

# “Channels of Interference”: Maurice Blanchot and Emil Cioran

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*Drawing on the concept of “literary interference” developed by the pioneer of poly-system theory, Itamar Even-Zohar, and expanded by other scholars, as well as on various interpretations of intertextuality, this article compares two twentieth century thinkers: the French writer, philosopher, and literary theorist Maurice Blanchot and the Romanian-born French essayist and philosopher Emil (E. M.) Cioran. The article uses Even-Zohar’s notion of “channel of interference,” and presents three such “channels” and their results that shed light on the relationship between Blanchot’s and Cioran’s works. The first “channel of interference” that I have termed the “change of epoch,” borrowing a phrase from Blanchot, led to their choice of fragmentary writing. The second, existentialism, might be able to bring their works together, especially through the way they treat the subject of suicide, focussing on Blanchot’s *The Space of Literature* and Cioran’s *On the Heights of Despair*. Finally, through the third “channel of interference,” the two thinkers’ skepticism, the article explores their engagement with the concepts of passion/passivity/patience.*

Keywords: literary theory / intertextuality / interference / Blanchot, Maurice / Cioran, Emil / fragmentary writing / existentialism / scepticism

## Preamble

Studying the biographies of the French writer, literary theorist and philosopher Maurice Blanchot (1907–2003) and the Romanian-born French philosopher and essayist E. M. Cioran (1911–1995), comparatists can be immediately struck by their lure of anonymity. The original subtitle of Christophe Bident’s biography of Blanchot, which the English translation unfortunately did not retain—the “invisible partner”—alludes to Blanchot’s desire to avoid notoriety. Ilinca Zarifopol-Johnston’s biography of Cioran suggests the same distance from the media and the public: after obtaining a doctoral fellowship in

Paris (1937), Cioran decided not to get back to Romania, and, with his French debut, *A Short History of Decay* (1949), pursued the career of a “born-translated” writer (Walkowitz; A. Ionescu, “Language”), signing his work with “the cryptic” abbreviation E. M. Cioran, with which he reinvented his self “as a ‘civilized’ West European author” (Zarifopol-Johnston 8).

Blanchot’s and Cioran’s desire to keep themselves anonymous partly originates from the “scandals”<sup>1</sup> of their youth. While scholar-polemicists such as Jeffrey Mehlman, Steven Ungar, Richard Wolin and Philippe Mesnard exaggerated in Blanchot’s case (see also Nancy), those who studied Cioran’s case (Nicole Parfait, Marta Petreu, Cristina Bejan, among others) were right.

After graduating from the University of Strasbourg, and obtaining an MA equivalent at the University of Paris, Blanchot embarked on a career as a political journalist, working for the conservative daily *Le Journal des débats* (1932–1940), the anti-Nazi daily *Le Rempart* (1933), the weekly *Aux écoutes* (1934–1937), but also for the far-right monthly *Combat* (1936–1937) and weekly *L’Insurgé* (1937). His contributions to the far-right journals as well as some polemical remarks on Léon Blum, a Jewish politician, led to the inclusion of Blanchot’s works in the investigation on the 1930s French intellectuals’ fascist discourse (see Hill, *Blanchot* 24). Most scholar-polemicists ignored three important details of Blanchot’s life: first, in 1935, he described Hitler as “the representative of an unacceptable political doctrine” (quoted in Hill, *Blanchot* 31); second, he was a fierce adversary of the pro-Nazi collaborationist, antisemitic novelist and journalist Robert Brasillach; third, he helped his life-time friend Emmanuel Levinas’s wife and daughter to avoid deportation (Bident 24–28; Lescourret 64–72).

After specializing in philosophy at the University of Bucharest, while on a fellowship in Berlin (1933), Cioran saw in the national-socialist experiment the promise of a great future for Germany and the source of Europe’s regeneration, as his articles published in *Vremea*, *Calendarul*, and *Acțiunea* testified. He expressed his strong admiration for Hitler’s “pure vitality” and “fiery passion” (Cioran, “Impresii” 52).<sup>2</sup> In *The Transfiguration of Romania*, he pleaded for the elimination of Jews and Hungarians from the country. Later on, he repented

<sup>1</sup> Allusion to Ungar’s title.

<sup>2</sup> All translations from Romanian, French, and German are mine if not indicated otherwise.

for his admiration of a "demented sect," to which he declared himself immune (Ornea 198), and excised all antisemitic assertions from the *Transfiguration's* second edition, where he added an official apologetic foreword (Zarifopol-Johnston 117).

The lack of references to Cioran in Blanchot's work and Cioran's remarks on Blanchot indicate rather an antagonistic relation between the two. Cioran characterized Blanchot with a strange mixture of criticism and admiration, calling him a "confused and verbose," "deep, yet cracked mind" (Cioran, *Cahiers* 111, 454). He found Blanchot—the theorist "the most profound yet the most exasperating critic" (544) and Blanchot—the writer, the creator of "elegant hermeticism," which, yet, remained "nothing but words" (622). In "La fin du roman," Cioran praised Blanchot as a novelist but portrayed him as a nihilist, an accusation to which Blanchot implicitly responded, without ever naming Cioran, in "At Every Extreme" (February 1995) and "Death of the Last Writer" (March 1955), later on included in *The Book to Come*. Cioran reworked his text for *The Temptation to Exist*, changing its title into "Beyond the Novel" and, subsequently, suppressed Blanchot's name but left the definition of "the deliciously unreadable" genre that "having squandered its substance, no longer has an object" (140).<sup>3</sup> There is no wonder that in his "exercises of admiration," he preferred to mention Blanchot's contribution only in passing in the section on Caillois: "in the analysis of the literary phenomena [he] has brought to the point of heroism or asphyxiation the superstition of depth in a rumination that combines the advantages of the vague and the abyss." (Cioran, *Anathemas* 206)

The poverty of comparative studies on Blanchot and Cioran bears witness to the two writers' implicit or explicit dialogue. So far, Camelia Elias put in parallel a multitude of fragments at work in literature, philosophy, and theology, including Blanchot's and Cioran's. Shane Weller's *Modernism and Nihilism* debunked the various theories about Blanchot's and Cioran's nihilism, showing how they surmounted it by privileging the literary (Blanchot) and the annihilation of belief and value (Cioran) (42–73). Gabriel Popescu contrasted Cioran's "solitude in the world" (in *A Short History of Decay*) with Blanchot's "essential solitude" (in *The Space of Literature*).

Reading through Blanchot's silences and braving Cioran's caveat that Blanchot was a "confused" mind, aware that Cioran was often

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<sup>3</sup> I reconstructed this neglected, yet highly revealing exchange, starting from Bident 549, note 11; Cavailès xlv; Demont 185, note 9.

un *enfant terrible*, whose entire work can be associated with paradox, I will examine more closely how their works may illuminate each other through Itamar Even-Zohar's notion of interference, which is more appropriate than the vague notions of influence or affinity.

### Theoretical Premises: Establishing Interferences

Drawing on Mikhail Bakhtin and Yuri Lotman, Even-Zohar coined the notion of interference in the context of intercultural relations, in the late 1960's–early 1970's (Even-Zohar, *An Introduction*; “The Relations”), when Julia Kristeva introduced the concept of intertextuality in her essays from *Tel Quel* and *Critique*, followed by her books *Séméiotiké*, *Le texte du roman*, *La révolution du langage poétique*.<sup>4</sup>

Even-Zohar returned to his concept in the special issue “Polysystem Studies” of *Poetics Today* (1990), formulating the following definition: “a relation(ship) between literatures, whereby a certain literature A (a source literature) may become a source of direct or indirect loans for another literature B (a target literature).” (Even-Zohar, “Laws” 54) By loans he designated “the totality of the activities involved with the literary system,” including “the role and function of literature, the rules of the game of the literary institution, the nature of literary criticism and scholarship, the relations between religious, political, and other activities within culture” (54).

In 2004, Marijan Dović, who had previously proposed a more appropriate theoretical-methodological apparatus in empirical literary studies (Dović, “Radikalni konstruktivizem”) further nuanced the notion of literary interference. He differentiated between “literary interference” and “interliterary exchange mechanisms” (Dović, “Literary Repertoire” 70) and saw borrowings not only “connected ... to texts, genres or models,” but also as part of “the organization of literary critique, institutions, publishing system, State funding of art and so on,” adding that “[a] weak polysystem cannot operate using exclusively

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<sup>4</sup> Although the limited space of this article does not allow me to mention the numerous illustrious theorists from Canada, Italy, France, Germany, Britain, the States, and Eastern Europe who worked on intertextuality, mention should be made of Laurent Milesi's “Inter-textualités,” Tötösy de Zepetnek's work on comparative cultural studies (Tötösy de Zepetnek, *Comparative*; “From Comparative”), Juvan's work on a poetics of intertextuality (Juvan, *History*) and discussions on “asymmetries of the world literary system” (Juvan, *Literary* 80–85), Franco Moretti's “world literary system” (Moretti, “Conjectures”).

its own repertoire, which is why it takes up foreign models and repertoires" (69–70).<sup>5</sup>

Even-Zohar's and Dović's definitions of interference are otherwise consonant with Marko Juvan's interpretation of intertextuality as

essentially a cross-cultural phenomenon linking together not only one national literature with other—including marginal, peripheral—literatures and cultures, but also, within a given semiosphere, mainstream literary production with its past, forgotten forms, and marginal, subaltern, or emergent subsystems; finally, intertextuality structures the text's affiliation and response to its cultural contexts—of other arts, social discourses (from politics to science), sociolects, ideologies, ways of living, and media. (Juvan, *History* 7)

Like Dović, Juvan emphasized the role of "understanding and employing foreign elements in a new cultural horizon," because in this way comparative criticism can move "into global theory of dialogism and intercultural exchange" (66).

Even-Zohar's pre-literary comparatist situation, which, otherwise, did not make a great impact in comparative studies, with the notable exceptions of Belgium, China, and Eastern Europe where it was further improved and expanded (Salvador 2; Lambert 11), can represent an appropriate tool to put in parallel Blanchot's critical works and Cioran's philosophical essays. I share Janez Strutz's conjecture that interference can be "a unique setting for comparative literary studies, a laboratory of literary and cultural scholarship" (Strutz 244). In my view, the two thinkers' works can be connected through what Even-Zohar called "channels of interference" (Even-Zohar, "Laws" 57), without offering us a definition of his term. I therefore endeavor to reconstruct this concept from his illustrations and define it as: the networks via which one source literature is assimilated by a target source literature, either directly (without the mediation of translation) or indirectly (through translation). The next sections of this article will delve into three main channels of interference ("the change of epoch," existentialism and skepticism) resulting in three similar modes of writing or literary themes: fragmentary writing, also connected to the concept of disaster, engaging with experience through recurrent themes such as the suicidal act, and dealing with the notions of passion/passivity/patience.

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<sup>5</sup> His examples of interferences from Slovenian literature canonical figures (Matija Čop and France Prešeren) were "cultivating a poetic language," finding a new "versification system", and "opening new spaces" through which many models were successfully incorporated in the target literature (71–73).

In order to establish whether these channels of interference were direct or not, I propose to return to the two writers' biographies. Both Blanchot and Cioran were *à-la-page* readers and commentators of Romanticism, existentialism and skepticism. Before moving to France, Cioran's exposure to French culture was massive. He did not need the mediation of translation, being proficient in French, which became his first language after 1937. Nevertheless, the "channels of interference" I propose do not refer exclusively to French but also to German and Greek models. While both Blanchot and Cioran spoke German, in which case the channels of interference were direct, they may also have resorted to translations from Greek philosophy, in which case they were indirect.

### **The First Channel of Interference: "The Change of Epoch"— Fragmentary Writing and the Experience of the Disaster**

The first channel of interference that can be placed in Dovič's larger interpretation of the polysystem (Dovič, "Literary Repertoire" 69) refers to what Blanchot named a "change of epoch" (Blanchot, *The Infinite* 328–329; *The Writing* 102)<sup>6</sup> in the aftermath of the Second World War.<sup>7</sup> The Holocaust revealed the weak foundations of Western thought, whose inability to conceive difference legitimated the Nazis' radical antisemitism. The immediate response to this change was fragmentary writing, which became a new genre and a new "organization of literary critique" (Dovič, "Literary Repertoire" 69) in the 1950's, a period of "anxiety and uncertainty," "upheaval and stagnation, discovery and obfuscation, readjustment and resistance" (Hill, *Maurice Blanchot* 37). Blanchot's and Cioran's return to the fragment corresponds to what Juvan called "the text's affiliation and response to its cultural contexts" (Juvan, *History* 7). Fragmentary writing makes the two thinkers' texts resonate, since both were attracted by the fragment's interminability/incompletion and its possibility "of 'recasting' its form," offering "a perspective which combines both the philosophical and theoretical

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<sup>6</sup> Blanchot used "the change of epoch" without defining it, also after the May 1968 Paris events, when he referred to the way in which numerous other contemporary cultural phenomena such as literary theory and the avant-garde novel were affected (Hill, *Maurice Blanchot* 49).

<sup>7</sup> For a discussion on the failure of the Enlightenment project and the dramatic changes that occurred in the aftermath of the Second World War, see also A. Ionescu, "The Essay" 345.

aspects of literature and the more affective experience of the text" (Watt 13). In their demand for discontinuity, they resorted, albeit independently, to similar trimming, segmenting, styling *en abyme*.

This type of channel of interference illustrates the midway where Blanchot, trained as a philosopher, yet professing literary criticism, meets Cioran, trained as a philosopher, yet adopting an essayistic writing style whose "secret formula" is often "consonant with poetry" (Oprescu 186).

Their fragments share "foreign models and repertoires" (Dović, "Literary Repertoire" 70), mainly Heidegger's works on language, the Jena romantics' best-known texts, and Nietzsche's "eternal return" which they imported directly. The fragment was theorized in the short-lived literary magazine *Athenaeum* (1798–1800) initiated by August Wilhelm Schlegel and Friedrich Schlegel.<sup>8</sup> Blanchot expressed his conviction that through the Schlegel brothers' manifesto, literature was to "bear in itself this question of discontinuity or difference as a question of form ... before consigning them to Nietzsche and, beyond Nietzsche, to the future" (Blanchot, *The Infinite* 359) and engaged with Hölderlin's "sacred" speech (Blanchot, *The Work* 111–131).<sup>9</sup> Cioran who also had an interest in the aphoristic school of Schopenhauer and Lichtenberg memorized and commented on several passages from Novalis and Schlegel (Cioran, *Cahiers* 418, 563, 685; cf. Zarifopol-Johnston 53), alluding to "falling into fragments" (Cioran, *The Temptation* 192). Blanchot's indebtedness and references to Nietzsche are so frequent that the task of footnoting them becomes impossible (see, for instance, Blanchot, *The Infinite* 137–170; *The Work* 287–299), while Cioran's first volumes (especially *On the Heights* and *Tears and Saints*) are highly reminiscent of Nietzsche, whom he admired for having questioned the discourse of any philosophical system.<sup>10</sup> Cioran agreed with Nietzsche who had stated that treatises "are for jackasses and magazine readers" (Nietzsche 579) and asserted: "The mediocrity of philosophy can be explained by the fact that one cannot think but at a low temperature. When you master your fever, you arrange your thoughts like puppets; you pull ideas by the string and the public does not deny itself illusion." (Cioran, *Amurgul* 19)<sup>11</sup>

<sup>8</sup> For a discussion on the theoretical romanticism's originality and its "radical modernity," see Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy 39–40.

<sup>9</sup> On Blanchot and Romanticism see Allen; McKeane and Opelz.

<sup>10</sup> For Nietzsche's influence on Cioran see Bolea, *Jung* 24; Regier, "Cioran's Nietzsche." For Cioran's distancing from Nietzsche see Liiceanu, *Itinéraires* 27–29.

<sup>11</sup> The quotation is also an allusion to Lev Shestov's existential principles: "But

Blanchot's "fragmentary turn" differentiated between the fragment, "the task of rendering all the others indeterminate" (Holland 260), thus "only the dialectical moment in a greater ensemble" (Blanchot, *Political Writings* 63), which was in relation to "the patience of pure impatience" (Blanchot, *The Writing* 34), and "fragmentary writing" that "does not know self-sufficiency," "does not speak in view of itself, does not have its content as meaning" (Blanchot, *The Infinite* 152). This difference shows that Blanchot's conception of writing was "'unworking' and (self-)effacement, the fragmentary—rather than the fragment" (Milesi, "B Effects").

Cioran took pride in writing his books as discontinuous aphoristic fragments: "[w]orks die: fragments, not having lived, cannot die either" (Cioran, *The Trouble* 168). He declared to Laurence Tâcu: "I'm an author of fragments" (Cioran, "Je suis un auteur à fragments" 345).

Exploring further the channel of interference which I identified as "the change of epoch," and its result, the fragment, I return to one of Blanchot's accounts on the fragment as the inner experience of the disaster:

Why does writing—when we understand this movement as the change from one era to a different one, and when we think of it as the experience (the inexperience) of the disaster—always imply the words inscribed at the beginning of this "fragment," which, however, it revokes? (Blanchot, *The Writing* 102)

Through this channel of interference, which is in close relation to the next one, existentialism, we can equate the total light that Blanchot sees when the falling of the star (*aster*) occurs (*The Writing of the Disaster*) with the demonic light that Cioran invokes in *On the Heights of Despair*. For Blanchot,

[l]ight breaks forth: the burst of light, the dispersion that resonates or vibrates dazzlingly—and in clarity clamors but does not clarify. The breaking forth of light, the shattering reverberation of a language to which no hearing can be given. (Blanchot, *The Writing* 39)

For Cioran, "the passion for the absurd" could throw "a demonic light on chaos" (Cioran, *On the Heights* 10) in connection with ecstatic states that lure the one who looks at it and pushes him into disaster which Cioran names apocalypse or "eternal silence":

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the temperate zones of human and cosmic life are not in the least like the poles or the equator." (Shestov, *Speculation* 280)



Let wildfires spread rapidly and a terrifying noise drown out everything so that even the smallest animal would know that the end is near. Let all form become formless, and chaos swallow the structure of the world in a gigantic maelstrom. Let there be tremendous commotion and noise, terror, and explosion, and then let there be eternal silence and total forgetfulness. And in those final moments, let all that humanity has felt until now, hope, regret, love, despair, and hatred, explode with such force that nothing is left behind. (52–53)

Both Blanchot's falling of the star and Cioran's demonic light imply the necessity to go beyond phenomenology. Mention should be made that phenomenology ultimately comes from *phos* (light), which is thus the science of what appears in the light.

### **The Second Channel of Interference: Existentialism—The Theme of the Suicidal Act and the Notion of Disaster**

Deriving its insights from phenomenology, whose roots can be found in Edmund Husserl, existentialism is concerned with human existence. I equate the second channel of interference between Blanchot's and Cioran's works with existentialism, which in its first phase (1840's) was represented by Kierkegaard, the second (1880–1940) by Nietzsche, Husserl, Karl Jaspers and Martin Heidegger, the third (1930–1970) by Albert Camus, Gabriel Marcel, Simone de Beauvoir, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Jean-Paul Sartre, whose doctrine was that "existence precedes essence; or ... that subjectivity must be our point of departure" (Sartre 20).<sup>12</sup> Blanchot and Cioran were in the midst of the existentialist wave that followed the Second World War and they engaged with some of the major predecessors of existentialism, especially, Kierkegaard and Nietzsche (see Cioran, *The Temptation* 12; cf. Bident 187, 193; Regier, "Cioran's Nietzsche"; Sontag in Cioran, *The Temptation*), but also Heidegger. However, as this section will show, very few scholars spoke about Blanchot's and Cioran's existentialism. From this point of view, this section endeavors to follow the urge that Lauren du Graf, Julia Elsky and Clémentine Fauré invoked in the latest issue on existentialism of *Yale French Studies*: "it is time to reanimate the statue, to de-essentialize existentialism, as it were" or to go "beyond the existentialist myths" (Graf, Elsky and Fauré 5).

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<sup>12</sup> See also Huisman; Bolea, "What Is Existentialism?"; *Existențialismul astăzi*; Dreyfus.

According to Bident, “[f]or Blanchot ..., the success of existentialism (even in its theoretical bases) had an element of mythmaking about it, and betrayed true *existence*...” (Bident 195). Bident records Emmanuel Levinas’s interpretation, similar to Georges Bataille’s,<sup>13</sup> of *Thomas the Obscure* as a “demand of experience” and his analysis of Blanchot’s *there is*, a concept to which Levinas returned in *Existence and Existents* (506, note 12).<sup>14</sup>

The young Cioran belonged to a group of intellectuals who “ostentatiously styled themselves the ‘Young Generation’” (Hitchins 10), many of them also members of the *Criterion Association* (1932–1934): the historian of religion Mircea Eliade (1907–1986), the avantgarde playwright Eugène Ionesco (1909–1994), philosophers Mircea Vulcănescu (1904–1952) and Nae Ionescu (1890–1940), the mentor of the whole group, who taught them to experience life. Ionescu’s Romanian version of existentialism was *trăirism* (from *a trăi*: to live). For him, “philosophizing is an act of life, an act of experience [trăire]” (N. Ionescu, 14; for the origins of Nae Ionescu’s *trăirism* see Cernica). Nevertheless, Ionescu’s method combined existentialist doctrines with ideas ranging from xenophobic nationalism (Bejan 25–57). *Criterion* organized conferences, symposia and arts exhibitions in Bucharest, and had their own eponymous publication, where they defined their “quintessential concepts ‘*Experiența*’ [experience], ‘Spirituality’ and ‘Generation’” (Bejan 154). As Eliade confessed, the association audaciously considered itself “a precursor to the French cultural circle surrounding existentialism” (Bejan 271).

I would like to go back to Juvan’s theory, since *trăirism*/existentialism is what he called “essentially a cross-cultural phenomenon” (Juvan, *History* 7); Cioran’s *trăirism*, a local, marginal form of existentialism,<sup>15</sup> is that “forgotten form” of the past (7) which is reiterated in his French texts in consonance with the existentialist ideas that were circulating in France in those times. Moreover, Juvan mentioned that “[a]ny text

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<sup>13</sup> Blanchot’s friend, Bataille wrote a letter addressed to Gaston Gallimard (December 1948), which mentioned a book that he intended to write, yet never finalized, whose provisional title was *Maurice Blanchot et l’existentialisme* (Bataille 391–392). Christian Limousin records some elements of this aborted project, such as the exploration of Blanchot’s connection with Kierkegaard, Nietzsche and Heidegger, which are also further developed by Bruno Chaouat (Limousin 253–254).

<sup>14</sup> Blanchot’s “there is” is linked to the Outside (*le dehors*), a space corresponding to Levinas’s formulaic *il y a* (see A. Ionescu, Large and Marin 6).

<sup>15</sup> For analyzing, via Sloterdijk, the four types of existentialism of Cioran’s work see Bolea, *Existențialismul* 17; “Death without Death” 74.

comes into being, exists, and is comprehensible solely through content and formal ties with other utterances, existing texts, and also sign systems ..." (45). Blanchot's and Cioran's works abound in such utterances and existentialist themes such as authenticity, human alienation, freedom and responsibility, absurdity and death prevail.

Perhaps the most frequent themes invoked by both are despair and suicide as a response to the absurdity of life (especially developed by Camus). Both Blanchot and Cioran associated the lure of the suicidal act with passion. For Blanchot suicide remained "secret, mysterious, and indecipherable" (Blanchot, *The Space* 102), for Cioran it meant "wealth" and "self-overcoming" reminding both of Nietzsche's *Selbstüberwindung* and Philipp Mainländer's argument that "at a certain level, in which the suicidal removes not only the phenomenal being, but also the noumenal being, every suicide is, in fact, a deicide" (Bolea, "Toward the 'Never-Born'" 151): "what greater wealth than the suicide each of us bears within himself?" (Cioran, *A Short History* 37)<sup>16</sup>

Bident records Blanchot's shock when hearing about Paul Celan's suicide, and the reflections on it in *The Step not Beyond* as well as his further thoughts from *The Space of Literature* (400–401). The latter also contains analyses of Dostoyevsky's *The Devils*, and Nerval's biography where Blanchot regards the suicidal act as passive, because the person who commits his final act "supremely and absolutely" affirms life when negating it: Kirilov's "feverishness," his steps that led him nowhere and Nerval's wandering before taking his life which scholars wrongly assumed to belong to "life's agitation or a still vital force" (102) demonstrate that "[w]hoever kills himself could, then, go on living; whoever kills himself is linked to hope, the hope of finishing it all, and hope reveals his desire to begin, to find the beginning again in the end..." (103).

The comparison between art and suicide is meant to state, beyond appearances, that both art and suicide are "testing a singular form of possibility" (Blanchot, *The Space* 106). As suicide is oriented towards its reversal to itself, "the work seeks this reversal in its origin" (106). Committing suicide is rather the death that one "refuses," that one "neglected," the negligence being itself "perpetual flight and inertia" and in this type of negligence that the work "wants to dwell" (107). For Cioran, philosophy was a way to bear with endless anguish, despair,

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<sup>16</sup> Also see Bolea's analysis of Cioran's theme of suicide as "election" from *A Short History*, and its correspondence to a reflection from his still untranslated Romanian *Amurgul* (Bolea, "Toward the 'Never-Born'" 150–151).

and suicide. “A book,” he asserted, is “a postponed suicide” (Cioran, *The Trouble* 77).

Nevertheless, exploring further this channel of interference, we can see also how this existentialist theme permeates the two thinkers’ works with a major difference. Blanchot never toyed with the idea of suicide, and adopted rather the cool reserve of Camus which was much more from the realm of the neuter, a concept that Blanchot’s work permanently responds to,<sup>17</sup> while Cioran’s approach was much more personal. Young Cioran suffered from insomnia and the torturing white nights made him produce his first text *On the Heights of Despair* “as a sort of generic rationale for all suicides” (Johnston 77). Inspired by “notices of suicides in Romanian newspapers of the period,” invariably opening “with the same formula: ‘On the heights of despair, young so-and-so took his life...’” (Johnston 77) and mirroring Camus’s statement that “[t]here is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide” (Camus 3), Cioran transformed this theme in the programmatic idea of his works. He felt that suicide meant tragedy and the idea of suicide meant freedom, a belief that he borrowed from the Schopenhauerian equation of life with pain: “Without the idea of suicide, I would certainly have killed myself.” (*Entretiens* 175)

### **The Third Channel of Interference: Skepticism—Passion/ Passivity/Patience**

Throughout the history of European philosophy, from Aristotle to Thomas Aquinas, Descartes, Spinoza, Sartre and Hartmann, activity (generally related to *thumos*) and passivity (linked to *pathos*) were viewed as related to affectivity, finally settling on a formula that Robert Zaborowski put forward in a thought-provoking article: “from *thumos* to *pathos* and *affectus*, then from passion to emotion and feeling.” (Zaborowski 11)

I call the third channel of interference skepticism. Blanchot’s and Cioran’s skepticism led to opening “new spaces” (Dović, “Literary Repertoire” 73) in their engagements with matters of passivity/passion/patience. By skepticism I understand, similarly to Shane Weller, “an undoing of values that never arrives at their complete annihilation” (Weller 72), thus disagreeing with those who followed the facile path of classifying all Blanchot’s and Cioran’s works as nihilist.

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<sup>17</sup> For Blanchot’s “neutrality of space” see Marin; Toma.

Taking a last glance at Blanchot's and Cioran's biographies, we may see that Blanchot was attracted by skepticism earlier than Cioran. Although Cioran's early works and a part of *A Short History* can be considered nihilistic, he moved from an explosive active nihilism to a start of "weary" Stoicism in his French period of creation, which is more categorically that of a skeptic.

Blanchot's thesis for a Diplôme d'Etudes Supérieures at the Sorbonne (1929), *La conception du dogmatisme chez les sceptiques* (Hart 5), affirmed a "skepticism against hope" (Bruns xxi). Cioran, whose skepticism made his writing voice undecidable in any particular position, rejected the lure of nihilism from his youth, reminding of Schopenhauer's turn from *The World as Will and Representation* to *Parerga and Paralipomena*:

I have imagined miracles of annihilation, pulverized my hours, tested the gangrenes of the intellect. Initially an instrument or a method, skepticism ultimately took up residence inside me, became my physiology, the fate of my body, my visceral principle, the disease I can neither cure nor die of. (Cioran, *The Temptation* 115)

Thus, there is no wonder why Cioran's French debut, *A Short History of Decay* opens "as a retreat into classical skepticism, with nods to Diogenes and Pyrrho" (Regier, "Cioran's Insomnia" 998).

Blanchot's work anchors the paradoxical affirmation of passion/passivity, which characterizes the experience of literature and death alike, often in the form of the neuter, that singular place of a passion beyond the opposition of passive/active, escaping both affirmation and negation, remaining what Blanchot calls "an unidentifiable surplus," situating itself "always elsewhere than where one would situate it" (Blanchot, *The Infinite* 305). The radicality of this experience leads the writer to the de-individualizing ordeal of *désœuvrement* (theorized in *The Space* and *The Book*), then the conception of the disaster (*The Writing*) as the passion in/through writing of a future death that is already past—and whose "autobiographical" origin was belatedly fictionalized in *The Instant of My Death*. This is the story of a young man brought before a firing squad during the Second World War, who, while waiting for the German soldier's bullet, suddenly found himself released from his near death by a Russian officer who told him to save himself. The paradox of a death that "has already taken place," yet "has never been present" marks the birth of a new tense, called by Jacques Derrida "the unbelievable" (Blanchot and Derrida 49–50) and connects skepticism to the aspiration to a passive, neuter language.

Not unlike Blanchot, in his Romanian texts, Cioran conceived death both the affirmation of salvation and the negation of nothingness, a paradox related to ruin: “The terrifying experience of death, when preserved in consciousness, becomes ruinous. If you talk about death, you save part of your self. But at the same time, something of your real self dies, because objectified meanings lose the actuality they have in consciousness.” (Cioran, *On the Heights* 4) Cioran’s French texts long for an affirmation of the neuter as well, although this is never explicitly advocated but as a transition: “Affirmation and negation being no different qualitatively, the transition from one to the other is natural and easy.” (Cioran, *The Fall* 97) *The Trouble with Being Born*, a summum of aphorisms can be regarded as Cioran’s version of the neuter: everything he passionately affirms, he later on denies with the same fervidness, as if “in him coexisted permanently and about all subjects the affirmer and the negator ... the pleader and the judge, in an eternal contradictory soliloquy, an infinite dialogue with his self...” (Bollon 150).

For Blanchot, natural death was immensely passive. Unlike Heidegger, for whom death was the human being’s ultimate goal and his only authentic experience, Blanchot conceived death as a “given” rather than something “to be achieved” and reread *Being and Time* as the desire to turn the fear of death into passion (see Alweiss). Furthermore, in Blanchot’s *Awaiting Oblivion*, which started from a text he prepared for Heidegger’s *Festschrift*, waiting meant “prolonging death unto eternity” (A. Ionescu, “Waiting for Blanchot” 80).

Although Cioran neither theorized passion, nor did he traverse such experiences as those recounted in *The Instant of My Death*, he also conceived death as human beings’ vocation: “The assent to death is the greatest one of all.” (Cioran, *The Temptation* 207) He made “of death an affirmation of life,” converting “its abyss into a salutary fiction” (222).

Skepticism as “an event” returns to Blanchot in the form of “the affirmation outside negation” (Bruns 231): “the return of the refuted, that which erupts anarchically, capriciously, and irregularly each time ... that authority and the sovereignty of reason, indeed of unreason, impose their order upon us or organize themselves definitively into a system.” (Blanchot, *The Writing* 76) For the writer of the disaster, passion is in relation to passivity, *pas* (in French both the negation “no” and “step”), past and patience: “[w]e are passive with respect to the disaster, but the disaster is perhaps passivity, and thus past, always past, even in the past, out of date.” (3; see also Derrida’s comments on the myriad of “pas” in “Pace Not(s)”) Furthermore, patience gives the

writer the possibility to think of the relation between writing and passivity and past in relation to the immemorial (Blanchot, *The Writing* 14; see also A. Ionescu, *Memorial* 43–44).

Cioran's preoccupation with passion/passivity/patience was more in the realm of theology, especially in *Tears and Saints*, whose title alludes to the Catholic tradition of the "gift of tears." For Cioran, writing was rather connected to impatience, unlike faith which was linked to patience: "Artists can't be religious. To have faith one must remain passive vis-à-vis the world. The believer must not do anything. The artist can't believe because he has no time." (Cioran, *Tears* 73) However, fiction which reveals "the passion for the absurd" (Cioran, *On the Heights* 10) gave the writer the possibility to "transcend death by the pursuit of the indestructible in speech, in the very symbol of nullity" (Cioran, *The Trouble* 34).

### Concluding Remarks

There is no one Blanchot, since he asserted that his own work was written "not by a single person, but by several" (Blanchot, *The Infinite* 435). In a similar way, we can say that "there is no *one* Cioran," but a "scattered" one, as Kluback and Finkenthal remarked (Kluback and Finkenthal 2, 4).

This article has attempted to make light on the apparent non-relation between Blanchot and Cioran, by establishing three possible "channels of interference." As we stepped in the third decade of the third millennium, Even-Zohar's concept of interference, enriched by Dović, and Juvan's broader definition of intertextuality may seem traditional nowadays and perhaps, as Juvan self-critically characterized his method, "old-fashioned" (Juvan, *History* 184). Yet, as this article hopefully demonstrated, they can remain extremely useful tools for the exploration of the labyrinthine connections between Blanchot's and Cioran's fragmentary writing, the disaster, the theme of suicide, and the notions of passivity/passion/patience.<sup>18</sup>

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## »Kanali interference«: Maurice Blanchot in Emil Cioran

Ključne besede: literarna teorija / medbesedilnost / interferenca / Blanchot, Maurice / Cioran, Emil / fragmentarnost / eksistencializem / skepticizem

Iz koncepta »literarne interference«, ki ga je zasnoval pionir teorije polisistemov Itamar Even-Zohar, razširili pa so ga drugi teoretiki, ter iz različnih interpretacij medbesedilnosti izhajajoči članek primerja dva misleca dvajsetega stoletja: francoskega pisatelja, filozofa in literarnega teoretika Mauricea Blanchota ter v Romuniji rojenega francoskega esejista in filozofa Emila (E. M.) Ciorana. V članku uporabljamo Even-Zoharjev pojem »kanal interference« in predlagamo tri takšne »kanale«, vsakega od njih z rezultati, ki osvetljujejo razmerje med Blanchotovimi in Cioranovimi deli. Prvi »kanal interference«, ki smo ga po Blanchotu poimenovali »sprememba epohe«, vodi v njuno izbiro fragmentarnega pisanja. Drugi, eksistencializem, bi lahko potencialno povezal njuna dela predvsem v tem, kako vzpostavljata temo samomora, s poudarkom na Blanchotovem *Prostoru literature* in Cioranovem *Na višavah obupa*. Nazadnje še prek tretjega »kanala interference«, skepticizma obeh mislecev, raziskujemo njuno ukvarjanje s pojmi strast/pasivnost/potrpežljivost.

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