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Emil Cioran

Degradation through Work

1934

Excerpt from *On the Heights of Despair*.
Translated by Ilinca Zarifopol-Johnston.

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Degradation through Work

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Men generally work too much to be themselves. Work is a curse which man has turned into pleasure. To work for work's sake, to enjoy a fruitless endeavor, to imagine that you can fulfill yourself through assiduous labor — all that is disgusting and incomprehensible. Permanent and uninterrupted work dulls, trivializes, and depersonalizes. Work displaces man's center of interest from the subjective to the objective realm of things. In consequence, man no longer takes an interest in his own destiny but focuses on facts and things. What should be an activity of permanent transfiguration becomes a means of exteriorization, of abandoning one's inner self. In the modern world, work signifies a purely external activity; man no longer makes himself through it, he makes things. That each of us must have a career, must enter upon a certain form of life which probably does not suit us, illustrates work's tendency to dull the spirit. Man sees work as beneficial to his being, but his fervor reveals his penchant for evil. In work, man forgets himself; yet his forgetfulness is not simple and naive, but rather akin to stupidity. Through work, man has moved from subject to object; in other words, he has become a deficient animal who has betrayed his origins. Instead of living for himself — not selfishly

but growing spiritually — man has become the wretched, impotent slave of external reality. Where have they all gone; ecstasy, vision, exaltation? Where is the supreme madness or the genuine pleasure of evil? The negative pleasure one finds in work partakes of the poverty and banality of daily life, its pettiness. Why not abandon this futile work and begin anew without repeating the same wasteful mistake? Is subjective consciousness of eternity not enough? It is the feeling for eternity that the frenetic activity and trepidation of work has destroyed in us. Work is the negation of eternity. The more goods we acquire in the temporal realm, the more intense our external work, the less accessible and farther removed is eternity. Hence the limited perspective of active and energetic people, the banality of their thought and actions. I am not contrasting work to either passive contemplation or vague dreaminess, but to an unrealizable transfiguration; nevertheless, I prefer an intelligent and observant laziness to intolerable, terrorizing activity. To awaken the modern world, one must praise laziness. The lazy man has an infinitely keener perception of metaphysical reality than the active one.

I am lured by faraway distances, the immense void I project upon the world. A feeling of emptiness grows in me; it infiltrates my body like a light and impalpable fluid. In its progress, like a dilation into infinity, I perceive the mysterious presence of the most contradictory feelings ever to inhabit a human soul. I am simultaneously happy and unhappy, exalted and depressed, overcome by both pleasure and despair in the most contradictory harmonies. I am so cheerful and yet so sad that my tears reflect at once both heaven and earth. If only for the joy of my sadness, I wish there were no death on this earth.