Chapter Four

"CONSCIOUSNESS IS A DISEASE"

EXISTENTIAL PESSIMISM IN CAMUS, UNAMUNO, AND CIORAN

If there are happy people on this earth,
why don't they come out and shout with joy,
proclaim their happiness in the streets?
Why so much discretion and restraint?
—E. M. CIORAN

IN the twentieth century, pessimism has been the philosophy that dares not speak its name. Although the writers I will discuss here—Albert Camus, Miguel de Unamuno, and E. M. Cioran—often went out of their way to defend the idea of pessimism,[1] they did not always adopt this label for themselves, or not with any consistency. My concern, however, is not with their practices of self-identification. Each of these writers, in fact, tried to disassociate themselves from *all* affiliations and often presented themselves as writers "without party." Thus Camus frequently rejected the tag of "existentialist" with which he was (and is) often associated. Cioran, a Romanian who lived in France from the late 1930s onward, remarked that his situation of exile was "the best possible status for an intellectual" (*FT* 185).[2] Unamuno was forcibly exiled from Spain by a military government and later removed from his university position by *both* the republicans and the fascists. Yet it is right to name these authors pessimists because they are, among others, the inheritors and perpetuators of the tradition of thought that I have outlined in the previous chapters. Their philosophy issues from, and focuses on, the problematic of linear time that has preoccupied pessimists since Rousseau.

Unlike the metaphysical pessimists, however, Camus, Unamuno, and Cioran all avoided the grand structural approach that characterizes the philosophies of Schopenhauer and Freud. This reflects, in large part, the common influence of Nietzsche, who discredited that style of thinking for many in the last decades of the nineteenth century.[3] Instead, the "existential pessimists," as I am calling them, reconstitute the issues that preoccupied earlier pessimists (the burden of temporality, the dearth of happiness, the futility of striving, boredom, and many others) by focusing on the life-conditions of the modern individual. One way to put this difference might be to say that while, for the earliest pessimists, time was inflected as history, and later as metaphysic, for the pessimists of this generation it is inflected as narrative. By "narrative," I here mean to indicate an ontological fabric of political and social life that is more than a psychological state and less than an historical destiny. It is in this sense that I think the adjective "existential" is appropriate—not to indicate an affiliation with Sartre or Heidegger—but to mark the level of explanation at which they aim.

Like Leopardi, Unamuno and Cioran are less familiar to English-speaking audiences today, but important figures in their own national litera-

[1] See, e.g., Cioran *DAQ* 133; Camus *RRD* 57; Unamuno *TSL* 144.

[2] It has now been well-established that, in the 1930s, Cioran was a sort of fellow traveler with the protofascist political movement in Romania that became the Iron Guard. His 1937 work *The Transfiguration of Romania* (written in Romanian and still untranslated) is full of nationalist sentiment and antisemitic cliches (based, in some sense, on a self-disgust at the backwardness of Romanian society). Alexandra Laignel-Lavastine, in her book documenting this (2002, chap. 4) and to which I am indebted for this information, compares his political writings in this period, not unfairly, to those of such "revolutionary conservatives" as Ernst Jünger—both had no use for the "old" politics of the church or the aristocracy, but nonetheless sought a "modernized" society that would be highly unified in purpose and devoted to national ends. Laignel-Lavastine also demonstrates that, in his later French career, Cioran obscured, rather than acknowledged, his earlier political associations (chaps. 9, 10). He rarely mentioned the Humboldt fellowship that took him to Germany in the early 1930s, and *Transfiguration*, unlike some of his other early works, was never translated into French or any other language.

While this research must cause us to tread carefully with Cioran's texts, it also seems clear that his philosophy, like that of many in his generation, underwent some kind of transformation (e.g., from 1956, "A fatherland . . . is a moment-by-moment soporific. One cannot sufficiently envy—or pity—the Jews for not having one"), which left him embarrassed by his earlier position (*TE* 106). If anything, the result of Cioran's political involvement seems to have been to push him to the other extreme such that he embraced a radical individualism typified by the condition of exile. "A whole period of my life seems scarcely imaginable to me today, so alien to me has it become. How could I have been the man I was? My old enthusiasms seem ridiculous to me" (*DAQ* 156–57). As with Heidegger, then, one cannot ignore the potential political implications (or the occasional elements of self-pity) of the work (less frequent than Heidegger's but still present); however, looking at Cioran's texts from the 1940s forward, even with a skeptical eye, it would seem very difficult to me to derive a fascist politics from them. Laignel-Lavastine, focusing on Cioran's career rather than the substance of his work, seems disinclined to acknowledge this, but offers no real argument or evidence against this conclusion. For a more balanced approach, see Parfait 2001.

[3] I realize there is some awkwardness here in that I am postponing a detailed discussion of Nietzsche's philosophy to a later chapter. As I have said repeatedly, however, it is not the goal of this book to trace a history of the influence of some pessimistic writers on others, although such a work could surely be done. In any case, my point here does not rely on the details of Nietzsche's pessimism, which I discuss in chapter 5, but on his effect as an antimetaphysical philosopher, which is widely acknowledged.

tures and in European discussions more generally. Unamuno, at least, was well-known for a period as a leading member of the Spanish "Generation of '98"—those stimulated to develop a new political model for Spain in the wake of the disastrous defeat in the Spanish-American War. His work of 1913, *The Tragic Sense of Life in Men and Nations*, was quickly translated into many languages and made him an international figure. Cioran, in fact, was under Unamuno's inspiration in originally planning to study in Spain before the Civil War in 1936 prevented it. While I will not be tracing out the influence of these three writers on one another, it should at least be noted, then, that Unamuno, a generation older than the other two, was well-known to both. While Cioran (b. 1911) and Camus (b. 1913) were near-contemporaries, Cioran only published his first work in French (*Précis de Décomposition*, translated as *A Short History of Decay*) in 1949, when Camus was already an international figure.[4] In recent decades, however, Cioran's many books, including those written in Romania in the 1930s, have been translated into English and many European languages and a substantial secondary literature has grown up around him, one that often puts him in Camus' company.[5]

Yet, again like Leopardi, Unamuno and Cioran are figures whose importance to political theory has been unseen or forgotten, largely, I would claim, on account of their pessimism. This is in part a problem of intellectual reference: when the pessimistic tradition itself is invisible, it is difficult to characterize their arguments or understand what questions they are asking and answering. The preceding chapters, I hope, will have given the background necessary to see both the seriousness and the originality of their work. The problem of reference, however, also extends to matters of style: Cioran's writing is largely composed of aphorisms. Even his essays (like Unamuno's), are aphoristic—they sometimes seem to consist of

[4] Camus' last major theoretical work, *The Rebel*, was published in 1951, so it is hard to imagine Cioran's book having much impact. The two men knew each other but did not have a good relationship: according to Cioran's biographer, the Romanian felt snubbed by Camus' initial rejection of his work in his capacity as an editor at Gallimard (which went on to publish all of Cioran's books). What notice Camus took of Cioran's work as the latter's reputation grew in the 1950s is hard to say (Camus died in 1960). Cioran makes almost no direct reference whatsoever to any living writers in his own work, so it is equally difficult to gauge Camus' effect on him. (I thank Prof. Ilinca Zarifopol-Johnston for private communication regarding the Camus-Cioran relationship.) One should also note their connection through the Romanian-French playwright Eugène Ionesco, who was Cioran's old friend and Camus' fellow contributor to the "theatre of the absurd."

[5] E.g., Cahn 1998, Jarrety 1999. Jarrety's book, *La morale dans l'écriture*, usefully aligns Camus and Cioran, comparing both to the French *moralistes* of the eighteenth century. He also describes their common efforts to fashion an art of living, however different in practice those arts may be. Like many writers, however, Jarrety mistakenly equates pessimism with nihilism and, thus, is quick to insist that the authors he examines are neither (16ff.).

a series of emphatic declarations rather than the various stages of an argument. As a result, both writers are sometimes praised as vivid stylists or "moralists," without considering that their style or morals are deeply related to a unified philosophy. In chapter 7, I will consider in more depth the link between pessimism and the aphorism, a relationship that begins, perhaps, with Leopardi and continues through Schopenhauer and Nietzsche. At this stage, all I would suggest is that ideas about the proper form of philosophy are more linked to the substantive content of it than we sometimes care to admit. It is therefore one of my contentions that learning to appreciate the pessimistic perspective and learning to appreciate the aphoristic style, while not identical endeavors, are closely allied—just as understanding Plato cannot by fully separated from feeling the effects of the dialogic form. The dismissal of pessimism has, in some sense, been the product of a vicious cycle where misunderstanding of the content leads to incomprehension of the form and vice versa. Placing Unamuno and Cioran within the pessimistic context can thus also lead to a revaluation of the form of writing that they chose to employ.

It is therefore worthwhile to note (without getting into the details of influence-tracing) that each of these writers, often depicted as iconoclasts, were very conscious of being members of a tradition. Indeed, at times this tradition seems so substantial to them that they curtail or telescope discussions of certain points because they fear being repetitive. Camus refers to it as the tradition of "humiliated thought" and he begins his survey of it in the *Myth of Sisyphus* with the observation that the critique of rationalist optimism that he is about to make "has been made so often that it seems unnecessary to begin again" (*MS* 22). Likewise Unamuno, who begins *The Tragic Sense of Life* by describing how personality is intimately connected to "continuity in time" cuts short his discussion with the observation that "I know very well that all this is sheer platitude" (*TSL* 12). Cioran, who is most candid about his influences in his early work, writes, "The more I read the pessimists, the more I love life. After reading Schopenhauer, I always feel like a bridegroom on his wedding night" (*OHD* 101).[6] In each case, the tradition that we have called "pessimism" appears to them as a living one to which they are indebted and to which they react.

If they hesitate to embrace the label for themselves, it seems to be largely because the psychological or dispositional use of the term "pessimism" has already begun to overwhelm the older meaning in everyday language; they fear how they will be perceived if they adopt the term. Thus Cioran, who in his first book refers to his own "somber pessimism," argues explicitly that "it is wrong to surmise that a pessimist has an organic deficiency or weak vital instincts" (*OHD* 110, 122). Unamuno complains

[6] Not, one must admit, the most common reaction.

that the terms "optimism" and "pessimism" "often come to mean the opposite of what their user intends," while tacitly allowing that his fundamental views are pessimistic (*TSL* 144). Camus' remark that it was "puerile" to believe that "a pessimistic philosophy is necessarily one of discouragement" comes in an article where he complains that the idea of pessimism is being used as a simplistic *reductio* that equates non-optimistic perspectives with submissiveness and Naziism (*RRD* 57–60). His heart, it appears, is with the pessimists even if, as I mentioned earlier, he disdained to be grouped with anyone. In all of these authors' rhetorical declarations we see no rejection of pessimistic ideas, but rather a simple (and well-founded) concern that allowing themselves to be labeled "pessimistic" will result in misunderstanding.

Furthermore, each writer is vehement in rejecting the historical optimism that they see as prevalent in their times. This is particularly Camus' theme in *The Rebel*, concerned as he is there with refuting the historical Hegelianism and Marxism that he takes as the dominant intellectual force in postwar France.[7] Unamuno and Cioran are, as we shall see, more concerned with the general modern theme of progress, as much in its liberal as in its Marxist variety. Not only do they doubt the claims of progress made to this point in time, however—their main concern is that the *telos* of progress has become an idol, and is used to justify violence and a loss of freedom in the present. When we become captive to historical thinking, they argue, we forget how to live in the here and now.

If each of these writers is well-ensconced within the pessimistic tradition, they nonetheless, as with the figures examined in the previous chapters, embody different responses to it. Cioran is the most misanthropic. While not seeking to eradicate the spirit to quite the same degree as, say, Schopenhauer, he does suggest a detachment from life in all but its most minimal respects. Like Rousseau and Schopenhauer, he repeatedly contrasts animal happiness with human misery and if he, in the last judgment, tepidly embraces the latter, it is only because he feels he has little choice in the matter, since he refuses as unreal all the metaphysical, mystical, or transcendent alternatives he can conceive of. Unamuno and Camus, on the other hand, while agreeing with Cioran on the prevalence of unhappiness, both embrace more heartily the life offered to us under the pessimistic diagnosis. Decades before the current interest in agonal politics, they both spoke of "contradiction," "conflict," and even "agony" as fundamental conditions of political life (and life in general) that could nonetheless be affirmed and, even, occasionally, enjoyed. "Battle," Unamuno wrote, "is a form of association" (*TSL* 124).

What is more, while pessimism remained for them primarily a personal

[7] This point is especially well-made in Isaac 1992, chap. 3.

ethic, both Unamuno and Camus clearly saw it as authorizing and encouraging political participation. Indeed, both men were in their lives directly and extensively occupied with public debates and politics. This behavior runs counter to the common conception of pessimism as issuing in political detachment. I do not, by this statement, mean to say that their philosophy is somehow validated by their personal behavior. (I do not examine their political lives here in any detail.) I only mean to indicate that their philosophical interpretation of pessimism pointed toward an engagement with, rather than a retreat from, politics. That they then acted on that conclusion speaks only to their personal integrity, which was, of course, enormous. Nonetheless, it certainly *ought* to disturb the ordinary interpretation of pessimism to realize that two of the most active, politically engaged intellectuals of the twentieth century fall within its ranks.

On this point, there is one fascinating parallel between Cioran and Camus that I will give some attention to in what follows. In describing Cioran's philosophy as one of detachment and Camus' as one of engagement, as I did in the previous paragraph, I am speaking of their mature, post–World War II positions, the one expressed in Cioran's French-language books and in Camus' *The Rebel*. Yet for both men these works represented something of a change from their prewar stances. Though each had a pessimistic outlook before the war, Cioran's Romanian books suggest an "ecstatic" interpretation of it that he later went to pains to disparage. And Camus' *Myth of Sisyphus*, written in 1940, before the invasion of France, is almost entirely focused on the individual with little attention given to political questions. While both men then endured World War II as noncombatants in France, and primarily Paris,[8] this common experience seems nonetheless to have driven them in entirely opposite directions. Camus emerged as a critic of solipsism and an advocate of participation (though, as we shall see, of a special kind) while Cioran abandoned the political sphere entirely.[9] While this was not, in either case,

[8] Camus, of course, was a participant in events as a member of the Resistance and editor of the underground newspaper *Combat*. Cioran was briefly attached to the Romanian diplomatic legation in Paris, but was quickly dismissed and never again in his life held a regular job, surviving as a free-lance writer and translator.

[9] Camus explains this shift with the claim that his first book was written in "the age of negation" while his second is written in "the age of ideologies" (*R* 4), but, of course, the two books were written only ten years apart, separated by the war. Camus makes no real attempt to defend these historical characterizations, which, in any case, seem arbitrary—one could just as easily argue for reversing them. Cioran had less to explain to his French-language audience since they, initially, had no access to his Romanian books. Because, as I have noted, he was, at a minimum, embarrassed by some of this work, he made almost no reference to it apart from the occasional "follies-of-youth" remark. It was only late in his career that several of the Romanian books were translated into French and English and he began to address his past in interviews.

an absolute reversal of their previous positions, it was a significant swerve and it emphasizes for us the political stakes involved in questions of pessimism.

Time, Consciousness, and the Absurd

The term "absurd" is by now indelibly associated with Camus and, to a lesser extent, with the other French philosophers and dramatists of the mid-twentieth century commonly referred to as "existentialists." Camus made the absurd character of existence the lynchpin of his analysis of the human condition in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, and it continues to play a central role in the more fully developed theory that appears in *The Rebel*. But his pithy formulations of the concept can sometimes create the impression that it is largely a matter of juvenile angst or personal alienation: "The absurd is born of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world" (*MS* 28). While Camus was clearly intrigued by Heidegger and Kierkegaard (writers whose relationship to pessimism needs further exploration), however, the concept of the absurd can be best understood as Camus' interpretation of the problem posed by earlier generations of pessimists.

This connection will perhaps be clearer if we consider first the intervening and important figure of Unamuno. Like the earlier pessimists, Unamuno focuses on the price that man has paid for becoming a conscious animal. He emphasizes, as did Rousseau, both how consciousness distorts animal health and happiness and how it catapults man into a state of self-reflectiveness:

> There is something which, for want of a better name, we shall the call the tragic sense of life, and it carries along with it an entire conception of the Universe and of life itself . . . man, because he is man, because he possesses consciousness, is already in comparison to the jackass or the crab, a sick animal. Consciousness is a disease. (*TSL* 21–22)

> A real disease, and a tragic one, is the one that arouses in us the appetite to know for the sole pleasure of knowing, the delight of tasting the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. . . . [Animals have knowledge but] what distinguishes us from them is reflective knowing, the knowledge of knowing itself. (*TSL* 25–26)

Consciousness is thus identified as the central feature of human (as opposed to animal) being and identified as the ability to mirror ourselves. But this same fruit, which teaches us to reflect, because it also allows us access to the temporal realm is laced with the poisonous knowledge of the

vanity of existence. That is why Unamuno calls consciousness, powerful though it is, a disease: "Everything passes! That is the refrain . . . of all who have savored the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil" (*TSL* 45).

If, for Unamuno, the problem is more directly existential than for the previous pessimists, this is because for him time is the source, both of human desire, and of that which thwarts it. For Rousseau and Schopenhauer, it was the constant dissolution of the objects of our desire (material, social, sexual, et cetera) that produced frustration. For Unamuno, our ultimate goal is immortality, which we can only come to grasp within the sphere of temporality; our ultimate enemy, which enters our imagination simultaneously, is death. Unamuno's analysis is parallel to that of Schopenhauer in making temporality, as it were, a condition of knowledge. But while for Schopenhauer, temporality is a cognitive structure, for Unamuno it is the existential condition that temporality engenders that is key: "The longing not to die, the hunger for personal immortality, the striving to persevere indefinitely in our own being, . . . constitutes the affective basis of all knowledge" (*TSL* 42). In addition Unamuno understands this "condition" in an individual way—time is not just the basis of cognition, but also, as Rousseau argued, of memory, personality, and whatever constitutes our distinct existence: "And that which determines a man, that which makes him a certain man, one man and not another, . . . is a principle of unity and a principle of continuity. . . . Memory is the basis of individual personality" (*TSL* 11–12). The human individuality that temporality makes possible is, for Unamuno, haunted from the start by this tragic conflict between immortality and death.

It is at this point in the analysis that Unamuno announces that this position is "sheer platitude." The centrality of temporal questions is not just something he takes for granted, but he also expects his audience to be satisfied with a relatively cursory account of them. And, in a certain sense of course, it is not very controversial to claim that human consciousness has a temporal element that that of animals lacks. But, like the other pessimists, both before and after him, Unamuno believes that we do not focus sufficient attention on the implications of this fact.

Human beings are caught, then, between the desire for permanence and the knowledge of decay and death, both equally the product of temporal consciousness. Unamuno tends to refer to this as the conflict between "reason" and "life." "Reason," to him, is shorthand for the reflective consciousness of the human mind: "Reason, what we call reason, reflex and reflective knowledge, [is] the distinguishing mark of man" (*TSL* 29). But reason, once activated, cannot be forced to serve the impulse toward life that is born its twin. Indeed, reason is ultimately compelled to oppose the hunger for immortality, just because the latter is irrational. Whatever else

we learn, through the employ of reason, we learn first of all of our own mortality. Here Unamuno follows the other pessimists: through reason, humans have foreknowledge of death, rather than the animal's instinctive aversion to it. This knowledge poisons our every attempt to give our lives immortal meanings by "rationalizing life and forcing it to submit to the inevitable, to mortality" (*TSL* 127–28).

But the image of death is, for Unamuno, as much a symbolic problem as a direct one. Death threatens our individuality, but only at the end of our life. Reason, however, in its capacity to generalize, also threatens our personal distinctiveness, not just at a later time, but at every moment:

> Reason confronts our longing for personal immortality and contradicts us. And the truth is that reason is the enemy of life. Intelligence is a dreadful matter. It tends toward death in the way that memory tends toward stability. That which lives, that which is absolutely unstable, absolutely individual, is, strictly speaking, unintelligible. *Logic tends to reduce everything to identities and genera, . . . But nothing is the same for two successive moments of its being.* . . . Identity, which is death, is precisely what the intellect seeks. The mind seeks what is dead, for the living escapes it. . . . Everything vital is irrational, and everything rational is anti-vital. (*TSL* 100–101; emphasis added; cf. 39)

Unamuno's point here is more subtle then, perhaps, the last line makes it appear. Reason, as reflection in time, allows us to form a continuous sense of ourselves by comparing one state of ourselves to others, both future and past. Being embedded in time means that we, like all creatures, are in a process of continuous flux and change—but reason can only perceive this change, as it were, in a negative fashion. In order to constitute a continuous identity within an ever-changing being, reason must identify that which remains the same within the flow of becoming. But to do so means to discount as inessential that which changes. If reason did not focus on the "genera," then consciousness would erase itself—there would be no self with "continuity in time"; this is the animal condition. The ability to perceive the genera as genera (that is, to hold identity constant over time) is just what consciousness is. But to Unamuno, this means that what is genuinely individual and alive is "strictly speaking, unintelligible." The only being that ceases to change is one that is dead. The "death" that truly concerns Unamuno, then, is not the one at the end of our lives but the death-in-life that consciousness creates at every moment. So reason and life, rationality and vitality, are housed together unhappily in one body, perpetual antagonists, both owing their existence to time-consciousness.

The human being as a house divided: this is for Unamuno the primary condition in which we find ourselves. We are trapped between reason and life, between heaven and earth. *And we must remain so.* To escape entirely

to either side would make life unbearable. If we could truly give up the hunger for immortality, we would lose the will to live. Reason alone cannot provide one. Hence, "The vital consequence of rationalism would be suicide" (*TSL* 128) If, on the other hand, we gave ourselves over entirely to faith in immortality, we would lose our humanity: "faith—life—can sustain itself only by depending upon reason, which will make it transmissible—transmissible, especially, from me to myself; that is, reflective and conscious" (*TSL* 125).[10] Pure faith would be too akin to an animal's instincts: unwavering, unquestioned—and thus unreflective, inhuman, and pathetic. What separates the will to life from the instinct for self-preservation is precisely the former's reflective character. Animals do not commit suicide, but neither do they keep their dead. To return to this condition would be to give up our human distinctiveness. Though some people, of extraordinary shallowness, may follow this route, it cannot be seriously recommended.[11]

Fortunately, humans rarely achieve either form of certainty. For both the most committed rationalist and the most committed believer, "A muffled voice, the voice of uncertainty, murmurs in his spirit's ear: 'Who knows?' . . . How, without this uncertainty, could we ever live?" (*TSL* 131). The tragedy lies, then, not particularly in the conflict between reason and life, but in the irremediability and violence of that conflict, which Unamuno calls "warfare" (*TSL* 118):

> Some reader may see a basic contradiction in everything I am saying, as I long on the one hand for unending life, and on the other hand claim that this life is devoid of the value assigned it. A contradiction? I should say so! The contradiction between my heart which says *Yes*, and my head which says *No*! Naturally there is a contradiction. . . . Since we live solely from and by contradictions, since life is tragedy and the tragedy is in the perpetual struggle without hope or victory, then it is all a contradiction. (*TSL* 17)

[10] It should be said here that Unamuno thought the desire for immortality was also the source for all religious feeling and that his own philosophy had a complicated relationship to Catholicism. I will not discuss his religious views here (he was raised Catholic but is said to have had a crisis of faith in the 1890s), but one can only describe them as extremely eclectic and complicated. He believed himself to be a kind of Catholic but it would be difficult, I imagine, to find any church authority that would agree. His writing, though, did have an influence on such tragic Catholics as Graham Greene, whose novel, *Monsignor Quijote*, could almost be seen as a tribute to Unamuno.

[11] "And as regards today, all these wretches are quite satisfied merely because they exist today, and for them it is enough to exist. Existence, pure and naked existence, fills up their entire soul. . . . But, do they exist? Do they really exist? I think not. For if they existed, if they really existed, they would suffer from existing and they would not be content with it. If they truly existed in time and space, they would suffer from not existing in eternity and infinity." (*OLDQ* 11)

No truce between the two forces may be called. We can ignore neither our presentiment of death, nor our desire for immortality, nor the conflict between them. But, as the passage above implies—"we live solely from and by contradictions"—this condition is not only a source of pain. In the next section we will trace the way in which Unamuno, along with other existential pessimists, makes this contradiction into a basis for activity.

It deserves emphasis, however, that, as with the earlier pessimists, this conflict must be understood as a product of time and, more specifically, as something that appears with particular force within modern, linear time. Mortality, in the sense Unamuno means it—the final and complete end to one's existence—is not the same issue in the context of circular time, in which everything recurs in one form or another. Not that a circular notion frees us from the fear of death, of course; but to fear death *as* that which puts a permanent end to one's existence in every sense requires a simultaneous belief that nothing recurs, that there are no cycles of existence, only a straight, unbroken path. Whatever truth there is in Unamuno's contention that the fear of death is universal, it should be clear that this fear is intensified by the emergence of linear time.

A parallel point can be made about the desire for immortality. Though Unamuno deems it something inalterably human, this drive makes little sense without modern ideas of temporality. A certain kind of permanence, after all, is already promised to those whose notion of time is circular; to have immortality as a *goal* of human life (as something we might or might not achieve) only becomes possible when life is subjected to linear time. To say that humans strive for immortality is to say they fear they do not naturally possess it. The fear and the desire are only intelligible within linear time.

The idea of a contradiction, deeply felt within the individual and framed by time, is the kernel of existential pessimism that Cioran and Camus share with Unamuno. What to Unamuno is the *tragic sense of life* is, to Cioran and Camus, each using the term independently of the other, the *absurd*. Both are preoccupied with the problem of suicide, each judging it to be a central issue and a special danger. The degree of interest in suicide (which far exceeds the relatively brief discussions of the earlier pessimists) is another marker of the existential character of their pessimism. The problem of time is not, to them, something one must reflect upon philosophically in order to feel. In their earlier works, both Camus and Cioran respond to the challenge of suicide with a philosophy that embraces life, but at the price of a certain degree of self-involvement and, perhaps, solipsism. Later, in rejecting that position, Cioran reverts to a kind of asceticism (akin to Schopenhauer's, but in some respects unique) while Camus

and Unamuno search for an alternative that is more personally active and politically engaged while avoiding the dogma of modern optimisms.

Like Unamuno, Camus equates consciousness with reason and considers both to be that which separates human beings from nature and from a simpler animal existence: "If I were a tree among trees, a cat among animals, this life would have a meaning, or rather this problem would not arise, for I should belong to the world. I should *be* this world to which I am now opposed by my whole consciousness. . . . This ridiculous reason is what sets me in opposition to all creation" (*MS* 51). This immediately produces, for Camus as for the other pessimists, a crisis centering around the questions of death and the potential meaninglessness of human activity: "If nothing lasts, then nothing is justified; everything that dies is deprived of meaning" (*R* 100–101). Also, as in Unamuno and Rousseau, there is the element of backward-glancing regret, the "nostalgia for unity," as he calls it (*MS* 50). The irreversibility of time means that our animal past is a homeland to which we can never return. Thus, Camus thinks, we could easily consider ourselves to be faced with a stark choice in which we either accept the empty, fruitless nature of our life or put an end to it by our own hand.

Camus' presentation of the problem is condensed—it only occupies a few pages of *The Myth of Sisyphus*. But this is in part because he believes that, in stating it, he is merely repeating a problem posed by others. It is his response that he thinks of as original.

Despite the seeming universality of the problem, both pessimists and suicides, Camus acknowledges, are rare creatures and this, he feels, needs to be explained. His explanation lies in the nearly universal human act of *eluding* (*l'esquive*).[12] Eluding is that mental maneuver that allows human beings to exist in linear time without being deflated by it, but without fully facing its challenge either, thus "the typical act of eluding . . . is hope. Hope of another life one must 'deserve' or trickery of those who live not for life itself but for some great idea that will transcend it, refine it, give it a meaning, and betray it" (*MS* 8). In this criticism, Camus means to sweep together both the transcendent hope of Christianity and the hope of historical optimists that, to him, is typified by Marxism. Both ultimately "betray" human life because they do not accept it in the time-bound, absurd state that is, in fact, its single unalterable condition. Even the contemporary philosophers whom he most respects (like Kierkegaard,

[12] Camus' noun has more strength than the English gerund so, unable to improve on O'Brien's translation, I use the French below. *L'esquive* covers a range of meanings from "dodging" or "ducking," as in sports, to "evading" or "escaping" or "the slip," as in "giving the slip" to someone.

Chestov, and Jaspers) do not get beyond a clear statement of the problem. "Without exception," Camus writes, they all "suggest escape. . . . That forced hope is religious in all of them" (*MS* 32).

In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus sets himself the task of defining a philosophy for the individual that copes with our temporal condition without recourse to *l'esquive*. He repeatedly refers to our situation as one of "divorce": "It lies in neither of the elements compared; it is born of their confrontation" (*MS* 30). We are all children of this divorce "between the mind that desires and the world that disappoints, my nostalgia for unity, this fragmented universe and the contradiction that binds them together. . . . It is essential to know whether one can live with it or whether, on the other hand, logic commands one to die of it" (*MS* 50). As this passage makes visible, Camus' theme reintroduces the problem of the earlier generations of pessimists. The "unity" between the desiring subject and the object of its desire, they all agree, simply cannot exist; we can only recollect it dimly as part of our animal past, hence our "nostalgia" for it (a term Cioran will also use).

But we cannot cope with this divorce simply by choosing which parent we prefer. "If I attempt to solve a problem," Camus writes, "at least I must not by that very solution conjure away one of the terms of the problem" (*MS* 31). This is especially the case here because all of our thinking, as Unamuno argued, has its roots in this confrontation between the two opposed forces of desire and logic. To "solve" the problem by erasing one element is to undermine the possibilities of reasoning itself. Camus is fundamentally committed to this point—it is his version of the Kantian a priori—the condition of thinking that thinking has no choice but to affirm. In *The Rebel*, when much about his political thought has changed, he repeats this point practically word-for-word in his conclusion: "[Rebellion's] movement, in order to remain authentic, must never abandon any of the terms of the contradiction that sustains it" (*R* 285).

Just as Unamuno argues that "we live solely in and by contradictions," so Camus believes that "it is a constant confrontation between man and his own obscurity" that is our initial spur to thinking (*MS* 54). This is the basis for Camus' argument against suicide. While we cannot clearly say why life is worth living, suicide, for him, is not so much a judgment against life as an abdication of judgment. If we are honest about the source of the problem, then, we cannot condone a solution that pretends, in essence, that the problem does not exist. Suicide does this by eliminating the value of the mind, that is, of the thinking being, man. Suicide is the ultimate performative contradiction. If we understand the confrontation that is the a priori of our thinking, we will see that suicide attempts to ignore it, and thus cannot be the conclusion of any clear reasoning. Rather than solve a problem or make a judgment, it declines to wrestle with or

endure the actual difficulty that confronts us in favor a simple exit from mental distress. It is not the *wrong* answer to the crisis of meaninglessness; rather, it is no answer at all. Like the leap of faith, it is a form of *l'esquive*, "acceptance at its extreme" (*MS* 54).

To abjure from *l'esquive* is to admit that "the absurd cannot be settled"—though we live in a state of divorce, the ex-spouses remain preoccupied with one another. And we, their progeny, cannot pretend to be other than the product of their meeting. Summarizing and endorsing, in *The Rebel*, the conclusions of his earlier essay, he writes, "Suicide would mean the end of this encounter, and absurdist reasoning considers that it could not consent to this without negating its own premises" (*R* 6).

In *The Rebel*, Camus is more concerned with what Unamuno would call the "antivitalism of reason." In a long discussion of the French revolutionaries, and especially Saint-Just, Camus describes how their passion for reason became the implacable basis for the Terror: "To abandon oneself to principles is really to die—and to die for an impossible love which is the contrary of love" (*R* 129–30). By this last phrase, Camus means that the revolutionaries' "love" was of a perfect justice and a perfect future that could not exist in this world. This love deprived them of any sympathy for human frailty or complication. They thus lost the ability to empathize or love their fellow citizens (hence their love became "the contrary of love") and sent them to the guillotine without remorse. Nor could they appreciate individual distinctiveness, since that too is something that occurs within life rather than outside of it. When "rebellion" (Camus' word for our protest against the absurd) is converted into revolution (an abandonment of the absurd for the safe harbor of rationalism), the nostalgia for a time outside of time becomes unhealthy: "All revolutionaries finally aspire to world unity and act as though they believed that history was concluded" (*R* 107).

Despite Camus' efforts to depict his arguments against suicide and murder as being in accord with the existential reality of our situation, he is conscious at the same time that there is an element of choice involved, and that his choice is rooted in a value of humanism that he cannot really defend but only describes: "The creature [man] is my native land. This is why I have chosen this absurd and ineffectual effort" (*MS* 87). Indeed, part of the value of keeping the absurd alive is that it creates, in part through its destruction of historical hopes, an expanded arena of choice for the individual. It restores to us our independence and unpredictability, which are our truly special capacities as human beings. While the various "hopes" of the past, both religious and historical, gave us (specious) reasons to live, they did so at an enormous cost. By presuming to tell us our future, they also told us what our role in history was to be. This prescripting of our lives relieved us of the burden of making our own deci-

sions, but also, thereby, of the freedom to make them. Confronting the absurd anew, Camus believes, "restores and magnifies . . . my freedom of action. That privation of hope and future mean an increase in man's availability" (*MS* 56–57).

In returning to our original dilemma, then, we confront the true burdens of temporality and admit that our response must always be, at some level, a personal one: "I understand then why the doctrines that explain everything to me also debilitate me at the same time. They relieve me of the weight of my own life, and yet I must carry it alone" (*MS* 54–55). Hope and optimism are condemned not because it is wrong to want something better in life for oneself or others, but because in pre-scripting history, they allow humans to elude their responsibility for making their own choices—just like suicide. All these forms of *l'esquive* hide from view the enormous range of potential lives, good and bad, with which we are actually confronted. We cannot rely on the flow of history or transcendental faith to give us our identity; to be truly human (to "really exist," as Unamuno might say) we must make that identity ourselves.

Cioran's Pessimism

Cioran's pessimism, as we shall see, gives us much the same diagnosis as that of Unamuno and Camus; it is their reactions to it, discussed in more detail in the next section, that differ. Cioran's writings display in more depth the many strands of the pessimistic tradition on which he draws. His aphoristic style allows him to take up different elements of this tradition and put them side-by-side and, indeed, sometimes he seems to rely largely on their thematic similarities to give coherence to his texts. I will have more to say about this in chapter 7, where I take up the question of aphoristic writing directly. But the exposition of the pessimistic tradition to this point should also allow the reader to perceive the consistency, which might otherwise be hard to see, between the historical, metaphysical, and existential elements in Cioran's philosophy, for all three are present.[13]

In his first book, *On the Heights of Despair* (published in 1934, when

[13] In discussing Cioran, then, the limits of the typology of pessimism that this book proposes will become more visible and I am happy to admit this. That typology is intended as a heuristic for understanding the evolution of pessimism and, I think, it serves that purpose well. But it is not intended to draw impenetrable barriers between the many authors discussed here. To do so would be to invite an Unamunoesque critique of devitalizing logical genera. Especially for the later writers, the availability of the pessimistic tradition means that there are bound to be vectors of influence that make their works resonate with earlier ones.

Cioran was only twenty-three), Cioran took "the demonic character of time" to be the pivotal problem for human beings (*OHD* 28). In terms more dramatic even than those of Camus and Unamuno, Cioran deplores our emergence into time from our animal condition and the irreversibility of that step: "*Knowledge is the plague of life, and consciousness, an open wound in its heart.* Is it not tragic to be man, that perpetually dissatisfied animal? . . . If I could, I would renounce my condition on the spot, but what would I become then, an animal? I cannot retrace my steps" (*OHD* 43).

This nostalgia for an animal condition (and sometimes, with Cioran, for a *plant-like* condition) is coupled, as one would expect, with the presence of death on the horizon of consciousness: "When consciousness becomes independent of life, the revelation of death becomes so strong that its presence destroys all naiveté, all joyful enthusiasm" (*OHD* 24; cf. 68). As in Camus' and Unamuno's analysis, the self becomes divided and doomed to unhappiness since "the secret of happiness lies in this original nondivision of an impenetrable unity" (*OHD* 78). Although his later books will no longer refer to time as "demonic," the theme of a self divided on the frame of time-consciousness remains central. One of his French books bears the title *Ecartèlement*, which refers to the form of execution known as drawing and quartering. But all his books emphasize the agony of ordinary human existence and the inescapability of it.

More clearly than Camus and Unamuno, Cioran also repeats elements of the metaphysical pessimism of Schopenhauer and Freud. Especially in his earlier works, human beings are sometimes depicted as confronting time directly. He reproduces Schopenhauer's concern with nothingness: "The presence of death in life introduces into one's existence an element of nothingness. . . . the nothingness inherent in the temporal" (*OHD* 26). All events and moral judgments, to Cioran, seem meaningless in a time that is infinite and linear: "Eternity does not lead to the triumph of either good or evil; it ravages all. . . . Nothing created by man will endure" (*OHD* 63). And he even repeats Freud's judgment that life is a diversion from the natural condition of inorganic being: "It is not *normal* to be alive. . . . Death . . . is no more than the cessation of an anomaly" (*DAQ* 171). This is a minor theme for Cioran—his main focus, as with Camus and Unamuno, is at the existential level of analysis, the conflict produced in the thinking mind by its consciousness of time. But these passages show, at the very least, how there can be a general pessimistic horizon of understanding that includes the various levels of argument in a larger perspective.

Cioran refers to the general calamity that subsumes all these problems as the "fall into time"—one of his books even bears this as a title—but

he does not actually interpret this event in a religious fashion.[14] Rather, like Leopardi, he uses Christian (and pagan) imagery as a kind of mythological language to explore and explain a phenomenon that is almost beyond our imagination.

> Already Adam showed signs of that inaptitude for happiness, that incapacity to endure it which we have all inherited. Happiness was within his grasp, he could have appropriated it forever, and he cast it from him. Ever since, we have pursued it in vain; yet suppose our pursuit were *not* in vain—we should accommodate ourselves to success no better. What else is to be expected of a career that began by an infringement of wisdom, by an infidelity to the *gift of ignorance* our Creator had bestowed on us? Cast by knowledge into time, we were thereby endowed with a destiny. For destiny exists only outside Paradise. (*FT* 35–36)

This last phrase—"destiny exists only outside Paradise"—indicates the extent to which Cioran, like the other existential pessimists, is concerned with historical narrative as both a product of our temporal condition and a crutch to help us endure such a condition. To make sense of our situation, we adopt a destiny, a *telos* located in the future that enables us to explain our suffering by reference to a supposed historical trajectory. But such hopefulness, he argues, amounts to no more than eluding the consequences of time and evading the reality of the present: "Hope is the *normal* form of delirium" (*DAQ* 167). This delirium is not far removed from Camus' *l'esquive*: to hope means simply "to lie and to lie to *oneself*" (*SHD* 83–84). Cioran also decries "modern optimism" as the false hopefulness that has been substituted for the traditional religious hopefulness. Such optimism blinds us to the perpetual cycle of destruction that an honest perusal of history would reveal: "Hegel is chiefly responsible for modern optimism. How could he have failed to see that consciousness changes only its forms and modalities, but never progresses? Becoming excludes an absolute fulfillment, a goal: the temporal adventure unfolds without an aim external to itself, . . . each period is perfect in itself—and perishable" (*SHD* 146).

Cioran's *Short History of Decay* was published just two years before Camus' *The Rebel* and there are many parallels to be drawn between the two books.[15] While Camus' book is now mainly recalled for its defense of the politically engaged artist and its exhortation to participation under

[14] Cioran's father was an Orthodox minister but he seems to have given up his faith early. *On the Heights of Despair* is already irreligious and his second book, *Tears and Saints*, was actually pulled from the presses in mid-run by his publisher who, from Cioran's account, feared the consequences of publishing something so sacrilegious.

[15] Cioran's *Précis* is the book that Camus initially turned down for publication at Gallimard.

the sign of decency, the better part of the book is a long exploration of the history of "rebellious" thought—a history that proves to be deeply ironic. Over and over, Camus attempts to demonstrate, ideas that began as beneficial ended up being used to defend murder and oppression. This is especially true, he thinks, of historical ideals, which allow one to defend violence as a "sacrifice" to be redeemed by a better future to come. Rejection of some aspect of current conditions is transformed into a wholesale denigration of the present in the name of an ideal but non-existent future. This is one of the reasons that historical "hope" is not just wrong, but dangerous. Though Cioran does not consider the history of modern ideology in the same sort of detail, he likewise views history as having an ironic character. "History", he writes, "is irony *on the move*" (*SHD* 147–48). "*Every step forward is followed by a step back*: this is the unfruitful oscillation of history—a stationary . . . becoming" (*SHD* 178). Faith in the future, for Cioran, is in fact itself evidence that our mental powers do not produce the results we expect: "That man should have let himself be duped by the mirage of Progress is what renders his claims to subtlety absurd. Progress? Perhaps we can find it in hygiene. . . . But anywhere else?" (*SHD* 178).

Just as Camus believes that abandoning hope is, perhaps surprisingly, a liberating step, so Cioran thinks that it is precisely the lack of order to history that is what gives possibility to an individual human life, and which should therefore be embraced: "That History has no meaning is what should delight our hearts. . . . The universe begins and ends with each individual, whether he be Shakespeare or Hodge; for each individual experiences his merit or his nullity *in the absolute*" (*SHD* 149). By this last phrase, I believe, Cioran means that the value of an individual life cannot be a function of its place in history. We cannot understand each other, and should certainly never understand ourselves, as a precursor of X or a culmination of Y; that is the effect of thinking in terms of history or destiny. Nor can we ever really direct our actions beyond ourselves. This does not mean, however, that we cannot think past the end of our life-span. The idea is that we ought not to do so (and ought not to let others suggest that we do so) if it means debasing our own life in favor of a future that we somehow allow to count for more than the present. For, in the end, the unpredictability and destructiveness of history mean that actions carry their meaning, Shakespearean or Hodgist, only in the present. We can, of course, *care* about the world that our children will inherit. But if we begin to evaluate ourselves *only* in terms of that future, we have fallen into an "idolatry of tomorrow" (*FT* 47). For our lives to have merit, they must have it in the here and now, and not by reference to an unactualized future.

Since, unlike the present, tomorrow is always imaginary, such idolatry

can be manipulated in many ways. On the one hand, of course, the Stalins of the world can demand the death of millions in the name of a future paradise. This is an especial concern of Camus, who complains of those who "glorify a future state of happiness, about which no one knows anything, so that the future authorizes every kind of humbug" (*RRD* 263). Cioran is concerned about this, but like Camus he is just as concerned with the way in which even a humane future, even one individually chosen, can act as a straitjacket for the chooser and close down possibilities in the present. The entire effort to make our choices *via* a complicated process of attempting to divine what the future holds distracts us from simply confronting the world that is all about us and asking ourselves what, if anything, we actually care about in that world. Avoiding the idolatry of tomorrow is therefore liberating in that one has options apart from simply reacting to perceived historical processes. We can ask not what is important to history but what is important to us.

Given the ironic character of history, we should, at the very least, make sure that our actions have some value in the present. The future that we imagine is unlikely to come about, if it does come about it will not last, and when it does come about we will probably despise it. *That*, at any rate, is what history suggests, if it suggests anything; and that is the only way in which it can guide us. Here too Cioran's conclusions parallel those of Camus: "The historical revolution is always obliged to act in the hope, which is invariably disappointed, of one day really existing" (*R* 251). And both are preceded in this thought by Unamuno. The latter, in explaining the ethic of Don Quixote, who simply leaves his house and confronts whatever evils come his way on the road, writes: "What is known as the future is one of the greatest lies. The true future is today. . . . What is happening to us today, right now? That is the only question." (*OLDQ* 11) For all of the existential pessimists, then, optimism has functioned to displace attention from the real world of today onto an imaginary future. Not only does this future denigrate the present, it causes us to lose touch with the present. When the present, which should be the richest and most vivid thing in our minds, is flattened out in our imagination, it makes our options seem fewer than they are. In fact, the present is the island on which we are stranded. But if, instead of looking offshore, we explore that territory, it may be richer than we initially imagine.

This focus on the present does not abjure all concern for the future. Unamuno's claim that "the true future is today" indicates not that we are forbidden to think about what is to come, but only that we should not make the future into an idol. *If we care about the freedom of later generations, we must respect it—and we respect it best by refusing to script their lives for them.* Respecting the radical openness of the future is hard to do because it can seem like choosing not to care. But, the pessimists insist, we express our care better if we focus on the present and stop considering the openness of the future a problem. The unpredictability of the future represents our freedom and that of future generations. Like the absurd, it is not a problem to be solved but a difficult condition that must be not just endured, but actively preserved.

It is from this perspective on history that Cioran's response to suicide originates. Looking on the meaninglessness of history as liberating, rather than depressing, is the means by which Cioran, like Camus, finds the tenuous grounds to avoid self-imposed death: "Everything that breathes feeds on the unverifiable; . . . Give life a specific goal and it immediately loses its attraction. The inexactitude of its ends makes life superior to death" (*SHD* 10–11). When we know (or think we know), the *telos* of history, even if it is a wonderful one, it renders our life one-dimensional. We exist as a means of transit from point A to point B. We can only appreciate our potential for multidirectional behavior if we abandon the conceit of a transhistorical aim for humanity. While this is no proof, of course, that life is worth living, this perspective at least removes one of the common reasons for suspecting it is not: the fear that we lack, or will not reach, such a destiny. The fruitlessness of human aims is less of a burden if we do not think of it as a failure but as an opportunity.

Like the other pessimists, then, Cioran does not so much build an argument against suicide as attempt to describe how the act itself would make no sense. Putting it laconically in *The Trouble with Being Born*, he writes: "It's not worth the bother of killing yourself, since you always kill yourself *too late*" (*TBB* 32). The act can never really catch up with the suffering that instigates it. While not presenting it as a rational deduction in the manner of Camus, Cioran does insist that the suicidal *thought* is the product of life-conditions that would, in a sense, be contradicted by the *act*:

> Since all that has been conceived and undertaken since Adam is either suspect or dangerous or futile, what is to be done? Resign from the race? *That would be to forget that one is never so much man as when one regrets being so.* And such regret, once it seizes one, offers no means of escape: . . . man still has his road to travel. . . . And since he advances by virtue of an acquired illusion, he cannot stop until the illusion disintegrates, disappears; but it is indestructible as long as man remains an accomplice of time. (*FT* 52–53; emphasis added)

The idea that the condition of regret is endemic to humans also explains why, though Cioran does not endorse the act of suicide, he understands why the habit of thinking about it is something that we can never entirely escape. Just as it cannot be logically carried out, so it cannot be logically refuted: it stems from a fundamental condition of consciousness. At the

same time that it is our burden, it is also, in a strange way, our honor to have this possibility before us at all times:

> No church, no civil institution has as yet invented a single argument valid against suicide. What answer is there to the man who can no longer endure life? . . . Suicide is one of man's distinctive characteristics, one of his discoveries; no animal is capable of it, and the angels have scarcely guessed at its existence; without it, human reality would be less curious, less picturesque: we should lack a strange climate and a series of deadly possibilities which have their aesthetic value, if only to introduce into tragedy certain new solutions and a variety of denouements. (*SHD* 38)

The fact that humans are permanently haunted by suicidal thoughts means that we feel the seriousness of our situation in a way that animals and angels do not. This too may not prove that life is worth living, but it does add to a sense of our existence as a precious opportunity that is not to be lightly dismissed. Systematic moralities that attempt to forbid suicide can only do so, ironically, at the cost of diminishing their appreciation for the variety of human life.

This incapacity to free ourselves from the thought of suicide is balanced, in a way, by an equal inability to eliminate our tendency to hope. As in Camus and Unamuno, our tendency to look to the future is not simply a mistake on our part; it is also a product of the embedding of our consciousness in time: "All men have the same defect: they *wait* to live, for they have not the courage of each instant. . . . we do not live in the living present but in a vague and distant future." We can perhaps free ourselves from some of its illusions but we cannot return to the animal condition of living entirely in the present. Our hoping is part and parcel of our no-longer-animal status. "There's no salvation without the immediate. But man is a being who no longer knows the immediate" (*OHD* 111). Hence, there is no longer any salvation; hoping is the after-effect of this loss.

And so Cioran, like Unamuno and Camus but perhaps more hellishly, depicts an immutable conflict as the ordinary human condition. "Agony means a battle between life and death. Since death is immanent in life, almost all of life is an agony" (*OHD* 16). The result of his approach is no *reason* to live, but simply what he calls a "state of non-suicide". Trapped between two conflicting impulses, we can only negotiate the unpleasant space between them:

> To do away with oneself seems such a clear and simple action! Why is it so rare, why does everyone avoid it? Because, if reason disavows the appetite for life, the *nothing* which extends our acts is nonetheless of a power superior to all absolutes; it explains the tacit coalition of mortals against death; it is not only the symbol of existence, but existence itself; it is everything. And this nothing, this everything, cannot give life a meaning, but it nonetheless makes life persevere in what it is: *a state of non-suicide*. (*SHD* 19; cf. *NG* 53, 58)

Cioran thus shares with the other pessimists discussed in this chapter what I have called *the problematic of linear time* manifested at a level of existential narrative. The most important implication, to them, of a consciousness predicated on linear temporality is the personal agony it creates in a human being perpetually poised between hope and suicide.

So far I have largely described the problem that the existential pessimists depict while only hinting at their proposals for an ethic that copes with this situation. As I mentioned before, there are, at least for Camus and Cioran, both an earlier and a later position. The later response represents, for both, but in very different ways, their attempt to make pessimism politically responsible, if not respectable (they are always suspicious of respectability!). Since Unamuno's position is more unswerving and since it dovetails, to a considerable degree, with that of the mature Camus, I postpone discussion of it to the second section below.

First Responses: Boredom and Living the Moment

Of the three authors we are considering here, Cioran is the one who takes up the pessimistic theme of boredom in a serious way. Unamuno, certain that we are all as preoccupied with our own immortality as he is with his own, cannot really conceive of it. Camus' discussion of a possible withdrawal from life comes closer, but he tends to think of that withdrawal only in terms of suicide, with boredom as a subsidiary problem. But from first to last boredom is a topic of which Cioran never tires.

Following Leopardi and Schopenhauer, Cioran considers boredom a model of bare human existence—one embedded in time but without the comforting illusions that we normally use to shield ourselves from the effects of that condition. "Life is more and less than boredom," he writes, but "it is in boredom and by boredom that we discern what life is worth" (*DAQ* 139). When we are not in pain and not distracted by some purpose we have given ourselves, we are left alone with unadorned life. And this existence does not, by itself, prove very stimulating: "Boredom will reveal two things to us: our body and the nothingness of the world" (*TS* 88). It is in part to relieve this feeling of nothingness that we engage in any activity whatsoever. Like Leopardi, Cioran views boredom as one extreme in a pendulum-flow—when we reach it, we are impelled in the opposite direction: "Life is our solution to boredom. Melancholy, sadness, despair,

terror, and ecstasy grow out of boredom's thick trunk" (*TS* 89). Inevitably, though, the search for activity will result in feelings of futility and meaninglessness that return us to boredom: "What should I do? Work for a social and political system, make a girl miserable? Hunt for weaknesses in philosophical systems, fight for moral and esthetic ideals? It's all too little" (*OHD* 43).

The bass-note that boredom sounds throughout our lives can be amplified: for example, by insomnia. Cioran suffered from insomnia for many years and he made this condition into a minor theme of his writing. Though insomnia is not quite the same thing as boredom, both of them give Cioran the sense of experiencing the naked flow of time. The very first aphorism of *The Trouble with Being Born* refers to it: "Three in the morning. I realize this second, then this one, then the next: I draw up a balance sheet for each minute. And why all this? *Because I was born.*" (*TBB* 3). Cioran puts this at the beginning of the book so that we will understand that everything that follows is framed by this fundamental experience. Time is what we are born into—we may only realize it when we step back from our daily activities but it is the baseline of all experience. In this sense, insomnia is a blessing since it allows us to tap directly into the pure feeling of happening, as Cioran documents here. But this feeling turns out not to be a pleasant one: everyone with insomnia seeks to escape it, which should not be the case if pure conscious existence were something good in itself. Schopenhauer and Leopardi thought that the fact of boredom proved the inherent misery of existence; Cioran copies that argument and extends it to insomnia. If being conscious were delightful, then we would think of insomniacs as the blessed.

The problem of boredom is especially important for understanding the response to the pessimistic diagnosis that Cioran pronounces in his early Romanian works. Conceiving of the problem as a personal, if universal, agony, he sought a solution that was also, in some sense personal, even private. *Tears and Saints* is a meditation on the agony of the saints—but especially the female mystical saints like Teresa of Avila—and an attempt to convert their experience into an ethic of ecstasy, divested of its religious content. Already in *On the Heights of Despair* he speaks of evading the burden of time and the boredom it delivers us to by, as it were, living entirely within the moment: "Eternity can be obtained only, . . . if one lives the instant totally and absolutely. Every experience of eternity presupposes a leap and a transfiguration" (*OHD* 64). "Eternity," here, while not divine in nature, is meant to signify some realm of existence outside the normal flow of time. Access to eternity is the essence of the mysticism that he credits to the saints, but which need not be limited to them: "The failed mystic is the one who cannot cast off all temporal ties. . . . As with music and eroticism, the secret of successful mysticism is the defeat of time and

individuation" (*TS* 67). The ecstasy of the saints was real enough, Cioran maintains; their error was to ascribe it to divine intervention. But as the examples of music and passion show, there are other paths to this kind of experience, which many can share. The success of the saints lies, not in their touching the divine, but in achieving ecstatic moments that relieved their temporal suffering.

Cioran is vague about what it would mean to "live the instant" in such a fashion, but it is reasonably clear that he means to associate himself with a kind of radical romanticism that tells us to abandon all thought of the past and future to experience as deeply and intensely as we can whatever is in front of us: "Suffer, then, drink pleasure to its last dregs, cry or laugh, scream in despair or with joy, sing about death or love, for nothing will endure" (*OHD* 63). Every moment, in this view, is equally valuable, or valueless—that is the view from eternity. But, since we are not gods, we can only experience this view by withdrawing entirely from a historical perspective and narrowing our vision to the immediate, the instant. Living the moment is the attempt to reverse, or cancel, the fall into time.

To be sure, there is something irredeemably juvenile in this kind of stance and Cioran, indeed, gave it up in his later writing. As we have seen, Cioran is clear in his French works that there is no exit or withdrawal from temporality. But he does not come to endorse history as meaningful or to admit the benefits of incremental efforts. Rather, in dismissing the option of ecstasy, he simply cuts off his last avenue of escape and leaves himself stranded. "Only ecstasy cures us of pessimism," he writes in *Tears and Saints*, "Life would be unbearable if it were real" (*TS* 101–2). His later books start from that unbearable reality of life—*leaving him with a pessimism that must remain uncured*. Without the escape-hatch of ecstasy, the burdens of temporal existence become all the heavier to him.[16]

As implausible as this ethic of ecstasy sounds to us now, there *is* a more developed version of the idea of valuing the present moment that can give us some sense of its seriousness—Camus provides it in *The Myth of Sisyphus*. In the middle section of that work, there is a sequence of sketches, as he calls them, that are meant to give substance to the idea of a vocation that does not presuppose an historical destiny. Like Cioran, Camus endeavors to devise an art of living that does not rely on, or attempts to combat, linear temporality. He too displays this art of living by outlining an exemplary existence (as Cioran, in his way, does with the saints). And while Camus also came to view his early essay as, in some sense, imma-

[16] The ethic of ecstasy is also the (narrow) point of contact between *Tears and Saints* and *Romania's Transfiguration*: the "transfiguration" in the latter title presumably refers to a kind of miraculous transformation by which backward Romania, through an ecstatic leap, will become a leading, modern European nation. The abandonment of this ecstatic ethic by the postwar Cioran leads him to abandon this kind of nationalism as well.

ture, the "ethic of quantity" it defends is, if not persuasive, far more plausible and instructive than Cioran's early efforts (*MS* 72).

The most famous of these sketches—Camus' imaginative, ambivalent rendering of Don Juan—is apt to be misunderstood (the term "ethic of quantity" is especially unhelpful here). Camus' Don Juan is not a sexual predator, but someone who seeks to repeat genuinely the experience of passionate love. He is not an insincere seducer; rather he loves "each time with his whole self" (*MS* 69). Nor does he collect victories or memories, "collecting amounts to being capable of living off one's past," and Don Juan does not do this (*MS* 72). Equally, he does not plan for future conquests; he "does not hope" (*MS* 70). Rather, he acknowledges the tragedy of our condition by accepting that the intensity of feeling we call "love" is not actually extended over time, as we pretend it is by insisting that love only finds its meaning in long-term, linear narratives. "There is no noble love but that which recognizes itself to be both short-lived and exceptional" (*MS* 74). Camus does not exactly endorse Don Juan's behavior, but he believes that it conforms to the conditions of life that the absurd perspective lays out. It accepts the inherent contradictions of temporal life and lives in moments by multiplying them rather than by trying to assemble them into a false narrative: "The absurd man multiplies here again what he cannot unify. Thus he discovers a new way of being which liberates him. . . . It is his way of giving and of vivifying. I let it be decided [*Je laisse à juger*] whether or not one can speak of egoism" (*MS* 74).

Even if one judges that Don Juan is not an egotist, what Camus describes is only an improved version of Cioran's mystic—his is a sober pursuit of ecstasy. With less ambivalence, however, Camus also describes the theatrical life as embodying an art of living that embraces the moment equally but more productively. Indeed, one can see here the origin of Camus' lifelong allegiance to theater as *the* essential form of art. He does not think at all of the texts of classic plays that endure and are repeated over time. His perspective is that of the actor and his performance: "The actor's realm is that of the fleeting" (*MS* 77). Theater, to Camus, is an art form that, in its nature, is impermanent. Each presentation leaves no trace of itself behind and therefore makes no claims upon the future. To record a theatrical performance would be to violate the terms on which it is offered. The actor succeeds or fails in the moment—but, as with Don Juan, this pursuit of the moment can be a life-long vocation, even if the moments do not accumulate or cohere into a narrative of their own. "Entering into all these lives, experiencing them in their diversity" is an end in itself (*MS* 77). The actor's performance has no goal beyond the performance itself; nor (qua actor) does his career have any goal beyond the repetition of such performances. Yet the actor gains something from experiencing so many different aspects of the human condition. He gains greater

understanding of the depth and complexity of the human condition, even if his actions cannot meliorate it. Such a life preserves, in rebellion, the conditions of the absurd.

Camus here embraces exactly those qualities of the theater that repelled Rousseau, but his fundamental reasoning about them is largely the same. For Rousseau the illusions of the theater were contrasted with a natural identity, in comparison with which they seemed shallow. But the theater, for Rousseau, exemplified our modern time-bound existence. And this is exactly the case for Camus as well, only, without the contrast of a natural identity, the theater's exemplary ephemerality becomes something to be embraced.

> [The actor] demonstrates to what a degree appearing creates being. For that is his art—to simulate absolutely, to project himself as deeply as possible into lives that are not his own. At the end of his effort his vocation becomes clear: to apply himself wholeheartedly to being nothing or to being several. . . . He will die in three hours under the mask he has assumed today. Within three hours he must experience and express a whole exceptional life. That is called losing oneself to find oneself. (*MS* 79–80)

Rather than pursue a long-term project of creation or pine for a primordial natural existence—both projects that must end in failure or frustration—the actor's vocation is one of a sequence of transfigurative moments, each independent of the others. The theater, to Camus, is a place where temporality can be acknowledged but where, in the repetition and reenactment of that temporality, a certain kind of freedom is created. Where Don Juan's experiences are, one supposes, more or less the same from night to night, the actor, playing a series of different roles, experiences a life that is more varied and, for that reason, more full of insight into different realms of life. The actor's life explores a wider territory than the libertine's—harkening back to Leopardi's invocation of a Columbian life as the one that best embodied the pessimistic spirit. It offers, at least, an individual solution to the problems that the pessimistic perspective identifies without denying the limits that perspective imposes or pretending to escape them.

Camus thus gives a deeper and more persuasive account of what it would mean to respond to the pessimistic diagnosis by attempting to live in the moment. But even here, it must be said, an air of solipsism hangs over the text. It is not just that Don Juan or the actor are selfish; rather, their vocation is described in such a way that their actions seem to have no effect whatsoever on others. One imagines a great deal of spontaneous monologue. For the earlier generations of pessimists, the problems they described were meant to be understood, at least, as general, social conditions. If the solutions they offered often amounted to individual ethics,

that did not mean that the situation of others simply disappeared from view, as it seems to here. While not as juvenile as Cioran's ethic of ecstasy, then, Camus' ethic of quantity still seems a rather narrow response to the sort of problem that his own pessimism put before him.

To his credit, it was not his last response. And while Cioran, as we shall see, still seeks a kind of withdrawal from life in his later work, the absolutism and love of excess of his early books is largely muted.

Second Responses: Into Life or out of It

In their post–World War II works, both Cioran and Camus altered, significantly if not radically, their responses to the pessimistic diagnosis. Cioran, as I have said, gave up his ecstatic solution and concentrated on finding a mode of existence that accommodates itself to the conditions of life in this world.[17] His new position, as we shall see, is a retreat into and valorization of solitude, akin to that proposed by the other misanthropic pessimists, Rousseau and Schopenhauer. Camus, as is well-known, was galvanized by the experience of war in the opposite direction. He strove to connect the situation of absurdity to a defense of vigorous political participation, albeit of a certain kind, one linked to the activities of the artist. His particular form of devotion to politics echoes that of Unamuno, who found, in the figure of Don Quixote, an exemplar of a pessimistic form of life that is nonetheless activist. This transformation is of particular importance because, if it is indeed the case that Camus' activism is consis-

[17] While it seems clear that Cioran was chastened by the disastrous consequences of wartime radicalism, as well as by the behavior of those with whom he had been associated in prewar Romania (as well as his own behavior), he referred to the transformation of his views only obliquely, as in this passage where he describes the effects of learning to write in French:

> After having frequented certain idioms whose plasticity gave him the illusion of an unlimited power, the unbridled foreigner, loving improvisation and disorder, tending toward excess or equivocation by an inaptitude for clarity, if he approaches French with timidity, sees it nonetheless as an instrument of salvation, an *askesis* and a therapeutics. By practicing it, *he cures himself of his past*, learns to sacrifice a whole background of obscurity to which he was attached, simplifies himself, becomes *other*, desists from his extravagances, surmounts his old confusions, increasingly accommodates himself to common sense, to reason; . . . How can one be mad—or a poet—in such a language? (*TE* 128–29; second emphasis added)

Of his enthusiasm for the mystics he writes: "I lived for years in the shadows of these women, these saints, believing that no poet, sage, or madman would ever equal them. I expended, in my fervor for them, all my powers of worship, my vitality in desire, my ardor in dreams. And then . . . I stopped loving them" (*SHD* 131).

tent with his pessimism, it answers one of the most persistent criticisms of pessimism, namely, that it cannot be effectively political. While it is part of my claim in this book as a whole that this charge should be taken with a grain of salt and that the term "political" should be understood in an expansive sense that includes the antisystematic views of the pessimists, it must nonetheless also expand our view of pessimism if we can see its fruit in Camus' political engagement. While Leopardi and Freud both resisted the temptations of misanthropy and resignation, it is still the case that what they offer is more or less a philosophy of personal conduct adapted to an unresponsive world. Camus' ethic at least allows us to see how such a philosophy can orient us toward the political arena.

Cioran, in modifying his original conclusions, did not change the fundamental perspective of his philosophy. He still felt that our separation from the animals was a regrettable event, from the standpoint of happiness or any other: "We would be better off, verminous and serene, if we had kept company with the animals, wallowing beside them for millennia to come, . . . dying of our diseases and not of our remedies" (*FT* 62). But such statements of regret can only be illustrative of our position; they hold no option for us. Indeed, we are, as Rousseau feared, no longer *lately* removed from our animal condition, but very far away from it indeed: "Nothing is better proof of how far humanity has regressed than the impossibility of finding a single nation, a single tribe, among whom birth still provokes mourning and lamentations" (*TBB* 4). At best we can say that humanity has adjusted itself to its temporal condition and learned to survive it without suicide, but that is not much to show for millennia of conscious existence: "After having botched the true eternity, man has fallen into time, where he has managed if not to flourish at least to live; in any case he has adjusted himself to it. The process of this fall and this adjustment is called History" (*FT* 180).

In this circumstance, what Cioran can suggest amounts to no more than an adjustment to that "adjustment." Like Schopenhauer's instructions for the construction of a fire-proof room, he attempts to adapt to a situation that is fundamentally hellish. And like Schopenhauer, his suggestions have a *tone* that is ascetic and, to a point, stoic. But whereas Schopenhauer predicated the idea of withdrawal or resignation from life on the claim that time-consciousness was something fundamentally unreal and that, in approaching nirvana, we actually approach true knowledge, Cioran does not comfort himself with the idea of an alternate reality or a compensatory knowledge. Our withdrawal from life is a purely practical matter: "As for happiness, if this word has a meaning, it consists in the aspiration to the minimum and the ineffectual, in the notion of *limitation* hypostatized. Our sole recourse: to renounce not only the fruit of action, but ac-

tion itself" (*FT* 65). Cioran's technique, then, is to radicalize the isolation that our time-consciousness creates, almost to the point of hermitage. Rather than strive after an impossible reunification, we should rest (not rest content, just rest) within our boundaries. In this way we will minimize our unhappiness, be free from illusion, and do the least harm to others. These are the only goals we can hope to obtain.

Like the earlier pessimists, Cioran associates ends-oriented activity with frustration and suffering. On the daily level, this suggests that we ought to cease our pursuit of objects outside of ourselves, whatever their nature: "Civilization instructs us how to take hold of things, whereas it is the art of letting them go that it should teach us. . . . Every new acquisition signifies a new chain" (*FT* 69). But this behavior, if generalized, amounts to an "art of living", albeit a monastic one—a withdrawal, insofar as humanly possible, from the effects of time. While we cannot leap out of time, in an ecstatic fashion, we can hunker down, as it were, mark our doors with blood, and let the worst of it pass over us. This, to Cioran, is the condition that we ought to call freedom: "If we were to wrest ourselves from our desires we should thereby wrest ourselves from destiny; . . . by the sacrifice of our identity we would accede to freedom, inseparable from a training in anonymity and abdication. 'I am *no one*, I have conquered my name!' exclaims the man who, rejecting the degradation of leaving tracks, tries to conform to Epicurus's command: 'Hide your life'" (*FT* 66). While this passage makes the freedom Cioran desires sound entirely negative, elsewhere, as we have seen, he describes the release from destiny as something that should "delight our hearts" on the grounds that it liberates the individual in the most radical way possible (*SHD* 149).

Epicurus is a figure to whom Cioran recurs on several occasions, always as an example of the sort of philosopher he would like to emulate, one who has "stopped thinking and . . . begun to search for happiness" (*TS* 50). While showing no interest in Epicurean metaphysics, Cioran directly identifies with the idea of a search for an "art of living" and with a practical approach to pleasure and pain. But where Epicurus recommended friendship as a core element of personal happiness, Cioran's stringent search for nothingness ends in isolation: "I suppressed word after word from my vocabulary. When the massacre was over, only one had escaped: *Solitude*. I awakened euphoric" (*TBB* 92). To escape our destiny, we must escape from all the trappings of social existence, which constantly threaten, as Rousseau argued, to generate new desires and aims for which we will futilely strive. Even more than hiding our lives, Cioran's advice, in effect, is to hide your soul. He replaces the ecstasy of transfiguration with the satisfactions of solitude. The atheistic mystic has become an atheistic monk. It goes too far to say that Cioran, in his later work, is reconciled to this kind of existence. One might say he accepts it as the best freedom there is, having given up all alternatives.[18]

None of this changes for Cioran the fundamentally pessimistic diagnosis. Always bleak, his tone becomes, if anything, even more laconic in his later works. "To live," he writes, "is to lose ground" (*TBB* 96). Having prescribed solitude and inactivity as the preferred form of existence, his ethics now amounts to a universal pact of noninterference, similar to Freud's injunction to let each person find his own path to death: "The originality of a being is identified with his particular way of losing his footing. Primacy of noninterference: let each live and die as he wants, as if he had the luck to resemble no one, as if he were a blessed monster" (*DAQ* 161). Anything more, to him, even the attempt to help another find their footing, would be inhumane.

Though Cioran's ethic resembles Schopenhauer's perhaps more than anyone else's, he did not, in his later writings, romanticize or aestheticize the inactivity he recommended. If anything, he satirized it, and his writings are full of self-mockery: "And who was ever bold enough to do nothing because every action is senseless in infinity? . . . Who has become a hero of total sloth?" (*SHD* 43–44). More clearly than Schopenhauer too, Cioran insists that we cannot make much headway in our efforts to minimize the unpleasantness of life. It is not just a matter of reducing our desires; time's destructiveness cannot, by such a maneuver, by avoided. "Resignation to becoming, to surprises that are no such thing, to calamities that pretend to be uncommon" (*AA* 189). Except for rare moments, Cioran sees the randomness of events in a world that is linear but not pro-

[18] Cioran is also motivated to affirm conscious life by his capacity to imagine another form of being—one that is worse than our own. Though this world is a hell, yet, he thinks, there are circles of it even beneath our own. Having been ejected from eternity into history, Cioran conceives a possible further ejection into what he calls "posthistory." Posthistory will occur when we lose touch with the temporal consciousness that now sustains us. If this happens, he seems to think, we might look back with nostalgia even on our current world of suffering.

> Now it will no longer be a matter of falling out of eternity, but out of time; and, to fall out of time is to fall out of history; once Becoming is suspended, we sink into the inert, into the absolute of stagnation where the Word itself bogs down, unable to rise to blasphemy or prayer. . . . And then, having lost even the memory of the true eternity, of his first happiness, he will turn his eyes elsewhere, toward the temporal universe, toward that second paradise from which he has been expelled. (*FT* 180–81)

The condition Cioran pictures here is not a return to unconsciousness or he would welcome it. He appears to be imagining the sort of nightmare where one is pinned or trapped but unable to even call out for help or lament one's condition. In posthistory, we would be neither human nor animal. And regrettable as our condition is, it is, to Cioran, apparently preferable to a posthistorical quagmire—as he prefers the state of nonsuicide to suicide.

gressive as uncompensated for—surprises are always bad surprises. And even in the exceptional moments ("That History has no meaning is what should delight our hearts"), the compensation is insufficient. What it amounts to is mostly the pessimistic knowledge that we are not enslaved to history. We can at least say then, in a Leopardian fashion, that in acknowledging this, we achieve the freedom of the person who has torn the last shreds of illusion from his vision of the world and sees it as it is. "Lucidity," he writes, "is the only vice which makes us free—free *in a desert*" (*TBB* 12).

The Pessimistic Rebel

Camus in his later writing also changed the direction, if not the foundations, of his pessimism. But from an initial position that was similar to Cioran's, Camus moved in the opposite direction. In *The Rebel*, Camus returned to the problem of absurdity that he explored in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, but it is clear from the start that he views it differently. Whereas in his earlier essay he had stressed the isolation of the individual within a meaningless universe, *The Rebel* takes pains to emphasize that this condition is one that is the common lot of humanity: "In absurdist experience, suffering is individual," he writes, "But from the moment when a movement of rebellion begins, suffering is seen as a collective experience. Therefore the first progressive step for a mind overwhelmed by the strangeness of things is to realize that this feeling of strangeness is shared with all men. . . . The malady experienced by a single man becomes a collective plague" (*R* 22).

This last phrase, of course, is a reference to Camus' highly successful novel *The Plague*, published immediately after the war. In that book, the "plague" (*la peste*) is an allegory for the pernicious spread of fascism, which the characters in the book respond to in a variety of ways, from servile acceptance to heroic resistance. By linking the problem of the absurd to the plague of fascism, Camus signals that his question is no longer simply the personal one of whether an individual can find a reason to avoid suicide. The dangers of absurdity he now considers to be importantly social and political—*l'esquive* is not just a personal failing, but, he now maintains, one that can lead to compliance with monstrous evil: "The longing for rest and peace must itself be thrust aside; it coincides with the acceptance of iniquity" (*R* 248). While Camus' novel was criticized for seeming to depoliticize fascism by using the metaphor of an anonymous, biological force, Camus' intention was, in a sense, precisely the opposite. His desire (successful or not) was to represent political danger as a species of the absurd condition, which perpetually confronts us

not just as individuals but as a population and a community. For the eminently personal question of suicide in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, *The Rebel* now substitutes the very political question of murder.

As we have seen, however, there is also a great deal of philosophical continuity between the early and late Camus. In both periods, he continues to reject historical optimism and to deny the existence of natural or permanent moral structures to guide our behavior. Indeed, as I described above, a large portion of *The Rebel* is given over to repeating and deepening these claims: "Thought that is derived from history alone, like thought that rejects history completely, deprives man of the means and the reason for living" (*R* 249). How, then, will Camus reformulate his pessimism so that it can address the political questions he now considers pressing? The answer, I believe, is by returning to the figure of the actor and by demonstrating that there is a kind of antiteleological political activity that is like the actor's in finding its purpose in the enacted moment.[19] He now emphasizes something he did not before, but which nonetheless grows naturally out of the idea of the theater: activity that preserves the absurd can be undertaken not only in the presence of, but in active concert with, others, as an actor does with his troupe. In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, the actors had appeared only to soliloquize. But "art," he now writes, "cannot be a monologue" (*RRD* 257). The purpose of the endeavor, he now maintains, though contained in the present, may be something more than the personal transfiguration of the participants.

Although still indebted to theatrical metaphors, at this point Camus no longer speaks exclusively of the theater but of art as such. Art is that which can represent both sides of the absurd divorce—the unresponsive universe and the human who demands a response. "If," he writes, "rebellion could found a philosophy it would be a philosophy of limits. . . . Injustice, the transience of time, death—all are manifest in history. . . . But confronted with [history], he [the rebel] feels like the artist confronted with reality; he spurns it without escaping from it" (*R* 289–90). What Camus means here is that art, when it is serious, does not reject the human condition but, *by the process of representing it*, manages to escape enslavement to it. Just as the actor, in representing a life, finds a freedom of expression that is the opposite of rote imitation, so the work of art in general, in representing life in general, amounts to a form of freedom that is not found in the world itself. Here is the element of liberation in the theater that Rousseau, who compared the actor to a prostitute, missed. The artist

[19] This point has been emphasized by Isaac who links Camus' theories here, rightly in my opinion, to those of Hannah Arendt. Both took as their model the activities of the French Resistance, which were, in this view, not undertaken in the belief that they would necessarily be efficacious or successful, but simply with the thought that they were the necessary human response to tyranny. See Isaac 1992, chaps. 4–5.

"spurns [reality] without escaping from it." The limits of the actor's performance are still set in advance by the boundaries of the character she inhabits. But within that horizon, the actor can, in a reenactment, find a moment of freedom that was not present in the original.

Important to Camus here is the example of Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*, which, in perfectly capturing our experience of life in the flow of time, is anything but a carbon copy of life: "Proust's work . . . appears to be one of the most ambitious and most significant of man's enterprises against his mortal condition. He has demonstrated that the art of the novel can reconstruct creation itself, in the form that it is imposed on us and in the form in which we reject it" (*R* 267). Proust does not escape reality; he rebuffs it by lovingly reproducing it in a beautiful form. Indeed, it is just Proust's radical dedication to reproducing the experience of the flow of time that is the center of his artistry and, therefore, of his individuality and his freedom. Though a novel, obviously, lacks the spontaneity and fleetingness of an acted performance, *Proust's* novel finds a way to reproduce that sensation and make it available to us outside of the theater. It is the element of creative reenactment, which Camus first associated with the actor, that he generalizes here into a broader theory of art. Proust's work "is allied to the beauty of the world or of its inhabitants against the powers of death and oblivion. It is in this way that his rebellion is creative" (*R* 268). Like an Impressionist painting, Proust's novel respects the fleetingness of the moment but also, in preserving it, rebels against its sinking into oblivion. The rebellion that Camus describes here is, to him, not mere artistry or simply a personal art of living but also, finally, a model for politics. Art of this kind can produce moments of beauty and freedom off the stage as well as on it.

For the later Camus, rebellion of this sort is the only kind of aim that it is reasonable to possess in an absurd world. The rebel must not just admit to limits but his actions, like the artist's, must "express fidelity to the human condition" (*R* 290). In politics, this means not directing one's efforts to a far-off future, but rather enacting the present in a way that does not merely replicate it. "Every great reformer tries to create in history what Shakespeare, Cervantes, Molière, and Tolstoy knew how to create: a world always ready to satisfy the hunger for freedom and dignity which every man carries in his heart. . . . The procedure of beauty, which is to contest reality while endowing it with unity, is also the procedure of rebellion" (*R* 276). Of course, the world is not remade simply by being reimagined and Camus readily concedes that "beauty . . . does not make revolutions" (*R* 276). Nonetheless, these great humanistic artists, by depicting an ugly world in which people suffered intensely, in their very act of doing so as human beings succeeded in establishing a human place in the world and in humanizing that world. In creating characters of universal appeal, they make the commonality of the absurd apparent and thus contribute to human solidarity. At the very least, then, such artists might help us to feel at home in our homelessness (in Heidegger's phrase) and, perhaps, they thereby contribute to an atmosphere conducive to "freedom and dignity." This, to Camus, is a model for political behavior.

In a later essay, Camus went somewhat further in describing what such behavior would look like: "Beauty . . . cannot serve any party; it cannot serve . . . anything but men's suffering or their liberty. The only really committed artist is he who, without refusing to take part in the combat, at least refuses to join the regular armies and remains a free-lance" (*RRD* 267). Here it is clear that Camus' ethic, though it may be more political than that of other pessimists, remains individualistic. In *The Rebel*, the moment of danger for any idea comes when it is converted into an ideology. When the thought of an individual becomes a template for group behavior, the element of freedom is removed. Performances become rote, they lack the spontaneous creativity of the initial instance, whether in the theater or outside of it. Thus, although Camus is committed to "taking part in the combat" (recall that *Combat* was the name of the resistance newspaper he edited), he insists that the sort of activism he recommends cannot include becoming a member of a party. This does not mean, of course, that his ideas cannot coincide with those of others or that he cannot work with others in the short term—but such coincidence will be just that and will not imply a long-term binding of destinies. Such destinies his pessimism, like Cioran's, continues to reject. An actor might join with others, with great unity of purpose, to mount a particular production, without thereby committing to the group for anything further. What sort of political activity, then, remains to a person without party?

The references to the artist as a "free-lance" and to Cervantes as a rebellious artist here point us back to Unamuno and to his hero, Don Quixote. While I will discuss Cervantes's actual text in chapter 7, it will be helpful here to consider briefly in what way Unamuno regarded the quixotic ethic as the upshot of his pessimism. As we have discussed, Unamuno also believed that human existence only takes place within an absurd contradiction. Like Camus, he believed we must banish any concrete image of the future from our decision making. Yet, like Camus, he rejected the withdrawal and misanthropy of someone like Schopenhauer or Cioran and used the exemplar of Don Quixote to explain his alternative.

In Unamuno's rendering, Don Quixote has no plan of justice, not even a system of beliefs. To be a free-lance is to wander the world as it is, lending a hand to whomever you meet who is in need of assistance: "Redress whatever wrong comes your way. Do now what must be done now and do here what must be done here" (*OLDQ* 16). In doing so, however, Quixote does more, Unamuno maintains, than merely behave commend-

ably. He performs an art of living that enhances the world by its appearance without fundamentally altering its temporal horizon. There is a fine line to walk here since Unamuno wants to say simultaneously that Quixote's actions do not improve the world in any permanent way even though we are all better off for having his example. Like Camus' actor, Quixote was all along *enacting* a piece of the world, yet transforming both the part and the whole in the process. Although Quixote's efforts never reach their stated goals and do not appear to directly make the world any safer, happier, or freer, his *performance* of freedom leaves a kind of afterglow that can inspire us to seek a similar relationship to our absurd condition:

> The Knight allowed himself to be led at random along the pathways of life by his horse. . . . He sallied out into the world to right the wrongs that would come forth to meet him, but with no previous plan, no program of reform. *He did not set out to apply prearranged decrees, but rather to live as knights-errant had lived; his model he had found in the lives created and narrated by art*, not in systems constructed and explained by any sort of science. (*OLDQ* 33; emphasis added)

Unamuno's Quixote is thus the instantiation of Camus' artistic rebel. *His success lies not in the later consequences of his actions but in the freedom that their occurrence represents*. While the vigorous execution of these actions does not negate their ultimate futility, it does manage to express simultaneously the essence of their author along with the inevitability of his demise. It is this unpredictable expression that marks the occurrence of something new, individual, and free. As Camus puts it: "The loftiest work will always be . . . the work that maintains an equilibrium between reality and man's rejection of that reality, each forcing the other upward in a ceaseless overflowing, characteristic of life itself at its most joyous and heart-rending extremes. Then, every once in a while, a new world appears" (*RRD* 265). The "new world" Camus refers to here, however, is not a different place or a better place than our own. Rather, it is the world of freedom that can exist within a human being, even while bound to a pessimistic universe: "There is not a single true work of art that has not in the end added to the inner freedom of each person who has known and loved it. Yes, that is the freedom I am extolling, and it is what helps me through life" (*RRD* 241). This sort of freedom is not a social or political *condition*—it cannot be locked into place by constitutional means and, strictly speaking, it cannot be shared with others. Less strictly, however, just as Camus now considers the problem of the absurd, though individual in structure, to point toward a political commonality, so the freedom he speaks of here is not *just* a private experience, but can at least be related to political and social interaction. An actor's performance is always her own but, if she shares the stage with anyone, there is a sense in which the various performances can mutually enhance one another. Moreover, it is always the actors' goal to share these performances with the audience. It is a goal that, like all others, can never really be achieved—but the repetition of such failures, the continuous reaching out and falling short, is, one might say, the real activity of the theater itself. Failing from the perspective of its goal, it is just this representational activity that, to Unamuno and Camus, generates a genuine experience of freedom, an experience compatible with the burdens of temporality.

If there is a difference between Unamuno's and Camus' ideal of a freedom, it lies in Camus' continuing emphasis on the "collective experience" of the absurd. "Rebellious art," he writes, "also ends by revealing the 'We are'" (*R* 275). When it is truly successful, as in Cervantes or Proust, the plight and triumph of the delineated individual makes visible to us our common situation. "The common dignity of man" is what is illuminated, what we see, during the experience of freedom we have in rebellion (*R* 277). This is why a rebel in politics seems, to Camus, so much like an artist who appears to work in solitude. In describing our condition, even in the most pessimistic terms, both figures call us together and call us to action. This call to action may have a specific content, but the only content that all such calls will share is to recognize the equality of our circumstances and, on this basis, to communicate. The common dignity of man is not a moral status but an existential condition—that is why it does not generate permanent rules of behavior:

> Far from obeying abstract principles, [rebellion] discovers them only in the heat of battle and in the incessant movement of contradiction. . . . If injustice is bad for the rebel, it is not because it contradicts an eternal idea of justice, but because it perpetuates the silent hostility that separates the oppressor from the oppressed. It kills the small part of existence that can be realized on this earth through the mutual understanding of men. . . . The mutual understanding and communication discovered by rebellion can survive only in the free exchange of conversation. (*R* 283)

Where Freud offered a pessimistic social contract, Camus rejects the idea of fixed terms of social engagement—but he does provide a model of pessimistic citizenship. The pessimist's engagement can be predicated on an equality of condition thrust upon us by our common situation of absurdity. While this equality generates no permanent principles, it is at least a distinct standpoint from which to view politics and to make one's own decisions about how best to intervene. And in establishing the grounds for communication with others, it offers a structure for politics that allows the radical individuality of the pessimistic spirit to come into contact with others on a regular basis. Camus rejects the conclusions of Cioran and the

other pessimists who insist on insulating the individual while still remaining within the larger pessimistic perspective.

As Camus' readers, it can seem frustrating that little about these political actions or conversations can be specified in advance. A quixotic ethic, the wanderings of a free-lance, can seem vague to the point of emptiness. But the vagueness is largely a product of the demand for a politics based on a specific future. Over and over, Camus insists that dedication to the present is in fact the more concrete political commitment in a world where the future cannot be known.

> Origin of form, source of real life, [rebellion] keeps us always erect in the savage, formless movement of history. . . . He who dedicates himself to . . . history dedicates himself to nothing and, in his turn, is nothing. But he who dedicates himself to the duration of his life, to the house he builds, to the dignity of mankind, dedicates himself to the earth and reaps from it the harvest that sows its seed and sustains the world again and again. (*R* 301–2)

If we devote ourselves to the problems that appear on our doorstep, we will not want for concrete steps to take. It is when we try to orient ourselves by means of a specific but imaginary future that our ethic descends into vagueness. Although we may seem to narrow our political engagements when we disdain to join any party, from Camus' perspective it is the parties that narrow the realm of the political by linking all behavior to the various destinies they pursue. The free-lance is the only political actor who can strike out in any direction at any time—the only one, therefore, who truly keeps the entire vast terrain of the political within the horizon of possibility.

Camus' activist philosophy thus continues to honor his pessimistic assessment of the world. Indeed, it echoes the concern first voiced by Rousseau that our consciousness of time distracts us from the reality in front of our faces: "What madness for a fleeting being like man always to look far into a future which comes so rarely and to neglect the present of which he is sure" (*E* 82). Camus has specific political desires, of course; no human being could fully divest himself of those. But he does not plan for the future or aim at it. That would be to invite frustration. Precisely because the future always remains for him open and unspecified, he leaves room for the surprises and spontaneous events that separate human freedom from historical destiny. That is why he also insists that "the 'We are' paradoxically defines a new form of individualism. . . . This individualism is in no sense pleasure; it is perpetual struggle, and, sometimes, unparalleled joy" (*R* 297). It is only when we attempt to release ourselves from historical narratives that we are able to appreciate the multiple potentialities of our being and thereby more fully respect the freedom of our peers and those who will come after us. If we care for others, we can best

express that care by exploring those potentialities as Quixote explores himself in the process of exploring the world: "Real generosity toward the future lies in giving all to the present" (*R* 304).

While he speaks of "giving all to the present," it should be noted that it is no longer Don Juan who exemplifies this attitude. Camus has left behind his absolute focus on the moment. Rather than seeking to escape from linear time into the moment, the rebel is someone who no longer relies on teleological narratives but still acts under the aegis of her time-consciousness. The "present" (as opposed to the "moment") is admitted to connect to past and future; we are simply not the masters of this connection. This is the "real generosity toward the future": neither hiding from it nor attempting to imprison it in advance. *Expecting nothing* from the future is not in any way a hostility toward the future—just the opposite, Camus claims.

Here too it should be clear that Camus as well as Unamuno (like Leopardi and Freud) are in possession of a humanistic impulse that separates them from the misanthropy of Cioran (and Rousseau and Schopenhauer). Cioran's self-disgust is only partly personal; it also extends to his status as a member of the species. Where Cioran offers the option of dying of our diseases or of our cures (and prefers the former), Camus counters with the advice of Abbé Galiani to Mme. d'Epinay: "The important thing," Camus repeats, "is not to be cured, but to live with one's ailments" (*MS* 38). Living with one's ailments is precisely what Camus' activist pessimism aims to do. It neither denies the limitations on our condition nor seeks to escape them. But it also is not paralyzed by them. Though it offers no ideological orientation in the ordinary sense, the quixotic ethic that Camus arrives at is without question intolerant of complacency. If the simultaneous injunction to explore oneself and to confront whatever injustices appear before one seems schizophrenic, one can only reply that this is in no way obvious and did not appear so to Camus. "There shines forth fleetingly the ever threatened truth that each and every man, on the foundation of his own sufferings and joys, builds for all" (*RRD* 272).

Indeed, the conjunction of the two seems to have occurred to him at the height of his political participation. In a famous editorial in *Combat* that was published on the night Paris was liberated, he wrote as follows: "Nothing is given to men, and the little they can conquer is paid for by unjust deaths. But man's greatness lies elsewhere. It lies in his decision to be stronger than his condition. *And if his condition is unjust, he has only one way of overcoming it, which is just to be himself*" (*RRD* 39–40; emphasis added). It is only, it seems, on the basis of a pessimistic acknowledgment that Camus could find simultaneous grounds for *both* individualism and human solidarity. The actions of the Resistance, he argues, were not justified by their eventual success. They were justified because they si-

multaneously gave dignity to individual life under occupation while allowing those who respected such dignity to create a common political space where they could have the experience of freedom. While the actions generated may have played a part in the demise of fascism, their failure to do so could never have invalidated the enterprise. Resistance, rebellion, if they are genuine, validate themselves in the moment of their occurrence, not by reference to some desired outcome, no matter how noble. While this, for Camus, is all the justification we should require for political acts, it is probably worth noting here that over the years such actions have proved more productive of freedom in politics than is often recognized.[20]

. . . . .

The typology I have set out in this chapter and the preceding two is, of course, a schematic one. The history of pessimism that it begins to describe could be expanded and deepened in a variety of directions. In the twentieth century alone, for example, detailed study of Weber, Adorno, Heidegger, Foucault, and Arendt from this perspective would be useful. But my intent has not been to offer an exhaustive history, but rather, as I said at the outset, to recreate the pessimistic perspective in order to trouble and interest the reader and to disturb the standard histories of political thought that exclude pessimism or treat it as a psychological condition. What I hope to have established to this point is simply the existence and seriousness of a pessimistic tradition in political philosophy, structured around the problematic of a time-bound human life and offering a variety of perspectives on that problem. In the second half of the book, I will focus more directly on that pessimism I am most concerned to defend.

One of the themes of this chapter has been the struggle of the twentieth-century pessimists, especially Camus, to define a philosophy that is not based on truths that somehow escape the destructiveness of time and yet that is equal, in some sense, to the murderous destructiveness of modern politics. Camus' critique of "dandyism," for example, betrays an impatience with an ethic that is purely personal or *in a narrow sense* aesthetic. Though Camus has in mind largely figures from the nineteenth century (as well, I believe, as his own earlier self), there is no question that this is a shoe that at times fits Cioran disturbingly well: "To make for the end of time with a flower in one's buttonhole—the sole comportment

[20] It seems to me that a very strong case exists that it was on the basis of just such a pessimistic solidarity that, for example, the rebellious dissident movements of Eastern Europe in the 1970s and 1980s coalesced. The writings of Václav Havel—and the veneration of iconoclasts like Frank Zappa by the Czech underground—echo Camus' injunction to combat oppression with individuality.

worthy of us in time's passage" (*SHD* 117–18; cf *R* 47ff.).[21] But Camus rightly believes that the evils of totalitarianism (whether or not they constitute something called Evil) simply cannot be ignored this way.

Yet, surprisingly perhaps, Camus returns at just this point to the subject of art and defends a kind of activity that is rooted in aesthetic values even when it is political. One might say, of this turn in his thought, that by means of a long detour through ideology, he comes back to Nietzsche, who was clearly one of his starting points. Though Camus faulted Nietzsche for writing words that lent comfort to fascism (while acknowledging that such was never his intent), his efforts to use aesthetic practices and techniques to craft a political ethic were perhaps more Nietzschean than he himself realized. It is in this spirit that I suggest we approach Nietzsche's own efforts to define his philosophy as a kind of pessimism. The pessimism that he suggests we practice, like that of Camus, has aesthetic models, but it is not meant to be limited to an artistic realm. Rather its aim is to break the hold that optimistic discourse has had on the political realm for many centuries—and it perhaps does so with more consistency and depth than Camus was able to register.

Unamuno, who endured the precursors of modern fascism in Spain, also felt that it was a human duty to right wrongs—but rather than search for a theory of justice to ground such a duty, he turned instead to the narrative of *Don Quixote*. This too is unexpected and, seems, at first, an aesthetic detour away from political engagement. But, as I hope the next chapters will show, the figure of Don Quixote is in fact one that is perfectly apt in the effort to make pessimism an ethic that is practicable and political. "Quixotic," like "pessimistic," is not an adjective we should blithely use as a form of denigration. I also hope that these chapters will flesh out in more detail the pessimistic sense of freedom and individuality that this chapter only began to develop.

Cutting against the typology that ordered the last three chapters, I have also relied on a distinction between those pessimisms that are misanthropic versus those that are humanistic. This distinction is also schematic: humanism and its opposite are not clear-cut categories. The figures I have discussed—as I think the substance of what I have written demonstrates—offer a range of opinions on our species that I would not want to see simply reduced to pro- and anti-. I have used this distinction, as I have used the typology, to give the reader a handle on the issues involved and to provide a preliminary sorting that might encourage further study.

[21] Parfait, whose study of Cioran is one of the best, reaches a similar conclusion, though she does not view it as necessarily a criticism (2001, 168–71). Cioran, one might say, also acknowledges the horrors of the twentieth century—by the energetic attempt to hide his life from politics altogether. *Je laisse à juger si l'on peut parler d'égoisme.*

Nonetheless, I do, of course, believe that the distinction gets at something real, even if in a crude way, and that there is within the pessimistic problematic a fundamental issue about whether the human condition is something to be embraced or, insofar as this is possible, rejected. In part III, I will attempt to give a better accounting for my preference for the humanist pessimists.

PART III