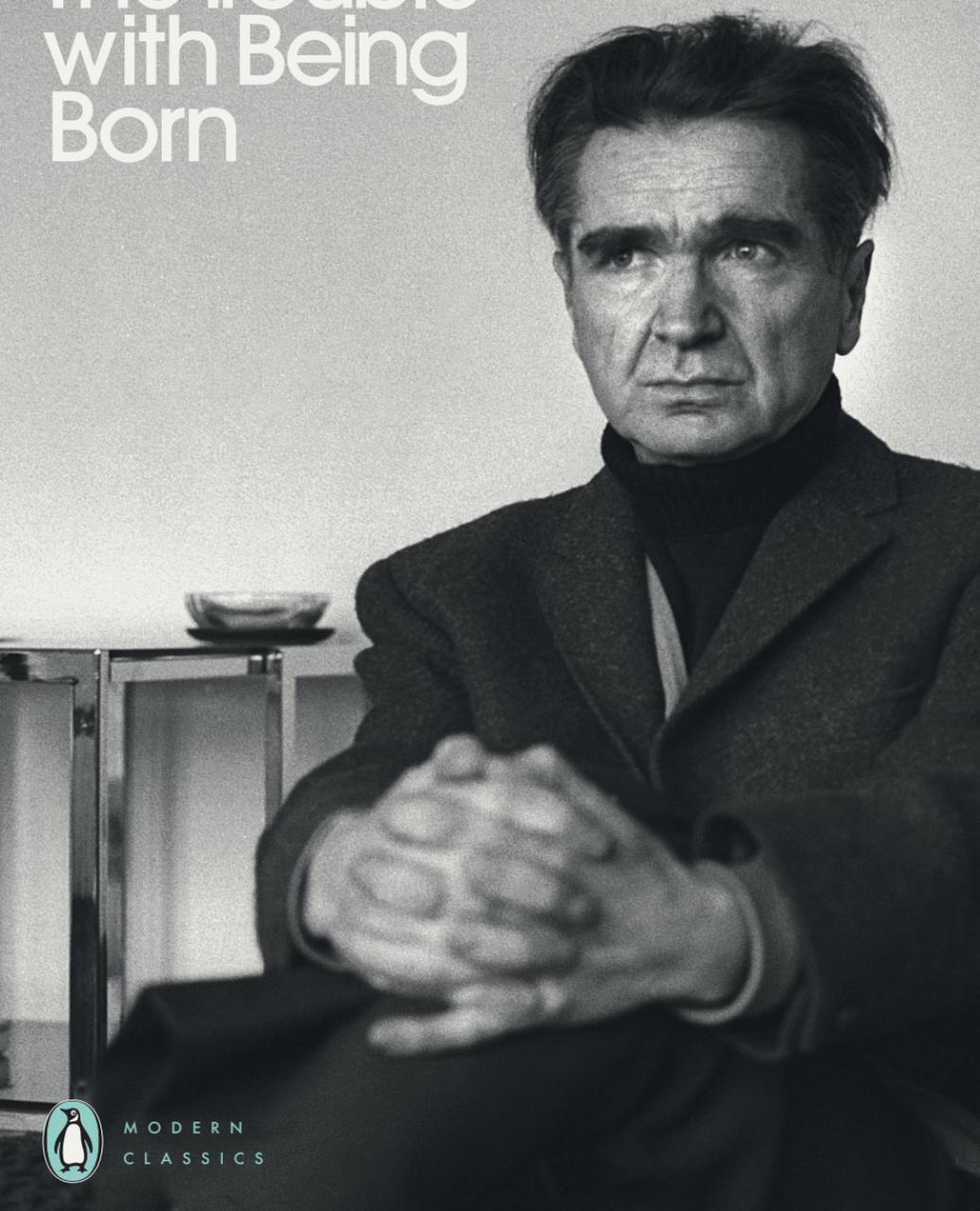


# E. M. Cioran

## The Trouble with Being Born



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*The Trouble with Being Born*

E. M. Cioran (1911–1995) was one of Central Europe’s most remarkable philosophers, whose thinking was influenced by pessimism and existentialism. A Romanian, he lived most of his life in Paris. His major works in Romanian include *On the Heights of Despair* and, in French, *A Short History of Decay* (also published in Penguin Modern Classics) and *Drawn and Quartered*. He refused nearly every literary prize he was awarded.

Richard Howard (b. 1929) is an American poet, critic and translator. He was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for his poetry collection *Untitled Subjects*, and the PEN Translation Prize for his translation of E. M. Cioran’s *A Short History of Decay*. Howard has translated more than 150 works from French into English.



E. M. CIORAN

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*Translated from the French by* RICHARD HOWARD



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Penguin  
Random House  
UK

First published in France as *De l'inconvénient d'être né*, 1973

First published in Penguin Classics 2020

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Translation copyright © Seaver Books, 1976, 2012

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Set in 11.25/14 pt Dante MT Std

Typeset by Jouve (UK), Milton Keynes

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-0-241-46727-5

[www.greenpenguin.co.uk](http://www.greenpenguin.co.uk)



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*The Trouble with Being Born*



## I

Three in the morning. I realize this second, then this one, then the next: I draw up the balance sheet for each minute. And why all this? *Because I was born*. It is a special type of sleeplessness that produces the indictment of birth.

### §

‘Ever since I was born’ – that *since* has a resonance so dreadful to my ears it becomes unendurable.

### §

There is a kind of knowledge that strips whatever you do of weight and scope: for such knowledge, everything is without basis except itself. Pure to the point of abhorring even the notion of an object, it translates that extreme science according to which doing or not doing something comes down to the same thing and is accompanied by an equally extreme satisfaction: that of being able to rehearse, each time, the discovery that any gesture performed is not worth defending, that nothing is enhanced by the merest vestige of substance, that ‘reality’ falls within the province of lunacy. Such knowledge deserves to be called posthumous: it functions as if the knower were alive and not alive, a being and the memory of a being. ‘It’s already in the past,’ he says about all he achieves, even as he achieves it, thereby forever destitute of the *present*.

§

We do not rush toward death, we flee the catastrophe of birth, survivors struggling to forget it. Fear of death is merely the projection into the future of a fear which dates back to our first moment of life.

We are reluctant, of course, to treat birth as a scourge: has it not been inculcated as the sovereign good – have we not been told that the worst came at the end, not at the outset of our lives? Yet evil, the real evil, is *behind*, not ahead of us. What escaped Jesus did not escape Buddha: ‘If three things did not exist in the world, O disciples, the Perfect One would not appear in the world . . .’ And ahead of old age and death he places the fact of birth, source of every infirmity, every disaster.

§

We can endure any truth, however destructive, provided it replaces everything, provided it affords as much vitality as the hope for which it substitutes.

§

I do nothing, granted. But I *see* the hours pass – which is better than trying to fill them.

§

No need to elaborate *works* – merely say something that can be murmured in the ear of a drunkard or a dying man.

§

Nothing is a 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.

§

To defy heredity is to defy billions of years, to defy the *first* cell.

§

There is a god at the outset, if not at the end, of every joy.

§

Never comfortable in the immediate, I am lured only by what precedes me, what distances me from here, the numberless moments when I was not: the non-born.

§

Physical need of dishonor. How I should have liked to be the executioner's son!

§

What right have you to pray for me? I need no intercessor, I shall manage *alone*. The prayers of a wretch I might accept, but no one else's, not even a saint's. I cannot bear your bothering about my salvation. If I apprehend salvation and flee it, your prayers are merely an indiscretion. Invest them elsewhere; in any case, we do not serve the same gods. If mine are impotent, there is every reason to believe yours are no less so. Even assuming they are as you imagine them, they would still lack the power to cure me of a horror older than my memory.

§

What misery a sensation is! Ecstasy itself, *perhaps*, is nothing more.

§

Unmaking, decreating, is the only task man may take upon himself, if he aspires, as everything suggests, to distinguish himself from the Creator.

§

I know that my birth is fortuitous, a laughable accident, and yet, as soon as I forget myself, I behave as if it were a capital event, indispensable to the progress and equilibrium of the world.

§

To have committed every crime but that of being a father.

§

As a general rule, men *expect* disappointment: they know they must not be impatient, that it will come sooner or later, that it will hold off long enough for them to proceed with their undertakings of the moment. The disabused man is different: for him, disappointment occurs at the same time as the deed; he has no need to await it, it is present. By freeing himself from succession, he has devoured the possible and rendered the future superfluous. 'I cannot meet you in *your* future,' he says to the others. 'We do not have a single moment in common.' Because for him the whole of the future is already here.

When we perceive the end in the beginning, we move faster than time. Illumination, that lightning disappointment, affords a certitude which transforms disillusion into deliverance.

§

I disentangle myself from appearances, yet I am snarled in them nonetheless; or rather: I am halfway between these appearances and *that* which invalidates them, *that* which has neither name nor content, *that* which is nothing and everything. I shall never take the decisive step outside them; my nature forces me to drift, to remain forever in the equivocal, and if I were to attempt a clean break in one direction or the other, I should perish by my salvation.

§

My faculty for disappointment surpasses understanding. It is what lets me comprehend Buddha, but also what keeps me from following him.

§

What we can no longer commiserate with counts for nothing – no longer exists. We realize why our past so quickly stops being ‘ours’ and turns into history, something which no longer concerns anyone.

§

In the deepest part of yourself, aspire to be as dispossessed, as lamentable as God.

§

True contact between beings is established only by mute presence, by apparent non-communication, by that mysterious and wordless exchange which resembles inward prayer.

§

What I know at sixty, I knew as well at twenty. Forty years of a long, a superfluous, labor of verification.

§

I am for the most part so convinced that everything is lacking in basis, consequence, justification, that if someone dared to contradict me, even the man I most admire, he would seem to me a charlatan or a fool.

§

Even in childhood I watched the hours flow, independent of

any reference, any action, any event, the disjunction of time from what was not itself, its autonomous existence, its special status, its empire, its tyranny. I remember quite clearly that afternoon when, for the first time, confronting the empty universe, I was no more than a passage of moments reluctant to go on playing their proper parts. Time was coming unstuck from being – *at my expense*.

§

Unlike Job, I have not cursed the day I was born; all the other days, on the contrary, I have covered with my anathemas . . .

§

If death had only negative aspects, dying would be an unmanageable action.

§

*Everything exists; nothing exists.* Either formula affords a like serenity. The man of anxiety, to his misfortune, remains between them, trembling and perplexed, forever at the mercy of a nuance, incapable of gaining a foothold in the security of being or in the absence of being.

§

Here on the coast of Normandy, at this hour of the morning, I needed no one. The very gulls' presence bothered me: I drove them off with stones. And hearing their supernatural shrieks, I realized that that was just what I wanted, that only the Sinister could soothe me, and that it was for such a confrontation that I had got up before dawn.

§

'In this our life' – *to be in life*: suddenly I am struck by the strangeness of such an expression, as if it applied to no one.

§

Whenever I flag and feel sorry for my brain, I am carried away by an irresistible desire to *proclaim*. That is the moment I realize the paltry depths out of which rise reformers, prophets, and saviors.

§

I long to be free – desperately free. Free as the stillborn are free.

§

If there is so much discomfort and ambiguity in lucidity, it is because lucidity is the result of the poor use to which we have put our sleepless nights.

§

Our obsession with birth, by shifting us to a point *before* our past, robs us of our pleasure in the future, in the present, and even in the past.

§

Rare are the days when, projected into post-history, I fail to witness the gods' hilarity at leaving behind the human episode.

What we need is an alternate vision, when that of the Last Judgment no longer satisfies anyone.

§

An idea, a being, anything which becomes incarnate loses identity, turns grotesque. Frustration of all achievement. Never quit the possible, wallow in eternal trifling, *forget* to be born.

§

The real, the unique misfortune: to see the light of day. A disaster which dates back to aggressiveness, to the seed of expansion and rage within origins, to the tendency to the worst which first shook them up.

§

When we see someone again after many years, we should sit down facing each other and say nothing for hours, so that by means of silence our consternation can relish itself.

§

Days of miraculous sterility. Instead of rejoicing over them, proclaiming victory, transforming this drought into a celebration, seeing it as an illustration of my fulfillment, my maturity, in short my detachment, I let myself be invaded by spite and resentment: so tenacious is the old Adam in us, the bustling *canaille*, unfit for self-effacement.

§

I am enraptured by Hindu philosophy, whose essential endeavor is to surmount the self; and everything I do, everything I think is only myself and the self's humiliations.

§

While we are performing an action, we have a goal; performed, the action has no more reality for us than the goal we were seeking. Nothing of much consequence here – no more than a game. But some of us are conscious of this game *in the course of* the action: we experience the conclusion in the premises, the achieved in the virtual – we undermine 'seriousness' by the very fact that we exist.

The vision of non-reality, of universal default, is the product of an everyday sensation and a sudden *frisson*. *Everything is a game* – without such a revelation, the sensation we haul through our usual lives would not have that characteristic stamp our metaphysical experiences require to be distinguished from their imitations, our *discomforts*. For every discomfort is only an abortive metaphysical experience.

§

When we have worn out the interest we once took in death, when we realize we have nothing more to gain from it, we fall back on birth, we turn to a much more inexhaustible abyss.

§

At this very moment, I am suffering – as we say in French, *j'ai mal*. This event, crucial for me, is nonexistent, even inconceivable for anyone else, for everyone else. Except for God, if that word can have a meaning.

§

We hear on all sides, that if everything is pointless, to do well whatever it is you're doing is not. Yet it is, even so. To reach this conclusion, and to endure it, you need ply no trade, or at most, a king's – say, Solomon's.

§

I react like everyone else, even like those I most despise; but I make up for it by deploring every action I commit, good or bad.

§

*Where* are my sensations? They have melted into . . . me, and what is this me, this self, but the sum of these evaporated sensations?

§

*Extraordinary* and *null* – these two adjectives apply to the sexual act, and, consequently, to everything resulting from it, to life first of all.

§

Lucidity is the only vice which makes us free – free *in a desert*.

§

As the years pass, the number of those we can communicate with diminishes. When there is no longer anyone to talk to, at last we will be as we were before stooping to a name.

§

Once we reject lyricism, to blacken a page becomes an ordeal: what's the use of writing in order to say *exactly* what we had to say?

§

We cannot consent to be judged by someone who has suffered less than ourselves. And since each of us regards himself as an unrecognized Job . . .

§

I dream of an ideal confessor to tell everything to, spill it all: I dream of a blasé saint.

§

After all the ages of dying, the living must have learned the trick; how else explain how the insect, the rodent, and man himself have managed, after a little fuss, to do it so properly?

§

Paradise was unendurable, otherwise the first man would have adapted to it; this world is no less so, since here we regret paradise or anticipate another one. What to do? where to go? Do nothing and go nowhere, easy enough.

§

Health is certainly a good thing; but those who possess it have been denied the opportunity of realizing it, for self-conscious health is either compromised or about to be. Since no one delights in his absence of infirmities, we may speak without exaggeration of a *just* punishment of the healthy.

§

Some have misfortunes; others, obsessions. Which are worse off?

§

Don't be fair to me: I can do without everything but the tonic of injustice.

§

'All is suffering' – modernized, the Buddhist expression runs: 'All is nightmare.'

Thereby, nirvana, whose mission now is to end a much more widespread torment, is no longer a recourse reserved to the few but becomes as universal as nightmare itself.

§

What is that one crucifixion compared to the daily kind any insomniac endures?

§

I was walking late one night along a tree-lined path; a chestnut fell at my feet. The noise it made as it burst, the resonance it

provoked in me, and an upheaval out of all proportion to this insignificant event thrust me into miracle, into the rapture of the definitive, as if there were no more questions – only answers. I was drunk on a thousand unexpected discoveries, none of which I could make use of . . .

This is how I nearly reached the Supreme. But instead I went on with my walk.

§

We tell our troubles to someone only to make him suffer, to make him assume them for himself. If we wanted to win him over, we would admit none but abstract worries, the only kind those who love us are eager to hear.

§

I do not forgive myself for being born. It is as if, creeping into this world, I had profaned a mystery, betrayed some momentous pledge, committed a fault of nameless gravity. Yet in a less assured mood, birth seems a calamity I would be miserable not having known.

§

Thought is never *innocent*, for it is pitiless, it is aggressive, it helps us burst our bonds. Were we to suppress what is evil and even demonic in thought, we should have to renounce the very concept of deliverance.

§

The surest way of not being deceived is to undermine one certainty after the next. Yet the fact remains that everything that matters was accomplished *outside* doubt.

§