

THE LONELINESS AND FRUSTRATIONS OF EDEL GARCELLANO

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"And my thoughts are as bitter as tears."

-Emile Cioran, *On the Heights of Despair*

"We are imaginary of God, or God is our imaginary."

-Edel Garcellano, *Heresies for Easter*

ABSTRACT

It is undeniable that Edel Garcellano's works – from poetry to criticism to philosophy – dawned on a new form of pessimism. His intensification of nihilism made Garcellano an undeniable force in Philippine literature and an original thinker amongst us. This essay intervenes by exploring the philosophical pessimism of Edel Garcellano. Comparing him to the Romanian philosopher Emil Cioran, I argue that Garcellano's pessimism and nihilism challenged the established texts and contexts in the Philippine intellectual landscape. Of particular interest is how his works embody a consistent grasp of philosophical nihilism à la Cioran that made him ahead of our time.

Keywords: Nihilism, Pessimism, Philippine Literature,
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THIS ESSAY REFLECTS ON TWO NOTIONS that made Edel Garcellano an undeniable force in the Philippine literary scene and an original thinker amongst us: his consistent attitude towards pessimism and his intensification of *nihilism*. These merely describe Garcellano's fleeting loneliness and frustrations – his negative accentuation of life and its limited opportunity to explore – knowing that we are only here to settle, in the end, with unavoidable elbow grasp room of disappointments and discontents. His philosophical pessimism, which I must say he closely shares with the Romanian philosopher Emil Cioran (of course, minus the totalitarian character), is battling. Yet Garcellano never admitted this consistent pessimism. No wonder his works embody a consistent grasp of critique – from politics, society, literature, philosophy, sports, *etc.* – that nearly taps the ceiling of nihilistic thinking to prorate the possibility of a suffering world without a crucial alternative.

WE LOVE TO FETISHISE WHAT DIRECTLY HURTS US. As Jacques Lacan argues, fetishism is the almost permanent form of fantasy radicalized by a hole or lack of being (*manque-à-être*) that needs a definite closure (Lacan). But closure, as we all know, is an impossible undertaking. It is like a freshly inflicted wound resistant to healing.¹ In this vein, the wounded subject is left to choose other than healing. He is condemned to either fantasizing

¹ Remember that for Hegel, the wound refers to the negative history but this time the Spirit embodied as the *Sittlichkeit* as the 'ethical life' appears as the positive antidote to the Hegelian wound. Hence, the fantasy of closure brings history to its make-up end like how Francis Fukuyama contracted the end of history in relation to the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989 yet only to postpone it since capitalism's vicious triumph set a new set of unprecedented historical delay. No wonder, for Hegel, history articulate itself first as tragedy, then as farce. See Hegel, G. W. F. *The Phenomenology of the Spirit*. translated by Terry Pinkard, Cambridge University Press, 2018. Also see Fukuyama, Francis. *The End of History and the Last Man*. The Free Press, 1992.

or fetishizing the open wound. The fantasy would drive us mad. Fetishism makes us appear sane and normal. Fantasy works in the positive dimension of life. Fetishism is negative tolerance. In other words, fantasy makes life somewhat literary and aesthetic, and fetishism charts psychopathic tendencies. Thus, psychopathology is to fornicate with pain, with what hurts us.

The same question has been set forth by most existentialists. Minus the psychoanalytic charm, existentialism regards the “hole in being” as a plane of absolute nothingness or a gap within being that needs no closing but intensity. In other words, the lack should be intensified, all the more maximize to sustain life’s dynamism. In this crux, existentialism works closely to psychopathology, if at all, share the same method in investigating human existence. For instance, the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard would illustrate this in his book *Fear and Trembling as infinite resignation* to a divine possibility which technically is a zero-sum existent or nothing.

On the one hand, Martin Heidegger speculates that we are thrown (*Geworfenheit*) in the world, and with no foreseeable alternative, we need to trace our “being there” (*Dasein*).² Jean-Paul Sartre also believes in this existential thrownness by condemning human freedom. However, unlike Heidegger, Sartre found authenticity with man’s moral collective obligation rather than in an individual desire to exist, which Heidegger found “thinkable” in the disruptive passing of *Dasein*.³ Therefore, in

2 As Heidegger says, “Dasein is nevertheless ‘thrown’ into the world and ‘ensnared’ by it.” See Heidegger, Martin. *Basic Writings from Being and Time (1927) to the Task of Thinking (1964)*, edited by David Farrell Krell, HarperCollins, 1993.

3 The moral collective is the commitment to oneself in light of others. Sartre argues that “When we say that man chooses himself ... he is choosing for all men” thus assuming a greater responsibility where all existences precede essences. “I am not committing myself alone,” says Sartre, “I am choosing to be resigned

the light of various existential substitutes, human existence recuperates from a critical wound only to stop it from healing, an actual case of psychopathology that traps his subjectivity to a contained discontentment. The subject dwells in his self-proclaimed manifesto in such entrapment and discontent while acutely drowned in self-denial. There, he would find the irony of enjoyment – of a pain enmeshed with a transient feeling of joy – but of course, with equal absolute displeasure.

Can we exploit a trapped subjectivity to long for his further entrapment and fetishize the containment to his desires? Emil Cioran claims this entrapment of subjectivity as a heightened consciousness of apocalyptic thinking. In his book *On the Heights of Despair*, he asked,

Wouldn't it be more creative to surrender our inner fluidity without any intention of objectifying it, intimately and voluptuously soaking in our own inner turmoil and struggle? (Cioran 18)

Situating the subject's "fluidity" in the face of chaos allows the subject to compose itself in a normative condition. However, chaos annihilates the subject into the thinking of the nothing – of the state of idleness in thought – that enables the subject to invent compulsive psychopathy as a form of resistance. But to suppose a subject who knows *under normal conditions* would likewise force him to isolate himself to two personas: one from himself for not bringing into fore the real condition of

on behalf of all" (See Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, trans. Carol Macomber, ed. John Kulka [New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007], 24). The simplistic proposition of *Existentialism is a Humanism* allegedly overshadowed his dense *Being and Nothingness*. But it is no less accessible and served as Sartre's defense against all sorts of criticism from atheism to naturalism (not to mention, mainly from Christianity and Marxism).

existence and two, from others he tries to mimic and not realizing that perhaps the same condition curtails them. If, for Kierkegaard and Heidegger, anxiety precedes existence that is, anxiety realizes subject's true potential, and if for Lacan it is the subject, under the disturbing Oedipalization, that creates anxiety; for Cioran, it doesn't matter which invents which, but the "void originates in the depths of being, spreading progressively like a cancer" (Cioran 29). As the void swells within the being, it directs the subject into the "sensation of expansion toward nothingness," where ennui (as powerful consciousness) becomes the first organic impulse of knowledge. To be in ennui or boredom, in the first place, is to be conscious of existence. Thence, ennui closely shares borders with anxiety, if at all, boredom creates essential precedence to anxiety. For example, we can see in Albert Camus' Mersault in *The Stranger* the development of this existential disease, in the self-convinced innocence of the criminal in Edgar Allan Poe's *The Black Cat*, and of course, Kazuo Ishiguro's Kathy H. whose narration tellingly draws the normal into the expected moral black hole of clones' fates. Although the subject's entrapment to void is a psychopathic invention (for Camus, Poe and Ishiguro, it is the fluctuating weariness turning into anxiety and back to sustain *normality of conditions*), it is the subject's consciousness of such condition that allowed him to circumnavigate to the tenets of the unthinkable and the unconscious. Or, in the words of Eugene Thacker, the one who introduced Cioran to Anglophone readers and the author of *In the Dust of this Planet*, such meandering towards the unthinkable presupposes the absolute limit of philosophy, that is, the "supernatural horror of philosophy." While Freud asserts the unconscious as dark reality responsible for our atrocities, Cioran would invite this dark reality to consume the subject and allow death to pound life's vitality only to grasp "slow revelatory agony" (Cioran 27). In such a case, he argues that

"awareness of death's immanence in life creates an atmosphere of constant dissatisfaction and restlessness that can never be appeased" (Cioran 27). There, philosophy ceases to be the cause celebre of human cognition (pace Kant). Quite the opposite, it is the triumph of death not over but *within* life.

It might be true that for Cioran, life indeed is restless thinking of death. In contrast, although psychoanalysis admits the inevitability of death in the conscious upbringing, it cannot deny, however, that the transference – the relation between the analyst and the patient – delays the subject's fantasy of death. On the one hand, existentialism cannot deny its privileging of the human subject in rescue. Concepts like freedom, authenticity and revolt still parade the existential rescue of the humanist framework. Against this, Cioran assumes that death is immanent in life, and loneliness is the spectacle of rethinking such immanence. Allow me to quote in length:

I would experience a kind of voluptuous awe if I could see a volcano of blood, eruptions as red as fire and as burning as despair, burst into the midst of the comfortable and superficial harmony of everyday life, or if I could see all our hidden wounds open, making of us a bloody eruption forever. Only then we truly understand and appreciate the advantage of loneliness, which silences our suffering and makes it inaccessible. (Cioran 29)

Hence, for Cioran, the human subject, while still alive, is long presumed dead. The existence of death in life provides an epistemological weapon to allow the subject to dip in the nothingness which consumes him and itself. Thus, the thinking of death weaponizes loneliness in the subject of nihilism. Here,

pessimism works like the beautiful outcome of this thinking. Gilles Deleuze, in *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, notes the same through Spinoza calling the latter the philosopher who anticipates life as death worship (26). That makes death both terrifying and uplifting—a pessimistic purchase quite precise.

AND SO, WAS FOR EDEL GARCELLANO. His philosophic pessimism brings us to consider, as he often says, ‘that the text is always political’ and poetry is a homage to a “savage god.” Albeit politics and savagery go on opposite directions vis-à-vis politics as the contractual dimension of a moral civilization and savagery as resistance to any form of moral legitimacy, Garcellano acknowledged the politics in/of savagery in the text to render, borrowing from the younger Marx, a “ruthless critique of everything existing.” Here, Garcellano referred to the suffused structure of the textuality contained in the misread/misinterpreted contexts as shown by unequal power distribution. The striated context would bring a semiotic imbalance between the writer (the active textuality) and the reader (the passive contextuality). Thus, the reader is contained in a desiring metaphysics to rebel against the writer, a controversial ploy following the pseudo-Hegelian logic of a creative Desire towards an Absolute Spirit (that is, the reader as completion of textuality). Anyhow, most Marxists fell in this spell of “dark” Hegelianism.

So, how to rescue the reader from this dark metaphysics? In the essay “A Young Man’s Fiction’s Macro/Micro Readings,” Garcellano psychoanalyzed a disgruntled exile, an alienated and displaced figure, caught in the face of an overarching stalwart of power (say the US) that he renders as the *abject petite* (a neologism by combining Lacan’s *objet petit a* or object cause of

desire and Julia Kristeva's notion of *abjection* or the state of being displaced or missing). What is by far interesting in this neologic ploy is that the term fully describes the metaphysics of desire that strategically deploys the logic of desire once the subject is entrapped or contained. The *abject petite*, for Garcellano, is the "nodal point in the circular pilgrimage" that caters for the subject the longing to subvert the place of power. Almost the same with Lacan's *point de capiton* (or weaving point), Garcellano's *abject petite* manifests in the displaced subject that desires a non-existent object/reality or an object/reality that primordially cancels itself (non-object) that which the subject only invents then desires (We can also say that God is an *abject petite* in the Sartrean sense). We can also trace a similar contention in Lacanian psychoanalysis vis-à-vis how a traumatic kernel of pain in the Oedipal circuit precedes and becomes a fundamental factor in symptomatic upbringing. If we are to extend this correlation to Garcellano, yet this time, on the contrary, the individual creates his pain and from there develops creative forms of resistance through encapsulation and containment within the tenets of desires. For Garcellano, resolving its metaphysics, "desire is autonomous, moving on its momentum of passion and subjectivity." In this case, psychopathic fetishism matures as a strategic metaphysics to overcome the immanence of power. The only thing we need to do is to bring the *abject petite* on the desiring subject to recognize his invention and integrate as a "desiring machine" against the darker reality of nihilistic thinking. Right on point is how *the* Lovecraftian Cthulhu was never Cthulhic except for the imagination and horror of the narrator. Meaning the tentacular monstrosity remains ancient—ancient as it were—as the supernatural horror only unfolds in the possibility of its emergence, the imagination or anticipation of horror to come but none so far. In other words, thinking more

so philosophy borders with the abject petite and the former, as it were, attempts to provincialize the latter only to find an integration (if not be consumed) to its horror.

Make no mistake. In this desiring metaphysics *cum* dark Hegelianism, Garcellano, in *Vanishing History*, closely referred to the nothing viz. "the only signifier that signifies itself." In this case, loneliness and pessimism outlast teleological thinking only to render the only possible attitude in nihilism: to return endlessly. To quote, and it is shocking to find this:

But Buddhists burn incense to calm down anxious hearts and pronounce all who have vanished will eventually return to finish a mission left undone: in another place & time. In another form. In another generation. (Garcellano *Vanishing History & Other Poems*)

Thus, the infinite return of the subject entails a confrontation with nihilism and horror and what goes in between. Garcellano, in *Sons of Naujan*, would call this infinite return as *final singularity* where "everyone has just one poem to write: journeys that return to another journey the circle's flow that breaks the circle." In the final singularity, everyone is contained in the dark repetition to singularize any attempt to repeat, that is to say, the vehement return only to re-write what was written and enjoy the act of writing as the fetishism of the vanishing. For Cioran, "Life creates in delirium and is undone in ennui." Susan Sontag, in *Regarding the Pain of Others*, takes this delirium and ennui as an infinite repetition of pain and suffering through photography. She said: "To catch a death actually happening and embalm it for all time is something only cameras can do, and pictures taken by photographers out in the field of the moment (or just before)

death are among the most celebrated and often reproduced of war photographs" (Sontag). For her, we develop an appetite for pictures showing bodies in pain just as bodies naked.

Similarly, in the poem "After Paul Virilio," Garcellano claims that there is no place to go and that we are hurtling violently into doomsday like smiling fools (Garcellano *Naujan*, 179). The fetishism of the vanishing is thus the return of the smiling fools enjoying the disaster, to see the withering of everything, humanity included, in the threshold of the inevitable chasm of death. However, to suppose an eternal return, like Nietzsche, is to confront then and again the disaster that never ends. In this pure nihilism, the Earth, for instance, won't plunge to a self-explosive ending or an extra-terrestrial asteroid pulverizing it rather an end we cannot imagine since it is the end that imagines us. As it turned out, what is left is the earth in itself living and dying in its reformatting geology that outlasted many periods and species extinctions. "The earth is strata," write Deleuze and Guattari. It territorializes, deterritorializes, reterritorializes and back, Earth is the absolute deterritorialization, a stubborn geometry (Deleuze and Guattari 573). Is "the smiling fools" Garcellano's cynicism against the philosophically-informed human ontology surveying these speculative registers?

GARCELLANO'S PESSIMISM ANTAGONIZES HUMAN ONTOLOGY. In the final analysis, he stresses the de-privileged social status *under normal conditions* to create a psychopathic pattern where the subject has come to admit his loneliness as a veritable weapon against the systematic agency of containment. A case in point, for instance, is the poem "Contratexts," where Garcellano pointed out that we are learned split-subjects in the Lacanian

sense or *psychoanalytically schizo*. Freud, Lacan, and Deleuze (through Spinoza) recognize the death principle that guides life. Garcellano, in the league of Cioran, acknowledges the thinking of death pessimistically while in life, that is, to render death not as a simple hole where everything will pass out or fall rather the black hole that consumes what thinks and what bores, what lives and what dies, an inescapable field in everyone's horizon: a beautiful chaos.

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