rest upon other objects. (La Rochefoucauld 2001, 93–94; translation modified)

This entry (about 75 percent of it is reproduced here) is too long to be a maxim, too structured to be a fragment, too self-contained to be an essay—and too perfect to be a mistake. If it is a "reflection," it is not simply a personal observation but one meant to be instructive for many readers. For La Rochefoucauld it is unusual in its length and emotional depth but it presages the aphoristic style later used by Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and Cioran, among others. Perhaps this is the first pessimistic aphorism. It comprises so many pessimistic themes: the power of the glance to the horizon and the desire to avoid it, the omnipresence of death and its effect on life and philosophy, the weakness of reason and the palliative effect of illusion.

Coming at the end of the book (and its placement can hardly be an accident), this entry marks the final boundary, as it were, of La Rochefoucauld's vision. By the combination of placement and subject matter it calls

attention to the fact that death is the ultimate and common horizon for all human beings. And La Rochefoucauld begins by disputing what he takes to be the classical assertion that we can look past this horizon—"one is never right" to believe that, he says. We can, and perhaps should, distract ourselves from it—but this presupposes that this vision is one that we all share. However little La Rochefoucauld's readers may have noticed the discontinuities present at other points (and which his style calls attention to), death (and the end of the book) are discontinuities they cannot ignore. In this aphorism, La Rochefoucauld comes to the end of his thoughts in every way, and contemplates that end.

At the same time, the passage notes that the experience of this vision is distinct and individual for every person, a result of "death's revealing itself differently to their imaginations, appearing there more vividly at one time than at another." Thus, even as he insists that our vision has a common object, which we can never fully avoid, he acknowledges that the problem it poses for us is individuated, and therefore our response to it must be similarly so. This leads him to criticize the "constancy" of the philosophers who, like the pagans it seems, tried to avoid the total destructiveness of death by eternalizing, as it were, some piece of themselves. But neither pagan pride nor philosophical reason, he believes, are appropriate responses. He suggests instead, in a manner very much like Leopardi's "Dialogue of Plotinus and Porphyry" (see chapter 2), that after confronting death, we allow ourselves to be distracted from it, whether by something great or small, it makes little difference. The most appropriate thing would be to maintain an internal division, "not to tell ourselves all we think about it," which sounds almost nonsensical unless we recall that internal discontinuity of thought is one of the things that the aphorism means to document and reproduce.

La Rochefoucauld's final entry thus contains, in the largest sense, the experience of looking at the ultimate horizon. It includes both the initial reaction of terror, but then also the effects of that fear on the mind, and the response that the mind can make to those effects—the digestion, as it were, of the initial vision. In surveying the possible reactions one can have, it is instructive without being prescriptive. If it is "moral," it is not so in any traditional sense, since it rejects the classical, Christian, and rationalist responses to death. Either La Rochefoucauld intends this reflection to be something other than moral, or its moral reflectiveness consists in the fact that it concerns a burden that every human must bear by dint of their common mortality and that it acknowledges the force of this mortality more directly than any of the other moral systems elaborated to date. While La Rochefoucauld's work antedates the emergence of pessimism as a fully developed style of thought, it is still fair to say that what is written here anticipates, in both form and content, the pessimistic ethic

that was soon to appear in more detail in other writers. It is a confrontation with death and temporality that leads to a prescription for life issued not as a universal command but as an interpretation of a common experience.

The pessimistic aphorism confronts us with an unavoidable horizon. Such a limit on our thought is not a problem that admits of a solution, but an ontological circumstance of politics, large or small, that must be attended to. Collections of aphorisms are prone to misinterpretation because they are full of gaps; they invite us to project a structure of meaning onto their silences, as a distant horizon seems to call for something to fill the space between itself and the viewer. For the most part, this creative activity is what aphorisms, by raising our sight to a far boundary, are meant to stimulate. But sometimes, as La Rochefoucauld suggests here, we measure the distance to a horizon as a preliminary to turning away from it.

5

Aphorism and Irony

A tone of cool irony is a further element of the pessimistic aphorism, not universal but at least widespread (more so than in the maxim or the fragment). A concept is introduced as a truism, only to be revealed as a local prejudice. An author begins by using a word in a way that seems conventional, but then ends by giving it nearly the opposite sense. I have emphasized in the preceding chapters how the pessimists often trade on historical irony. The seeming progress of our civilization, to them, conceals a process that contradicts, and perhaps even cancels, this trajectory. But the irony of the aphoristic voice has different, if parallel, aims. Externally, one might say, it reflects the absurdity of existence that pessimism constantly points to. Internally, it reflects the antidogmatic approach to theorizing that pessimism attempts to exemplify.

A form of writing is not antisystematic just because it appears in short dollops, as Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* gives ample evidence. Nor is the antidogmatism in question here simply a matter of self-undermining, of appending an "I doubt it" to every paragraph. Rather, the irony in pessimistic aphorisms is an attempt to bridge the gulf between the absurdity of events as we experience them and the model of meaning embedded in our ordinary grammar. From Rousseau forward, it is a common theme of the pessimists (though of course hardly exclusive to them) that the structure of our language encourages us to filter our experiences through a lens of temporal causality that in turn creates a perception of a greater order to events than is actually the case. To undo this effect without resorting,

on the one hand, to gibberish, or on the other, to a mere gesture-of-incommunicability requires a form of writing that allows the substance of an insight to appear while resisting its tendency to become a dogma or a counterdogma. This is what pessimistic irony, combined with the other elements of the aphoristic form, attempts to accomplish.

Cioran gives an example of this in his attempt to look to the limit of our historical experience per se, to a period he calls "posthistory":

> No more schools; on the other hand, courses in oblivion and unlearning to celebrate the virtues of inattention and the delights of amnesia. The disgust inspired by the sight of any book, frivolous or serious, will extend to all Knowledge, which will be referred to with embarrassment or dread as if it were an obscenity or a scourge. To bother with philosophy, to elaborate a system, to attach oneself to it and believe in it, will appear as an impiety, a provocation, and a betrayal, a criminal complicity with the past. . . . Each will try to model himself upon the vegetable world, to the detriment of the animals, which will be blamed for suggesting, in certain aspects, the figure or the exploits of man. (*DAQ* 59)

Here Cioran imagines an historical irony as large as history itself. The result of our learning will be to despise learning; the result of our civilization will be to despise civilization. Humanity will attempt to close the circle with the vegetative life. But the irony here is not merely historical. Cioran's tone suggests that he is not merely reporting on the future but offering a wry comment on the present and its obsessive Socratic faith in the power of knowledge to cure all ills.

And then, in a move characteristic of Cioran but also of many other pessimistic writers, he turns on his own conclusion:

> How are we to believe that [humanity] would not weary of bliss or that it would escape the lure of disaster, the temptation of playing, it too, a role? Boredom in the midst of paradise generated our first ancestor's appetite for the abyss which has won us the procession of centuries whose end we now have in view. That appetite, a veritable nostalgia for hell, would not fail to ravage the race following us and to make it the worthy heir of our misfortunes. Let us then renounce all prophecies. (*DAQ* 60)

Extreme as Cioran's initial vision is, it leads him, in a manner that feels inexorable, to consider the opposite. Having witnessed the end of history, he imagines, we will, in the next moment, witness its rebirth. Desires give birth to their opposites in a pattern that follows an ironic, rather than a causal, logic. The aphorism ends by renouncing the power of prophecy that it appeared, at first, to embody.

These embedded ironies, far from diminishing or canceling the stuff of Cioran's philosophy, in fact have the effect of generating the substance of