PETER LANG

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A POET-PHILOSOPHER CAUGHT BETWEEN THE SUNDAY OF HISTORY AND THE EXISTENTIAL MONDAY

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PREFACE

B. Fundoianu is a well-known Romanian poet born (Wechsler) in 1898; Benjamin Fondane is a French poet and philosopher, who died in Auschwitz in 1944. Of course, we speak of the same person: young Fundoianu left Romania for France in 1923. This book tells briefly his personal story and describes his work of approximately thirty years. The main difficulties concerning this author are related not only to the fact that his activities were spread over relatively large numbers of different domains of intellectual and artistic endeavor; in addition, his poetry and his articles, essays, and books were written in two languages and in two different countries. Moreover, the turns and the twists of history that unfolded around him created a situation adversarial to his oeuvre both in his homeland and in France. In his homeland because the communist regime installed shortly after the end of WWII in Romania made the discussion of such an author impossible as he was too close to values that rejected Marxism in philosophy and too far from engaged literature in his poetical works. In France, his existential thought was in stark opposition with the Sartrian brand of existentialism that came to dominate the French philosophical landscape after the war.

After being forgotten for a while, his work was brought back to the attention of the public through the efforts of Michel Carassou during the late 1970s and 1980s and by his brother-in-law, the poet Paul Daniel, during a period of relative liberalization in Romania at about the same time. In the 1990s, a significant Fondanian activity was initiated by the Société d'Etudes Benjamin Fondane (SEBF), established first in Israel and later in France as well; since

then an impressive number of conferences and colloquia have been held and even a permanent gathering of specialists in the field convened for a number of years in Peyresq, in Southern France, to discuss the works of the author. The number of those who participated in the revival of the legacy of Benjamin Fondane during the last thirty years is quite impressive, and out of the concern of leaving out somebody, I shall not mention any names here. However, many of them can be found in the *Cahiers Benjamin Fondane*, published every year by the SEBF or on one of the two large sites dedicated to Benjamin Fondane on the Internet.

Most of the secondary literature on Benjamin Fondane has been written in French and Romanian; there are, however, a few books about Fondane in English (John K. Hyde, William Kluback, Arta Lucescu-Boutcher), in spite of the paradoxical situation that, with the exception of one play and some poetry (*Exodus*, *Landscapes*, a few scattered poems), practically none of his major works have been translated into English so far. In Romania, Mircea Martin contributed significantly to the reevaluation of Fondane's legacy, and a few monographs have been written about him (for a more comprehensive list see the attached bibliography). In France, in addition to Michel Carassou, there were a number of authors who wrote extensively about Fondane; out of a long list, I will mention André Neher, Jean Lescure, Monique Jutrin, Olivier Salazar Ferrer, Patrice Berray, Henri Behar, Louis Janover, and Patrice Repusseau, among others.

I wrote this book on Benjamin Fondane because I believe he was a great poet in both the Romanian and French languages, as well as an important existential philosopher. I think that he was also a significant religious thinker insofar as contemporary efforts to redefine religious thought in general and Jewish thought in particular are concerned. I tried, therefore, to make the case for these claims in the chapters of my book. As I was writing in English about Fondane, however, I realized that since so little of what he wrote is accessible to the English-speaking public, I had to translate prohibitive amounts of material if I wanted to substantiate each of the above arguments. This difficulty shaped my work and made it into an overview, a general presentation of Benjamin Fondane's work rather than an in-depth study. Since I tried to follow chronologically the unfolding of his activities in the various domains in which the author was active, some ideas and events are mentioned more than once. My best (and perhaps only) excuse is that such repetitions are somewhat

in tune with Fondane's tendency to revisit often his ideas and constantly rewrite his texts.

To do a thorough job in situating in context his writings, at every stage and in both countries in which he lived, would have required a significant amount of historical, political, socioeconomic, and religious background specific to both Romania and France. This would have made the lecture cumbersome; the volume would have arrived at prohibitive dimensions. The compromise I arrived at is the following: the English-speaking reader will find in this book a fairly complete overview of Benjamin Fondane's life and his works; a future rewriting of this material into Romanian and French will take care of the many specific interferences between his activities and those characteristic to the two background cultures in which he was active.

The number of people with whom I interacted and discussed matters related with Fondane's life and works over the years is very large and, again, I am trying to avoid the danger of offending through omission good friends and trustful collaborators. In 1993 we founded in Jerusalem, together with the regretted Leon Volovici and Monique Jutrin, the Fondane Society. Then, one after another, I had the chance to meet, in France, Claire Gruson, Eric Freedman, Geneviève Piron, Michel Carassou, Olivier Salazar Ferrer, and Ann Van Sevenant; in Romania, Mircea Martin, Roxana Sorescu, and Mihai Sora; in Italy, Pierro Boitani, Gisele Vanhèse, and later Alice Gonzi; on the North American continent, Bill Kluback, Michael Weingrad, Ricardo Nirenberg, and Bruce Baugh. In Canada, I was also in touch during the early years of my Fondanian activities with a group in Les Trois Rivères organized around Christian Bouchard. I have also met many other Fondanians and researchers from all over the world involved with authors and studies that were Fondane relevant at the Peyresq meetings or at those held in Israel, France, Romania, Italy, and elsewhere. I want to thank them all, those mentioned explicitly and those who are mentioned only in the many footnotes, for the insights gained from discussions and exchanges of ideas over the years.

Finally, a technical note about the quotations used in my texts: Since, as I said above, Fondane is not yet available in English I had to translate practically everything from both Romanian and French (in a few cases where translations were available, I indicate clearly the sources). I must assume, therefore, the responsibility for any *faux-pas* in this endeavor. When it came to poetry, the difficulty of the Fondanian verse exceeded at times my abilities as a translator.

I apologize for this, and my only hope is that this book will help, to some extent at least, to convince a few good translators to join our efforts.

INTRODUCTION

Writing about Benjamin Fondane poses a problem for the author of the book as well as for its reader. Fondane wrote both in Romanian and in French, and although a few books about him have been published in English, there are very few translations of his own works. In addition, he was a prolific author who wrote not only poetry and philosophy but was also involved in theater and cinema (at the theoretical-artistic level and at that of film-making) as well. He expressed strong political opinions that, at times, diverged from the mainstream ideas both in his native Romania and in his adopted land, France. He participated in the literary avant-garde but rejected the doctrinaire character of the movement set up in France by André Breton. After encountering Lev Shestov, Fondane embraced Shestov's philosophical thinking and, to some extent, his religious outlook as well. The question is, therefore, "was the poet Benjamin Fondane also a religious thinker and/or an existential philosopher?" In spite of having spent many years in studying the works of the two, and in spite of several rewritings of some of the chapters of this book, I am not sure whether I succeeded in answering these questions satisfactorily.

This might not be considered after all a serious drawback when one talks about an author who rejected classifications and rigid models of thought. Not that Fondane rejected logic *per se* in his philosophical and critical writings; he denied, however, the absolute right of a thought based exclusively on concepts and the logical inferences based on them to take over our lives in all their manifestations, intellectual, religious, moral, or aesthetic. He did not always think that way: in his youth, he was a poet known in his country of birth for his deep

involvement in the quarrel between modernist tendencies (represented by those who tried to transcend a *sui generis* Romanian symbolist poetry) and a traditionalist trend, split itself between the old ways and a new bent toward some form of a revitalized Orthodox spiritualism. In the first chapter we shall follow B. Fundoianu's position in this debate during his Romanian years, as well as his early poetical and theatrical activities. When, at the age of almost twenty-five, the young poet decided to leave Romania, he was sincerely convinced that, from a cultural standpoint, his native country was merely a colony of France. In a book published shortly before leaving Bucharest, he stated explicitly this thought and emphasized its corollary: why should someone be willing to spend his entire life in the provinces when he feels that he can make it in the capital city?

When in 1923 Benjamin Fondane arrived in Paris, he was—unlike his compatriot Tristan Tzara who did the same, after a detour through Zürich and the Dada movement—totally unknown. Moreover, in spite of a good command of the French language, he still remained for a while just a Romanian poet in a foreign land. This in itself presented a huge challenge. The first couple of years in France were difficult but Fondane soon began to write in French; by 1925 he was working on a draft of a volume of essays to be titled *A False Treaty of Aesthetics*. The project was not completed but a different work carrying the same title was published later in 1938. During these first years in France, Benjamin Fondane tried his luck with Jacques Copeau's *Vieux-Colombier* theater company—he was joined in Paris by his sister Line and her husband, Armand Pascal, both actors—worked as a librarian for the philosopher Jules de Gaultier, and kept a quite intense and active relationship with his colleagues and friends back in Bucharest. In 1926 he met Lev Shestov, the Russian philosopher who came to Paris in 1921, and began reading him again (he was already familiar with some of his works and even wrote about him in Romania) but this time with a genuine interest in philosophy. Around 1928, Fondane was, for a short time, superficially involved with some French avant-garde groups and, perhaps as a result, began to look into the possibility of exploiting the potentialities of the new art of cinematography. Not only was this a promising artistic venue in itself, but at the time, it would have imposed less stringent requirements on the degree of versatility in new language; his French was by then certainly good enough to write *scenarios* (scripts), never to be implemented, under the guise of cinematographic-poems. Indeed, in 1928 Benjamin Fondane

published his first book in France titled, *Trois-scenari: ciné-poèmes*. In 1929, after having met him in Paris, Victoria Ocampo, a well-known personality on the literary scene in Argentina, invited Fondane to Buenos Aires; during his sojourn there, he presented avant-garde movies produced in France and also gave two lectures about Lev Shestov's philosophy. Prior to this trip, he finished preparing a collection of his Romanian poems that were published in Bucharest under the title *Privelisti* (Landscapes) in 1930. It seems, therefore, that by the end of the 1920s, Benjamin Fondane was beginning to establish a stable place for himself under the literary-artistic sun of the City of Lights. During the same period, he started writing poetry in French and, after having sent a few poems for publication in Romanian avant-garde journals, he began looking for outlets for his poetry in France as well as in Belgium. He was working hard on a book about Rimbaud (a first version was ready by the end of 1930), which was published in 1933. Thus, only ten years after his arrival in France, Benjamin Fondane was a well-known name in the very crowded French literary world. In 1933, his first volume of poetry in French, titled *Ulysse*, was published in Brussels. It was followed by a second volume titled *Titanic* in 1937. Meanwhile, in 1934, he participated as screen writer and assistant-director in the production of the Franco-Swiss movie *Rapt*, which was based on a novel written by Swiss author Charles-Ferdinand Ramuz, and directed by Dimitri Kirsanoff. In addition, Fondane's newly acquired notoriety as poet and literary critic guaranteed him access to an impressive number of literary journals; from 1932 on, Benjamin Fondane became a permanent collaborator to one of the most important French literary reviews, *Cahiers du Sud*, published in Marseilles. In 1936, he traveled again to Argentina, this time to direct and produce the movie *Tararira*. The very same year his first philosophical work, *La Conscience Malheureuse*, was published in Paris by the very prestigious Denoël and Steele publishing house. It seemed that Benjamin Fondane was launched on a very promising track that allowed him to become involved in many of the major areas of contemporary French culture, exactly as he had predicted less than fifteen years before in Bucharest.

Yet Benjamin Fondane was only one among a large number of foreigners who came from remote provincial towns to the great cultural capital of Europe in search of that special atmosphere that nurtured and nourished talents from all over the world: from the American writers of the Lost Generation to the artists who came from Spain, Italy, and Eastern Europe to invent modern pic-

tures and sculpture, avant-garde music and dance. Romania itself was a fairly abundant source of talent and, in Paris, Fondane became friendly with Constantin Brâncuşi, Ilarie Voronca, and Claude Sernet, all of Romanian origin. Regardless of his personal fortunes and relationship with the external world, Fondane's real concerns always related to his own internal world: he was writing his poems (and rewriting them permanently) in an attempt to actually live his beliefs about the nature, the meaning, and the scope of poetry. For him, poetry was not merely an artistic expression; it was a way of life. The poet was neither the interpreter of the world nor its prophet. *He lived by his poems*. In order to substantiate such claims, the poet, any poet, has to develop a philosophical interpretation of existence that has these requirements as its corollary. Or perhaps was it the existential philosopher who *had to* write poetry in order to find himself in agreement with his own philosophical thinking?

During the last few years preceding the outbreak of WWII, Fondane wrote and published *Faux Traité d'Esthetique*; opened a discussion with Jacques Maritain, the neo-Thomist philosopher, on matters related to religious consciousness; and began the in-depth study of the works of a few contemporary French philosophers. Thus, he assiduously read Lucien Lévy-Bruhl's anthropology, Stéphane Lupasco's new philosophy based on "logic of the included contradiction," and studied with avid interest Gaston Bachelard's new philosophical ideas rooted in scientific thought but applied, to a large extent, to the world of spiritual and artistic creativity. During these years he was in search of a new philosophical modality that would allow him to understand the individual, "*le particulier existentiel*," who persistently refuses the ways of the "real" world around him through a thought that accepts the fusion of rational thinking with the affective and even incorporates it.

At the outbreak of the war, Benjamin Fondane, who became a French citizen in 1938, was mobilized by the French army. He was taken prisoner at some point, was freed by the Germans, and returned finally to an occupied Paris. During the war years he wrote steadily, mostly poetry (the cycle *Mal de Fantômes*) but philosophy as well; he returned to literary criticism in an extensive essay on Baudelaire's poetry—finished in 1943 and published posthumously in 1947—under the title *Baudelaire ou l'experience du gouffre*. He kept his contacts with a more and more difficult and dangerous external world by often visiting his good friend, the editor José Corti, in his bookstore near the Luxemburg Gardens or by going from time to time to audit Gaston Bachelard's

lectures at the Sorbonne. He also went on long walks and bicycle trips with Stephane Lupasco and became friendly with Emile Cioran who, during the war years, lived in Paris as well. The pressure mounted around him, and by the end of 1943, when it became quite risky to walk the streets, Fondane spent most of his time confined to his small apartment, Rue Rollin. Here, at the request of Jean Grenier, he wrote in fewer than two months his last philosophical essay, *Le lundi existential et le dimanche de l'histoire*, published posthumously in 1945. In early March 1944, he was arrested by the French police and, after two months spent at Drancy, Benjamin Fondane was deported by the German authorities to Auschwitz where he died, according to witnesses, in a gas chamber at the beginning of October the same year.

All these facts, events, ideas, and critical evaluations of the works of Benjamin Fondane will be discussed at some length in the following chapters. I shall try to explain his philosophy and to interpret his poetry; I will attempt also to put, to some extent, in context his activities by presenting and discussing his interactions with philosophers and poets, artists and intellectuals both in France and—to a lesser extent in the present work—in his native country, Romania. I shall briefly discuss Fondane's contributions to contemporary theater and his failed attempt to make the silent movie into an art object. It is hard to find the right balance in the presentation of such a wealth of activities. In fact, one could write probably extended essays (if not books even) about all these topics, and as I wrote in the preface, I had to make my choices. For instance, in the present work I will not insist on Fondane's contribution to the big debate surrounding modernity or on his involvement in the political life of post-WWI Romania even though this would have been a worthwhile enterprise if one considers the important role played by intellectuals who were his contemporaries, such as E. M. Cioran, Mircea Eliade, or Eugene Ionesco. I shall mention, but will not discuss in depth, Fondane's interactions with French surrealism or his work in the areas of cinema and theater; all these will be left for versions of this book to be published later in Romanian and French. The relationship with Lev Shestov and his philosophy—abundantly illustrated in Fondane's notes published under the title *Rencontres avec Léon Chestov* and his articles on Shestov—will be discussed more extensively. In this case, too, in order to do justice to the subject, one should write a full-length book probably titled *Shestov and Fondane, Existential Philosophers*. Such a book should present the work of the two in the context of the twentieth-century *existential* and *exis-*

tentialist philosophies. This in itself would represent, however, quite an enterprise that, at this point, must be postponed for a later time.

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B. FUNDOIANU

The Romanian Years

B. Fundoianu was born Benjamin Wechsler on November 14, 1898, in Jassy, an important cultural and administrative center of pre–WWI Romania. This city, which was for centuries the capital of the historical Moldavia, had for many years an important Jewish population. Fundoianu's father, Isaac, was a tradesman from an established family; his mother, Adela Schwarzfeld, came from a family that embraced the ideas of the Jewish Enlightenment (Haskala) while still living in one of the Eastern Austro-Hungarian provinces. Her father, Benjamin Schwarzfeld, built the first Jewish high school in Jassy. All of his sons were cultivated young men who followed intellectual paths; one, Elias, wrote a narrative documenting the history of Jews in Romania.

Young Fondane wrote autobiographical notes (he started a diary at the age of fourteen) and several poems celebrating the people and the places he knew as a child,[1] often remembering the atmosphere reigning in his grandfather's house as well as trips to Hertza, a village in Northern Moldavia where his father's family originated and still maintained ties. There is also a fairly large body of correspondence within the family from the pre–WWI years that has

been conserved.[2] In his early notes, Fondane remembers his mother chanting a song to him as a young child, an "old, foreign distant song. A song born in pain and suffering, which in its clear waters reflected however unexpected shining lights; a song originating in remote places impregnated with the balm of pomegranates and oranges…in the land of palm and cedar trees…where under a red bright sun a strange, lively population lived."[3] It is possible that he visited Hertza quite often during the years preceding enrollment into elementary school in 1904 and later; the poet seems to even remember a trip to Kishinev with his father following, perhaps, the pogroms that erupted there at the beginning of the century. The school years were unhappy times; an eighteen-year-old Fundoianu wrote, "I remember horrified the school years" even though he went to the school founded by his grandfather and, at the time, had as principal one of his uncles. "I was a poor student; I could not count well and I am still bad at it today. Grammar I managed ultimately, history was difficult; my memory, which is excellent today, was not very good at that time…During class hours I was absentmindedly watching my teacher, lost in daydreaming while letting my eyes scan randomly the walls. And the walls were covered with wonderful things!"[4] At home, however, and in the family environment, the young boy was happy: he lived in Jewish surroundings but at the same time he was very alert and knowledgeable about events outside the restricted familial circle. Thus, in his correspondence with his elder sister Lina, sent to Vienna for studies between 1911 and 1913, he mentioned the results of the national elections of November 1912, and, at the beginning of 1913, discussed with her in very patriotic terms the possibility of a war between Romania and Bulgaria.

According to his own recollections, young Beno, as he was called by family and very close friends at the time, began writing poetry at the age of eight. By the time he enrolled in high school in 1913, he was already familiar with the attempts made by a few young students to launch a literary journal in Jassy, titled *Poetry and Prose*.[5] As evidenced by his correspondence with his sister, about the same time, the young poet was reading Heine in German and translating his writing into Romanian; moreover, as witnessed by the same correspondence, he became very interested in the possibilities of using Yiddish as a literary medium. In parallel with all these his involvement with classical Romanian literature steadily increased to the point that in 1913 he began to give talks about Eminescu, Cosbuc, and Caragiale, among others, at a high school literary club. He had two intellectual mentors during this period: Alfred

Hefter, who will later become the editor of the literary journal *Poetry and Prose*, and the poet A. Steuerman-Rodion, who married one of the Schwarzfeld girls, becoming Beno's uncle. During these years, he also attended meetings at the main gathering place of the Jewish intelligentsia in Jassy, Toynbee Hall. Here, general cultural events were mixed with specifically Jewish ones, and Haskala and Zionist ideas met frequently. Jacob Groper and A. L. Zissu gave talks there and read from their literary works. Young Beno Wechsler dreamt about translating poems from German and publishing them in a volume to be titled *Modern German Lyrics*; he also wrote poems and essays and avidly read everything he could get his hands on. Too busy to pay attention to his obligations as a high school student, he performed so poorly that he had to repeat his freshman year in high school. It did not seem to bother him in the least: during 1914 and 1915 he was already a published author and about the same time he began to get involved in polemics (in *Rampa*) related to the nature of modern literature and the role of symbolism in Romanian literary modernity. In 1916 he published in *Hatikva*—in addition to translations from Yiddish—his first cycle of *Biblical Sonnets*. The last of the war years were filled within intense literary activity for the future poet B. Fundoianu—he finished the first version of the poems titled *Hertza*—but they were also years of deep grief: his father died in 1917 and in 1918 his uncle and mentor, Dr. Rodion-Steuerman, committed suicide after his return from the frontlines. By the time the war was over, the young poet was already known in literary circles far beyond Jassy and had established solid friendships with two important figures in the Romanian literary world, Gala Galaction and Ion Minulescu. In 1918, just before he left for Bucharest, Fundoianu published his first play, *Peter's Denial*. At this turning point he felt the need to be anchored in a tradition even if he did not know what its exact nature and meaning was to be: "I needed a father, a tradition; an inheritance… Groper took my hand and brought me under my grandfather's portrait. I understood that he represented this tradition. I returned to the origins, that is, to the Bible…I returned to Judaism (which was) a vital finality."[6]

B. Fundoianu graduated from high school in Bucharest where he arrived soon after the war ended. Here he worked at A. L. Zissu's newspaper of Zionist orientation *Mantuirea* (The Redemption), but very soon he began collaborating with a few mainstream Romanian journals such as *Adevarul Literar si Artistic* and *Contimporanul*, *Sburatorul Literar*. He enrolled in the School of Law at the Jassy University, which he abandoned after three years because of the oppres-

sive anti-Semitic atmosphere there, without getting his degree. Very quickly he befriended in Bucharest a number of young avant-garde authors; some of them became famous later either in the Romanian or the French cultural realm (or in both): Ion Vinea, Ilarie Voronca, Stefan Roll, M. H. Maxy, Brunea-Fox, Sasa Pana, and others.[7] The width and breath of B. Fundoianu's activities during the few years he spent in Bucharest before leaving for Paris in December 1923 is quite impressive. He wrote an enormous amount of poetry, published in 1921 a book of essays titled *Images and Books from France*, and established with his sister Line and her husband, Armand Pascal, the avant-garde theater *Insula*. The first drafts of two plays, *Balthasar's Feast* and *Philoctetes*, were also written during these years.[8]

According to Eric Freedman's very thorough bibliography of Fondane's works, by 1919, B. Fundoianu published more than one hundred articles in the Romanian cultural and literary press. His interests were manifold, from the discussion of the literature of the future, with emphasis on the role of the symbolist movement, to critical appraisals of a large variety of authors, foreign (Ibsen, Renan, Julien Benda) as well as local (Arghezi, Minulescu, Davidescu). Jewish themes were abundantly present and here the domains of interest extend from Martin Buber's ideas about Judaism—young Fundoianu will write a long series of articles under the title *Judaism and Hellenism*—to Zionism and questions related to the political attitudes adopted by the Jewish population in Eastern Europe.[9] In addition he manifested a keen interest in cultural events and developments in Western Europe: a long string of articles under the generic title "Cultural Movements Abroad" were published in *Mântuirea*. During the early 1920s, Fundoianu's *resonance* with the French literary world became more and more pronounced and materialized in *Images and Books from France* (1921). The point Fundoianu makes in this book is explicitly stated in its preface: Romanian and French literatures are not in a symbiotic relationship as this would imply reciprocal cross-fertilization. In fact, Romanian literature represents only an imitation of French literature (Fundoianu used the much harsher term "parasitic," which upset many of the leading critics and authors in post–WWI Romania, among them Eugen Lovinescu, the most important literary critic of the time). In a way, this idea was in the air, traditionalist thinker and historian Nicolae Iorga stated it before him; but Fundoianu was very brash and categorical in his uttering. For instance, he would write that the founder of Romanian symbolism, Alexandru Macedonski, "began with Musset and ended

with Mallarmé" and that whatever was written since 1900 in Romanian poetry was anchored in Baudelaire, Verlaine, and Laforgue. Such radical pronouncements contradicted some of his own previous observations made between 1919 and 1921, concerning the evolution of Romanian poetry from the classical (Eminescu) and traditionalist (Alecsandri, Bolintineanu, Cosbuc) to the neosymbolist modernist authors such as Minulescu, Pillat, Davidescu, Maniu, Bacovia, Arghezi, and others. Did young Fundoianu reach indeed, in 1922, the conclusion that some sort of a psychological barrier, a severe intrinsic limitation of the autochthonous "poetical soul," which prevented the creation of self-standing, original literary creation, was at work in Romania? This is an important question and the way it is answered provides the key to the explanation of his move in 1923 and to the interpretation of his future evolution in France. That is why I shall concentrate on and use this question as a guiding principle to my brief and random walk across the large body of articles B. Fundoianu published during these few years of intense critical activity. I shall treat his early poetry separately in this chapter and chapter 2, which discusses the passage from Fundoianu to Fondane during his first years in Paris. Since the writings about theater as well as those about Jewish subjects also have a significant impact on the later career of Benjamin Fondane, I shall relate to these aspects as well in this introductory chapter.

In one of the articles published in 1919 Fundoianu observed that the literature that follows the war years will have to be necessarily a new one, qualitatively different from that of the past. The war experience would certainly influence it and the only important question will be about the ways in which this "tearing apart and upsetting of the human soul" will impact a literature called to depict it. The author also promised to show elsewhere that the direct, causal relationship between the sociopolitical event and its cultural reflection was not obvious. He ended his article "About Tomorrow's Literature" by asking a few questions reflecting his understanding of the complexities of the interplay between the social and the artistic: "Could the new literature be more mystical than that of Claudel, Jammes, Péguy and the most recent symbolism? (Can it be) more humanly profound than that of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky or stronger than the poetry of Whitman, more fantastic than Poe's, more tragic that Baudelaire? The new literature might end up not being tragic, mystical, or humanistic at all. It might be totally different. Nature is still very resourceful when it comes to imagination."[10] These final remarks show not only that

Fundoianu was aware, at this very early stage of his intellectual life, of the fallacy of any simplistic, causal interpretation of the creative act but also that he could accept in principle the possibility of the emergence of radical novelty within a culture dominated by overwhelming external influences.

The concept of *symbolism*, which had a well-established definition in French literary context, was used during the first two decades of the last century in a somewhat loose manner in Romania. It would not be exaggerated to say that here it was practically synonymous with *modern*, modernity in literature. In his first article published on this subject shortly after his arrival in Bucharest, "We, the Symbolists," Fundoianu observed that while the movement was present in Romanian literature for more than twenty years, nobody cared yet to give it a theoretical interpretation and to explain it to the general public—or, for that matter, even to the authors who spontaneously adopted it as their means of expression. If someone had looked at its meaning, he or she would have observed that "symbolism is a transposition in a different style of the idealist philosophy"; moreover, the astute observer would have noticed that "art represents the uncontrolled effect of the external reality on the artist; as such, art is metaphysical," concluded B. Fundoianu. The first conclusion is not surprising as it is consistent with the idea mentioned above, published only three months earlier; the second, however, adds an important dimension to the discussion, which enables establishing criteria and classifications among the generation of the poets who followed in the footsteps of Macedonski. The names mentioned are those previously mentioned, from Minulescu to Arghezi but also the younger Ion Vinea and Emil Isac (the word *complex* is twice mentioned by Fundoianu in connection with Vinea's name), as well as to those later forgotten, Rascu and Hefter. And most important, Fundoianu included himself in the list: "*We* (that is the symbolists) are an established fact" (emphasis added). In an entry in his *Notebook of an Irrelevant Person*, he observed that if he had not been born in the melancholic city of Jassy he would have never become a symbolist poet.[11]

In 1912, Tristan Tzara, who was to become later in Zürich one of the inventors and the promoters of the Dada movement, was editing in Romania, together with Ion Vinea, a literary journal titled *The Symbol*. Ion Minulescu was by then recognized as the leading symbolist poet of the younger generation and Nicolae Davidescu was, in fact, in spite of Fundoianu's claims, a "theorist" of the movement before the war. George Bacovia was a poet of the "correspondences" related to Verlaine,[12] but Arghezi was considered the genu-

ine modernist (for Fundoianu, at that time, meant "authentic symbolist") poet, the "only great (Romanian) poet since Eminescu," in his words. Mircea Martin, one of the major Fondane researchers today, pointed out in his introductory essay to Fundoianu's poetry[13] that in spite of the poet's rhetoric concerning foreign influences on Romanian authors, he himself was abundantly influenced by both the classical, traditional poetry as well as by other Romanian symbolists, such as Bacovia. Since the main purpose of this chapter is merely to present briefly the Romanian background of the poet-philosopher to be known later in France as Benjamin Fondane, I shall not elaborate on this interesting discussion concerning the nature of Romanian symbolism and the young B. Fundoianu's place in it. It would be of interest, though, to see how his thinking about the dialectical relationship between the external and internal influences evolved over time and to what extent it might have influenced his decision to leave Romania.

In April 1921, Fundoianu published his first article on classicism, followed by a second one six months later. Based on André Gide's ideas, the poet came to the brief but firm conclusion that the *classical* represents the triumph of intelligence over affectivity. Not a very surprising statement in view of the fact that he already spoke about symbolism as idealistic philosophy, but then symbolism would have had to be linked to classicism. The second article made Fundoianu's reasoning more explicit: symbolism is the new classicism he wrote and that meant that in symbolist art affectivity was not replaced by something else but rather transgressed. That will allow the artist to penetrate into its depths with the only purpose of *understanding* the affective and, by that, control it. Is not absolute control an obvious sign of classicism? The article "Toward a New Classicism," published in November 1922, unveils a very interesting evolution in Fundoianu's thinking: the role of the symbolist expression in art, he will contend, is to trigger a new aesthetic revolution. The logic of his argument could be explained as follows: symbolism, while successful, cannot bring real novelty because novelty cannot be imposed by gradual changes or by adding new meanings or values to old ideas. Literary movements reach their summit when they exhibit a certain degree of excessiveness in all their manifestations: that which was true for the old classicism, as well as for the romantic movement of the nineteenth century, is true now for symbolism. Classicism died of an excess of *order* and romanticism was destroyed by the excess of *freedom*; symbolism is endangered now, argued Fundoianu in 1922, because of an *excess* of

anarchy. One must stop this process and redirect creativity toward a new equilibrium, to state a new measure and introduce a new degree of discreetness and reservation when it comes to the affective impulses of the artist. This is the new form of classicism he talks about, a new kind of *apollonian* art. I insist upon this evolution in Fundoianu's thought because, as we will see in the next chapter, the search for a new classicism guides his first steps during the coming years and determines to a large extent his ambiguous attitude toward the avant-garde movement issued from the Dada and surrealist "revolutions."

To these, I would like to add another observation: while at the age of twenty-four the poet was inclined to grant to the idea and its aesthetic embodiments primacy over the affective, he was not at all dogmatic in this belief. Indeed, at about the same time, in a dispute he had with his good friend Felix Aderca concerning some basic postulates of literary criticism, Fundoianu accused him of not being able to understand that there is no room for a hierarchical view when it comes to judging the role of rationality versus that of affectivity in artistic endeavor: "Both the engines of ideas and those of affectivity co-exist within our heads, indivisible."[14] This statement will later become a central idea of Fondane's existential thought, and it preceded by quite a few years his encounter with Lev Shestov.

The poet B. Fundoianu appeared in print for the first time in 1914,[15] with a typically symbolist sonnet titled "Sleeping Flowers." From the very beginning of his (relatively) long poetical career—which will evolve in two distinct languages—one notes an almost compulsive tendency to rewrite, to improve, and to change his poem, which will become a constant of Fondane-Fundoianu's writing till the very end of his life. And indeed, the second version written the same year is a quite different poem that keeps only the title of the previous one. "Eve," dedicated by the adolescent to a certain Carmencita, was published at about the same time, creating some confusion insofar as the debut of the poet is concerned. The symbolist character of his early poetry and the maturity of his verse caught the attention of Ovid Densusianu, at the time the editor of one of the main symbolist publications in Romania, *Viata Noua* (The New World/Life), and a professor at the University of Bucharest, who invited him to publish in his review. The very young poet took advantage of the invitation and, indeed, published the same year a few poems there; however, soon after this promising debut, the contact with the review ceased after attempts were made by the editors to suggest changes of titles or even, in a few cases, to intro-

duce modifications in the text itself, an attempt that the young author resisted forcefully and protested loudly. As we shall see, this problem became a recurring one in Fondane's later interactions with editors, whether of literary journals or books.

Autumn was an often encountered motive in Fundoianu's early poetry, with the usual "ingredients": sick roses, the strange bird coming from nowhere, the crypt, and heavy rain abundantly present. The recurring motive "*iti plânge ploaia in priviri*" (the rain is crying in your eyes) reminds one of Minulescu, while "*cânturi funerare*" (burial chants), Bacovia. In fact, Fundoianu, who signed during this early period at times as Alex Vilara and Const. Meletie, published some of his poems during the WWI years in reviews in which Bacovia, Topârceanu, or Demostene Botez, well-known poets, wrote. In 1915 he began publishing in *Cronica*, edited by Gala Galaction and Tudor Arghezi, whom Fondane always considered the greatest Romanian poet alive. He was so overly enthusiastic concerning Arghezi's poetry that, at some point, he provoked the ire of his venerated master, who even made public his displeasure.[16]

The typical symbolist poetry of the *onyx* and *agate* (see, for instance, *Poem Profan*) alternate during these early years with this dominated by biblical personalities and motives (Moses, Jacob and his ladder, Samson). They, however, show the signs of great original poetry that Fundoianu wrote in *Privelisti* (Landscapes), the volume of poetry to appear in 1930, as well as the "early" Fondane of *Ulysse* and *Titanic*. "The Leper's Poem," written in 1917 but published in 1920, is one of those outstanding poems of young Fundoianu. For a Romanian reader, the influence of Arghezi is quite obvious both at the level of the poem's construction and at that of the imagery. Roxana Sorescu, writing about Tudor Arghezi's psalms, pointed out that "Romanian literature is the only one in which a large number of poets, belonging to different generations, used the title 'Psalm' for poems in which they pondered upon man's relationship with divinity." Macedonski himself seems to have started this tradition and Arghezi published his first psalm, "Psalmul de taina" (The Secret Psalm), in 1914.[17] It is not surprising, therefore, to notice that young Fundoianu published a number of psalms not only influenced by this Arghezian trend but also by his own interest in the Bible. Many years later he told Jacques Maritain that the secret meaning of human life is hidden in this monument of monotheism that is the Bible; at this early stage, however, he embraced a rather pantheistic attitude, which encouraged him to seek beauty rather than truth in its texts.

In an article published in 1920, the same year "The Leper's Poem" was published, Fundoianu wrote: "Since Chateaubriand we know that God exists because nature is beautiful. God is to be found in the stone, in the spring, in the lizard, in the pavement of the road. At every step you risk stepping on him…because God is everywhere."[18] In the poem, the opening verses are meant to create the background for the dialogue by describing the landscape, and they state explicitly this pantheistic belief: "I want to find you in palm trees and in flames/but I am afraid to soil your land/to cover with my dirt your leaves." The hideous description of the leper is strongly emphasized—I am tempted to write *in very expressionistic way*—in order to contrast it with the purity of God. And then comes a most daring stroke: "Oh, if you would be like me, God/The leper I am," which seems to imply a rejection, an abomination even, if the reading is kept in a purely biblical frame of reference. But this modality of "persuasive conversation" in which the leper tries to convince God that if he would exchange places with him, even for just a flickering moment, he could understand his plight, is not unusual at all in the Jewish tradition (in particular the later Hassidic one). If God could only experience the depth of the suffering of the poor leper, he would certainly save him; not by taking back his life but by ridding him of his predicament. At that point, though, the leper realizes that God does not need to have such an experience in order to make the saving move. He knows everything, he represents the absolute that incorporates everything and that, precisely because he, the human, is a leper: "I know too well, oh God/that you are sane because I am a leper…I must remain a wreck for you to be a god/ My stupor gives your science glory/My weakness makes you strong/And from my dirt the sparks of heaven will be born."[19] The poem then takes a turn that is reminiscent of the "cursing prayer" Roxana Sorescu identified in her analysis of the Arghezian psalms.[20] God needs to have the leper alive—as witness? for a warning?—but the leper refuses to cooperate, he wants to die. This would bring him before Divine Judgment and give him the opportunity to seek revenge. That is what the leper wants from God: he will request Divine Punishment. All those who persecuted him and sent him away, kept him out of their camps, beaten and dejected, must become themselves lepers. None should be spared, neither children nor the elderly, only the beautiful young girls who never intended harm, because the beautiful is always good and pure, should be exempted from this terrible fate: "Forgive, Oh God the beauties/with sparkling hips/and milky bosoms/they never willed to harm me/they cannot know

what harm is/and when afraid, they used to run away from me/I stopped and kneeled/to kiss the muddy prints/of their naked feet."[21] Again, the reader of Romanian poetry might think of Eminescu and Cosbuc even while reading these verses, but in spite of it, the poem stands for itself as a first major accomplishment of a very young poet. In spite of recognizable influences, his verse is sure, the metaphors dashing and daring, and the construction of the poem is quite well rounded. One could interpret in various ways its religious, social, and even metaphysical "messages"; undoubtedly, this poem represents a turning point. One might say that at the age of nineteen, B. Fundoianu was an accomplished poet destined to leave a strong imprint on Romanian literary modernity.[22]

As mentioned, Fondane published before he left for France a collection of essays that not only present a snapshot of French literary life during the late nineteenth and the first years of the twentieth century but also define and estimate today the intellectual sources (and resources) of the later Benjamin Fondane. The book *Carti si Imagini din Franta* (1921) contains a number of studies dedicated to authors writing in French (not all were French, Belgian authors such as Maeterlinck and Verhaeren were also considered): poets (Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Jammes, Claudel), prose writers (Flaubert, André Gide, Proust), and critics and philosophers (Renan, Saint Beuve, Huysmans, Amiel, Rémy de Gourmont, Jules de Gaultier, and others). It is quite an impressive panorama, but it is by no means a descriptive, neutral presentation of the French cultural-literary life over the previous five or six decades. On the contrary, Fundoianu exhibited very clear-cut points of view, and his strong opinions were sometimes perceived as offensive (if not right out of place). In the following, I shall briefly relate to only three authors out of this long list who significantly influenced young Fundoianu: André Gide, Rémy de Gourmont, and Jules de Gaultier.

If André Gide and Jules de Gaultier were often present in the conversation Fondane had in Paris with Lev Shestov, Rémy de Gourmont seems to have been forgotten after Fundoianu's departure from Romania. This is surprising since he dedicated two chapters in the book to him, one of them titled "Rémy de Gourmond, Creator of Values." By doubting everything and rethinking all accepted values, the French critic proceeded, according to Fundoianu, to a constructive "remolding" of critical thought, creating in the process new values: "There is no fact, theory, axiom or postulate in the entire field of ideas, which was not put under severe scrutiny, to which Gourmont did not look with skep-

ticism, which he did not consider with irony. He could have opposed any idea even before he found its inner contradiction." When he looks at an artwork he is seeing across it, and discovers that "the marble statues turn out to be false."[23] These quotes sound like fragments of an autoportrait *avant la lettre*. Young Fundoianu was fascinated by the multidimensional quality of Gourmond's work: he was a literary critic, a grammarian, a botanist, a biologist, and a philosopher (a French Goethe transferred into modernity?), in permanent search for a common denominator, a unifying idea in this seemingly boundless diversity. He became the theorist of the symbolist movement by introducing the idealistic philosophies of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche into contemporary literary criticism ("in the symbolist *hermeneutics*" as we would say today). There is also another important idea that Fundoianu identified in Gourmond's work and which, regardless whether he explicitly mentioned him later or not, remained with the poet-philosopher Benjamin Fondane until the very end: that of the essential role of individuality or what will be called in his later writings "*le particulier existentiel*." Gourmond, points out Fundoianu-Fondane, "does not love collectivities, flocks, herds. He is trying to learn how each individual plant absorbs light in its own way, he differentiates constantly…he dissociates."[24] Scientists generalize (later Fondane will replace in his discourse "scientist" with "philosopher") and consider the differences to be accidental. For them the similarity, the *identity* is that which confers value. In contrast with them, Rémy de Gourmond, the philosopher of art and culture, the theorist of the symbolist movement and of whatever trend or new movement will follow it, "will consider the resemblance as being merely accidental and will give difference the ultimate value."[25] The task of the critical work should be, therefore, to establish the structures built upon these individual qualities, to look for the diversity of expression, to seek the different realizations in their individuality. If Buffon wrote that the style defines the author, Gourmont went far beyond this statement to state that "the style represents art itself."

André Gide was also a central figure in young Fundoianu's literary pantheon. It must be said, however, that while Gourmont was already dead by the timeFundoianu wrote *Carti si Imagini din Franta* Gide was known only in part by the public (many of his important works will appear during the 1920s and his major political turn toward the Left occurred during the early 1930s; both these facts will influence Fondane's attitude toward Gide in later years). It is very interesting, though, to see how Fundoianu interpreted Gide's work and

his position within the literary landscape at the time; in his view, André Gide grew up within a well-established symbolist medium and, being a late comer to it, "He did not need to seek anymore for new means of expression; he found them waiting for him, ready. His originality consists in diligence and orderliness. With him, the anarchy of the affectivity is coming to an end and thought is triumphant."[26] Gide is seeking inner equilibrium and, through this, happiness. Yes, activity is creating some degree of turbulence, of disorder; *Paludes* was a book dominated by a feeling of uneasiness (an early version of the later, all pervasive "angst") but, in fact, observed Fundoianu, "any book is the story of an anxiety."[27] Facing reality, the artist must choose between one of the following three attitudes: he can either accept it (that is what "realist art" is all about) or reject it in the name of an idealized past. But there is a third way that represents the path proposed by Gide, in which the artist wears a mask and, under its protection, follows his own way. At this point the concept of the *masked* author brings into convergence the three intellectual heroes of young Fundoianu: Gide, Gourmont, and Gaultier. In the case of Gourmont, the presence of the mask was more subtle; it had to do with the fact that, in accord with idealist philosophy, the world was merely a subjective representation of the individual. Each piece of reality is, therefore, different; reality is masked by the multiplicity of its representations. Gide transferred the masks carried by the characters to the creator of the work of art and to its spectators. There is an entire debate in Gide, in connection with Greek tragedy, concerning the presence and the role of the mask: Is it on the scene or on the spectator's face, out in the amphitheater? Jules de Gaultier, on the other hand, was an idealist philosopher influenced by Nietzsche, and in that respect he was very close to Gourmont; however, his idea concerning the presence and the need for the mask was related to a phenomenon he defined as *human bovarism*. Flaubert's heroine, Madame Bovary, was unhappy because she imagined herself to be totally different from how she actually was. But Flaubert saw the mask in other places as well and many of his heroes wore it: "Flaubert's entire oeuvre is based on this vision of bovarism," wrote Fundoianu in his essay on Jules de Gaultier. We all have this propensity, this drive to substitute an imagined personality, to wear a mask, when we have to face the world. That means that one is forever the prisoner of the mask since the phenomenon occurs each time we face ourselves even as "objects"; according to the idealist philosophies of Gaultier and Gourmont, which in some indirect way Gide also embraced, one always

moves and acts in this world under the cover of a mask. This is a philosophy in which subject and object are inseparable: the subject always creates his own object. This "relativistic" view will be rejected by Fondane later.

Since I followed B. Fundoianu's life and activities chronologically in this chapter, I must finish this brief presentation of the Romanian years with the story of the *Insula* episode that occurred during his last year spent in Bucharest. The story of this attempt to establish a new, avant-garde theater there is, in turn, related to young Fondane's interest in theater in general. As noted, he wrote a play titled *Peter's Denial* at the age of nineteen and published it in Jassy in 1918. This early play is very interesting (the title might have been suggested to him by the lecture of the poem by Baudelaire), but it turns out that this was not his first attempt at playwriting: at a very early age young Beno wrote sketches and small theatrical dialogues reflecting his cultural and social experiences.[28] None has been ever played but in the early 1920s in Bucharest, B. Fundoianu wrote extensively about theater with the declared intent of implementing some of his ideas on the scene. He even sent to Paris an article—his first to be published in French before he left Romania—in which he claimed that for a whole century nothing significant occurred in the Romanian theater. He wrote quite a bit about Ibsen, whom he considered a playwright par excellence, the master of modern sensibility, a creator of values who proposed and created a new way of looking at the world. Moreover, in referring specifically to *Speaking of Borkman*,[29] he uttered a statement which, again, stayed with him during his Shestovian years: "A deeply human creation is always the expression of a cry (scream)." In 1920 he wrote about Jacques Copeau and his *Le Vieux Colombier* (his sister Line just married at the time Armand Pascal who was a student of Copeau in Paris). The great French master was dismayed by the obsolescence of the plays seen in the City of Lights and Fundoianu echoed him in writing that "what Copeau says about the French theater is exactly what I think about the contemporary Romanian scene."[30] Beyond the deficiencies of the scene itself, however, observed Fundoianu, there were serious problems with the spectators as well. True theater goers should be able to understand the spectacle as an art event; they must filter the story through a certain cultural sensibility. When the tragic is localized in external events and not in the characters of the play, the theater represents a mere distraction. At this early stage, Fundoianu remarked about the tendency of the new medium of the cinema to address the unfiltered natural event; later, Fondane will base his hopes on the

silent movie, the only cinematographic form that, in his opinion, could elude the simplistic representation, reject the "show," and replace it with an artistic, sublimated mode of participation.

In addition to *Peter's Denial*, by 1922 young Fondane had two other plays in the works: *Philoctetes*, not completed at that time, and *Balthasar's Feast*. Fondane reworked both work later on in France. The second was clearly a symbolist work announced by a poem titled "Balthasar's Monologue," published in 1920, which had, indeed, a strong resemblance to a text extracted from a play as the flow of the verses is at times interrupted by a text resembling directions given to actors. *Philoctetes* was written most probably with Gide's play in mind, another attempt to rewrite Sophocles' play in modern terms (see chapter 7). What is the common denominator to all these plays written by a very young author? In the preface to *Peter's Denial*, Fundoianu explained that his work was not intended for the critics of the day; he might have added neither for the day's spectators. In the same text he also stated that the piece was to be seen as an example of symbolist writing ("a symbolist book, therefore," in his own words). According to his definitions of symbolism that meant that his play represented a purely subjective interpretation of a story communicated somewhere, sometime by another subjective observer. The impact of the play was supposed to trigger an artistic reaction in the intelligent reader or spectator who, in turn, must be inclined toward deep, educated emotions. As one can see, the young author is not embarrassed to firmly declare his purely idealist outlook; Balthasar too represents, at this early stage, a Nitzschean hero who tries to overcome the limits imposed by the rules of ethics and religion, and this, in perfect agreement with the symbolist "theory" embraced by the author. Daniel, the prophet of a mysterious God, all-powerful yet invisible, who refuses to respond to repeated human provocations and who, for strange and incomprehensible reasons, disappears from time to time is there merely to guide Balthasar *within* the labyrinth *not out of it*. In the poem on the same theme, toward the end, the Assyrian king himself expressed the idealistic tenets of the symbolism by asking, "People have become illusions/it is my mind who makes them live?"[32] In the foreword to the later French version of *Philoctetes*, Fondane stated that his original intention was to rewrite in terms appropriate to the spirit of the times—that is in symbolist terms—the old Greek tragedy. The plays young Fundoianu wrote were, therefore, part of an effort to inscribe his works in an artistic worldview he believed to perfectly match and define his times. The problems related

to the aesthetics of the creative act and the means of expression (pre)occupied him intensely; in addition, after the Great War, a new spirit seemed to conquer the European literary and artistic scenes. The Dada movement was more and more present. In Bucharest, in June 1922, Ion Vinea—Tristan Tzara's friend and colleague at the *Simbolul*—began publishing *Contimporanul*, the first avant-garde journal in Romania and declared his main aim to be "awakening the Romanian public," making it aware of the new realities of the post–WWI world. B. Fundoianu was present in the first issue of this journal and remained a permanent collaborator even after his departure from Romania. The journal helped a group of young writers and actors to establish the avant-garde theater *Insula* (The Island); on December 26 1922, in a very small playhouse, under the direction of B. Fundoianu and his brother-in-law Armand Pascal, a play written by two symbolist authors, St. O. Iosif and D. Anghel, was presented.

Two months later, in a small write-up introducing a review having the same title (only two issues were published), B.Fd., the signature used by the author, wrote that "the theatrical representation is not the only target of our effort; we aim as well to the transformation of the theater in an art."[32] "We want the emotion to be communicated through images," he added and pointed out that the promoters try to elevate both the theater and the spectator to a higher level. The attempt to present classical playwrights, such as Molière, in a completely new spirit turned out to be unsuccessful (not to say a failure), and the experiment had to be aborted a few weeks later because of an excessively hostile reaction from a public overwhelmed by the novelty and the daring attempts of the cast to break the mold of "theatre de boulevard." Also, the lack of funds needed to keep the project alive forced B. Fundoianu in the end to leave and try his luck elsewhere.

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BENJAMIN FONDANE'S FIRST YEARS IN PARIS

B. Fundoianu arrived in Paris in January 1924, four years after Tristan Tzara. The trip was not an easy one; immediately upon arrival he described the difficulties of the voyage in a postcard to his mother. According to the postcard the young man had to cross in the snow-covered Tyrol Mountains more than five miles by foot, with his luggage carried by a sledge, and accommodations in the City of Light turned out not to be easy either.[1] Paris was full of bright and talented young intellectual immigrants; soon after the end of WWI, the city became a focal point for every modernist and avant-garde trend imaginable in literature and art.

There were many Romanians among the artists and the literati living in Paris at the time, the most famous among them being the sculptor Constantin Brâncuşi. When the young Fundoianu arrived from Bucharest he had no money in his pockets, but this lack was compensated by hope and a long list of names of writers, artists, and philosophers he planned to contact. And indeed, very soon after his arrival, he landed in the home of Rémy de Gourmont's brother, he himself a *home de lettres*, where he took care of the family library and handled the private letters and manuscripts collection of the deceased essayist and

philosopher. In addition, his friend in Romania, A. L. Zissu—the publisher of one of the reviews to which Fundoianu collaborated extensively in Bucharest (see chapter 1) and who was also a successful businessman—helped him to get settled in Paris. André Gide and Jules de Gaultier turned out to be very forthcoming when approached. Perhaps this favorable attitude of the two determined young Fundoianu to contemplate a radical change: as he wrote a few years later in the preface significantly titled "Savage Words" to the volume of verses *Landscapes*, a poet died in 1923 to make place for a completely different, new author.[2] But beside the name—from Fundoianu to Fondane—what else changed during these first years in Paris? This chapter will try to answer the question as thoroughly as possible within its limited confines.

When Benjamin Fondane arrived in Paris, the echoes of the Dada "revolution," while still present, were significantly weakened by the birth of the surrealist movement; in part, this was due to the opposition of the surrealists' leader, André Breton, manifested toward it. As early as April 1920, in an article published in the *Nouvelle Revue Française* (*NRF*), André Gide pointed out that while a revolution was necessary—after all, the spirit cannot be left behind the evolution of the material world ("*il emporte que l'sprit ne reste pas en retard sur la matière*," in Gide's own words) and obviously the latter was changed quite significantly after WWI—it cannot become a permanent feature of everyday life. New ways to replace the revolutionary upheaval had to be found; even André Breton, who at first was a convinced Dadaist, wrote in his "For Dada" article, published the same year, that the radical critique of art and its implicit moral values brought forth by the Dadaist movement reached a stage that had to be transgressed.[3] Jacques Rivière, the director of the *NRF* during the early 1920s, reacted immediately and pointed out that the merit of the Dada was real even though, in fact, the movement represented merely a radical expression of claims already made by the romantics, the symbolists, and Rimbaud, who followed in their footsteps. He pointed out that giving expression to one's discontent, bringing forth one's doubts, or manifesting a cynical denial of reality is not enough to make literature; art will always exist and the writer will have to create the "unreal" by delving into the surrounding reality. Ultimately, wrote Rivière, the artistic lie must be based on the most sincere quest for truth.[4] Breton, following Rivière's advice, feverishly sought, after his break with Tristan Tzara a year later, the path that would overcome Dada's radical and permanent deconstruc-

tionist program, and in 1924, he announced the tenets of the new movement in the first surrealist manifesto.

The rising stars of poetry the *NRF* was publishing or writing about at the time of Fondane's arrival in Paris were Philippe Soupault, Louis Aragon, and Paul Eluard. Antonin Artaud was already in correspondence with Rivière at that time, trying to convince the critic that his poetry, too, was worthy of the review Rivière headed; he was published for the first time by the *NRF* in 1924. This correspondence is very important as it unveils the nature of the confrontation between the revolutionary Dadaist spirit and the Weltanschauung of the French literary establishment. The fact must be emphasized that the latter did not, by any means, reject the views of modernity; from Picasso's cubism to Apollinaire's "surrealism," Gide, Rivière, and later Jean Paulhan were open to avant-garde ideas. But the rationalist traditions, from Descartes on, always impregnated the French art world and the bent toward classicism was a constant over the centuries. A somewhat blurred, vaguely negative attitude toward romanticism was indeed distinguishable in the works and the critical essays of the leaders of critical opinion in post–WWI French letters. Max Jacob remained a quite strange and singular figure in the literary and artistic landscape after the death of his friend Guillaume Apollinaire. There were, of course, other authors difficult to position at the time, for instance Jean Cocteau, Francis Carco, and Pierre Reverdy; there were the "older" Charles Péguy, Claudel and Léon-Paul Fargue; and there was the all-embracing shadow of Stéphane Mallarmé and his follower Paul Valéry. Together with the younger poets of Breton's generation, these were the authors who represented French poetry at the time. Fondane was familiar with them and had written about some of them while still in Romania, but the generation born roughly ten years before him and the poets about his age seemed to have been unknown to him prior to his departure from Bucharest. It would have been natural for him to seek them out; but he did not do it. Instead, he tried to contact Gide and Jules de Gaultier. Perhaps that was because Fondane felt that it would have been easier for him to write literary criticism or essays, even philosophy, rather than poetry in a new language. Of course, things were not so simple: beside the language barrier, there were other intellectual and artistic activities that attracted the young author, such as his old passion for theater, photography, and even more perhaps, the newly upsurging art of cinematography. Beyond the language barrier loomed also the troubling questions related to the nature of an art limited by

the ability of words to express a reality perceived more and more as being radically different from that expressed in the old ways. Was poetry the best medium for the discovery of a reality manifesting itself in ever renewed and, thus, unpredictable shapes and forms? Were all these changes taking place in the external world or in the (troubled) mind of the artist? Could art, in general, become a modern day savior or was it merely playing the role of a tool that helped keep the individual in a state of eternal slavery as he faced an endless sequence of rotten social orders? As we have seen in the previous chapter, some of these questions preoccupied the young poet Fundoianu before he left Romania, but now, after his arrival in Paris, these querries were quickly brought into focus by the ebullient intellectual atmosphere surrounding him. In addition to the old questions, new issues posed by the nascent surrealist movement and internal contradictions, which did not take too long to manifest themselves within this new revolution, surfaced. The alternative avant-garde movements, both the local ones and those coming from neighboring or even faraway places (as it is well known, the East European and the Russian avant-garde movements had a great influence in France in every artistic domain, from music to painting, from dance to poetry) restated old questions and generated new ones. At first, Fondane, attracted by both Dada and surrealism's daring novelty, did still seek guidance in Gide, about whom he wrote enthusiastically just before he left for Paris. However, in his previous analysis of Gide's works, Fondane did not mention *Lafcadio's Adventures* even though it was published in 1914 and perhaps that is because the hero of *The Vatican Cellars* (translated into English as *Lafcadio's Adventures*) did, as pointed out by Mark Polizzoti, express a nihilism that "seemed to foretell the unsparing nonchalance of Jacques Vaché," André Breton's best friend and a person who will deeply inspire him. Might it be that from the very beginning there was a psychological rift between Fondane and the spirit, the primeval idea originating, at least in part, the surrealist movement?

In April 1924, Benjamin Fondane met at Jules de Gaultier's house the Russian philosopher Lev Shestov who, after leaving the newly proclaimed Soviet State in Russia, settled in Paris in 1921. In 1922, responding to a request by Gide and Rivière, Shestov published in *NRF* a shortened version of an article on Dostoevsky, written previously in Russian. Very well received, he soon became a collaborator of *Mercure de France*, where he published in 1923 a long article about Spinoza. A second article, on Pascal this time, turned out to be too long to be published by the review; its editor, Charles du Bos, convinced

Daniel Halévy to print it as an independent book in *Cahiers Verts*, a selective and prestigious collection published by Grasset. By the time the two met, Lev Shestov was a well-established author in France. Fondane did not actively participate in the conversation between Jules de Gaultier and the Russian philosopher but he made a good impression on Shestov; soon after, in May 1924, he invited the twenty-six-year-old Fondane to come to "a small party for our French and Russian friends."[5] In spite of this early contact, for the next two years the elderly philosopher will not significantly influence Fondane: "It was only in 1926 that the first serious contact was established between us,"[6] wrote Fondane later. Those two years, however, turned out to be important in shaping Fondane's attitude toward the new cultural environment he lived in.

Very little is known about Fondane's everyday life in Paris during the first year after arrival. His sister Line and her husband, Armand Pascal, came in 1924; they were both actors and hoped to join Gaston Baty, a well-known playwright and director at the time. The three lived together in a small apartment on rue Jacob. His friend Ilarie Voronca arrived also in Paris the same year, and it is possible that Fondane's colleague at Jassy High School, the poet Alexandru Philippide, arrived in France about the same time. In any event, by 1926 the three young poets worked together at the Abeille Insurance Company, where Fondane met his future wife, Geneviève Tissier. The contacts with Romania, family, and friends were still strong and when, in March 1925, the new avant-garde review *Integral* was launched in Bucharest, Benjamin Fondane and Ilarie Voronca became its correspondents in Paris. In *Integral* Fondane published not only poems written before he left Romania but also articles about the names that were popular in Paris at the time, mostly poets. During the same year, he sent to Bucharest his first poem written in French, "Exercise de Français," to be published the modernist publication, *Contimporanul*. If the details about his everyday life during these years are scarce, the lecture of Fondane's articles teaches much about his inner thoughts during the first couple of years in Paris.

When Anatole France died in October 1924, a group of authors formed around André Breton—who shared France's views concerning the need for a radical revolution both at the level of the individual and that of society—published a collection of short "statements" gathered under the title, *Un cadavre* (A Corpse). Under the impression of this collective anti-establishment manifestation, Fondane wrote and sent to Romania a text titled "The Refusal to be Young."[7] The six young authors of the anti-Anatole France manifest, four of

whom—Breton, Eluard, Aragon, and Drieu la Rochelle—became famous during later years, (Philippe Soupault who was very close to Breton during the first years of the surrealist movement, as well as Joseph Delteil will be forgotten later to some extent) wrote very irreverently about the deceased writer who represented the French neoclassicism in literature. Breton, for instance, wrote, "I consider any admirer of Anatole France to be a degraded human being… He was a miserable clown of the spirit."[8] Fondane was ready to agree that Anatole France, an enchanter of his generation's young years, disappointed them by the time they reached adolescence; he was "too polite to understand our state of mind. He could not love us and could not hate us either." Perhaps the old author was not a genius but rather a delicate and peculiar "museum": "Certainly, I did not love Anatole France," he writes, but "I highly esteemed him."[9] Fondane believed the day would come when the current youth would be old and misunderstood and the mere thought that after their death they might be victimized in such a despicable manner was nauseating: "*If this is what it means to be young, I refuse to be young*" added in italics young Fondane. The article contained as well significant statements that would reappear later in his disputes with the surrealists: "If this means thinking, I refuse to think, if this represents the modern spirit, I refuse to be modern!"[10]

Delteil was somewhat less aggressive: "This mediocre man (Anatole France) succeeded in extending the limits of mediocrity. A talented writer, he pushed his talent to the borderline of geniality; but he could not enter the gate," he wrote.[11] Perhaps that is why a few months later, after a scandal caused by his article on Jeanne D'Arc and his repudiation by André Breton, Fondane was more complimentary about Delteil in his article published in *Integral*. The same year he contributed another piece about Cocteau but this was a different matter; Cocteau was a former friend of Tristan Tzara and he was not an angry young man anymore. Cocteau was now a celebrity not only in the literary domain but in the arts and music worlds as well, and engaged also in a dialogue on religious matters with Jacques Maritain as he was on the way to become a born-again Christian. Fondane intuited a certain degree of histrionic attitude in Cocteau: "He told me a bunch of stories, infatuated and full of himself, either because to mystify people had become, since Baudelaire, a tradition in France or because he considered me a fool."[12] In fact, the article was less about Cocteau and much more about the Parisian cultural landscape—music, theater, and poetry (Max Jacob is explicitly mentioned)—during the mid-1920s. Fondane

wrote about cinema during the same year as well as about his earlier hero, the poet Tudor Arghezi. All in all, his articles sent from Paris seem to reflect the same preoccupations he had in Bucharest before he left. The style was, to a large extent, the same as well: enthusiastic, self-assured, and seemingly well anchored in his aesthetic and critical view of the world. In its October 1925 issue, *Integral* mentioned a volume of essays Fondane was to publish soon in France; the proposed title was *Faux Traité d'Esthetique*. Still, in spite of this flurry of activities, Fondane was often depressed. The bootstrapping effort needed to keep himself moving along was quite demanding; he wrote to his sister Rodica in Romania, "I do not do too much, I merely keep myself afloat… The obstacles are quite enormous. Of course, in the end I will prevail as the water droplet prevails of the stone but I must find the way to make this droplet into a stream; perhaps today, perhaps tomorrow, maybe in a year from now."[13]

If his collection of essays was ready or only planned at this stage we do not know.[14] Under the title page the author marked "Paris 1925" and two chapters added to the manuscript ("Faux concepts de l'art classique" and "Le concept du beau") signed B. Fondane, indicate the address of the author as being rue Monge 19.[15] It can, therefore, be safely assumed that these texts expressed the young author's most recent thoughts on art and literature. The texts were written in French and their declared intent was to develop a "discourse against the idea of the art for the sake of art"; that is, the essays were meant to convey a new aesthetic that diverged from the ideas of purity of the artistic-literary act and the supremacy of art over the actual existence of the artist. The titles of the chapters reflect to some extent the ideas discussed: "The crisis of the concept of art," "The error in considering modern art as synonymous with progress ("*Erreur de l'art modern en tant que progrès*"), "The reign of the theoretical man ("*Le règne de l'homme théorique*"). All in all, the book was to comprise at least nine chapters. In addition to the general discussions announced by the titles, there were specific discussions planned on Dada, surrealism, and the idea of avant-garde in general (a chapter not recovered had the significant title "Faut-il brûler le Louvre?"). As we can see, Benjamin Fondane began to write about the French literary and artistic landscape in 1925, at a time he was still very much involved with the Romanian cultural world. In a letter written at about the same time, he promised to send his sister in Bucharest "a few francs to buy me the (poetry) anthology published by Pillat and Perpessicius, with the poems,

biographies and bibliographic lists. I kept asking Maxy to do it for a whole year but he did not do it. I am very eager to see it."[16]

From all these writings I try, hesitantly and cautiously, to reconstruct Fondane's intellectual profile at this turning point in his life. After more than two years in Paris, quite knowledgeable about the things occurring around him but still very much involved with his Romanian past, the young poet faced a double crisis: (1) that of the writer who must give up a language in order to adopt another one and (2) the confrontation with a radically new reality. This second difficulty was shared with an entire generation of writers, poets, and artists; the first problem could have been tackled in ways not available to previous generations. New artistic modalities appeared and cinematography was one of them. The new medium enabled a direct rendering of the surrounding world without the intercession of language and seemed to make possible communication without the intervention of the written word. Moreover, a seemingly new and borderless imagination was replacing the old one limited by the intelligibility of the human discourse. In 1925, Fondane wrote for *Integral* an article, "Entr'acte ou le cinéma autonome" about the new cinema. Apparently, it was a presentation of René Char's most recent movie (*Entr'acte* was produced in 1924), but in fact it represented more of a statement concerning the nature and the role of the new cinematographic medium. The film does not reproduce reality and should, therefore, not be seen as a mere picture of the reality: it renders rather the independent view of the camera while freely scrutinizing the surrounding world. "One used to call the tricks invented to falsify reality cinematographic techniques," writes Fondane, "from now on, those will serve as means to uncover it."[17] During later years he wrote quite extensively about the new art of the silent movie and practiced this trade under various forms himself. He, at one time, following Jean Delteil's remark that the cinema was waiting for its Rimbaud, wished to René Clair to become just that; he thought about himself as a possible participant to this revolution.

There were two additional, apparently unrelated pages attached to the materials included in the unfinished volume of essays of 1925. They were titled "Foi et Dogme" (Belief and Dogma). Their content seems to be, at a first glance, somewhat outside the realm of the young poet's preoccupations, having to do with religious matters. In his articles written during the Romanian years, he seldom touched explicitly this subject; of course, he wrote quite often about Jewish themes, he even attempted a symbolist interpretation of St. Peter's act

of betrayal in an early attempt at playwriting, and he came close to discussing issues related to belief and faith in the context of the comparison between the spirit of Athens and that of Jerusalem. In the article "Traducerea Bibliei," dedicated to the translation of the Bible, Fondane clearly oscillated between a Voltairian position and one closer to that of Martin Buber: at times he spoke about the Bible as of a collection of "One Thousand and One Oriental Tales," full of stories of vengeance, crime, and betrayal, while at other times, he referred to it as a providential book that stands above and beyond Voltaire's or anybody's rational commentaries. In 1925, he wrote in the same vein, "I must confess that I do not believe in God but at the same time I must recognize that I see in Him the only possibility to make the human life a necessary, meaningful proposition."[18]

Contingency was in any event something to be encountered in both the real, concrete life and in one's reflection about it. That was certainly a worthy issue to consider and to discuss: in fragments about classical and the autonomous art, Fondane sketched a point of view that seemed to crystallize at this stage, a view built upon but also expanding his previous horizons. In the chapter titled "False Concepts of Classical Art," while mentioning classicism—"French classicism, what a beautiful thing to wonder about"—he introduced the distinction between a "rule" (*la règle*), which can be considered a basic principle valid in all arts, everywhere, and at all times, and "the rules" (*les règles*), which represent "local adaptations of the 'rule' to a temporary, specific content, that which Hegel defined as *Zeitgeist*, the spirit of the time."[19] There is, therefore, *a rule* that is eternal and there are *rules* that change and adapt themselves to the specificity of the times: the universal and the historical seem to cohabitate. As a result—even though he began his chapter with the statement "The idea we had about art is to be abolished forever"—Fondane recognized that the absolute and the relative are always present in art and both are equally legitimate in any discussion about art in general or poetry in particular. The question will be, how can one define the specific character of a given culture and what makes one moment distinguishable from another in its history? The *classical spirit* is defined by the fact that it always tends to establish a certain order in any domain of activity but, obviously, the realities of the twentieth century were very different from those of the seventeenth century and this begged the question: "What will be the intrinsic value of the twentieth century if it will ever be able to achieve one?" Fondane's answer was "the establishment of an order which (the century) will impose upon itself, accept and rigorously prac-

tice it."[20] In fact, the query proposed by Fondane in 1925 was one about finding a new philosophy, a new intellectual modus operandi, and a new organizing principle for a cultural-intellectual artistic world to follow after the void created by the Dada movement. His message was well attuned to that of Gide and Rivière in their dialogues with Breton or Artaud at about the same time. Fondane was very familiar with Gide's writings, and in Paris he certainly began reading with application Jacques Rivière. One may wonder what would have happened if this very authoritative figure had not died the same year; Fondane was very impressed by him and I have the feeling that the lecture of the posthumously published book Rivière wrote about Rimbaud pushed him in this direction as well.. Fondane might have been influenced by the last article published by Rivière in *NRF* in March 1925 titled "La Crise du concept de littérature." He might have also read his correspondence with Antonin Artaud published by *NRF* a year earlier in 1924. However, Fondane opposed some of Rivière's ideas as representing a false concept of classicism: in essence, he disagreed with his statement that the self-imposed ordered arrangement of words and styles was to be replaced by a "filtering" process as a result of which the pre-existing multiplicity of inner states would be transformed into well-ordered, new, and novel works of art. If that were the case, it would become impossible, argued Fondane, to make a distinction between a "new situation" created by *old* predispositions and rules and one in which the emergence of the new requires novel means and tools ("*pour les objets nouveaux, des appareils nouveaux*," in his words). That situation would leave the field exposed to the unanswerable question concerning the ways through which the new means are going to be generated and this, in turn, will engender the even more difficult question "How does one define novelty?" Arrived at this point in his argumentation, Fondane's explanations became a bit muddled; it is important though to understand the reason for that, since it might offer a significant hint for the understanding of the poet's future evolution. If one tries to perceive the *new*, the *novel*, through the old ways of judging and evaluating things, Fondane argues, one remains anchored in the old. In order to test the quality of one's inner intuitions, one must *live* the new, not just *understand* it in an abstract way ("*il ne suffit pas de les voir, mais ils les faut vivre*"). This process, however, leads to an entanglement in the contradiction created by mixing *existence* with *knowledge* ("*confondre être avec connaître*").[21] The paradoxical result of this will be that art will, thus, be defined and understood in terms that do not belong to it at all.

One observes, therefore, that even at this very early stage, long before he became familiar with and embraced Shestov's existential philosophy, Benjamin Fondane was preoccupied by the relationship between knowledge and being, between existence and the act of reflecting upon it. One might say that he was predisposed to become an existential philosopher long before he discovered existential philosophy. Obviously, poetry was a definite part of this discussion. It is true that in his article Jacques Rivière suggested a mysterious *deus ex machina* when he defined *the spirit of the modern times*, intending to transfer without the intervention of the subjective self "all the unknown fluids which permeate us" ("*les fluids inconnus qui nous baignent*"). He referred here mainly to surrealism, and this statement represented, in fact, rather a critical attitude; as such, Rivière did not leave the scene with an attitude of surrender as Fondane seemed to believe. He left a very important message to the literary world: the artist must not consider the hints of his subconscious as revelations from an external force; he should never attempt to make literary creation into something aimed at a transcendental purpose.

After this encounter with Rivière, Fondane took to task in his critical articles of this early period Paul Valéry's ideas concerning classical art. In this case, the explanations remained in the realm of the logical, of the intelligible. Insofar as his views about Valéry are concerned, Fondane remained consistent in his future writings with what he concluded in this early essay: "*Le système de Valéry. . .fut contaminé de cette ivresse logique, qui est, peut-être, le vice fundamental du siècle.*"[22] In order to separate and extract the essence of the new classicism, Charles Maurras and Henry Massis were also brought into the discussion,[23] as well as other contemporary authors who embraced this "modern spirit" (Reverdy, Cocteau, Max Jacob, and, of course, André Gide). It is worthwhile to notice also the importance Fondane began to grant at this point to Rimbaud (whom he neglected to a large extent while in Romania) and to Baudelaire. Moreover, some of the ideas found *in nuce* in this early essay will be developed later in his book about the latter, published posthumously.

One might ask at this point, why this intense preoccupation with the apparently obsolete concept of "classicism" in art? According to Fondane the concept was not made useless (even less, "meaningless") by the new, radical manifestations of this late modernity. The amorphous, the dynamic, the never stable element in the work of art requested by the new avant-garde movements had to be somehow balanced by something settled, shaped, perennial. Fondane men-

tioned Valéry's use of the concept of "system" as being opposed to that of the "domain": *classical* is that which can be included in a system and discussed "systematically," while a domain is the sum total of independent fragments, very much as the romantic movement was. The debate prolonged itself as the new movements constituting early twentieth-century modernity much as postsymbolism in poetry or cubism and expressionism in painting were perceived as new renderings, new forms of the same "old" romantic spirit. Theoretically, this represented a somewhat symmetrical image of the Apollonian-Dionysian dichotomy introduced by Nietzsche retranslated into a slightly different language. There was, however, another important issue involved in this discussion and Fondane made it quite explicit: the Dada movement wanted to get rid of everything conceived under the old guise, including art itself. Or, this was unacceptable on both logical and moral grounds. At this early stage in his intellectual development, Fondane was not yet rejecting *in toto* all logical argument in the discourse about life and art. He observed that the artist "necessarily proposes something through his work and in the process, he opposes something else"; art is the ability of giving a shape to that which is formless ("*donner une forme au vague*"). And by quoting Gide's famous line "*L'art naît de contrainte, vit de lutte, meurt de liberté*," he introduced a moral dimension to the problem he was not ready to abandon. In 1925 Benjamin Fondane used "classical" as a synonym for art; in his own words, "*Le mot classique n'est qu'un pléonasme: il ne signifie qu'art*."[24]

The second chapter in the aborted attempt to his volume of *False Treaty of Aesthetics* was titled "L'art autonome" (Autonomous Art). It began by explaining why the concept of an autonomous art would not contradict the assertion that art should be subject to a priori constraint. I would like to emphasize the fact that here an indirect dialogue was engaged with André Breton: "Did I preach against an autonomous art? But the same thing did M. Breton when he wrote that 'we know now that poetry has to lead somewhere'. . .unlike him, I did not say that I am preoccupied with the moral aspects of art; if I deal with this aspect it is merely because art itself begs it."[25] This seemingly contradictory dialectical pair was there at all times; following a subtle analysis based on Benedetto Croce's *Esthetics*, Fondane showed, using the dialectics of the subjective-objective opposites, that the "dependence (of art) is of such a nature that it guarantees its. . .independence." Boris de Schloezer, Shestov's translator into French, whom Fondane met at about the same time, was also brought into this

discussion in relation with a book he wrote on Stravinsky; both Rimbaud and Jacques Rivière were mentioned again at that point. The first, to ascertain the "dynamical" character of the modern work of art, "*Rimbaud fit de la poésie en marche*"; de Schloezer said about Stravinsky's music that it was a depersonalized force flowing as a thunderous water stream ("*torrent sonore*"), not at all an emanation of the artist but in spite of him. Stravisky, "even if he remained unaware of it, was not creating music; the music was flowing through him."[26] The same was true for Proust: "Thought would make itself into words by the intermediary of Proust, without even asking him" ("*La pensée parlerait à travers Proust, sans l'interroger*"), wrote Schloezer. Pierre Reverdy and Apollinaire were brought also into the discussion of the new cubist, expressionist and abstract trends in the plastic arts. Novel technical means replaced the human content of the work of art here, exactly as the camera replaced the old techniques in the new art of cinematography. Moreover, Fondane mentioned a similar trend at work in the contemporary theater, as explained by Gordon Craig, who promoted the vision of a theater that did not require either a written play or an actor. "This is not to be confused with the idea of the *pure* theatrical event of Jacques Copeau, who places the actor at its very center," and one can only regret that a detailed discussion of these matters is missing from Fondane's aborted *False Treaty of Aesthetics* of 1925.

This lengthy presentation and analysis of these early pieces of Fondanian work was needed because they pointed toward the origins of a central idea that will be developed later by Fondane in connection with so-called primitive thinking or the *participatory thought*, the idea that art might precede the artist. The object of art is produced in a state anterior to that of the reflected act of knowledge. Does this argument unveil a bent toward idealist philosophy in young Fondane? We will return to this question later. Here, before concluding this brief overview of the very first steps of the author in his new French cultural environment, I would like to emphasize again a point: long before becoming Shestov's pupil, Fondane developed ideas that appeared "Shestovian" to later critics; it is more appropriate to say perhaps that many of these ideas resonated efficiently with those of Lev Shestov and were re-enforced by the master's existential philosophy. One must realize that there was a time when Benjamin Fondane was very far from Lev Shestov, to the point that in the draft of this early *Faux Traité*, he mentioned "*a certain Shestov* (my emphasis) who goes as far as to imagine a pure faith, ruled by a logical God."[27]

As we have seen, during these early years in Paris, Benjamin Fondane was very active insofar as his Romanian involvements were concerned: but beside seeing himself a "correspondent" who reports from the Capital City, he got involved in a number of activities unrelated to the literary and artistic movements of the day. He was very receptive to other messages as well; thus, he contributed to the *Puntea de Fildes* (The Ivory Bridge), a Zionist cultural publication in Bucharest (only two issues were published in 1926) launched to help the establishment of the Hebrew University on Mount Scopus in Jerusalem. He also sent poems for the anthology published by Pillat and Perpessicius. The year 1926 seems to have been a particularly difficult one for the young poet; 1927 was better from the point of view of his writing but, as it turns out from the correspondence with his sister Rodica, the price he paid for his literary successes was quite high. An exhausted and depressed Fondane had to spend some time in Arcachon under medical observation in order to recover (information contained in a postcard sent to Rodica on January 18, 1928, found by the regretted Leon Volovici among the documents left by Paul Daniel). From a letter received by Fondane from Jules de Gaultier in May 1927, we learn that he wrote poems in French; the postcard from Arcachon announced also that his first French volume of *Ciné-Poèmes* was in print. We know that his translation from Romanian of Zissu's *Memoirs of a Candelabrum* appeared in May 1928. Armand Pascal died in March 1929 of a tuberculosis he had fought for long years. The contact with Shestov was renewed in 1926 ("at about that time he decided to let me see him and our conversations started, more and more frequent…It was not before 1926 but certainly long before 1929"[28]). That was the time when Fondane began his intensive philosophical apprenticeship: was he still a poet in a foreign land? Did he become toward the end of the decade a philosopher in the making? Could he break through this predicament by abandoning both poetry and criticism (transformed more and more into philosophy) in favor of a new art, that of the silent movie, which will not require a new language or the efforts of a rigorous, sustained abstract thinking that constrains imagination and freedom? These three difficult years between 1926 and 1929, culminated with his first trip to Argentina at the invitation of Victoria Ocampo. When he returned to Paris, Benjamin Fondane was set on a new track.

· 3 ·

BETWEEN AVANT-GARDE AND THE NEW ART OF CINEMA

In an article titled "De Dada à l'Existentialisme,"[1] Michel Carassou observed that while in Romania Benjamin Fondane belonged doubtlessly to the avant-garde movement. In France he was much more cautious toward it during his first years there, to become toward the end of the 1920s, an opponent of the surrealism proposed and promoted by André Breton and those who remained his associates at that time. Was that because the meaning of *avant-garde* was very different in the two contexts, the Romanian and the French, or because an inner force always pushed Fondane toward a state of permanent opposition to any established trend as many of his readers and some of his critics believed? This chapter tries to address and possibly find an answer to this question.

I looked hard for the first article in which Fondane mentioned Breton and surrealism; to the best of my knowledge he did not discuss the French poet before his arrival to Paris. This is somewhat surprising since Fondane was alert and paid great attention to every new signal coming from France; André Breton published in 1917 an important article about Apollinaire—to be included in his volume *Les pas perdus* (1924)— and *Champs magnetiques*, with Philippe

Soupault, in 1920. By 1925, when he began to write the first version of a *False Treatise of Aesthetics*, Fondane manifested a moderately negative attitude toward Breton and surrealism. It is possible that his position was influenced, by some extent, by his friendship with Tristan Tzara, the compatriot who, like Fondane, tried to carve out for himself a place in this crowded space that was the French literary world after WWI. In an undated article that might very well have been initially part of the planned book of 1925 titled "Signification de Dada," Fondane wrote: "*Déjà à cette époque* (1921) *André Breton n'avait rien compris a Dada*" ("at that time already, Breton exhibited a total lack of comprehension of Dada").[2] In *Les pas perdus* Breton included an article written in 1920 titled "Pour Dada" and a second one, "Après Dada," written in 1922; in the first, Dada was presented as a joyful thing that brought a breath of fresh air, as "a marvelous moment of lucidity," and the idea that this new movement was merely an outburst of arbitrary subjectivism was categorically rejected at that point.[3] The second article began, however, with a very harsh statement: "My friends Philippe Soupault and Paul Eluard will not contradict me if I say that 'Dada' was never seen by us as anything more than the vulgar image of a state of mind."[4] What happened in the interval of time between the two texts? Many critics tried to explain the rift between Breton and Tzara in terms of their personal relationship; others singled out André Gide's adverse article on Dada published in April 1920 in *Nouvelle Revue Française* (*NRF*)—which months later will publish Breton's "Pour Dada"—to conclude that Dada was incompatible with the French spirit.[5] While all these arguments could be retained as starting points for an in-depth understanding of Breton's early evolution toward surrealism, a careful reading of the texts shows that Breton was, albeit in a hesitant way, uncertain about the new movement; toward the end of his article, Breton, after a few ambiguous statements about Dada as a "movement" and the dynamics of the relationships between it and the individualities it included, quoted Jacque-Emile Blanche who predicted that "Dada will survive only by ceasing to exist." The warning was on the wall. Breton had only to find out how to substantiate this argument. In any event, it was not a matter of comprehending the Dadaist spirit or the message of the Dada revolution. The issue was essentially about how to find a direction for a movement that postulated the absolute value of the lack of any direction.

In 1925 Fondane was still a Romanian poet struggling to adopt a new language for his own poetry, but at the same time he was also involved in a deep

inner conflict: that between the poet he was and the one he wanted (or was led) to become. We began this chapter by quoting an observation about Fondane as identifying himself with the avant-garde in Romania but maintaining a safe distance from it in France. In post–WWI Romania, the avant-garde movement in both arts and literature represented a conglomerate of trends that found a common denominator in their opposition to a tradition anchored in archaism and nationalistic values. There were among the modernist poets those who accepted the legitimacy of deeply rooted national archetypes—Lucian Blaga represents probably the best illustration of this trend—but the poetry originating in symbolism and its avatars during the first years of the twentieth century were those out of which will stem in Romania the avant-garde movement. One may say that Fondane did not have any other option there but to belong to it. In France, on the other hand, things were quite different; there, Fondane was a foreigner, a lost soul unaffiliated with any group or literary trend. He did not benefit of the guidance Breton found with Rivière and Gide at *NRF*. From 1925 to 1926 he was mostly on his own; coming closer to Shestov strengthened him and made him feel that he had found an anchor. During these same years the major avant-garde movement in France, surrealism, underwent many changes; Fondane observed them and took note. By the time he wrote about these things authoritatively, around 1927, and during the following years until the publication in 1938 of *Faux traité d'esthétique*, he progressively distanced himself from avant-garde in general and from surrealism in particular in order to find himself a place, as a poet, in a world dominated to a large extent by existential thought.

In 1927 Fondane published in *Integral* no fewer than four articles that illustrate and clarify the arguments brought forth above: two about individual French poets identified with the surrealism (Louis Aragon and Paul Eluard); a third titled "The Surrealists and the Revolution"; and a fourth about contemporary French poetry that served as an introduction to an issue dedicated by the journal to this very topic. A year later, he wrote about Pierre Reverdy, the "old man" among the representatives of the Dada and surrealist generation, and in 1930, he summarized his views in the article "Pure Poetry from Paul Valéry to Tristan Tzara," published in *Unu*, at the time the journal of Romanian surrealists. It is interesting to observe that in his article on Louis Aragon, Fondane identified very accurately the nature of the surrealist movement; surrealism, wrote Fondane, is a second order Dada; since Dada leveled everything, one

needed a new orientation, a long range target to become the essence and the scope of the surrealist movement. In his words, "*il fallait créer une catégorie qui permit l'existence d'une nébuleuse, une étoile qui justifiât la longue vue*."[6] Not only was the scope of the new movement concisely and accurately defined but the essence of surrealism was also well explained by Fondane in this article. It is really surprising that at this early stage in the unfolding of the surrealist saga, the poet saw so clearly the contradictions between its declared revolutionary aims and the nature of the social revolution they joined so enthusiastically. Might have this been due to his interaction with Shestov who witnessed the realities of the revolution in Russia?[7] Whatever the answer to this question is, the fact is that Fondane in his article "Louis Aragon ou Le Paysan de Paris" pointed out explicitly that the meaning of *revolution* in Moscow was very different from that shared by the surrealists in Paris; as we well know, many had to wait till the end of WWII to reach this conclusion. While Fondane found ridiculous Aragon's political rhetoric (but appreciated his poetry), in the case of Eluard he liked not only the poetry but the poet as well: Eluard doubted everything, he challenged all things including the nature of poetry, and Fondane would have been happy to follow him in his endless quest across the big void that is our world. "Et je sais des aveugles dont je suis, cherchant à tâtons avec Eluard et heureux de chercher infiniment ta chevelure d'orange dans le vide du monde," is the closing phrase of Fondane's article "Paul Eluard: Capitale de la douleur."[8]

The article "Les surréalistes et la revolution" is, in essence, a piece of political writing. After the presentation of Breton's arguments in favor of the fusion between surrealism and revolution, Fondane attacked the naïve understanding of the proletarian revolution: "With or without a church we know that the proletarians will build upon a categorical imperative, will invoke the necessity, the law, the human, the sacrifice…which all will oppose the *marvelous*,[9] a free poetry. The proletarian dictatorship built upon Reason, will be forced, therefore, to always prevail over any arbitrariness, over the human dances and their desires, over human beings and their myths, human beings and their freedom; how can the dictatorship of the proletarians accept the irrational aspects of the human life?"[10] Here Fondane introduced an argument going beyond the political, an argument he reiterates in almost all his disputes with Breton and the surrealist movement. Fondane was also very harsh in his letter directed to the surrealist movement at the occasion of the "Aragon scandal" in 1932, explain-

ing why he refused to join in the protest movement of a large number of writers and artists when Aragon was accused of "inciting to murderous action" through his poem "Front rouge." Fondane directly stated: "For ten years now, you are the only ones to concede that your activities are not at all in the realm of poetical art and disregarded the immunity accorded by a bourgeois society which granted you the status of poets and fools,"[11] exposing, thus, the hypocrisy involved in the surrealist movement's ideology.

The brief *chapeau* written by Fondane in 1927 for *Integral*, which introduced "le grand ballet de la poésie française," expressed the author's credo insofar as the nature of the French avant-garde was concerned: "*Si a d'autres époques c'est fut par la poésie qu'on prit conscience de la force vive du temps, c'est par la poésie que l'aujourd'hui est amené à considerer en face sa déraison*."[12] Fondane could identify only with an avant-garde promoting the crime of "lèse-poésie" since poetry must be humiliated, the words written by the poets of the past having been devalued by its servile bent, its eagerness to please. "*Créer n'est pas un métier. Vivre n'est pas une methode. Les poètes voulaient* plaire, *comment non avaient-ils honte*?" writes Fondane.[13] Obviously any "old" aesthetic must be rejected, "humans have to unlearn (*désapprendre*) their language…that will be difficult but it could become possible if one will learn to despise the (so-called) beautiful in the work of art (*le chef-d'oeuvre*)."[14] Fondane did not reject, in fact, the avant-garde itself; he gave it another definition, different from that of surrealism and from most of the avant-garde movements around him. Fondane's avant-garde was one supported by his *sui generis* evolving existential philosophy.

Both the book on Arthur Rimbaud written around 1930 and the second *Faux traité d'esthétique*, published in 1938, and including a few articles written during the earlier years of the 1930s, contained references to the surrealist movement. But there, too, Fondane began the story with Dada: in *Rimbaud le voyou* he observed that the post–WWI Dadaists, in search of solid ground for a "dictatorship of the spirit" (*dictature de l'esprit*), were willing to adopt, indeed, the spirit of the French poet's *lettre du Voyant*.[15] The total liberty attainable through an unfettered abandonment to any and each experiment and to all possible transgressions of limits was supposed to enable the transfer of the individual into a suprareality. This new medium was something the surrealists wanted to create and understand. But to do that simultaneously, one would need a tool that would possess the exceptional property of acting and reflecting at the same time upon the thing done (or the experience as it was lived). Breton, using

Rimbaud's own confession that his words contained in the letter were mere sophistry (*sophismes magiques*), pointed out that Rimbaud's "method" could not help the surrealists. Instead of getting out of the prison of the immediate reality, the poet meekly returned to it: "*Rimbaud est* impardonable *d'avoir voulu nous faire croire à une seconde fuite alors qu'il retournait en prison*."[16] To this, Fondane could not agree; the surrealists and their leader did not understand, in his opinion, the true message brought by Rimbaud. This message was not confined merely to his letter to Izambard; in order to understand it, wrote Fondane, one had to take into account the poet's *Saison en Enfer* as well. Furthermore, all these together could not be separated from Rimbaud's actual decision to abandon poetry following these writings. In fact, Fondane expressed this thought in a different context (that of the discussion of contemporary French poetry): if in past times poetry was that which rendered visible hidden forces at work in the real world surrounding us and helped us cope with the tragic human experience in the world, in our times (and that was the meaning of Rimbaud's prophecy) poetry is that which makes the world (*l'aujourd'hui*) realize its out-of-normal (anomalous) state (*sa déraison*).

Thus, Fondane will turn around Breton's argument to show that not only he did not understand the essence of Rimbaud's message but worse, even, his reasoning could "incriminate" Breton himself. He observed that Rimbaud thought of his "method" as of a magic way to access the Unknown: the poet, by becoming a "criminal," by carrying the cross of the ultimate curse, through his sickness, finds the way to this unknown. And after having lost his sight through this unmediated contact with it, he will have had actually seen it.[17] Many of Rimbaud's followers and commentators believed, therefore, that a magic formula enabling access to the supreme unknown, to a completely different realm, was found. Even if Breton adopted this view only partly (his opponents, the members of *Le Grand Jeu* group will fully embrace this interpretation), in Fondane's view such a conclusion had to be rejected; otherwise, it would have opened the road to a dictatorship of the spirit and this, as any dictatorship, was unacceptable to him. How outrageous he found the idea of dictatorship, even if it was confined to the realm of the spirit, is made plain by the fact that he used in this context the word *fascism*. But was not Fondane carried away a bit too far by this kind of intellectual transfer? In a lengthy note at the end of his book on Rimbaud, the author asked himself, "*Mais que cherche dans un livre sur Rimbaud et plus souvent qu'il ne le faudrait, le procès d'un movement spiritual quel*

qu'il soit et aussi important qu'il puisse être?" (Why would the trial of a spiritual movement be discussed, and so often, in a book on Rimbaud?) The question was posed, therefore, very overtly and Fondane did not hesitate to talk even about a *trial*. This brings us back again to the question, why was he so adamantly opposed to surrealism?

The mentioned note becomes in fact an almost fully fledged article about the essence and meaning of surrealism, as seen by Fondane—in fact, it goes even beyond that, as it discussed also the basic ideas of the splinter group of René Daumal and Roger Gilbert-Lecombe, the founders of *Le Grand Jeu* movement, and of René de Reneville, who wrote a book titled *Rimbaud le voyant*. After carefully stating that his text was not meant to be a hidden attack against French surrealism using Rimbaud as mere pretext, Fondane pointed out that in the past, he had great hopes (*j'ai mis le plus d'espoir*) in some of the promoters of the newly born movement. However, these hopes had been disappointed when the surrealists imprisoned the miraculous in the jail of eloquence only to submit it to a totalitarian dictatorship ("*tourné à l'éloquence et la dictature policière, le sentiment que nous avions du miracle*"). Rimbaud became the prisoner of the surrealists, and Breton would at times scold him while covering him with calumnies and, at others, hail him as a surrealist revolutionary. Several quotes from works Breton published in the late 1920s, including one from the *Second Surrealist Manifesto* of 1929, were mentioned and the famous letter sent by Rimbaud to his teacher Izambard on May 15, 1871, was also extensively used in his argument. With these in the background, Fondane explained that Renné Daumal and Gilbert-Lecomte adopted the view that "*l'homme peut, selon une certain méthode, dite mystique, atteindre à la perception immediate d'un autre univers, incommensurable à ses sens et irréductible à son entendement*."[18] He overtly took issue with the ideology of *Le Grand Jeu* as well since he found it at fault when it wrongly (according to him) assumed the existence of a method able of reaching another kind of truth; he understood, though, their aspiration to seek a Truth that belongs to a realm beyond that of a reality defined solely by reason. It might be that at the time he wrote these lines, Fondane was under the influence of some of Shestov's ideas; however, as we have seen, he was set on his own path in search of a *transcendental reality*, a different realm that was not to be an *immanent* one long before he embraced the Russian philosopher's thought. Man must bootstrap himself to a superior state of being, believed Fondane, but the result, unlike for surrealists, will not be the unveiling of a new state of mind

obtained through this process but the encounter with a transcendent reality, perhaps with Shestov's God.

André Rolland de Renéville, who was a great connoisseur of Rimbaud's oeuvre and for a number of years also a member of *Le Grand Jeu*, could be of interest in the context of the general discussion concerning Rimbaud; however, I shall not discuss here Fondane's criticism of his work since he was neither a surrealist nor did he (re)present their ideas. I will only quote a short fragment from Fondane's note in order to give the reader a feeling concerning the line of argument he adopted: "*Au lieu de 'situer' Rimbaud entre Dostoïevski et Kierkegaard, en plein centre de la culture occidentale dont il marquée une crise et une cime, M. de Renéville, avec la seule pensée de Rimbaud entre ses mains, s'est mis a lui trouver des sources pures et à lui faire un voyage livresque à travers l'histoire de la philosophie hindoue, de la Cabale et des gnostiques*."[19]

A few years later, at the end of the preface to the *False Treaty*, Fondane's attack on surrealism will be more direct and show a higher level of animosity; at that point in 1938, surrealism was considered a target and one will be surprised by the argument made by the author to justify his assertion. The surrealist movement represented for Fondane at this stage the idea that art made of itself; however, this was neither an idea confined only to France nor was it a specifically French idea. This school of thought, represented by two or three personalities, was sectarian and aggressive ("*sectaire, aggressive, limitée à deux ou trois personnalités*"), he wrote.[20] In its inadequacy to reality, surrealism represented a caricature of the times; its efforts to merely dream out ways to change life and the living rather than to adopt a way of life more often than not impossible to define (*authentic* the existentialists would say later) or imagine even while dreaming. By making man the measure of all things and by declaring him the absolute master of his own destiny, surrealism set up a doctrine exclusively built upon reason and rational thinking: an objective reason validated externally by its universality and made operative by a dialectical relationship with both the inner and external reality of the individual human being. Guided and at the same time determined by this relationship, man is engaged in a permanent revolution through which he tries to transcend from within his own existential condition. This expansion of the human consciousness, claimed the surrealists, can be achieved through various methods and techniques: the automatic writing, the induced-dreaming experiences, the objectification of reality, and many others were the well-known and extensively discussed examples in

Breton and his follower's works.[21] Fondane saw the danger posed by a movement constrained by a doctrinaire philosophy and isolated from the existential truths of the real world by sophisticated intellectual constructs (*une pensée de laboratoire*).[22] His statement at the very end of his introductory chapter to *False Treaty* of 1938 articulated concisely but very poignantly his critique of a process of thinking confined exclusively to rational thought and, thus, hopelessly limited in his view: "*Une raison qui se nie, pour des motifs de raison, est encore une raison; et il n'est rien actuellement, dans notre folle Europe, qui ne soit un produit, ou un sous-produit—de la raison. La déraison meme. . .Je rougis presque de devoir rappeller ces lieux-communs.*"[23] Benjamin Fondane's entire work after that moment was, I would dare say, an endless reworking and development of this idea and an uninterrupted commentary on it.

With all this in mind, one finds less surprising (or perhaps, shocking) Fondane's observation that in Breton's thought one finds Plato meeting… Marx. Plato was at the origin of our staunch opposition to anything which is not a perfect idea amenable to interpretation by means of a theoretically oriented mind. Whatever strays away from the perfect form, argued Fondane, human suffering and passions, preconceived ideas, the ugly, the evil, the infinity, and, most of all, that part of our soul we cannot control was rejected by Plato. Marx, following Hegel, sought and discovered objective laws supposed to govern the world as well as the individual human being and his/her associations. A dialectical relationship governed by such laws is moving everything and everyone along a spiral that takes us all in the end to the highest attainable point; that, however, only if one could get rid of the subjectivity ("*la subjectivité demeure le point noir*," wrote Breton). Human beings are so tightly linked to the surrounding material world that "*toute erreur dans l'interprétation de l'homme entraîne une erreur dans l'interprétation de l'univers.*"[24] I shall limit to this the discussion concerning Fondane's relationship with the surrealist movement; one cannot, however, avoid the question, "Did Fondane understand André Breton's assertions, the real meaning of surrealism?" Certainly, the question remains open to further research.

In spite of this more and more pronounced antisurrealist rhetoric developed during the late 1920s, and reaffirmed in later writings, one may safely claim, I believe, that Benjamin Fondane remained close to the avant-garde spirit.[25] Cornered to some extent by his difficulties with his newly adopted language, disappointed by his inability to pursue the project of a book of essays, hesitant

between the old masters Gide and Jules de Gaultier, and the fascinating but yet poorly known (to him) Lev Shestov, Benjamin Fondane began to look for a new medium of expression that would somehow represent a mix between poetry and the newly discovered art of cinematography. In 1928 the volume *Trois scenario—Ciné-poèmes*, illustrated by Man Ray, will be published in French, in Paris. The slim volume contained three rather long poems in prose written in the guise of film scenarios. "The press was very nice to me, embarrassingly laudatory," Fondane told Sarina Cassvan during an interview published in *Rampa* (Bucharest), in February 1930.[26] The preface to the slim volume of *Ciné-Poems* was written to clarify the position of an author who tried to make his artistic statement in a tridimensional space defined by image, text, and narrative. Early on, Fondane had the intuition—based on works of such movie makers as René Clair—that an independent camera, freed of the constraints of neatly arranged sequences following each other according to a logical outline inherent to the unfolding narrative could make cinematography into a new, radically novel art form. By the time he began writing these texts, probably in 1927, it became clear that a conflict between a cinema more and more pushed to become an extension of the theater (as the sound movie) and the much hoped for art of the cinema was manifest; Fondane recognized this fact and pointed it out at the very beginning of his introductory text ,which ended with the statement: "After tomorrow's drama will be that of the *camera against the cinema*."[27] Perhaps by mixing words with images crossing rapidly the mind of the reader one could save the author from the unpleasant task of having to create beauty or to offer responsible moral statements about the world. A scenario (screenplay) that never becomes a movie could help define a means of expression dedicated to the only important task of the artist: that of the contemplation of human life and the causes for its destruction, whether they are external or internal. In Fondane's own words, "*Nous ne pouvons nous intéresser qu'à l'homme et à ce qui le détruit*."[28] The apparently Dadaist texts had to be read in spite of their intrinsic difficulty or just because of it. This is a quite daunting task and the question may be asked, "If everything was so difficult, incomprehensible, bordering on the edge of nonsense, why should one go through the painful exercise of writing such a ciné-poem?" Because, answered the poet in his preface (in spite of being at the time at a point where the futility of the act of writing was plain to him), in a remote corner of his soul something mysterious was in search of expression, sought meaning, and he felt that was made possible only

through this recently discovered art of the silent movie. Fondane's words were hesitant at times and induced a painful sensation of void, of lack of purpose: "To write: some kind of false comfort for people whose timidity causes them to lose their center of gravity, as one felt while singing a tune in a stranger's living room or talking with hands in one's pockets and asking silly questions à la Rousseau."[29]

There is, however, certain "content" embedded in these seemingly abstract scenarios. In all three, one can distinguish the shadow of a character condemned to a sad ending. It looks as if an existential content has been embedded in a Dadaist form. I think that this was a tendency that could be observed in Fondane's Romanian works: his Gidian bent superimposed to the philosophical outlook influenced by Jules de Gaultier already predisposed him to such a choice. I shall not analyze in detail the three scenarios, this has been done by Peter Christensen, in English, and, more recently, by Nadja Cohen, in French[30]; I shall add only a few observations which, I believe, point toward Fondane's intellectual quest at this turning point in his life. In *Mtasipol*, the dream does not free the dreamer from "causeless ailments" (*maladies sans cause*, the specialty of M. Ixe, the physician in the "play") that represent real life as the surrealists would have wanted it. In the end, the hero seems to commit suicide in a quite Dadaist way: "Il sort son revolver de la poche et tire sur le mirroir/dans le mirroir on le voit tomber/plusieurs coqs—en fondu sur fondu—sur plusieurs tables de nuit."[31] Fondane wanted to confront the reality of the real, lived life, to be able to overcome the pain and the suffering neither by changing the world—a mission not only impossible but quite superfluous in his view—nor by trying to transcend them through a sublime art born from the ethereal waves of a universal and timeless aesthetics.

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THE ENCOUNTER WITH LEV SHESTOV

It has often been said that Benjamin Fondane became a philosopher after his encounter with Lev Shestov; the poet himself wrote that he became a philosopher only to please the master. As we have seen, however, one could distinguish a philosophical bent in many of his youthful works long before his encounter with Shestov and his existential philosophy. I would like to add here another example in this sense: in an article titled "A New Logical Idol: Relativity," published in 1922, young Fundoianu rejected the idea that the all-mighty logic can—or has the right to—impose itself in an exclusive way upon our minds. The article was written as a review of a book by Fritz Bauer about the new theory of relativity announced by Albert Einstein that was recently translated from German .[1] It is surprising to see that at this early stage Fondane rejected the leading role of the abstract concept in our intellectual endeavors; the motto of the article—extracted from the work of a French mathematician, Jules Tannery—sets the stage to this rejection. The world of mathematics, physics, and chemistry, in short, that of the so-called natural sciences is not real, says Fondane, but rather an oversimplification that merely enables quantitative measurements and summarizing formulas. Moreover, whatever happens in this

"natural world," daring even as Einstein theories might be, is confined merely to this limited reality, wrote the young poet, set on his way to become an existential philosopher. He observed that the relevancy of the new theory of relativity outside its realm consists in the fact that it singles out the weakness of the concept of *absolute*: "The absolute had become a ridiculous word and must leave the sciences as well as the ethical."[2] The absolute is something human beings "invented," and this idea veils our minds; the result is a distorted view of the world, argued young Fundoianu, which in turn prohibits any objective, true law. There are no true theories, only useful ones, he concluded. The article ends with the interrogation, "Can it be that the only absolute truth possible is that of the *relative*?"

One not only finds here the origin of some of the later philosophical ideas of the future existential thinker but also one observes again that very early Fondane had the intuition that it is very difficult, if not impossible, for the human mind to rid itself of the distorting propensity imposed by the rejection of the particular, the individual, and the concrete. He identified also the tendency to adopt the "cult of the imperceptible," required by the need to establish fixed relationships, that is, laws. Small variations, which make the difference between seemingly identical objects, should be neglected and considered imperceptible. Later on, in 1935 and 1939, Fondane will write two articles about Gaston Bachelard's ideas concerning "the new scientific mind" (*le nouvel esprit scientifique*), in which one can clearly single out his own ideas distinct of those of Shestov, even after their encounter. While in the article *Le Nouvel esprit scientifique*, a statement such as "science is the humble servant fulfilling the utilitarian and social needs of human beings" might sound Shestovian, the observation that according to Einstein's relativity time is born the very moment we measure it, reminds rather ideas contained in this older Romanian article mentioned above.

Benjamin Fondane met Lev Shestov soon after his arrival in Paris, in the house of the philosopher Jules de Gaultier (who wrote at the turn of the century one of the first books on Friedrich Nietzsche published in France); a very close relationship developed after this first encounter between the two, with deep consequences for both. While their first meeting occurred in 1924, it took another two years for this relationship to become concrete, material; as we have seen, at the time of their first encounter and during these two years which followed it, Benjamin Fondane was struggling to forge for himself a new identity

both on the individual/personal side as well as insofar his poetical/literary activities were concerned. His previous involvements with philosophy were limited to a few authors only, most important among them being Nietzsche, Schopenhauer and Jules de Gaultier, who according to him, "provided my youthful years with the intoxicating idea of the esthetic justification of the universe"[3] (those familiar with Shestov's biographic details will notice striking similarities between this situation and that lived by young Shestov before the turn of the twentieth century). The years spent in searching for this new identity were painful and a long period of crisis ensued. The period of Fondane's philosophical apprenticeship covered roughly the years 1926–29, during which Shestov taught him not his own thought and philosophy but mainly that of others: "he forced me to read the philosophers everybody was talking about at the time, Husserl, Heidegger…."[4] In parallel, Fondane would begin reading his mentor's works as well (as we have seen, he had a brief encounter with Shestov's works while still in Romania, mainly through the book *Revelations of the Death* translated to Romanian after WWI) and these lectures helped him to identify a Nietzschean strain in his own personality ("ce fond nietzschéen en moi"[5]). Reading Shestov he realized that this "taste for the concrete, the living, the individual hero and his dramatic existence"[6] was something he had in common with his (recently encountered) master. Once this "resonance" was established, Shestov taught Fondane "the meaning of his ways of expressing himself…as well as the meaning of this strange resistance human existence puts up against theoretical speculation" (ibid.). This last point is an essential one since it explains not only the core of the existential thinking common to the two thinkers but also why Fondane *the philosopher*, continued to remain at the same time Fondane the *poet* too.

Benjamin Fondane began publishing his first philosophical articles in 1929–30; the very first one was an essay on Shestov titled, *Un philosophe tragique: Léon Chestov* . It was published in the literary-philosophical review *Europe*, followed, in the same journal, by an article on Husserl in June 1930 (in 1932, he will publish in *Cahiers du Sud* an article on Heidegger). The same year (1929), during his first visit to Argentina, he presented in Buenos Aires a talk titled *Un nouveau visage du Dieu: Léon Chestov mystique russe*. In a letter to Herman Lovtzki, Shestov mentioned his young "student"; "the article for *Europe* is written in a somewhat impressionistic style," he writes, "Fondane is not a philosopher, he states explicitly that he writes for "artists" but one finds in his writing,

all in all, quite a bit of 'energy.'"[7] A year later, Fondane will have ready for publication the first version of a book on the French poet Arthur Rimbaud, which will turn out to be more of a philosophical work than one of literary criticism. This "blending" of the literary and the philosophical was clearly a result of Shestov's influence on Fondane; in a letter addressed to the master in 1927 already, he explicitly recognized his influence when he wrote, "you make me understand not only Nietzsche, Tolstoy etc., but also authors you never considered such as Rimbaud and Baudelaire"[8] (the remark was only party accurate as Shestov himself did in fact meditate quite a bit about Baudelaire in his younger years). As a short illustration of the fact that *Rimbaud le Voyou* is also as much a book of existential philosophy as it is one about a great modern poet, I shall quote two brief introductory statements from the book: "if a Rimbaud would not appear from time to time to subvert the idea the spirit has of itself, men would fall asleep for ever."[9] And why would such a thing happen? Because, wrote Fondane, men are born in a world in which "the received and the preconceived ideas" have an ascendance over "any and all experience of the real."[10]

The philosophical "take-off" of Benjamin Fondane was not an easy one. Not only did he write mainly for poets and people with literary inclination—one has often the feeling that in his first philosophical articles Fondane continued an interrupted conversation with Gide and Rémy de Gourmont—but his lack of formal training and his limited philosophical lectures were at times quite obvious. While explanations regarding Shestov's philosophy of tragedy could be confined to a frame of reference defined by the Bible, Pascal and Nietzsche, the presentation of Heidegger as a thinker who follows in the footsteps of Dostoevsky or the statement that "Husserl arrives to the site of the drama (of consciousness) with many pre-conceived ideas which he did not bother even to analyze"[11]—are clearly due to young Fondane's limited understanding of these authors. In fact, Fondane openly recognized his limited philosophical knowledge at that moment: in the same article about Husserl he wrote at some point "even the least initiated reader in philosophical matters, as myself, will understand, etc.."[12] What is interesting and perhaps surprinzing to realize, is the fact that this wanting and relatively limited philosophical knowledge did not prevent the author to make very pertinent observations about the philosophers considered. (In his major philosophical work, *The Unhappy Consciousness* published a few years later, Fondane will re-visit some of these topics and authors).[13] It is also important to point out that the introduction of

the Bible in the philosophical argumentation as well as that of other religious sources (Luther, Job, the Talmud and Rabbi Eliezer in the Argentine presentation for instance, the Cabbala later, in *Rimbaud le Voyou*) will become a standard "procedure" in Benjamin Fondane's existential philosophy.

In the second part of the talk given in Buenos Aires in 1929, Fondane presented not only Shestov's struggle with the *evidences* of the philosophical discourse as the underlying mechanism generating the philosophy of the tragic but he also set a frame of reference for his own vision of the philosophical endeavor. Far from being a search for an abstract truth which does not engage its author in any deep affective participation (which in his opinion was the way of Descartes, Kant, Hegel, Bergson and Husserl), *the true philosopher* will be somebody who is seeking to uncover a reality buried deeply under the rubble of the firm, logical and rational evidences. This is a search performed while suffering, groaning and moaning, "une recherché *en gémissant*," as Fondane put it. Obviously, such an approach is open to the poet to the same extent it is to the philosopher and to the artist in general. That is why his more extended project already started before his departure to Argentina, the book on Rimbaud, was to be as much a philosophical pronouncement as it will be a critical essay on a poet and his poetry. This "dual-character" of his writing, critical and at the same time philosophical, made indeed the work of Benjamin Fondane—from the very beginning—accessible to poets and writers. Miguel Angel Asturias wrote Fondane that he read and re-read the book on Rimbaud because of the sheer pleasure of reaching a feeling of deep internal freedom, something similar to the feeling one has in the middle of an ocean. Miguel Unamuno the philosopher, on the other side, sensed the deep philosophical message implied in the statement made by the author about the moment when "existence begins to doubt the being."[14] Jules de Gaultier, in a letter of November 1933, wrote Fondane: "you have identified Rimbaud's condition as that of the metaphysical man. This is, in my view the radical opposite of 'the man who is *doing* metaphysics' (my emphasis). Rimbaud lived metaphysics, he lived the human condition." It is quite obvious that the old philosopher found himself in total agreement with the view of his former admirer insofar as the main goal of an existential philosophy was concerned. It seems, however, that a careful reading of de Gaultier's letter reveals also a hint to the fact that Fondane could have come to this conclusion even without Shestov's help, just by following in his footsteps: "you understood Rimbaud—wrote the old philosopher—as I under-

stand him and if you read the few pages dedicated to him in "La Vie mystique de la Nature," you will see that this is not a mere afterthought following the lecture of your book."[15] Gaultier observed and singled out in his letter the connection Fondane made between philosophy, religious thinking and poetry: "Jamais, peut-être, depuis les cabalistes, prophètes, foux et faux-messies, une action pareille à celle tentée par Rimbaud avec sa théorie du Voyant n'eut plus haute signification. Se server du réel et de la raison…afin de s'emparer de l'Inconnu par un coup de force…est susceptible d'agrandir le pouvoir de l'homme."[17] This is basically the same claim Fondane made in his presentation in Buenos Aires in 1929 when he quoted the story of Rabbi Eliezer and his dispute with the Sages, adjudicated by God in the favor of the first; when this occurred, the frustrated Sages explained God that the law given on Mount Sinai cannot be modified, not even by God Himself should He be allowed to do it.

Rimbaud was defined by Fondane as being "*un temperament métaphysique*" which meant for him not a human being who sets off to consciously study the nature of the transcendental but rather a person pushed by a thirst of it ("*un home qui a soif du transcendant*"), somebody for whom the real is absent and who ceaselessly oscillates between love and horror of God. Whether he speaks of poets and poetry or philosophers and philosophy, Fondane always tends to bring in discussion the unbreakable link between the affective and the rational, the contingent and the transcendental. Kierkegaard will be mentioned as well in this context and next to Gide and Mallarmé one finds Croce and the Book of Zohar.[17] All these authors and ideas were invoked to support the argument that Rimbaud's revolt was one against the all powerful Aristotelian *ananke* (necessity) and to substantiate the claim that the French poet rejected, as Shestov did and as he will do, the tyranny of the "ideea." Rimbaud's logic is not that of the Greek philosophy: "doubtlessly, one can be forced to die," writes Fondane, "but nothing in this world can force us to accept this death." The reader recognizes easily here Shestov's distinction between *constraint* and *persuasion*.

The abstract idea is also rejected by Fondane both as a philosophical tool and as a vehicle *for* or a means *of* aesthetic expression. Everything claiming certainty, infallibility, authority ends up as an oppressive and/or destructive force in real life as well as in the individual's reflection upon it, be it abstract or metaphorical in nature. An entire chapter of the book on Rimbaud (the

twentieth) is dedicated to this total deconstruction of the idea of the *idea*: the Hegelian and anti-Hegelian, the reactionary and revolutionary ideas, that of happiness or that of freedom, the Christian as well as the Pagan ideas are all rejected in the name of those who suffer and those who refuse to give in. "*J'appelle Idée tout ce au nom de quoi on fait tuer les nègres par les blancs, les juifs par les Allemands, les communists par les bourgeois, les trotzkistes par les communists… Je ne connais pas d'Idée, qui n'ai au moins cent mille meurtres sur sa conscience*"[19] (my emphasize). This is an extremely powerful philosophical—but not only philosophical—statement.

The attempt to position the rebellious poet in a Shestovian frame probably led Fondane to think about the unhappiness of any awakened consciousness. We know also that soon after the publication of the book on Rimbaud, Jean Wahl—who published in 1929 a book titled *Le Malheur de la conscience dans la philosophie de Hegel*—wrote a brief presentation of Fondane's work in the prestigious philosophical journal Revue philosophique de la France et de l'étranger edited by Lucien Lévy-Bruhl in Paris. Certainly, two very important representatives of the French philosophical establishment recognized, thus, Fondane's book as belonging to the domain of philosophy more than to that of literary criticism. A promising intellectual relationship was established at the occasion between Fondane and Wahl, which will unfortunately go sour a year later because of a controversy between the two concerning the main messages to be extracted from Kierkegaard's works recently published in France.[20]

In 1935, a year before the publication of *La conscience malheureuse*, Fondane published in *Cahiers du Sud* a long essay with the same title, which will become—in a somewhat modified version—the introductory chapter to his first major philosophical work.[21] *The Unhappy Consciousness* discussed in detail the philosophies of such philosophers of existence as Shestov, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, and Heidegger, but the works and the ideas of Husserl, Freud, Bergson, and Gide are also considered and analyzed. An extensive preface, as well as the introductory chapter, set the background for a thorough discussion about the need to find new ways toward a philosophy liberated from old patterns of thought and the tired idiosyncrasies of classical metaphysics. Fondane began his argument by observing that while human beings are simultaneously "citizens of the social order and its misfortunes" and, as such, political beings obviously, they remain always also "citizens of human misfortunes (*citoyens du malheur humain*)."[22] Thus, Fondane was ready to recognize the role of social life

and its effects on the existence of the individual, but refused—as Shestov always did—to accord it a preponderant specific weight. The human unhappy consciousness (*la conscience malheureuse*) must face the hostile forces of the "contradiction, weakness, and the necessity of death, that is, of this *fatum* through which the total alienation of the human forces is realized."[23]

Therefore, the task of any "real" philosophy should not be one of building systems of thought based on abstract categories and general laws governed by logic destined mainly to calm us down and perpetuate a state of intellectual beatitude. Instead, it must seek the means that enables living individuals to cope with their actual circumstances, with their real existence. To a large extent, the entire book was dedicated to a discussion concerning the distinction to be made between those philosophical solutions that try to impose the laws of a so-called objective reality upon a human being left without recourse to freedom and those that can be useful to the individuals embarked on a search for genuine freedom. This freedom is—and here Fondane will indeed follow Shestov's definition—that of Job and Abraham, who dared defy both the will of the Almighty God and the impositions of the ethical laws (be them of divine or Kantian origin), which bound mankind. In a chapter dedicated specifically to Shestov, Fondane emphasized, perhaps stronger even than his master, the need to live one's own philosophy even if that implied a renunciation of ethics and of the need for logical proofs (very much in the Nietzschean tradition). Fondane requested that the understanding of human ways of reasoning go beyond mere logical inferences. Thus, he followed the ways opened by Nietzsche and Kierkegaard not only in the domain of epistemology, but also in that of the ontology, in the realm of the questions related to the explanation of the nature and the meaning of being itself. Fondane asked for an approach different from that of academic, traditional philosophies. Educated in a different intellectual frame, belonging to a different time, and having his own, distinct sensitivities, Benjamin Fondane was much more aware of the distinction between these two philosophical domains than Shestov was. Human existence was something that eluded us, unpredictable and often arbitrary; when facing this ontological reality, reason tends to react negatively: "Reason does not like to recognize the irreducible opposition between the real and the reasonable."[24] Because of his close proximity to Shestov, many commentators of Fondane's work were quick to point out the similarities between his thoughts and those of the master; indeed, at a first reading it might seem that statements as the

one quoted above represent simple renditions of Shestovian ideas, but one should keep in mind that, at the same time, everywhere in Europe diverse brands of existential thought and *lebensphilosopies* were proposed by various authors. Moreover, a careful consideration of Fondane's later writings uncovers a strenuous effort to overcome the often purely deconstructive aspects of Shestov's philosophical thought. In *Faux traité d'esthétique*, as well as in his book on Baudelaire (*Baudelaire et l'expérience du gouffre*, published in 1947), Fondane will follow his own path and develop his own ideas insofar as the content of an existential philosophy dealing with the individual and his destiny were concerned. He strove to overcome the feeling of despair and powerlessness induced by Shestov's works; being a poet, Fondane concentrated on the examination of the nature of the poetical act, its meaning, and its impact on our lived, real, lives. The issue was not only a matter of concern for poetry or poets; the fate of poetry and of poets should be a preoccupation of all human beings since the poetical act, hidden in the deepest folds of our existence, acts as a radioactive substance emanating a quality intimately linked to our real existence in its innermost depth. In Fondane's view, the real essence of the individual existence, that which one lives *of* and reflects *upon*, was that which was seized and lived simultaneously in the act of participation-creation, or, in his words, "*la réalité ne doit ainsi être nommée que dans le bref instant où elle est vécue et saisie dans l'acte de participation-inspiration*."[25]

When, in 1938, Lev Shestov died, Benjamin Fondane found himself alone and terribly lonely. By that time, however, he was set on his own philosophical road: the thorough deconstruction performed by Shestov was perhaps a necessary condition for the creation of a new existential philosophy, but it certainly was not a sufficient one as well. Fondane looked for inspiration and sought resonances in different quarters for the continuation and extension of the debate related to the relationship between being and knowledge. In his literary testament he mentioned a planned book that should have been titled *Being and Knowledge* (*L'Être et la connaissance*), which was supposed to continue this discussion initiated but left unfinished by Lev Shestov. Fondane looked for new outlets in Stéphane Lupasco's ideas about thinking reality without submitting oneself to the rigors of a logic embodied in the all-powerful "law of the excluded middle"[26]; he was probing the possibility of living and acting within a reality that could be understood and experienced in terms of the contradiction and of the paradox (Fondane will insist on Kafka quite a bit in his book on Baudelaire).

In addition, he tried to find in the works of Lévy-Bruhl support and the confirmation of his ideas concerning the possibility of revitalizing "participatory thinking" (*pensée de participation*); a chapter on this author, based on two extensive papers published just before the outbreak of WWII was to become a part of *L'être et la connaissance*. During the war years, Fondane was also actively following Gaston Bachelard's ideas and he wrote about him and his books in *Cahiers du Sud*.

Benjamin Fondane's philosophical swan's song was a text written at the request of Jean Grenier, Albert Camus' philosophical mentor, just a few months before his arrest in March 1944. The article, titled "Existential Monday and the Sunday of History" ("Le lundi existentiel et le dimanche de l'histoire"), was to be part of an anthology of existential thinking titled *L'existence*, which was published in 1945 by Grenier. In this last work, whose title was inspired by an entry in Kafka's *Journals*, Fondane tried to clearly outline the basic principles of a new philosophy of existence. After considering the existential philosophers and philosophies of the day, from Karl Jaspers to Gabriel Marcel, the author observed that one should decide whether philosophers need to know what consciousness thinks about the existent being or rather the opposite, that is, what does the real *existent* thinks of consciousness ("*il faudrait se decider sur la marche à suivre: voulons nous réelment savoir ce que la Connaissance pense de l'existant, ou bien, pour une fois, ce que l'existant pense de la Connaissance?*").[27] The existentialist philosophies that came into fashion after WWII, inspired mainly by Sartre and Heidegger, avoided the question Fondane posed in his essay. Perhaps traumatized by the encounter with a problematic existence (Sartre) and by the shortfalls of a number of not less problematic choices made in their own lives (Heidegger, for instance), many of these post–WWII philosophers decided to avoid this too-blunt question concerning the relationship between existence and knowledge—as the problem was posed rather in terms of existence and being. Fondane's question, "*Est-ce l'existence, comme toujours, ou est-ce la connaissance, enfin, qu'il s'agit de rendre* problématique?"[28] which clearly echoed Shestov, will become of interest later but this will happen in a frame different from that of existential philosophy. From Wittgenstein in *Philosophical Investigations* to postmodernists, such as Deleuze or Derrida, the problem of the relationship between existence and knowledge was reformulated and extensively discussed after WWII.

What was, therefore, the outcome of this encounter between Benjamin Fondane and Lev Shestov? Fondane, who began "formally" his philosophical career in France as a disciple of Shestov, quickly became himself a philosopher in search of new ways and means to counteract the "tyranny of the reason." Being a poet, he explored the possibilities of a "poetical thinking" in guise of philosophy: in his *False Treatise of Esthetics*, he dwelled upon the deep meaning of the poetical act and its implication for a possibly new philosophy of existence (something equivalent to what I referred to elsewhere as Shestov's *metasophia*[29]). As he saw it, this was not to be a rational discussion about an "existence" represented in terms of abstract concepts, but rather a way of reflecting upon the life of the concrete individual as it unfolded within the confines of the actual circumstances of his existence. Two years before publishing *The False Treatise*, in the preface to his *Unhappy Consciousness*, Fondane wrote, "That which should have been kept, above all, silent—the terrifying secret of *homo philosophus*—we have slowly, but with much passion, spelled out deep inside ourselves! Is it possible that this pure wisdom, this learning accumulated since ancient times we call knowledge, was a lie? A lie brought forth in order to forget precisely its own primeval question, *the very first question of all*: What is knowledge good for? What is the meaning of the deep, absolute truths? Why do we need these unshakable pillars upon which knowledge is built? And what should we do with those postulates that are supposed to sustain the building but which turn out not to be able to perform the task? What good does a knowledge based on sacrifice? Does life need it in order to survive? Is this knowledge really necessary or rather, just the contrary, knowledge represents a *denial of life*, a suicide, a way out from a situation life *refuses to accept*?"[30] The unhappy consciousness must find a way out of this tension between Hegel's rational (and reasonable) knowledge and Job's total refusal to accept it. Poetry, Fondane believed, was perhaps the only option left and his reasoning can be summarized as follows: There was a time when there was no split in the human consciousness between the world in which one lived and acted and this other, parallel world created by the mind in its act of reflection upon the external world. At that time human thinking was a *thinking of participation*. As the rational, Socratic thinking (i.e., philosophy in the traditional sense) was born and began to evolve, this thinking of participation, *existential* thinking (not *existentialist*) began to retreat and diminish. But at the point of intersection of the two, thinking of participation and philosophical reflection, poetry came into being. Poetry is, thus, the ref-

uge of the unhappy consciousness, the refuge offered to a being engaged in the confrontation with an all-pervading and domineering rationality. But poetry cannot be practiced in a world in which the literal dominates; a world in which there is a perfect match between the signified and the signifier, a world deprived of metaphors. Unfortunately, Fondane did not have the opportunity to explain further and develop this so promising idea. In order to expand somewhat upon this extremely important point in the context of the Fondanian thought, I shall revisit and discuss in more detail the story of the unhappy consciousness in chapter 8.

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THE BIRTH OF A FRENCH POET

The precedent chapters followed the unfolding of the long gestation process of the new persona of Benjamin Fondane caught between doubts and a continuous search implemented through lengthy and painful oscillations between poetry and cinema, literary avant-garde and philosophical thought. When he decided to gather in a volume some of the poems he had written in Romania and publish them in Bucharest under the title *Privelisti* (Landscapes), the poet had made his decision: he would break all past connections and would re-create, almost from scratch, a new intellectual and artistic persona. Even though the author of the book was B. Fundoianu, he opened the preface to this new volume of poetry by declaring the old author dead: "The present volume belongs to a poet who died (around 1923) when he was 23 years old."[1] Why did such a terrible thing have to happen? The answer was somewhat bombastic but it contains the hard truth Fondane will live by from that moment on: the author, he told the reader, was exhausted after a battle having the intensity and the cruelty of a cockfight in Flanders between an inclination toward *achieving* and a strong temptation of merely *being* in this world. He concluded this confession by stating that it was not yet clear to him whether he was the victim or the per-

petrator of this "murder." Achieving (*a săvârsi* in Romanian was translated as *accomplir* into the French text) meant in the context of Fondane's preface, "living *for* artistic creation as opposed to merely being," that is, existing as an individual and interpreting the meaning of one's life *through* an act of creation. In fact, the poet himself will explain in the same text that poetry, as he understood it earlier, was some sort of a messianic act meant to save him: "I saw in you (poetry) the only means of knowledge, the only reason a being might come up with in order to remain alive and persevere in his state of being."[2] The human being, and young Fondane would not have been an exception, could escape this drama of *being* only by creating an alternative world that exists *sub specie aeterni*: "The idea was the center and the core of the poem" (*L'idée étant le centre et le noyau du poème*[3]). At about the same time he wrote this preface, Fondane was also writing his book on Rimbaud, in which he vehemently rejects the tyranny of the idea. For the Benjamin Fondane born of B. Fundoianu, reconsidering and rethinking Rimbaud and Baudelaire, during these years in Paris, was equivalent to the tasting of the forbidden fruit. And like Adam (although Paris was not quite a paradise for Fondane), all of a sudden he saw the truth of the great illusion art represented; for that sin, as it happened before to Adam and Eve, Fondane was punished drastically. The removal from Eden lead to the realization that poetry was not meant to be "a beautiful mask on an ugly face" but rather an intrinsic part of the human makeup, "an obscure force which precedes the being." "I understood," wrote the defunct poet, "that one cannot get rid of poetry as one pleases, neither can one catch it at will using a lasso."[4] And this was to be a quite serious punishment. Why then publish the "old" poems? Simply for the sake of ridding himself forever of this "old" foolish poet; in his own words, "*pour liquider un passé dont je voudrais bien plus rougir.*"[5]

Under the surface or perhaps out of the ashes of the old was growing a new poetry; did, however, the poetry written in French during the 1920s belong to the old, dead poet B. Fundoianu or to the newly born Benjamin Fondane? Whatever the answer to this question would be, the fact is that already toward the end of the 1920s, while he was assembling the volume *Privelisti*, Fondane was working on a new collection of poems to be collected and published a few years later under the title *Ulysses*.[6] Three personal events influenced him and would be in various ways woven within the fabric of his new poetry: the death of his brother-in-law Armand Pascal, the opening toward Lev Shestov's philosophical thought, and his trip to Argentina in 1929. From now on, poetry would

become a modality of existence, a prism that breaks down the emanations of real life into a spectrum of distorted (not beautiful) images. The poet's concern will certainly no longer be one for the aesthetic, he is not in the business of proposing alternate worlds or parables and a wisdom to live by. From now on, he becomes a filter of reality and a messenger who resonates with various experiential states lived in the past, (re)felt in the present and intuited in a future in which the only certainty is a total lack of certainty. Ulysses was from ancient times the symbol of the life-changing experience implemented through voyage: while *The Odyssey* describes a travel toward a well-defined destination, Dante's *Ulysses* transcended the idea of the voyage towards a known target. Older critics as well as new commentators of Fondanian poetry have attempted interpretations in terms of Homeric and Dantesque keys; many spoke of a Jewish Ulysses following Fondane's verse "*Juif naturelement, tu étais Juif, Ullyse*" (Jew, of course, you were Jewish Ulysses). In the following I shall present this first volume of Fondane's French poetry and interpret it in the terms explained above, that is, using its own yardstick in its own system of reference.

While reworking some of the poems published in 1933 during the war years, Fondane mentioned explicitly the date of conception of *Ulysse*, "*le poème fut conçu vers 1929*."[7] The same note also confirms our assessment above: "*Il s'agissait. . . d'une prise du réel à travers la couche habituelle du vécu*."[8] The volume published by Pierre-Louis Floquet in Brussels in 1933 contained a preface and thirty-nine numbered sequences.[9] It was dedicated to the memory of Armand Pascal and the introductory sequence mentioned him at its very beginning: "*Armand, ta cendre pèse si lourd dans ma valise*" (Armand, your ashes weigh so heavy in my suitcase). The atmosphere is set by this statement; the reader soon realizes that he is accompanying a distressed poet on a long and uncertain voyage: "*Est-ce arriver vraiment que d'arriver au port?*" (Does one really arrive while entering a port?). The feeling of guilt is overwhelming, "*pardonne-moi d'être vivant, d'écrire des poems*," and the doubt is painfully present: "*Et le Dieu existe-t-il, le Dieu d'Isaïe, qui essuiera toute larme des yeux et qui vaincra la mort—quand les premières choses seront évanouie?*" (Does Isaiah's God, who dry tears and vanquish death, still exist?). Earth is still there ("*Elle etait là encore la Terre*") but there is no happiness and no trust anymore ("*il ne faut pas lui faire confiance*") as the poet was left alone, "*Seul! Jétais seul au monde avec moi-même, feuille morte pareille à une feuille morte*" (Alone! I was left alone with the world and with myself, a dead leaf resembling a dead leaf). This was the man who left for

Argentina soon after the death of his beloved Armand: it is not surprising, therefore, that the long trip across the ocean will have a strong impact on him. The maritime motives, "*des bouquets d'eau de mer se fanent dans les valises*" (bunches of water flowers wither in suitcases), the attentive observation of the life and the landscape of the harbors "*le monde s'ouvre en nous par la vue des navires qui partent*" (the world opens up in us as we watch the parting ships) and of the fellow travelers, "*quel curieux voyage j'ai fait parmi les hommes*" (strange voyage made in company of men) were recorded by a sensitive and at the same time nervous spirit. One may wonder who is this "*grande poète né pour chanter la Joie*" (great poet born to celebrate Happiness) who lives—in his words—in a world full of intrigues and turmoil? Fondane did not claim to be, himself, a Jewish Ulysses but believed that Ulysses had perhaps a Jewish destiny. It is very interesting to observe that the description of the chaotic nature of Jewish life is rendered in these poems in an almost surrealistic language reminding at times of an automatic writing; for instance, the line, "*Juif, naturellement, tu étais Juif, Ulysse*" (A Jew, you were, of course, Jewish, Ulysses) is followed by "*tu avais beau presser l'orange, l'univers,/le someil etait là, assis, les yeux ouverts,/l"espace etait immangeable,/le sang mordait au vide et se sentait poreux/un gros poisson touchait au monde*" (quite a task to follow tempests and the world/sleep was there sitting with open eyes/space was impossible to swallow/blood was biting the void and felt himself porous/a huge fish touched the world).

The memories of childhood added by the poet in sequence 4 were included at the last moment while he was reading the proofs: "*Pourquoi l'océan me fait-il penser à ces plaines de Bessarabie*" (Why do I think of Bessarabian plains as I watch the Ocean?) and "*J'ai vu ces paysans en 1914 fuir les Autrichiens*" (I saw these peasants flying the Austrians in 1914). It is the same ocean that instills these early memories, and the fifth sequence stated it explicitly, "*une ombre t'a frôlé et s'est évanouie./Tu souffres. Tu te couches/à bord du Mendoza, le 30/VII/29*" (A shadow touched you and disappeared/You are in pain/You go to sleep/On board of the Mendoza on July 30, 1929). Of course, *Mendoza* was the name of the trans-Atlantic steamer that carried Benjamin Fondane to Argentina. A few descriptions of the port cities where the author stopped on his way, Marseille, Spain, and North Africa follow; it is not so much their exotic aspect that catches attention but rather the uninterrupted flow of the thoughts: in Marseille the immigrants coming aboard remind the poet of the pogroms of Ukraine, "*J'ai voyagé avec vous dans le train, mon père est là*" (I did travel with you by train and

my father was next to me, 9). This long sequence contains many autobiographical components and is followed by one, which, unlike other sequences, carries a title: "The Immigrant's Song" ("Chanson de l'Émigrant"). Not only is the presence of a title unusual but also this poem is composed of rhymed strophes. It has also a quite straightforward, one might say almost a didactic character insofar as its message is concerned: it starts with "*Amer, le goût de notre sort*" (the bitter taste of our destiny), mentions "*l'heure du Jugement*" (the hour of the Last Judgment) together with the "*cruelle existence*" (cruel life), in connection with Kiev, Irkutzk, and Warsaw and poses the question "*Quand donc finira le périple?*" (When will all these end?). But the poet does not remain anchored in the discussion of the Jewish predicament only: he asks also, "*Dans la chair oublié de l'homme, qui s'avance?*" (Within the forgotten human flesh, who is moving on? 12). Such a "poetical" interrogation belonged to the time when the poet still loved the world, "*oui, j"ai aimé le monde*" (14), when at the end of himself he was used to find only himself ("*au bout de moi-même MOI-MÊME*." The Greek Ulysses had somebody next to him, "*tu avais une déesse à tes côtés, Ulysse*" (You were accompanied by a goddess, Ulysses, 15), thus, it was perhaps not the voyage in itself that was relevant but who accompanies you on it, be it a phantom, an illusion, or a real companion. Besides, the voyage begins where the world ends; the only relevant question remains; therefore, is there still a sun somewhere? (*Le monde est fini, le voyage/commence./Y-a-t-il encore un soleil quelque part*?). After a few more maritime sequences we arrive to (South) America: "*Amérique, Amérique, merveille noir et rouge*" (America, America black and red marvel, 23). From that moment on, the focus was narrowed down to Argentina and its Pampa: "*La Pampa était à gauche*" (The Pampa was on the left, 24). Fondane, however, did not insist on this new Promised Land to be found in the Southern Hemisphere; some commentators have observed that he probably never went to visit the Pampa.[10] He quickly returned to the impressions of the maritime voyage, "*Que d"eau! Pendant des jours et des semaines*" (So much water, during days and weeks, 28), and to the ocean that made the firm ground even more concrete, more prone to remind the poet his past: "*Je me penche sur mon passé*" (I return to my past, 29), a past during which history meant an endless voyage from a death to another, "*de la mort à la mort, nous sommes passés de main à main*" (From death to death, we went hand in hand, 31). There is a change in tone as well as in the message toward the end of this long poem: one is surprised to read in the thirty-fourth sequence—added in 1933— "*Il fut un temps*

camarade" (repeated several times), a revolutionary adagio hinting at programmatic, revolutionary poetry. Especially puzzling is the last stanza of the sequence in which Ulysses is invoked in a very strange way, "*Je ne songeais pas, camarades,/ qu'un jour nous referions ce voyage d'Ulysse/les bourses vides*" (I would not have imagined comrades/that we will redo this trip Ulysses did/with empty pockets). The next sequence raises the question whether the poem takes a militant turn, in particular when—toward its end—the poet mentions "*un home…qui chante/ et que rien ne peut balayer de la terre…comme une feuille morte en la saison des loups*" (a man…who sings/and whom nothing can remove from Earth…as one would sweep a dead leaf during the wolves' season). However, the final sequence brings the reader back to the poet who refuses to change the world in the name of *any* revolution, who knows that more often than not human history is a tale told by an idiot and that the only way to escape this valley of tears is to refuse to give up the fight, be it as absurd as it may:

> Ulysses it is time to part; we came to the end of the world…
> It is a long time since the rats had gnawed the ropes,
> and gulls have eaten away the wax in our ears—
> Bound by ourselves, it is too much!
> Would you like to jump freely into the sea?
> I feel pressed to listen to the chant that kills![11]

Titanic, Fondane's second volume of French poetry was published also in Brussels in June 1937. Apparently, some of the poems included in this volume were elaborated at about the same time Fondane wrote those included in *Ulysse*.[12] At first glance, the poems of *Titanic* do not seem very different from those included in Fondane's first volume of French poetry. This is somewhat surprising since during the long interval between the two collections of verses many significant changes occurred in the poet's life. To begin with, he became during this time a fairly well-known figure on the Parisian literary and intellectual scene. He was now the author of a volume about Rimbaud that had quite a significant reception; his poetry was well received, critic Léon-Gabriel Gros recognized traces of Pascal in *Ulysses* and Roger Gilbert-Lecomte found his verses supple and musical. He published a year prior to the publication of *Titanic* a philosophical work, *The Unhappy Consciousness*, which reflected a more-focused and a better-oriented existential outlook. It is somewhat intriguing that Fondane began the second poem by declaring, "*Je vais inaugurer ma seconde tournée et mon second voyage parmi les homes neufs*" (I want to begin my second coming among

new people); the return to the theme of the voyage was understandable. What was surprising was the observation that in this second trip he will be accompanied by new fellow travelers. Perhaps the remark was related to his quality of witness he ascribed to himself; he ended the poem dedicated to Lev Shestov in *Ulysse* (37) with the observation "*je ne suis qu'un témoin*" (I am only a witness). Not only the witness is changed now, the same seems to have happened to his readers as well.

The opening collection is titled *Robinson*. The first poem seems to promise an open and airy perspective as one would expect indeed, on Robinson's island: "*le matin t'a lavé dans ses grands eaux/il jette dans tes yeaux les fourmis du soleil—/tu reviens à la nage/ suspendu à ce beau premier matin du monde!*" (The morning washed you in its abundant waters/While throwing at you the sun's ants/you return to your swimming/attached to this beautiful inaugural morning of the world!). This almost bucolic image is immediately contradicted by the first line of the next strophe, "*la chair meurtrie par les coqs*" (the flash wounded by the roosters) and the same pattern is repeated in the next poem: the luminous image of Earth appearing at the morning horizon is soon forgotten when the broken life and the agony of consumed time are brought up toward the end. The voyages and the boats are brought back but some of the verses sound plain ("*les figures…enjambent les frontiers mentales*" (The images…leap across the boundaries of the mental, 3) or, "*une pensée nouvelle qui grince sur ses gonds*" (a new thought that grates its hinges, 4), and the images are, at times, somewhat dull ("*dans les bistrots écoute la chanson perforée/des pianos mécaniques*" (In taverns, the perforated music/of the mechanical pianos, 6). The second collection titled *Villes* (Cities) might be read as a reply to "Ulysse dans la Cité," written a few years earlier by Fondane's good friend Ilarie Voronca, or, perhaps, as a memento dedicated to Guillaume Apollinaire. The title reminds of Rimbaud as well but certainly not the content and the style of the collection. The four poems reunited under the title *Radiographies* were written in the spirit of *Landscapes*. As opposed to the city depicted in the previous collection, these poems re-create the small provincial town of the old country ("*la petite ville*") and that of the Moldavian shtetl, "*Les juifs sortis des pures etudes de la faim*" (The Jews walking out from their pure studies of hunger, 1). Those are places where nothing changes with the exception perhaps of the change itself, which grows old ("*rien ne change/que seul viellit le changement*" 2). The third poem is a beautiful rendering of the pre-Sabbatical atmosphere in one of these small Jewish towns of Moldavia and all

of a sudden the imagery and the expressionistic quality of the poetical text sound like some of the best verses of *Privelisti*: "*Un âcre odeur de songe et de sueur flottait/dans cet acquarium où les viands molles/projetaient des lueurs visqueuses et miroitante/les membres d'une espèce marine révolue*" (A sour smell of dream and perspiration was floating/above an aquarium in which soft animals/sent out viscous reflections/members of a long passed marine species). The fourth poem of the cycle, dedicated to the poet's sister Line, renders a description of the Sabbath at the time when "the crowds entered the cinema (movie theater) of the synagogues" ("*la foule entrait au cinéma des synagogues*"). The nostalgia for those times overtakes the poet at the end of a very moving recollection: "*Une clepsydre hostile/comptait avec mon Coeur le temps qui s'écoulait/qui s'écoulait et qui n'est jamais revenue—/et qui ne reviendra qu'au jour du Jugement*" (A hostile watch/ measured in my heart the flowing time/which flew away never to return/ which will never be back before the Day of Judgment).

Le poète et son ombre, with its thirteen poems, was the closing cycle of the volume. It represents a very eclectic collection that seems to bring together different poetical attempts in an effort to find and exhibit new modalities of expression and to try themes not approached previously. Even from a technical point of view one finds here mixed styles and various poetical forms, for instance, quatrains alternating with six line stanzas. As if conscious of the fact that this process of continuous elaboration must go on, the poet, toward the end of the thirteenth poem, states twice this fact explicitly: "*Mon voyage n'est pas fini…Le voyageur n'a pas fini de voyager*" (My voyage did not end yet…the traveler did not finish his travel). The volume ends with a poem inspired by the message of the Ecclesiast[13]: it begins with "*Toute l'histoire me suit—suis-je un résidu ou un terme*?" (The entire history follows me/am I a residual or a purpose?) and ends with "*Il est un temps ou l'eau est froide, mais un temps ou elle bout/ le gaz irrésigné distend les parrois et éclate/il est un temps de mourir et un temps de ne pas mourir/de révolte perpétuelle—/Un temps de folie et de haine?*" (There is a time when water is cold/and a time when it boils/The restless gas pushes the walls and they explode/there is a time to die and one not to die/one of permanent revolt/A time for foolish things and hatred?). After having read *Titanic*, Jules de Gaultier wrote Fondane: "Your imagination, as well as your sensitivity, is very acute. Your tentative answers that which is the most interesting in modern art, in all arts, first and foremost in music but also in poetry: the estab-

lishment of meaningful relationships between those two modalities of reality, the abstract and the concrete, separated by human thought."[14]

What was Benjamin Fondane's position at that point, after having published two volumes of verses, within the landscape of French poetry? An answer to this question will require a brief excursion into this world in which literary trends and movements intersected in a multidimensional space and various poetical styles and traditions confronted each other at that time. It is well known that the intellectual history of the first five years of the 1920s was marked by the radical critique made by the Dada movement in all areas of artistic endeavor. This is how Tristan Tzara, one of its founders, described this period, thirty years later in an interview with another important player during the early years of the movement, Georges Ribemont-Dessaignes: "The eagerness to fully live our lives was enormous, all forms of the so-called modern civilization and its very foundations, rational thought, and its language were totally rejected in the process by means of a revolt in which the absurd and the grotesque were to replace the accepted aesthetic values."[15] Shortly after his arrival in Paris, Tzara will fall out with Breton and, as a result, not only did the two part ways but the avant-garde movement itself also suffered a split. Among the poets who joined André Breton were Philippe Soupault, Louis Aragon, Michel Leiris, Robert Desnos, Antonin Artaud)—some of whom the young Romanian poets in Paris about the same age will meet and befriend later. As we have seen, Fondane attentively observed the literary scene and its convulsions and wrote about it in various avant-garde journals published in Bucharest (*Contimporanul*, *Integral*, *Unu*); between 1925 and 1930, he published articles about poets and representatives of the French artistic world, such as Cocteau, Aragon, Eluard, Pierre Reverdy, Sonia Delaunay, Copeau, Brancusi, Chagall, and others. Two Romanian friends joined Fondane in Paris, Claude Sernet in 1926 and Ilarie Voronca, who, although didn't settle there until 1933, was active in Paris in 1927 when he published a book there. Sernet was involved through his friend Arthur Adamov, with whom he published the avant-garde journal *Discontinuité* in 1928, with the group *Le Grand Jeu*, for which René Daumal and Roger Gilbert-Lecomte, among others, participated.

Benjamin Fondane's first collaboration with a French literary journal was that with the *Discontinuité*'s single issue of 1928, where he published his first poem in French, "Le regard de l"absent."[16] The next French poems, "Bâtards de songe" and "Ce que l'âme dit," written in 1929, appeared at the beginning

of 1930 in the literary and poetry monthly *Chantiers*, published in Carcassonne by Joë Bousquet and René Nelli. In 1929, Fondane began his collaboration with *Cahiers de l'Étoile*, an eclectic review published between 1928 and 1930 and directed by Irma de Manziarly and Carlo Suarès. Among the authors who published in this journal were philosophers such as Jules de Gaultiers, poets as different as Joë Bousquet, Paul Valéry, and Ribemont-Dessaines, and the prose writers John Dos Passos, Alfred Döblin, and Marcel Jouhandeau. In 1930, Fondane published a fragment of his *Rimbaud le voyou*, launching the title that made his name known in French literary circles, in Jean Audard's, "Raison d'être." Fragments of the poems included in the *Ulysses* cycle three years later appeared during the fall of the same year in *Commerce*,[17] a publication edited by three well-known poets, Paul Valéry, Léon-Paul Fargue, and Valéry Larbaud (assisted by Saint-John Perse and Jean Paulhan). One may safely conclude, therefore, that by the end of 1930, Benjamin Fondane was a recognized name in French literary circles.

This recognition helped him establish two very important contacts by 1932: one in Marseille with Jean Ballard, the editor of *Cahiers du Sud*, and a second one in Brussels, with Pierre-Louis Flouquet who issued in 1931 the *Journal des Poètes*, to which he added a year later the Cahiers du Journal des Poètes printing house, where Fondane published his first two volumes of poetry, *Ulysses* in 1933 and *Titanic* in 1937. It is possible that in Marseille he was introduced to the well-known poet Joë Bousquet, who lived in Carcassonne. Fondane had published in Bousquet and Nelli's *Chantiers* and Ballard liked the young Romanian poet's spontaneity, vitality, generosity, and his unconventional ways.[18] As Bousquet witnessed, this southern review dedicated to "Poetry, Criticism and Philosophy" offered the newcomer a pleasant and stimulating intellectual environment, "*un cercle intelligeant et accueillant…où les pensées seront vécues ou réimaginées*."[19] In Brussels, Flouquet, himself a poet, manifested quite a bit of interest in Fondane's French verses as well as in the modern Romanian poetry Fondane proposed to translate for *Journal des Poètes*. The collaboration between the two continued during the 1930s, through the days preceding the outbreak of WWII.

The year 1933 was the real year of consecration, the year during which Fondane became a French "homme de lettres," following the publication of *Ulysse* and *Rimbaud le voyou*. Roger Gilbert-Lecomte appreciated his "*talent de versificateur*," observing that "*l'ensemble est souple, est musical*" and hoping to

read soon his "perfect poem." Léon-Gabriel Gros, in a review published in *Cahiers du Sud* in September 1933, identified in the poem a magnificent reincarnation of the Pascalian idea that defined the only sustainable poetical mission: that of keeping the human spirit alert forever; Jean Cassou, in the April 1933 issue of *Nouvelles littéraires*, compared Fondane with Apollinaire and Blaise Cendrars.[20] The book about Rimbaud was a great success to the point that Céline, probably not knowing the identity of the author, wrote Fondane a postcard full of enthusiastic appraisals.

The year 1933 was an important one for Fondane also because it was the moment at which he decided to entrust to paper the summary notes jolted down after each encounter with his philosophical mentor, Lev Shestov. At the same time, his activities in the realm of cinema reached a high point during the summer, when, in the Swiss Alps, he participated in the production of *Rapt*, a film directed by Dimitri Kirsanoff.[21] This exploration of cinema as a potential new artistic medium, begun with the *Ciné-poèmes* in 1928 and continued with articles written in the interval of 1928–1934 on this topic, will end sadly, however, in 1936 when, after an unsuccessful attempt with the film *Tararira* in Argentina, Fondane gave up his dreams about expressing his poetical and philosophical ideas through the new medium of cinematography.[22] The years 1934–1936 were dedicated mostly to philosophical writing but Fondane continued to work on his second volume of poetry, *Titanic*, as well during this interval. A long article titled *Poésie et métaphysique*, published in 1936, brought together his ideas about the link between philosophical thought and poetry, which will be reformulated later in more detail in *Faux traité d'esthetique*, published in 1938. In fact, the period between 1933 and the outbreak of the war in September 1939 was a very productive one for Benjamin Fondane, who was by that time a familiar figure in the French intellectual world, known through his many publications and activities in areas as diverse as poetry, philosophy, cinema, and politics. Also, during these years, Fondane maintained his contacts in Romania and established new ones in Argentina. The links with the French-speaking Belgian literary world was also a fairly active one; in 1937 he published seven articles in *Le Rouge et le Noir*, a literary and artistic journal established in Brussels in 1927 by Pierre Fontaine.[23] Many of these articles were dedicated to philosophical matters but one had to do with the German romantic movement; he also published there a fragment from *Titanic*. The large breadth of his activities enabled the poet to overcome the difficult moments created by the death of

Shestov in 1938 and the difficulties of everyday life during the period preceding the war.

This extensive intellectual activity, expressed in an impressive number of articles and books covering poetical, critical, and philosophical domains, enabled Benjamin Fondane to open a dialogue with the poetical-philosophical world of the interwar period. We do not know to what extent he read some of the poets who became, after WWII, the "representatives" of the interwar period, among them surrealists or former adherents to this movement, such as Francis Ponge, Henri Michaux, Audiberty, or René Char, or the somewhat older modernists such as Max Jacob, Saint John Perse, and Pierre Jean Jouve. What is certain is the fact that Fondane always remained interested in the "classics" of French modernity, Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Mallarmé, and even Paul Valéry. The "horizontal" relationship with those named is a worthwhile topic of research, but not less interesting to uncover are his "vertical" interactions with younger poets he tried to help or promote, such as Georgette Gaucher or David Gascoyne.

The letter Gilbert-Lecomte sent to Fondane in March 1933[24] is a good starting point in this brief attempt to try to understand our poet's involvement with his contemporaries in matters of poetry—not only related to the act of *poiesis* but also to the theoretical aspects of the poetical act. The indirect conversation between the two started earlier and might have found its common denominator in their reactions to some of the basic tenets of the surrealist movement, mainly those concerning the nature of knowledge and its object(s). Fondane, who under the influence of Shestov, challenged the authority of an all explaining, all-encompassing rationality, began to resonate intellectually with several former surrealists including René Daumal, Roger Gilbert-Lecomte, and Antonin Artaud.[25] All of them, though based on arguments different from those used by Shestov, contested the supremacy of reason and proposed different structures of reality while seeking new modalities of reaching them.[26] By the time he wrote his letter, Gilbert-Lecomte had published in the first issue of *Le Grand Jeu* his seminal article "La force des renoncements" and made known some of his observations related to experimental metaphysics. Fondane sent him *Ulysse* probably because of the elective affinities established between the two and not because he was a known poet. In fact, he was not really a poet, in spite of the fact that, as he modestly wrote in his letter, he had "*la manie de faire. . . des vers*." He certainly read, however, a lot of poetry and his critical work

was always heavily influenced by his poetical lectures. The letter contains a long phrase in which this interdependence is made abundantly clear in the context of a discussion about André Breton's and Pierre Unik's poetry, but the really important thing to note was its author's very direct attempt to position Fondane's poetry within the space of contemporary French poetry. "I place you," wrote Gilbert-Lecomte, "in the following order among your contemporaries: 1. St John Perse (from the point of view of the roundness of content as well as form)…2. Certain poems of (Paul) Eluard…3. (Léon-Paul) Fargue… and 3.bis, some stanzas of (Paul) Valéry" and he added that in this 3 bis category he would include also the name of (Robert) Desnos.[27] I do not quote here the arguments following each comparison; it is quite striking and significant at the same time to find such an appraisal from a person who presented himself earlier in his letter as being "*le plus grand lecteur de vers de France*." Of the same quality is the poetry of his friend René Daumal, who published, announced Gilbert-Lecomte, *Le Contre-ciel*, "*égal au plus grands*."[28]

I do not know if Benjamin Fondane ever answered Gilbert-Lecomte or if the latter wrote him again after having read *Rimbaud le voyou*. A dialogue between the proponent of a metaphysics grounded in the concept of resignation and the poet who adamantly rejected it would have been very interesting to follow. Fondane addressed the issue concerning the relationship between poetry and metaphysics in 1936 in an article titled "Poésie et métaphysique," occasioned by Jean Cassou's publication of the essay "To the Defense of Poetry," published by *Corréa* in Paris in 1935.[29]

In this article Fondane, who identified Cassou's main point as being a defense of poetry against the poets—whether or not this was, indeed, the main idea in Cassou's work— submitted both the book and its author to harsh criticism. Cassou's premise, that in modern poetry—from the romantics to his contemporaries—one can discover at work a strong inclination toward a "metaphysical despair" ("*la séduction du désespoir métaphysique*") is forcefully rejected by Fondane. Moreover, the association of this temptation with the unjust nature of the society the poet lives in is a repugnant idea for somebody who sees the tragic nature of human life as an obvious given. Fondane's axiom concerning the nature of reality confronted by the poet and its corollary that poetry is a subversive act opposing a reality interpreted mostly in terms of logical reasoning—"*la poésie, acte subversive par excellence, s'oppose aux données de l"experience,…tire la langue aux certitudes,…se refuse au Devoir—à la notion*

sociale du Devoir"[30]—is diametrically opposed to that of Cassou, who argued that man's destiny is to be in harmony with the surrounding world (*l'homme est fait pour vivre en paix avec le monde!*").[31] Fondane was very upset by the erroneous reading Cassou made of his main message in *Rimbaud le voyou* by defining the work as being a metaphysical one: in Cassou's words, Fondane's book represented the metaphysical attitude par excellence. Nothing could be more remote for Fondane than a metaphysical attitude toward poetry. While he discussed often, and in some of his works at length, the relationship between poetry and philosophy, Fondane always maintained that a metaphysical attitude—as opposed to a metaphysical content—is incompatible with the genuine poetical act.

Finally, it will be of interest at the end of this chapter to describe briefly the encounter Benjamin Fondane had with young British author David Gascoyne, destined to become one of the most prominent surrealist poets of the English language in the twentieth century. According to his own recollections, Gascoyne met Fondane in Paris in 1937.[32] To a long letter sent by the twenty-one-year-old poet on July 24, Fondane replied promptly and sent Gascoyne his recently published *La conscience malheureuse*. Gascoyne's letter began with a very sincere and naïve introduction[33]: he recognized that there was no reason to write this message to a stranger but he felt lonely and needed to share his thoughts with somebody he could trust. The young British author explained to Fondane (did he know at the time of writing the age of his correspondent, I wonder?) that the lecture of his book on Rimbaud determined him to write his letter; in an interview many years later, Gascoyne said: "From all the books I consulted on Rimbaud at the time, Fondane's was the most dramatic, the most clear."[34] In turn, Fondane answered the unknown young poet because he sensed that he was one of the few who understood the true message of *Rimbaud le voyou*. This was not a book about Rimbaud or about its author, Fondane wrote to Gascoyne, but one that reflected Rimbaud's reality as it was experienced by Fondane: "*la vérité de Rimbaud en tant que je l'ai vécue, vraie*."[35] We never possess reality, on the contrary, it is reality that always takes hold of us ("*l'on ne s'empare de la vérité, alors qu'il est clair qu'elle prend possession de nous*"), explained Fondane; therefore, a mere biography or a learned interpretation of poetry and the poetical act will always represent, in fact, a superfluous, if not a futile, act.

David Gascoyne unveiled in his letter his feeling of up-rootedness and the despair produced by it and, toward its end, he asked Fondane, "Why should I live on?" ("*Pourquoi continuer à vivre?*"). And immediately following this pathetic cry came a deep thought: "*si l'on croit qu'il y a une certain valeur dans le cri que fait pousser la souffrance?*"[36] To the first question Fondane replied in his letter by stating that not only will he not attempt to recommend solace but, on the contrary, he would reiterate the Shestovian creed that despair is to be welcomed since it enables us to see across the immediate reality that does not represent true reality. Suffering is a starting point, wrote Fondane, and "*crier, faire confidence à la bêtise, je veux dire aux valeurs de notre existence, à notre existence absurde, c'est cela, il me semble qu'il faut tenter.*"[37] The second point made by Gascoyne was answered at length in Fondane's book, *The Unhappy Consciousness*, which was sent to him at the same time.

Toward the end, Fondane reacted to Gascoyne's mentioning of surrealism as a possible salvation; seen from far away, this movement seemed to the English poet "*une bombe qui pouvait faire craquer ce monde plat et mediocre que je detestais.*"[38] The promise was not realized but Gascoyne was not sure what made French surrealism to be a false promise; his only suspicion was that the surrealist bomb was meant to explode in an endlessly deferred future ("*une bombe qui va faire explosion demain, mais toujours demain*).[39] Fondane hinted in a few words that in his view surrealism abandoned any real fight when it failed to accept that the true revolt is related to the human relationship with a transcendental God who represents total and absolute freedom. This point either remained somewhat unclear to Gascoyne or he refused to accept it. In the 1992 interview with Arta Lucescu-Boutcher, when the interviewer pointed out that "according to Fondane, man should claim his reinstatement; he should once more inhabit the Garden of Eden provided that he is willing to renounce the Tree of Knowledge," Gascoyne answered, in a very vague and noncommittal way, that "the theme of the Garden of Eden and the Fall of man, the nostalgia of the origins is the fundamental theme of European literature."[40] Two years later, in another interview, granted to Ramona Fotiade this time, Gascoyne explained the rift between Fondane and surrealists in terms of a different understanding of the concepts of *spirit* and *spirituality*: for the surrealists, said Gascoyne, *spirit* meant mind.[41] And I should add that in the first interview, he gave a quite interesting (and surprising) answer to the question, "Why did not Breton (and surrealists in general) bother to respond to Fondane's attacks?": "Breton never

responded in writing because he did not have much to respond to; in my opinion it's because Fondane's criticism was so good."[42]

In Gascoyne's *Paris Journal*, one finds the following note in the entry for November 10, 1938: "Ran into Georgette Camille in the rue du Bac yesterday: she asked me to accompany her to a dinner given by the *Cahiers du Sud*. The restaurant was packed with obviously literary people. Valéry, looking rather like an old white horse, was the guest of honor; Fargue and Supervielle were also there. Spoke to Benjamin Fondane, who seemed a little out of place, but was very pleasant, as he always is."[43] On November 3, Fondane sent Shestov his recently published *Faux traité* with a simple but very significant dedication, "*À Léon Chestov, à qui je dois tout*."[44] A tired and already very ill Shestov replied two days later, "Regretfully I must postpone the reading of the book, I spend most of the day in bed, sick and quite tired…but I hope to feel well again soon."[45] On November 20, Lev Shestov died at Boileau Hospital. A few days later, David Gascoyne met Fondane on St. Michel Boulevard: "He only said: 'Shestov is dead,' like that. There was nothing I could say…and we continued to walk away one from the other. It was one of the last times I saw him."[46]

The most recent edition of Fondane's French poetry published under the title *Le mal de fantômes* contains the two volumes *Ulysse* and *Titanic* and three collections of poems, reconstituted following the "literary testament" sent by the poet to his wife from Drancy in May 1944. These are *Le mal de fantômes* written during the war years, *L'exode*, most of which was written during the 1930s, and *Au temps de poème*, a collection of scattered works, some of them dated, apparently all written in occupied Paris between 1940 and 1944.[47] When analyzing Fondane's French poetry the main difficulty stems from the lack of reliable dating. This is always significant but even more so in his case because of his rapid evolution from the status of a Romanian modernist to that of a French poet. In the process he tried to position himself somewhere between an avant-garde dominated by surrealist tendencies and a modernism in the Baudelaire-Rimbaud-Mallarmé-Valéry tradition. In the end, Fondane found his own way in French poetry through a *sui generis* expressionistic poetry, heavily permeated by his own philosophical ideas blended with strong hints of biblical literature.

The discussion about Fondane's late French poetry can begin by bringing up the story of an incident that occurred about a year before his arrest in March 1944. During the summer of 1943,[48] Fondane sent from occupied Paris to Jean-

Gabriel Gros, the editor of the poetry section of the *Cahiers du Sud* in Marseille, an envelope containing a long poem titled *Le mal de fantômes*, accompanied by a long letter. Frustrated by the fact that his name was not included in the recently published anthology *Panorama de la jeune poésie francaise*, the poet asked Gros to read his poem and publish it in its entirety, in spite its unusual length. As it turned out there were several exchanges with the editor in chief of the journal, Jean Ballard.[49] The response of the editorial board in Marseille was lukewarm, and a few months later, Ballard wrote Fondane that the journal agreed to publish fewer than half of the poems included in the proposed cycle. The poet, a staunch proponent of *irrésignation*, did not give up and wrote Gros in December 1943 that "*toute coupure risqué de ruiner le tout, en diminue non seulement l"intensité, mais l"architecture*."[50] Impatient and apprehensive of Gros's possible refusal, he wrote again to Ballard, insisting anew on the unity of the text; he was ready, however, to take care of some of the possible concerns of the readers of the revised version. Fondane was frustrated but ready to compromise insofar as some details were concerned but certainly not on the completeness and the coherence of the text as he understood them.

It is not difficult to understand the sources of Fondane's feeling of frustration: the isolation in which he lived his everyday life in the hostile environment of a Paris occupied by German forces at a time when every Jew was in danger of being sent to an extermination camp was certainly depressing. But not less worrisome was the invisible perhaps but real isolation he felt he was submitted to in the surrounding world of French poetry. In June 1939, in a letter to Pierre-Louis Flouquet, Fondane wrote "*on nous accorde du talent, du sens critique, un oeil vif, etc.—et tout cela n'est qu'indifference*" (underlined by Fondane).[51] Between 1940 and 1942 he established a friendly relationship with the poet Max-Pol Fouchet, the publisher of the review *Fontaine*. The two met in May 1942 in Paris, and in October a very lonely Fondane ("*je vis dans une grand solitude terriblement menace*," he wrote in July) reminded Fouchet that poets badly need feedback ("*les poètes sont sensible à l'écho*") and announced that his book on Baudelaire was finished ("*Mon Baudelaire est achevé*").[52] Fondane wrote about the loneliness and the frustration of a poet who feels neglected by his peers, not about his status of *paria* in the real world (or in *Sunday of History*, as he will put it later). In a letter to Georges Ribemont-Dessaignes written in August 1943, at about the time the poem *Le mal de fantômes* was sent to Marseille, he described in more detail his feelings: "*Nous sommes sur place. . . un peu demâtés,*

un peu chavirés, mais encore solides et pleins d"espoir. Nous espérons ne pas être trop longtemps encore éprouvés, car chaque jour est dur, et la solitude accablante."[53] The human being is menaced by dark and dangerous forces but the poet is frustrated for reasons other than the fight with the hussars of history: in spite of his uninterrupted work, in spite of his efforts to abandon the old ways of writing poetry, and reintroduce the true soul of the human being into the fabric of the poem, he felt that he had been forgotten and he profoundly resented it.[54] And yet, Benjamin Fondane had not been entirely forgotten: Jean Lescurre published him in *Messages* in 1942–1943[55] and *Cahiers du Sud* was willing to publish his poetry in those difficult years of 1943–1944. The letter Ribemont-Dessaignes wrote to Fondane during the summer of 1943 included an invitation on behalf of Henri de Lescoët to participate in a discussion concerning French poetry during the last ten years, to be published in *Profil littéraire de la France*.[56] Perhaps the misunderstanding between him and his peers came from the fact that in his works, Fondane did not seek the poem but the *poïesis*, the act of creation rather than the perfection to be found in its outcome.[57] Lescurre understood from the very beginning that more than any other French poet, Benjamin Fondane was deeply entangled in his existential thought. Like Jaspers, he would not give in to the despair of not being able to understand his own existence; the leap into the domain of a nonrational perception of reality offered by poetry promised a way out of this existential predicament. As Lescurre put it, "*On s'interdira sans doute indéfiniment de comprendre quoi que se soit à l'apport de Fondane à la littérature, et singulièrement à la poésie contemporaine, si l'on ne se décide pas à se placer dans la seule perspective de cette mutation brusque. Il voulait qu'on existât une possibilité de rupture violente dans la conscience*."[58] This was, apparently, too difficult for Jean-Gabriel Gros and Jean Ballard to understand in 1943–1944.

The cycle of poems *Le mal de fantômes* was so important to Benjamin Fondane during these times of great difficulty that in his last letter sent in haste from Drancy just before his and his sister's transfer to Auschwitz—the letter known as his "literary testament"—he asked his wife to lend this title to the volume that would contain his entire poetical work. Since the poem under discussion was written at the end of his life, this work represents an excellent test ground, perhaps the best, for the analysis of some of the key themes and the main poetical devices found in Fondane's French poetry. I have repeatedly stated that in his work, poetry and philosophy were embedded one into the other to

the point that they became inseparable; however, this was not a theoretical, a programmatic fusion. Fondane's existential philosophy postulated the primacy of the lived experience over that guided mainly (and sometimes exclusively) by a purely rational interpretation of the facts of life. A corollary of this idea was that the confrontation with historical events is not governed by social laws and their interpretation in terms of the destiny of large human collectivities. It is not that Fondane refused to acknowledge the existence of the historical event; he only rejected a certain interpretation of it. What happens to a given individual is always a singular occurrence; yet the sum total of these individual destinies has an existence in itself. How can these seemingly contradictory observations be reconciled? Moreover, some things or events seem to be recurrent; strikingly, similar events repeat themselves over time. Seemingly similar destinies involve people who live far apart in time: but if everything is the same, what and where are the differences? The individual living in the present is always surrounded by those who shared these similar experiences in the past: the phantoms. At some point, it becomes difficult to make the distinction between those alive and the phantoms, and this fact induces a feeling of sickness; but who is the sick person, the one living in the present or the witness from the past who accompanies him?

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FONDANE AND THE REFUSAL OF POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT

A superficial reading of Benjamin Fondane's works might give the impression that he was an apolitical author in a heavily politicized world (of course, it depends on how one defines *political*). Both Romania after WWI and France during the 1920s and 1930s, not to forget the WWII years, can be seen in retrospect as having been hotbeds of radical political activity. Even the major avant-garde movements that dominated the artistic and literary world during the interwar period were sensitive to their relationships with the proletarian-communist or the national-social revolutions of the early twentieth century in Western-Central Europe and Russia.

Many of his Romanian friends, from the world famous Tristan Tzara to Ilarie Voronca and Stéphane Roll, became involved with the radical left. Many intellectuals and artists who began their careers on the barricades of modernism or in various avant-gardes—such as Ezra Pound or Julius Evola—shifted toward the Far Right movements (Romania, France, Germany, and Italy, practically all the cultural centers that could have influenced Fondane, witnessed this phenomenon). Still, he kept his distance from political movements and from the political and politics in general, and it is not difficult to understand

why when one reads his opinions about the ideological substrate defining any political outlook. He harshly critiqued the concept of Idea in *Rimbaud le voyou*. In his mind, any individual action predicated or conditioned by an abstract idea, any collective activity organized around an ideological vector, assumes that the individual becomes an abstract entity submitted to universal forces and laws, very much like a small electrically charged particle or a planet in a gravitational or in an electromagnetic field. Contrary to the small particle or the planet, the human being is free not because he rejects a given order or revolts in order to replace it by instituting another (utopian) order. Fondane did not believe in this definition of freedom; a certain relationship is established between the individual human being and the surrounding world and this becomes his reality. Freedom meant for him the possibility—which, for Fondane, implied a willingness as well—to permanently affirm one's right to refuse any reality that makes the individual unhappy. And even if it is utterly unhappy, the individual human being always must have the possibility to negotiate it with an external, transcendental entity. The following chapters in which I discuss his philosophical and religious outlook will abundantly illustrate these points. During the years he lived in Romania, as well as during his years living in a Paris strongly influenced by politics and the political, Benjamin Fondane kept his distance from any actual political involvement and from all ideological trends. There is no better illustration of his relationship with the political than his essay about the writer facing the revolution, "L'écrivain devant la revolution," written in 1935.

From the very beginning of his activity as a publicist, Fondane sought the solution to the political elsewhere than in the ideological: in an article written as early as 1921, he observed that, in the contemporary world, the events and the rhythms of life are centrifugal, that is, determined by a movement from the center outward, while in earlier times it was just the opposite: life was centripetal, it flowed from the external world toward the individual. Values were determined by sensations caused, in turn, by externally imposed events. Today, wrote Fondane in the same article, people are moving at high speed one with respect to the other and the world becomes a superposition of ceaselessly moving particles. Values are no longer rooted in something solid; everything moves relatively to everything else. This dynamic situation prevents, in young Fundoianu's mind, any possibility to anchor oneself in a stable political vision.[1] In the article published in *Integral* in 1927, Fondane showed a keen awareness

of the political landscape and theoretical disagreements among representatives of the various intellectual trends in contemporary France: "What can the surrealist movement expect from the (socialist) revolution if not the revolution itself?" he asked. And as we have seen his immediate answer was quite unambiguous.[2] We find there *in nuce* the source of Fondane's antipolitical credo, which will be further developed in later articles. Moreover, Fondane realized the danger built in the fashionable worship of action, the liberating activity considered a value in itself; in the same article he warned against the tendency to give up and obey this fascination with gratuitous activity. In this context, he observed how well some of the intelligentsia representing the Russian communist revolution received the futurism that thrived in Mussolini's Italy.

In 1929, in *Cahiers de l'Etoile* Benjamin Fondane published a review of a book on historical materialism written by Marc Ickovicz, in which he stated upfront that the critique he made of Marxism was not based on the nature or the depth of its socioeconomic or religious tenets but rather on the fact that, in his opinion, the Marxist ideology denied and sometimes falsified basic empirical truths. Never in history could one prove the existence of an order, a law applying to specific social systems that could be verified through the predictions of their future evolution. There was no independent method; any operational concept proposed by Marxism "depends upon a political doctrine and ultimately serves it," wrote Fondane. This entire effort, he believed, served to create some sort of a "physics of the mind" that will—sooner or later—take away the autonomy of the human spirit. He rejected as well the Marxist claim that the later (i.e., the human spirit) was merely an emanation of a material structure that underlies and determines any spiritual infrastructure: "Lautréamont unplugged the ears of the deaf," he wrote, and "Rimbaud tore down all the castles built by the spirit," as Baudelaire did before them. If anything, Marxism itself should be liberated from the constraints of a narrow determinism and be presented with the challenge of confronting the irrational aspects of life and society, he wrote in the concluding words of his article.

During the early 1930s, an alert and well-informed Fondane reacted to the political events in Europe: in December 1933 he published in *Le Cahier Bleu* an article titled "Lever de rideau," in which he sharply criticized the political events of the day. This was preceded by a scathing criticism of the politically driven Soviet cinema in the article "Cinema 33."[3] In an article published at the end of 1934 in the Parisian journal of the Romanian Students Association,

Viata Studenteasca, he also reacted to events in Romania, where the right-wing political movement became more and more visible and where prominent intellectuals changed allegiances and joined it in droves. Two things may surprise the reader of today: first, the acuity of the judgment, and second, the degree to which this practically apolitical author was aware of the political aspects and implications of the events. In his article, after passing in review events from President Franklin Roosevelt's endeavors to recover from the Great Depression in the United States to the success of the Nazis in Germany and the Fascists in Italy, all the way to Soviet Russia, Fondane made several pertinent observations: "Germany does not make a secret of its intention to get a hold of a few Russian steppes" since "the Russian land and its reaches could satisfy for a while (at least) some imperialistic appetites."[4] Japan is not forgotten either. But the political analysis does not stop, as is always the case with Fondane, at the superficial level of commentary; he observed that the new leaders of the Soviet revolution, pragmatic at first, became opportunistic and gave up the idea of exporting their revolution across the borders. The events (on the Left as well as on the Right side of the political spectrum) were in perfect accord, wrote Fondane, with the gregarious and silly nature of the human being who quickly gets tired of any sustained effort to slowly but steadily improve his/her character: "From Maurras to Stalin, passing through Hitler, it is fashionable to state that politics has absolute priority. One gets started with the beginning, that is, with the revolution. One destroys everything but one conserves the human being, this sacred animal." To which Fondane added ironically, "Humans installed at the top of the revolution urgently create six days dedicated to rest. Of course, they will have to work during the seventh day."[5] Until then, however, he wrote, during these six free days people can do all the silly things they wish, they can get drunk, drugged, sing songs, and give patriotic speeches; "while the Soviet man sings, so do Hitler and Mussolini."[6] The end result of this folly will be a terrible war, cautioned Fondane in 1933, and added with a chilling premonition, "In the streets, in the subway stations, in the local movie theaters, I see you human beings already cement of future common graves!"[7]

All these may serve to backlight the two major "political" texts of Fondane: the unpronounced speech at the International Congress of Progressive Writers, organized by a number of Left movements under Soviet supervision in Paris in 1935 and his later political pronouncement, "L'homme devant l'histoire," published in 1939 in the issue dedicated by *Cahiers du Sud* to the events preced-

ing the outbreak of WWII. It is clear by now, however, that Fondane's approach to political matters was one based on existential philosophy rather than on ideology or social science. As he pointed out in his preface to *La conscience malheureuse*, the human being faces a reality that most of the time is an adverse one: in many cases things happen without any possibility to prevent them from happening and one has to cope with their consequences whether one finds meaning or not in their unfolding. One can either try to rationalize everything and build upon abstract concepts, thus, developing intellectual constructs which, for some, provide some degree of solace. For many, however, rational answers to seemingly irrational facts and events will not do. The question will then be what to do under these circumstances? Benjamin Fondane proposed an exit from the labyrinth through a *sui generis* solution implicitly present in all his writings, critical or philosophical; however, all those proposed solutions were presented in existential language rather than in that of the political.

The International Congress of Progressive Writers held in Paris was inspired by the Komintern in Moscow; Ilya Ehrenburg convinced the Soviet leadership that such a meeting could and would lead to the creation of an international antifascist organization that might include a large number of left wing and progressive intellectuals from all over Central and Western Europe. The local key players were André Gide and André Malraux; André Breton was favorable to the initiative but the organizers were not too enthusiastic about surrealist participation in the Conference. Breton's ambiguous statements concerning the relationship between his movement and Communist leadership, at home and abroad, strongly biased by his probably sincere belief that both Marx and Rimbaud were prophets of the surrealist movement[8] made him and his friends undesirable in the eyes of the organizers. When Ehrenburg and the Soviet delegation (Boris Pasternak and Isaac Babel were also members) insisted on their refusal, René Crevel, a young follower of Breton, committed suicide the night before the opening day. Following this dramatic event, André Breton was allowed to speak late at night when everybody was too tired to listen or to react. The French literary establishment was represented at the Conference by such authors as Louis Aragon, Romain Rolland, Jean Giono, Henri Barbusse, Emmanuel Mounier—who will become later the founding father of the personalist movement—in addition to Gide and Malraux. In attendance from other countries were Waldo Frank, Aldous Huxley, Robert Musil, Max Brod, and Bertold Brecht; what were the odds that Benjamin Fondane would be able

to deliver a speech at such a politicized and overcrowded gathering? Even if his discourse were an "orthodox" one, it would have been difficult for him to reach the scene; but as one can imagine, the speech prepared by him was far from being a Marxist one and, therefore, was never delivered.

As motto, Fondane used a quote from Karl Marx that led him very early in his text to the following warning: "Those who begin their journey with closed eyes will still have their eyes closed at the finish line."[9] He pointed out from the very start that the lack of a common intellectual platform among the gathered writers, besides their antifascist tendencies, prevented the speakers to give free reign to their thoughts: "If we would have been *among ourselves* at this conference, Gide and Malraux would have been more clear and straightforward in their interventions."[10] Fondane stated bluntly, "We heard here the same adagios that stand witness for the lack of understanding Marxism manifests toward the vital issues the writers face nowadays."[11] After these introductory statements, Fondane went on to talk about the role of the ideology that ends up replacing any truth with merely tactical stratagems and the well-known fact that "any tactics represent lies, calumnies and is hypocritical." As opposed to communism, which was by its very nature totalitarian, the bourgeois society did not permeate deeply into the human soul, "It allowed us to retire into our own solitude, to cry out against society, to develop quietly a valuably instrument of knowledge,"[12] explained Fondane. Even if he agreed that the spirit (or the mind) could not get rid (by itself) of economic inequalities, Fondane challenged the Marxist postulate concerning the primacy of the economic over the spiritual. Or, more exactly, he disagreed with this hierarchy in the theoretical realm; in practice, it was acceptable perhaps to have the spiritual removed from its pedestal and give priority to the economical. However, one must recognize that even if the later can be a potential source of spiritual values, it will neither be the first nor the most important one. Getting rid of the chains imposed upon the spirit by its material substrate, the economical, will never be synonymous with creating spiritual values, observed Fondane.

This "unpronounced discourse" contained also a surprisingly large collection of insightful thoughts and straightforward criticisms of preconceived ideas. Human beings have a strange and, at times, unreasonable tendency toward self-overestimation, he remarked: "They see themselves aggrandized, elevated on a macrocosmic scale, they claim a religious reality. . .the spirit and the liberty are part and parcel of their reflexes, their biological makeup. . .Perhaps the

human being is a dangerous megalomaniac, a savage idealist who loves that which enhances his stature, hates what diminishes him. That is why the Soviets reject psychoanalysis considered by them to be a demoralizing science," observed Fondane.[13] The discussion concerning the writer and his role in society was also a very interesting one: If the writer is there merely to reflect society he has no personality and does not play any significant role; a mirror is just a tool, a reflecting surface that cannot modify the object it reflects. Unlike the reflecting mirror, however, the writer is a free agent. Socrates was the first to contradict Marx's claim that revolutionary activity can occur only in the economic-social realm. Since then, more illustrations of this fact came up, among them the works of Voltaire, Rousseau, Nietzsche, and Rimbaud. A writer who remains a conformist in the sociopolitical realm might very well be a true and dangerous revolutionary in the spiritual one, claimed Fondane: witnesses are Pascal, Baudelaire, Mallarmé, and Lautréamont. Moreover, writers that are quite conformist in the spiritual frame, for example, Zola or Barbusse in France, could be revolutionaries in the social one. The truth, concluded Fondane, is that writers tend to be rather conformist in the social realm, "They have been monarchists, feudal, bourgeois and they might soon become communists as soon as the wind blows in this direction."[14] More often than not they react to spiritual crises rather than to social ones; can it be that writers hate involvement with the social? Not at all, replied Fondane, they only refuse to live their lives in the superficial layers of reality; they prefer to address issues buried deep in human consciousness. The turmoil and the turbulence at the surface prevent the writer to delve deep; as paradoxical as it might seem, he needs a stable social life in order to reach these creative depths. His relationship with revolutionary movements must necessarily be one of a different nature from that of the "commoners": the writer's involvement in revolutionary activities should not be misunderstood and interpreted in terms that are inadequate and unrelated to his real intentions. Nietzsche was probably right when he called the writer a lighthearted soul; that is why one must understand in a proper way his acts and his claims in the realm of the social. When it comes to writers, says Fondane, one must distinguish between the ethical and the artistic-cultural values. This was a thorny issue in 1935 and remained a not less problematic one until this very day and Fondane did not make things easier when he wrote, "As it is well known, artistic expression is different from the social one, even if from an ethical point of view they are seemingly identical."[15] The ethical is unfolding in the

frame of rational discourse, while the artistic is implemented in a space of irrational lyricism. That creates the strange—and paradoxical—situation in which the artist, while praising the good, the healthy, the happiness, the courage, and the liberty, he hails, in fact, the evil, the sickness, the despair. There is an intrinsically demonic character in art and the writer cannot detach himself from it. This fact determines the role and the status of the writer in the context of the revolution, of any revolution. Gide, as well as Tolstoy before him, reflected upon these questions. For Fondane, the singularity of the writer's position was a given and, as a result, he always considered the political under the incidence of this status of exception granted to the artist.

Fondane reconsidered some of the theoretical issues implied in his political discourse—such as those related to the nature of reality and truth, the relationship between the individual and society, or that between the poet or philosopher and the surrounding world, and so forth—in his major philosophical work, *La conscience malheureuse* and in *Faux traité d'esthetique*. Toward the end of the difficult year 1938, during which a seemingly unavoidable war was postponed at the very last moment as a result of the agreement reached in Munich, Jean Ballard, the publisher of *Cahiers du Sud*, asked Fondane to write a concluding essay summarizing a sequence of articles in an issue dedicated to a discussion concerning the position of the Catholic writer facing contemporary events. (France considered itself at the time a Catholic country even though it imposed, as it does today, a complete separation between Church and State.) Many things happened between 1936 and 1939 in France as well as elsewhere in Europe, in the world, and in Benjamin Fondane's personal life. In 1936 Fondane traveled to Argentina to produce a film and when his attempt to succeed in the world of cinematography failed he returned to writing. At about the same time, he opened a dialogue concerning religious matters with Jacques Maritain, whom he met on his way back from Buenos Aires. In philosophy, he sought new avenues in the works of Gaston Bachelard and Lucien Lévy-Bruhl. During the summer of 1938, he published in *Revue Philosophique* a long and comprehensive article on Shestov. The same year he obtained French citizenship. On November 20, 1938, Shestov died in Paris. In spite of the Munich agreements reached in September that year, "peace was not definitely saved" as French prime minister Daladier warned. In France the situation was tense, "the interest and the very life of the country are at stake," he claimed while asking Parliament for "plenary powers."[16] Until the end of the year, "the home

policy was dominated by anti-Communism and a foreign policy of rapprochement with dictatorial countries."[17]

The issue of *Cahier du Sud* published in May 1939 was opened by Jacques Bénet's article "Avec les cartes truquées," followed by brief interventions by such well-known authors as Gaëtan Picon, André Chastel, Jean Grenier, and Roger Secretain. In exchanges with Ballard that preceded the publication of his article "L'homme devant l'Histoire ou le bruit et la furreur," Fondane complained at first that the task assigned to him was difficult since it induced so many thoughts that he was tempted to write an entire book on the subject—which was not surprising in view of his intense activities during the preceding months.[18] It is obvious from the interchanges with Ballard that this long essay, which in Fondane's own words summarized the content of a whole book, was very important for its author. It turned out to be a fairly comprehensive statement concerning Fondane's view of a world facing a catastrophe that, at the time, seemed unavoidable. In this context, it is very interesting to observe the author's approach to the interpretation of events. Fondane's article turned out to be, indeed, an essay about politics but in terms very different from those used by many other interpreters of the events, from Adorno to Evola, from Walter Benjamin to Lion Feuchtwanger, and from Mounier to Drieux LaRochelle—or, for that matter, from that proposed by the Catholic friend of George Bernanos, Jacques Bénet, who opened the discussion.

Fondane began his essay with a quote from Gide used by Bénet, who observed that "it is unpleasant to play in a world in which everybody is cheating, including me."[19] In spite of this beginning written in a style reminding rather more of the pamphlet than the serious critical study hinted at by the author in correspondence with his editor Ballard, the article represents a serious effort to analyze in depth and using quite sophisticated intellectual tools the situation of the surrounding world less than a year before the outbreak of WWII. The metaphor of the faked cards, "*les cartes truquées*" enabled Fondane to pose a very fundamental question: How can one distinguish between individual truths in order to find a common denominator that will allow people to live in harmony? He observed that "the mere possibility to claim that a general truth is at work in the world is predicated on the postulate that my view is the only correct one and whatever others claim is biased either by their interest or by their ignorance."[20] This pronouncement is followed by another interesting observation: "Unless one accepts the (human) error as representing a structural

damage in the fiber of *virtue* itself, one cannot understand a thing about history" ("*on ne comprend rien à l'histoire si l'on ne part du fait que l'erreur a toujours été tenue pour* une maladie de la vertu.") [21] Again Fondane's discourse was different from the Marxist one or from the arguments used by right wing nationalists of different colors in discussions of historical trends of the time.[22]

It is customary to believe that philosophers or public intellectuals have a bent toward teaching (if not preaching) and that tendency represents the mark of their "seriousness"; their statements are general, objective, they reject the frivolity manifest in the discourse of the poet and of the fiction writer. Their world is ordered, predictable, amenable to directed change, and to improvement: history has a direction, a purpose, a finality that is intelligible. But then comes Dostoevsky, writes Fondane, who reminds us that "one can write anything about universal history, whatever an unfettered mind will be able to produce on the subject, but certainly not that it is reasonable to any extent."[23] He recognized, though, that even a world permeated by the permanent sound and fury of history presents some traces of structure, of common principles that should make conversation between reasonable people possible. That thought reminded him of Plato, who, in *The Sophist*, spoke about the "forces of reasoning" present in every educated human being, which would include, therefore, Hitler and Rosenberg as well. The true enemies of human beings who completely gave in to reason were people like Nietzsche, Dostoevsky, and Shakespeare, the only ones who dare think outside the box of the social constraints (*qui osent penser hors la contrainte du social*, in Fondane's words).[24] With those and a few other exceptions, philosophy, from Plato to Hegel—and included in this long march across the centuries were thinkers as diverse as St. Thomas Aquinas or Leibniz—was always dominated by logic; furthermore, this domineering reason pretends that such concepts as that of evil, for instance, are relative and cannot be used in any operational way in a serious political discourse.

In order to better illustrate his arguments, Fondane borrowed a metaphor from Plotinus, the great Neoplatonist philosopher, author of the *Enneads*, a favorite of Fondane's old master, Lev Shestov: "Down here, there are beings who die just because they are unable to live by the rules of the universal order; thus, for instance, a little tortoise who lives on the floor of a dance parlor would be trampled under the feet of the dancing couples as it will be unable to understand, from its vantage point the rhythms and the rules of the dance. However,

if it would find himself in agreement with them, no harm would occur."[25] This is a beautiful metaphor because it makes transparent a fairly abstract and controversial idea: the universal laws that control history are understandable and become operational for a few select little tortoises who can, thus, avoid being destroyed by any movement out of sync with them. However, the overwhelming majority of the little beings will be condemned by their ignorance. For them, history will forever represent that cataclysmic force that runs them over and crushes them on its dance floor. There were thinkers, very few though, who realized, however, that even the wisest tortoises can fall prey to the violent bursts of history: Dostoevsky, Shakespeare, and their great source of wisdom, the Bible—says Fondane—tell us, each in his own way, that history is indeed a tale told by an idiot. "The philosopher would say that such a claim would offend God but Jeremiah, in the footsteps of Job, cried *damned be the day when I was born*."[26] What is to be done? Accept the terror of history and pray to God? But reasonable human beings do not accept the idea that God would intervene in the affairs of a remote, finite, perishable world; their answer is *amor fati*. From Plato's *Republic* to Marx's *Capital* one always witnessed this uninterrupted effort to keep away passions, affectivity, and avoid judgments based on the intuition operating in spaces where order, logic, and reason are unable to impose themselves. And in any event, concluded Fondane, even if one accepted the idea that there are laws at work in history, laws that one could figure out at times, it was and it will always be difficult to make the human being and his history compatible. The trouble is that "the modern world did not understand a thing about this desperate attempt to make man and history live together" (*le monde modern n'a rien compris à cette tentative désespérée de rendre l'homme et l'histoire co-habitable*).[27] And at this point Fondane will add an important comment that hints at the esoteric (if not religious) nature of his thinking: "For most human beings, most of the time, the transcendental entity that replaced History was not God but Reason, the (Greek) *nous*."[28] In the same essay, a few pages later, Fondane will state in a very direct way that "the religious begins for us at the point at which we become unable to find any intelligible meaning to history."[29]

The supremacy of the *nous* led to the triumph of the Hegelian idea of the real as rational and the unconditional victory of the reason in history (*die Vernunft in der Geschichte*), concluded Fondane: "If four centuries of humanism and the apotheosis of science led to horrors that were thought impossible, the

fault is not to be found in the 'noble counter-humanism' of Luther, of Kierkegaard, of Nietzsche or in Shestov or Maritain's works, which all saw the disaster coming and prophetically warned against it. The fault has to be found in a humanism that lacked any feeling of pessimism, which put all its bets on a divine intelligence totally separated from affectivity and, thus, totally neglecting the *real* human being."[30] The author of *L'homme devant l'Histoire* was realistic enough to observe that his argument does not imply that wars could have been avoided if a more cautious brand of humanism, less inclined toward utopias, would have been in place; "but it would have avoided certainly the wars at the national scale, the revolutions on a universal scale and the mechanical barbarity, the use of poisonous gases and biological warfare and the racism."[31] All these cover quite a bit of the awful history of the twentieth century.

Still, after all these considerations, the question of "what is to be done?" remained wide open. Facing the national-socialist Caliban one has to act, "*il faut abattre ce Caliban qui est a nos portes*," wrote Fondane but this was not enough and that because, in fact, he did not represent something outside the realm of reason, in spite of the claims of many anti-Nazi intellectuals and historians. "Mister Hitler is not only reasonable, he is Reason itself, *only this time sincere*, this same reason which—long before the German chancellor—was embarrassed by the image of a Christ crying on the Cross."[32] Socrates, not Jesus, was always the real hero of those who believe now in the all-powerful Reason observed a very bitter Fondane. Self-sacrifice seems to be easier to accept than genuine humility, "which means recognizing that one is powerless, that one is worth very little, to the point that one should not be afraid to recognize that one is scarred and has to call for help, trembling and crying."[33] This thought led to the conclusion that "it is possible that the supreme heroism, the most difficult thing for a human being is not giving up one's own life; much more difficult is the recognition of one's *spiritual defeat*."[34] Fondane will actually live through this process: first, during the years in German-occupied Paris when he experienced "*les terreurs de l'esprit humilié*"—the terrors of the humiliated spirit that are more tragic than those of the mortified flesh" and then, after his arrest in March 1944 and until October the same year, when all he was left with was "the courage of this bare truth more atrocious than self-sacrifice."[35]

History, concluded Fondane, is not understandable in terms of human reason; did he really want to arrive at this conclusion? No, not at all, he recognized; he would have liked, as any of his readers probably would have liked as

well, to believe in the meaningfulness of history. He lived with the hope while, at the same time, he doubted it. At times, he, too, thought of reforms that could improve things. But looking back, he could not avoid seeing always the sound and the fury in action. And what was done could not be undone by Reason; only an omnipotent God could do such an unimaginable thing, concluded Fondane. Where does this leave the reader insofar as the understanding of Benjamin Fondane's attitude toward the political is concerned? As in (almost) everything he wrote, this "political" article ("political" in the sense that it represents an attempt at a conversation in the *polis*, on subjects that preoccupy and interests its members), presents the answers in a mix of poetical, philosophical, and, to some extent, religious garb. It is very difficult to render his words and ideas into the language of political argumentation of those days and I am afraid that it is even more difficult to do this translation today. However, for those who pay attention and are willing to judge free of preconceived ideas his texts, Benjamin Fondane's articles present a profound challenge to this very day.

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CINEMA AND THEATER REVISITED

It might still be debatable whether Benjamin Fondane began to think about engaging the new art of cinema as a result of the failure of the *Insula* project in 1922 (see chapter 1) or the fact was unrelated to this unsuccessful attempt to establish an avant-garde theatrical activity in Bucharest. In any event, during the 1920s in Paris, the young poet began to be involved with the rapidly developing visual arts of photography and cinema. His friendship with Constantin Brancusi and Man Ray had probably influenced him to move in this direction much as his close relationship with Armand Pascal pushed him toward theater before leaving Romania; in addition, his status of *new*comer to a *new* country and a *new* language certainly had to do with his decision to try to adopt these rapidly developing artistic domains. The impact of the Dada movement and its manifestos and manifestations, his friendship with Tristan Tzara and other Romanian authors and artists who, in turn, resonated early with the new cultural-artistic radicalism announced by Dada and surrealism, offered Fondane a way out of the difficult predicament of the immigrant poet—at least during the first few years of his life in France. One has to remember also that he left Romania with the feeling that its culture in general and its literature in par-

ticular were merely peripheral manifestations—*colonies*, he termed them—of the main trends in French artistic and intellectual milieus. A new way of participating in their dominant culture seemed to have been offered to him by the new medium of cinema and he planned to take full advantage of it.

Fondane's contacts with the upcoming world of cinematography went back to his early years in Jassy. He remembered the fascinating shows presented both on the scene and on the screen at Toynbee Hall, a Jewish cultural center active in pre–WWI years in the capital city of Moldavia. Since Fondane's involvement with movies and the art of cinematography, in general, has been studied quite extensively in recent years, and there are several good presentations of this aspect of his activities in this domain,[1] it will not be necessary to enter into details here. I will only point out that Fondane kept writing articles on both theater and cinema during 1925–1927, which were published in *Integral*. Later, he will return in *Cahiers de l'Etoile* with the article "L'art du spectacle," which was initially published in Romanian, and in the *Cahiers Jaunes* issue dedicated to cinematography, he published the article titled "Cinema 33." Among these writings it is worthwhile to single out in particular "Entr'acte or the autonomous cinema," in which he presented the daring avant-garde director of silent movies René Clair, in whom he saw a potential "Rimbaud of the cinema." With *Trois scenarii* published in Paris in 1928, Benjamin Fondane demanded to "open the era of scenarios that cannot be spoiled by the camera" (*ouvrons donc l'ère des scenario intournables*); he had a sharp intuition of the confrontation between the camera and the text when he wrote in his preface to this work, titled "2x2," "L'objectif contre le cinema—voilà le drame d'après demain."[2] His ideas concerning the new art of cinematography were brought forth and expressed in a much more focused way about two years later, in his conferences in Buenos Aires.

In Argentina, Benjamin Fondane was received as a knowledgeable and authoritative promoter of the French cinema, which at the time was not well known on the South American continent. To the point that a French newspaper, *Paris-Midi*, mentioned Fondane's trip, during which he presented movies that later became classics of the European cinematographic avant-garde, among them *Entr'Acte (René Clair)*, *L'etoile de Mer* by Ray Man, *La coquille et le Clergyman*, by Germaine Dulac and Antonin Artaud and most probably also Luis Bunuel's *Un chien Andalou*.[3] He summarized the content of his conferences on cinema in two articles published in Buenos Aires in 1929, "Presentación de films puros" (A Presentation of Pure Movies) in *Sintesis*, and in 1931 "Cinéma

dans l'impasse" (Cinema in Deadlock) in *Sur*. About the same time, in April 1930, Fondane published in *Bifur*, an avant-garde review edited by Georges Ribemont-Dessaignes between 1929 and 1931, another article on the theme of the cinema in transition from silent to the sound film, titled "Du muet au parlant—Grandeur et décadence du cinéma" (From Silent to Sound Movies—The Greatness and the Decadence of Cinema).[4]

In "Presentación de films puros", the art of cinematography was presented as a radically new form of art, "*le premier art non noble. . . le premier art a-religieux également*"[5] (and half-jokingly, "*le seul art qui a l'âge de la femme qu'on aime*"[6]), qualitatively different from the theater. The title of the article published in 1930, "Du muet au parlant—Grandeur et décadence du cinéma," represented in itself a statement regarding the loss of quality in the transformation from the silent to the sound movie, but the interesting argument brought forth by Fondane related to the issue concerning the specificity of the silent movie when compared with theater as an art form. This was an important issue in the theoretical realm for an author who still was very much involved with theater precisely at the moment at which the silent movie began to affirm itself. "The matching of image and sound, does this represent indeed a new dimension for the art of cinematography?" demanded Fondane in the opening line of "Du muet au parlant," published in 1931. Sound film is not adding new dimensions, as both critics and the public believed; on the contrary, sound menaced to take away dimensions the silent added to the new art of cinema, which were, according to Fondane, "that of the visual movement and the wealth of possibilities through infinite editing choices and that obtained through a language born in the silent movement and its infinite possibilities of expression."[7] He recognized the drawbacks of the silent movie such as "the subtitles and the lack of a sound background, which could neutralize the effects of breathing, sneezing, and other unwarranted noises made by the public during the show" that seemed to be remedied by sound-image synchronization. True, Fondane wrote, "The improvised orchestras, a concept totally external to the art of cinema, could not represent a solution; their synchronizing effects were hazardous." However, the dialogue did profit from the addition of sound; and that merely turned the movie into an aggrandized form of theater. Moreover, "instead of fifty subtitles we got three thousand and the bad but inoffensive orchestra was replaced by an avalanche of songs, operettas, etc., which destroyed the established grounds of the silent movie," In this process, "the movies ceased to be an art in itself,

becoming the mere *copy* of another existing one, or worse even, a non-art."[8] Disappointed as he was at this point in his life, Fondane claimed that, with a few rare exceptions such as Ibsen, Strindberg, or Claudel, theater had become undistinguishable from sound movies: "Whatever we call 'theater' is nothing but *a boring news item amplified by a microphone*."[9] His bitterness about the state of theatrical art was expressed in strong words: "Bad theater, using fancy technical accomplishments ended up where nobody wanted. . .it sank low, very low, to the point that it was abandoned and replaced first by the Russian ballet, which had become the most impressive stage show at the beginning of the twentieth century, to be followed next by the music hall, the circus, the radio."[10] It is interesting to observe that today critics tend to assume that the two media, theater and cinema, share a common goal: story-telling[11]; Fondane would have disagreed with this assessment. For him, "the cinema, from its very beginning, embraced the lyric character lost in the theater. The excitement it induced in the spectator originated in the fact that it detached him/her from the boredom instilled by the theater in the actual life."[12]

The words Fondane had to struggle hard with after his coming to France, where everywhere, in poems, in scripts, in plays, the overuse of words was a constant source of unhappiness for him. They were imprecise, treacherous, and ended in communicating uncertain meanings and uttering false truths. The years of Fondane's struggle with a new language were also those of ceaseless challenges related to the possibilities and the meaning of human communication through words, attacks that came from all quarters. Dada was the most radical, and perhaps the surrealism followed it, and Fondane tried to channel this destructive radicalism toward a more constructive negation of the tyranny of the language and of the rational discourse based on it. The fact is that both Dada and surrealism were present at the time Fondane thought out the ideas presented in his articles about the art of cinema at a crossroads. He was strongly pressed to find another way of expressing himself:

> We had enough of chatting! Everything has been made into words: the wars, born and cultivated by words, made their effects painfully felt; in order to protest against them, a cynical attitude that makes one impervious to any real passion was born. The unrestrained use of words made everything ridiculous: love, hope, adventures, even the sublime in life. The hero became devoid of luster, deprived of any glamour: on the scene as well as in real life Sancho Panza replaced Don Quichotte."[13]

The silent movie had a chance to redeem the artist but things did not work out because the dialogue, master of the new sound movie, destroyed the new possibilities opened by the silent movie actor who worked in full agreement with a speechless camera. Unfortunately, "the shot angle became boring as soon as it became afraid of the microphone."[14]

At the end of a long journey during which he tried to achieve the total liberation announced by Dada while rejecting the "surrealist travels through a dream-land where Freud's unconscious served as Baedecker (guide book)," Fondane abandoned this way, not without noticing with bitterness that the new art of cinema was in danger of becoming merely a fancy clone of the old theater. The dialogue in movies could only lead to the same old theater; thanks to it, the movie ceased to be an art in itself, becoming a pale copy of an existing one, or worse even, it became a nonart. In spite of these disappointments, Fondane continued to stay in the orbit of the cinema: at the same time he was writing articles concerning the state of film, he also was making a living as scriptwriter at Paramount Studios. Life forced him to make compromises and, thus, he began writing scenarios for sound movies produced by an industry that became more and more prevalent during the late 1920s: the art of cinematography was slowly becoming a new artistic medium. Fondane was painfully aware of this process but by the beginning of the next decade he was back to writing poetry, literary criticism, and starting his first philosophical experiments. In 1932, he will go back to revisit his abandoned plays, *Philoctetes* and *Balthasar's Feast*.

Benjamin Fondane spent the summer of 1933 in the Swiss Alps where he worked with Dimitri Kirsanoff on the film *Rapt*, based on a novel written by the famous Swiss writer Charles-Ferdinand Ramuz, and for which Fondane produced the script; the music score was by Arthur Honegger. In spite of the obvious fact that the movie was a sound film, all those involved, first and foremost Fondane, of course, were trying to give priority to the movements of the actors—their gestures and mimic—and to the music, over the dialogue. These things were evident to the spectator and the fact was emphasized by the critics of the time.[15] When the movie was released in 1934, it was fairly well received but, by that time, Fondane had moved back to his poetical tools. A volume of poetry written in French had been in print since 1933 and his book on Rimbaud had also been published. The magnetic attraction of the cinema did not completely fade away, however; it seems that Fondane did not give up completely

his intention of writing and directing his own movies to be situated somewhere "on the border of the silent." In 1932, when a French translation of the novel *Don Secundo Sombra*, by Argentine writer Ricardo Güiraldes, was published, he had the idea to do a movie about the *pampa* (the vast grassy plains of northern Argentina). He wrote to Victoria Ocampo who had also thought of such a movie and apparently even proposed the project to the famous Sergei Eisenstein in late 1929 or early 1930.[16] It did not work out during the late 1920s and it did not happen in 1934 when Fondane proposed it. Two years later he came back again to the world of the cinema in a last attempt to save his beloved cinematographic art, which at that time had become merely a figment of his imagination.

It was again Victoria Ocampo's initiative to invite Fondane to Argentina in 1936, this time to direct a film to be produced by Miguel Machinandiarena.[17] This was a difficult and troubled year both in France and in Spain: the famous Paco Aguilar musical quator sought refuge from a Spain on the verge of civil war and found it in Buenos Aires. Their sister was a good friend of Ms. Ocampo who had not only the will but also the means to help the five refugees. The four musicians were in agreement with Fondane's idea that if sound had to be used in a movie it should be mainly that of music. Indeed, Ravel's *Bolero* was chosen to serve as musical background for an absurd comedy (or a comedy of the absurd?), in which the persistent but nonsensical activity of the protagonists was to reach its peak as the orchestra executed its music using kitchen utensils while punctuating it with the noises produced by the breaking of the furniture on the set. After several months of hard work the movie was ready but the producer was so stunned by the end product that he refused to release the film titled *Tararira*. However, Fondane returned to Paris with the feeling that he achieved his goal. In letters sent to his family in Romania, he was sure of great success; he was hoping for the same when the film will be shown in Paris. When the movie failed to arrive in France, an upset Fondane wrote to his Argentine friend Freddy Guthman that a grave moral prejudice has been caused to him: "I came to Buenos Aires with a certain prestige as moviemaker, hoping to start there a career in this domain." He agreed that perhaps the movie needed more work to be finished and proposed two possible outcomes for the deadlock: one (the bad solution) would have been to have Falma Films release the movie as it was at that stage while the other was to have Paco Aguilar send him the film, which then he would complete within six months using the superior technical means at his disposal in France. Neither of the two proposed

solutions worked out; a very disappointed, and this time bitter, Fondane complained to Guthman in March 1939 about the complete silence reigning over the fate of *Tararira*, a movie "mutilated" by those who handled it in Argentina after his departure.[18] During the years to follow, Fondane tried again to write film scripts but he never attempted another movie production. The times became too difficult for such an enterprise, and during the year preceding the outbreak of WWII and the years of Occupation, he spent more and more time in the company of his poems and writing philosophical essays. But it seems that his interest in theater continued until the very end.

The first attempt to playwriting occurred quite early in Benjamin Fondane's life. In addition to his only printed play, *Peter's Denial*, there were quite a few earlier theatrical attempts.[19] In Romania, as we have seen in chapter 1, the symbolist attempt of 1917–1918 was followed by the avant-garde experiment of 1922.[20] The first Romanian version of the play *Balthasar's Feast* dates the same year. This and the second play written by Fondane, *Philoctetes*, were worked and reworked many times during the French years. They were never played though during their author's life; still Fondane did not give up his passion for theater. During the late 1930s and the war years, this interest materialized in a few attempts to write scripts based either on plays or novels, such as *Romeo and Juliet in the Twentieth Century* or *Les puits de maule* (The House of the Seven Gables), after Nathaniel Hawthorne's famous novel.[21]

In the early 1930s, Fondane, still unsure of the direction he will take, still hesitant among the arts of cinematography, theater, and philosophy, and not yet sure to what extent his poetry written in French will be able to offer him an artistic and existential outlet, went back to work on his two plays abandoned for about ten years. He worked hard at finishing them and, on the cover page of the first edition of *Ulysse*, appearing in Brussels in 1933, he announced their imminent publication. The plays were not published, however. The probable reason for the failure might be found in the combined effect of the success of his volume of poetry *Ulysse*, the immediately following book on Rimbaud, and his increasing involvement with philosophy—by 1935 he was working on *La conscience malheureuse*. Moreover, his participation in the production of the movie *Rapt* encouraged him to return to the cinema on a larger scale.

Balthasar's Feast, defined by its author as a dramatic poem, was a story Benjamin Fondane told and retold in his essays, philosophical writings, and mostly in his poetry: that of the dispossessed, of the immigrant, the Jew who

has to confront an adverse world, represented by Belshazzar and his masks, Reason, Spirit, Madness, and Death. The plight of the eternally tormented victim of a history that did not seem to make any sense was made worse even by the fact that, on the one hand, the tormentor was all powerful and deemed himself as a god (Belshazzar in Fondane's play stated it explicitly), and on the other, the victim himself has lost the conviction, the faith, in the possibility to plead, as Job did, for the return of his dignity by a truly Almighty God. Since the play is hard to come by—a version edited by Eric Freedman was published in 1985[22] but no English translation is yet available—I will not discuss it at length here.[23] Instead, I will present in some detail Fondane's second play, *Philoctetes* and that is not only because the reader can find an English version,[24] but also, and mainly, because the play is meaningful from a biographical point of view. I believe that *Philoctetes* represents not only a philosophical statement in the key of the Shestovian philosophy of existence but also an indirect closing dialogue with André Gide.

Young Fondane was indebted to André Gide. During his first years in Paris, Fondane was still gravitating, to some extent, in Gide's orbit, and I feel that his antisurrealist attitude during the late 1920s was influenced to some extent by Gide's adversity toward André Breton and his movement. As he moved closer to Shestov, Fondane began to change his worldview and became more and more estranged of Gide's oscillating attitude between the moral and the esthetical. In his article "Gide suivant Montaigne," included in *La conscience malheureuse*, Fondane clearly and unambiguously spelled out his position determined by his newly arrived-at conviction that Gide did not seek, in his invocation of the Gospels, of Nietzsche, Montaigne, and the Soviets, the true nature of the human being, the human as he appears in his naked reality. All these were, in fact, for Gide "*des arguments, des texts justificatifs, pour etayer ses amours et ses haines—et plus encore ses haines que ses amours—sa haine des interdits sociaux, de la famille, de la foule, du sacerdot religieux*."[25] The rift was sealed but a brief essay did not suffice even though the criticism to which Gide was exposed was quite thorough. In his preface to *Philoctetes*, Fondane mentions twice the approximate date of its writing: first in the opening sentence when he writes "about 15 years ago…I had the idea of 'correcting'…one of those old Greek tragedies" and then in the concluding phrase: "The beginning of this *Philoctetes* was written more than 15 years ago. We kept it when we revisited the plot several years later. We are still keeping it."[26] From the fact that the first version was written

in Romanian around 1922–1923,[27] we can date approximately the writing of the preface to 1937–1938; before this date, as quoted above, the text was worked upon continuously, and the preface is clearly written in the style of a work in progress. Gide was present in the beginning of the process; by its end Fondane's rift with him was complete.

Of course, the Greek tragedy Fondane refers to is Sophocles' *Philoctetes*. There were two other plays with the same central hero, one by Aeschylus, the other by Euripides, but they did not survive. A modern rendering of the story by André Gide was published the year Benjamin Fondane was born (1898), a work that "had greatly impressed me in the past," wrote the author in his preface. The title of the Gidian play, *Philoctetes, Treatise on Three Morals* introduced the problem: the three main characters represented three well-defined moral attitudes. They do not reenact a drama, they do not present a real human tragedy: Ulysses, writes Fondane, is a Barrèssian character, that is, someone who puts tradition, the *raison d'Etat* and the gods of the nation above anything else. Neoptolemus is a Kantian hero, the reasoning person who tries to understand both the motives of men and the gods; finally, Philoctetes represents an endlessly oscillating artist, "the young Gide of that time," wrote Fondane and, I would add, the young Fondane as well, before his encounter with Shestov. After this important remark, Fondane observed that Gide "still thinks that ethics is merely a 'dependence on aesthetics' and that, as a result, human suffering can be tamed."[28] This was a statement Fondane came to fiercely oppose, however. Therefore, he had to write his own *Philoctetes*, another play in which the roles of the characters changed and the main issue was not that of overcoming suffering but rather the presence of suffering itself. In Fondane's own words: "We draw Ulysses' character in a way that brings him closer to Maurrass' ideas; Neoptolemus, a Kantian at first, sees his Kantian approach explode and, as a result, he comes closer to Nietzsche. As for Philoctetes, we make him go through a Stoical period before throwing him wholeheartedly into religious revolt and have him come approach Job's position."[29] These few sentences clearly outline the content of the play and its underlying philosophy; with all these in mind one could go now to the text and identify the statements that illustrate the above characterizations but what good will that do?

It seems to me that it will be more interesting to try to see how Fondane built the character of his hero and how the interplay between reality and his

perception of it changes at each stage in this unfolding tragedy. The Stoic hero makes his appearance as soon as Philoctetes appeared on stage:

> Man is stronger than everything if he has for himself
> Not chance, not the gods! But rather the feeling
> of drawing out only from his inner self.[26]

At some point a voice cries, "Help!" For ten years the hero was abandoned on a barren island by his friends. Ulysses was the main culprit, but the stench given out by Philoctetes' gangrenous wound was unbearable, the soldiers around could not concentrate on their main task, the conquest of Troy, and, therefore, Philoctetes had to be abandoned. Now, all of a sudden, a voice is heard; like almost every significant event in our lives, it is this unexpected, sudden outburst of an event that triggers the change. The Stoic who lives in immanence encountered the contingent. The question of the truth is posed in the most direct way: "The storm is real," says Philoctetes, "but how can we establish the reality of a thing?"[31] The departure from the Greek spirit becomes more and more manifest as the drama of the meeting between Philoctetes and the son of Achilles, Neoptolemus, unfolds. One of the talking Rocks ("kind of dwarf pyramids on rollers, upon whose summits men's heads appear, covered by masks") says at some point, as Philoctetes saves the drowning Neoptolemus, "Do not open your eye before seeing in yourself"; a bit later, when the hero was told who he just saved, he mutters, "If I forget thee, O Ulysses, let my tongue dry up!"[32] The staunch Stoic begins to melt away. Then, sounding more like an exiled Jew in Babylon, Neoptolemus readies to leave while Philoctetes thunders:

> O, Thoughtless youth!
> I have told you all my ills
> As an old man I wept before you
> what is your heart made of?

At this point, a somewhat weakened Philoctetes has to confront another blow when a merchant washed ashore by the storm unveils the fact that Ulysses is on his way to take Neoptolemus and his bow back to Troy "dead or alive, either by force or by persuasion!"[33] Neoptolemus tries to explain to Philoctetes in the best Kantian way that he must go since the gods have decided (absolute necessity) that Troy will be conquered only by the force of his bow. Philoctetes remained hesitant, however,

I have to recognize that your reasons are good, but
At my expense and the risk of my life…
And…what is true for all men
is hardly for man alone!'[34]

Once this truth is uttered the rest followes from the above: the individual experience remains incommunicable precisely because of its unique character. The human language tries hopelessly to "express the inexpressible" establishing, thus, insurmountable barriers: "My life is of no use to you," said Philoctetes to Neoptolemus while coming to an end point in his strange metamorphosis. From now on, the Stoic who could live through his ordeal by relying on the supremacy of virtue becomes a creature resembling, if not yet Dostoevsky's underground man, a germane character at least. And this Philoctetes will now ask,

Why is man born
if he has to die like a dog
after he's spent an entire life
in constant fear of his own death?[35]

Neoptolemus is now paralyzed; he knows that he should take the bow and leave but at the same time, impressed by the conversion he witnesses, he decides to stay—"No man, no god shall bend my will"[36]—in spite of the warning he himself gave Philoctetes moments before, when he predicted that "he who, like you, voluntarily dives into Misfortune brings upon himself eternal ills."

When he arrives on the scene, Ulysses faces a metamorphosed Neoptolemus. A verbal fight ensues, in which a Barrèsian Ulysses, indeed, confronts the by now Nietzschean Neoptolemus; or it may be that Ulysses was not so much resembling Barrès anymore; he acted rather like those medieval theologians and modern philosophers who submitted everything to the all-powerful logic of rational thinking. Before Philoctetes wakes up to talk to the shadow of Ulysses, he will tell Achiles' son:

'If there is somebody at fault, it's the gods'—
They well know that no one
Is expected to perform impossibilities!...'.[37]

In his final monologue, Philoctetes mentioned a "boundless desire to scream," to pray; but to admit than one is conquered by it, taken over by the desire to abandon oneself in front of a divine power was not easy at all. Humility,

even toward the all powerful gods is not in the nature of man (we clearly hear here Fondane's voice).

> 'Who then, what brave man, what hero,
> had ever practiced humility, the true humility
> of being nothing, of being unable to do anything
> …and of believing only in the absurd?'[38]

Those will be among the play's hero's last words, and they might have been perhaps Fondane's last words in October 1944 as well.

· 8 ·

THE UNHAPPY CONSCIOUSNESS OF A POET-PHILOSOPHER

As we saw in chapter 4, Benjamin Fondane's book titled *La conscience malheureuse* (The Unhappy Consciousness) was published in Paris in 1936 while the author was still in Argentina and Lev Shestov was away on a trip to the Holy Land. In the book in which Fondane resumed his conversations with the old master, *Rencontres avec Léon Shestov*, one can find a few traces of the discussions held by the two both prior to their departures and later (see, for instance, the letter Shestov sent to the author in July 1936; the earlier conversations had to do mainly with the contents of the preface and the first chapter of the book). In an introductory statement to an article with the same title published by Fondane in 1935 in *Cahiers du Sud*, the editors mentioned that they "have published in the past essays about Heidegger, Kierkegaard, and Shestov, which the author brought together now with a few new works on Freud, Bergson, Husserl, and others in order to include them eventually in a book to be titled *The Unhappy Consciousness*." Here, they added, "we shall be able to publish only a few fragments from the substantial introductory chapter to the forthcoming book."[1]

The Hegelian concept of "unhappy consciousness" was abundantly discussed in philosophical literature. In France, Jean Wahl published a book in 1929 titled *Le malheur de la conscience dans la philosophie de Hegel*, which Fondane probably read at some point (the relationship between Fondane and Wahl in the context of the Hegelian philosophy was extensively studied recently by Bruce Baugh[2]). In his book on Hegel, Jean Wahl pointed out that in the *Phenomenology of the Spirit* (1807), the German philosopher applied himself not to philosophies but to modalities of existence (the two should not be separated anyhow); from this observation Fondane concluded that Wahl cast doubts about the ways in which both Kierkegaard and Shestov interpreted and criticized Hegel. This interpretation led to a rather bitter dispute between Fondane and Wahl; it was not so much an unhappy consciousness that irritated Fondane but rather the uncomfortable feeling that an unconditional alignment with his master's existential thought menaced to bring him to a philosophical blind alley. In any case, if he read carefully Wahl's book of 1932, *Vers le Concret*—and one must assume that he did—he could not have missed that, in the chapter dedicated to Gabriel Marcel, the author singled out the fact that Marcel was seeking precisely the understanding of that which was impossible to be perceived through rational thinking: of the irrational essence of human affectivity that represents an essential component of the human individual makeup. Gabriel Marcel concluded, according to Wahl, that the problem facing the philosopher was that of finding a way to reconquer the paradise lost by an excessive use of reason; in his text Wahl explicitly used a metaphor often invoked by Shestov himself, that of the temptation of the forbidden fruit of the Tree of Life.[3] Fondane must have realized that he was not alone in following the road indicated by Shestov, even if other followers were less inclined to recognize the fact or to adopt the intransigent attitude of the master.[4] In any event, such doubts and hesitations influenced Fondane later to seek wisdom in the works of other philosophers, among them Gaston Bachelard, Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, and Stéphane Lupasco.

La conscience malheureuse begins with a "Preface for Today" followed by a "Post-scriptum." In the discussions the author had with Shestov prior to publication, the master found the second part of the introduction somewhat weak[5]; following this criticism, Fondane rewrote part of the text and added an afterword. Why did he single out the fact that the preface was "for today?" One has to remember that the book appeared in 1936 and even for the most existential

thinker the events surrounding Fondane must have had a certain concreteness, exercised a pressure that could hardly be avoided. Fondane recognized that the human being had never before been asked in such a forceful way to find a new road in history and, thus, to tie his destiny to a radical modification of the human condition. Ultimately, he will conclude, "*Nous sommes à la fois, en tant que citoyens du malheur social, des êtres politiques*."[6] However, to this hard political statement he will immediately add—as if he wanted to correct himself—the more philosophical one, "*et en tant que citoyens du malheur humain, des êtres métaphysiques*" ("as citizens of human unhappiness, metaphysical beings"). I mentioned in chapter 6 the writers conference held in Paris a year prior to the publication of *The Unhappy Consciousness*. That same year Malraux and Gide each published a very engaged book, *Le Temps de mépris* and *Les nouvelles nourritures*, respectively. Around the time of the publication of Fondane's philosophical work, the country was under the spell of the recent electoral success of the political Left in France. In Spain, the civil war was menacing, while neighboring Italy and Germany seemed to flourish under their totalitarian regimes. Fondane was very aware of "the permanent menace of pauperization and war," of the "methodical growth of stupidity and evil" and asked himself, if under these circumstances, one could or even should avoid the political.[7] Yet, in spite of the famous Latin saying *primum vivere deine philosophari*,[8] philosophy should have priority; not just any philosophy though, not that of abstract knowledge, but only a philosophy intimately related to human existence, claimed Fondane. That because, for him, philosophy was "the act through which the existing poses the question of his/her existence, the act which defines the living being through an inner and an external search, with or without evidences, and establishes the possibility of living on."[9] Thus, the revolt against the economical-political order, while justified, must not lead to the abandonment of one's inner life and to the rejection of another reality, that which is unveiled only through a difficult and, to a large extent, painful existential process.[10]

Fondane's philosophical writing was in stark contrast with that of some of the authors of authority and notoriety of the day. His view of the role of philosophy, of the act of philosophical interrogation under given sociopolitical conditions, was different from that of the Marxist dominated thinking of Henri Lefebvre or Georg Lukacs, for instance, or, on the other side, of such authors influenced by the Right as Charles Mauras or Maurice Barrès. For Benjamin Fondane, philosophy represented *the mere act of living in the world*. That is why,

in his long preface to the book, he attacked not only Hegel's philosophy in general but also the dialectical materialism much used by left wing thinkers of the time. In fact, observed Fondane, their dialectic is an idealist one since it did not make the distinction between the life lived in the realm of the social (*le social*) and that lived in the realm of the genuine or real (*le réel*). By making this distinction, he saw much before others did—many needed a terrible World War, a Holocaust, and the discovery of the realities of the gulags to arrive at this conclusion—that social revolutions never modify the deep structures of reality (in Benjamin Fondane's parlance, *le réel*). In spite of this, or perhaps for this very reason, "*l'homme ne pourra pas se dérober au besoin de remettre éternellement en question la signification de son existence*."[11] The added afterword further clarified the problematic relationship between "that which is known" (*le savoir*) and "that which is lived" (*le vécu*). Here, Fondane returned to another former master, Jules de Gaultier, and to his thoughts concerning philosophical reflection versus life issues; at the same time, in order to clarify his arguments he followed Edmund Husserl and Henri Bergson as well, went back to Kant, returned to Nietzsche, and ended his review with Heidegger. Toward the end of his post-scriptum, Fondane defined the philosopher as a thinker who comes to the truth not through the *knowledge* of things but rather through lived experiences. For this kind of thinker the question was what should be the task of a philosopher whose freedom exists in a realm situated beyond the boundaries of rational knowledge?[12]

After the strong introductory statement, "Human beings, no matter where they come from and where they go, are always dissatisfied with their condition in this world,"[13] Fondane continued with a rapid review of a number of apparently axiomatic statements concerning the *existent* and its *existence*, and this because "*l'homme est mal partagé entre les choses qu'il pense et les choses qui le pense*" (the human being is caught up in the difficulty of being torn between the things he thinks about and what, in turn, things think about him). This is a quite unusual and, at a first glance, strange thought that can be interpreted either as a religious idea (there are transcendental forces that observe and influence us) or as a personification, or a subjectivation of things external to us. That was the case in old times, when in a still "enchanted" world, the sacred reigned and human beings participated in its movements and acts. It seems to me that this notion existed already in Fondane's mind in a rather vague form at the time of writing the *The Unhappy Consciousness* (Shestov pointed out to him Lucien

Lévy-Bruhl's works on what at the time was called "primitive thinking," "*la pensée primitive*"). Later on, as we shall see, he will try to formalize it following Stéphane Lupasco's ideas about a knowledge based on a dynamic logic that incorporates the contradiction. The hypothesis concerning the presence of a religious component in Fondane's first serious philosophical statement is justified when one considers the extended discussion of the relationship between reason and faith in the 1935 article with the same title preceding the book as well as in its first chapter. While in the article the author quickly came to the conclusion that "reason and faith developed along different paths, each one granting to the real its own dimension," in the book he will spend much more time to argue this point. First, he introduced in the discourse based on faith a "coefficient of reasonable" (*coefficient du raisonable*): "Even a cursory glance at the ancient myths allows us to identify the presence of a certain reasonable thinking."[14] Later on, the two approaches to reality will develop along tracks that will lead to a deep conflict between them; but the conflict was not one between two ideas, two approaches, two philosophical views; it was a conflict intrinsic to the human being; "*le déchirement*" (the disjointedness) being within us, occurring on the existential level (I would have said here ontological level, if Fondane would not have rejected, together with Shestov, the discussion of any existential thinking in the ontological realm). In every human being the believer and the rational inquirer live together and that makes the rift permanent and painful at the same time. Can one at least discuss it in a meaningful way if to get rid of it turns out to be impossible? Fondane tried to cope with this important question in his article as well as in the first chapter of *The Unhappy Consciousness* and it is interesting to observe how his attitude evolved through the comparison of the two texts written at only one year's distance.

In the article one reads that the realization of our mortality through any artistic endeavor is performed by reasonable means, using concepts and logical inferences. Thus, a positive value is assigned to human reflections concerning the void and death (*des valeurs positives sont accordées a nos enterprises de néant et de mort*).[15] On the other hand, negative values are associated with what Fondane called the "vital functions of our existence" (*les fonctions vitales de notre existence*). Why should this be the case? Why are these vital functions of existence considered to represent antivalues? Because, argued Fondane, they are applied in a "word of unsolvable contradictions, where the *existent* is assigned the property of *malaise* and the Being is seen under the sign of a split and unhappy con-

sciousness."[16] It seems that the author concluded that these arguments constrain the human being to agree and consider them noble values condemning him to death; but is this a conclusion or rather a postulate? Such questions often were posed and discussed during Fondane's conversations with Shestov, held during the months preceding the publication of the book. Fondane understood that an argumentation in which the distinction between a corollary and a postulate is not clear has to be revised. And indeed, in the introductory chapter to the book, the question concerning that inner split was revisited. The inner tension, produced by this "*déchirure*" Fondane identified previously was due to the fact that the thinking being himself implanted deep inside his own consciousness the idea of necessity. Thus, the question concerning a possible objective split within the reality of the things ("*la déchirure objective du Réel*") becomes an intractable problem because the epistemological tools needed to handle it are missing. The need to submit our thinking to the all-powerful (logical) necessity, the *anankê* of the Greeks, replaced any alternative possibility of interpretation and explanation of the human experience. If one had to accept the explanations given by "knowledge" (*le savoir*), one remained condemned to a way of living in which positive values are subdued to endeavors related to void and death. But such a conclusion mixes epistemology with ontology and what is worse, perhaps, the concept of knowledge as used by Fondane becomes quite "fuzzy." This weakness was immediately observed by Jules de Gaultier who, in a letter written to Fondane immediately after reading *La conscience malheureuse*: "My immediate general criticism of your work has to do with the confusion between reason and rational thinking manifest in it." Yet beyond all these philosophical considerations stands tall the question: If Fondane's unhappy consciousness was not that of Hegel and did not represent merely a post-Hegelian variation of it, what was the meaning of his message in the book under discussion? I believe that the answer is to be found in the same first, introductory chapter of the book: a philosophy based on reason and inferences supported by its seamless logic will always find itself in agreement with Hegel's conclusion that what is real is reasonable and only that which is reasonable is real. The *existential* thought, on the other hand, perceives the real as something originating from a *created* reality and, as such, a reality that can always be modified. The failure (rift or rupture) observed in existence is merely an accidental occurrence within the realm of knowledge, "*La faute n'étant, tout comme le savoir, qu'un accident du savoir, qu'un accident dans l'économie du créateur.*"[17] If this last

sentence had been missing in his long argumentation, any religious implication would have been absent in it. As it is, one must admit that even at that early stage in his philosophical endeavors, Benjamin Fondane was considering ways to integrate the absolute transcendental into his existential thought.

I presented this introductory chapter at such length because, indeed, it discussed all the problems of existential philosophy as understood by Fondane in 1936, about ten years after the beginning of his philosophical apprenticeship. By that time he studied extensively Shestov's writings but also those of Blaise Pascal, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche. He seemed to be ready to make a clear-cut choice between the ignorance of Job and the knowledge of Hegel, between Kant's "freedom" and Abraham's "slavery." That because to a science that had to suspend the liberty of the individual in order to make itself legitimate (and possible), Abraham and Job opposed a way of thinking that enabled them to affirm their own, individual existence. However, the ways of thinking in these two realms are essentially different: the logic and its principle of contradiction are neglected by existential thought.[18] How did Fondane avoid this difficulty? I think that the Ariadne's thread that guided him through the labyrinth of philosophy recognized that existential thinking originated in poetical experience. After all, Benjamin Fondane was a poet, and the poet is more open than anybody else to the immediate, the incidental, and the concrete. Since existence and rational thinking evolve on separate tracks,[19] he stayed on that of existence. But he was a philosopher who believed that "*la où le concept fleurit. . . un concret y est enterré*."[20] The poet cannot be, therefore, but an existential philosopher, concluded Fondane.

It is only toward the end of this long introductory chapter, after all the discussed ideas were clarified that Fondane finally approached the central issue of the unhappy consciousness. And it is here that the reader realizes the seriousness of Fondane's analysis and its depth. He was perfectly aware that Hegel well understood the fact that consciousness was a generator of anguish, "an artificial system that generates motives and reasons to hope" in human beings. Hegel, he wrote, "recognized the historical existence of a *hiatus irrationalis* that, in terms of consciousness, represents unhappiness."[21] But unlike Kierkegaard, who insisted on the separation between consciousness and unhappiness, Hegel emphasized their reconciliation through his famous *Aufhebung*. The implication of this was that there is no need for a transcendental, for God, ideas that became obsolete and had to be replaced by the absolute conciliator, the Spirit

(Husserl, Fondane added, will later try to establish a solid base for these ideas). This Hegelian attempt to overcome conflicts and contradictions was debunked, however, by Kierkegaard; and long after him, one realizes that, in spite of all the efforts to revive later Hegel, "the human being remains forever immersed in something radically different from himself, which is contradictory, something he cannot rid himself of." Philosophy always tried to forget the existence of that which is beyond any object: "The object in itself is, however, something that is 'beyond' (*l'objet est déjà un au-delà*) and as long as it exists, metaphysics is still possible and with it, perhaps, religion."[22] This is a key statement linking Fondane's existential thought with religion in a perhaps more explicit way than before. It is quite surprising to see that in his assiduous attacks on Hegel, Fondane sought the help of another opponent of the great idealist philosopher, Karl Marx. He astutely pointed out that "*toute comme Kierkegaard, Marx rétablit le 'ceci' et le 'maintenant' que Hegel avait abolis; tous les deux sont partis à la recherché du concret perdu!*"[23] However, the problem of unhappy consciousness was not eliminated by Marx who converted the thought into the real, made it a concrete object and, thus, transformed dialectics into dialectical materialism. When Marx defines the human being as representing "the totality of social relations," he remains in the domain of abstract speculation: "*L'abstaction est encore vivante!*" cries out Fondane. "*Si vivante que l'individu n'est plus dans sa réalité que l'Ensemble des Rapports Sociaux, c'est-à-dire seulement une apparence d'individu.*"[24] Engaging Marx in this discussion was important not only for the sake of completeness but also because—for the reasons explained in the author's preface for today—the external events lived by the author and his readers required including in the conversation thinkers who were deeply involved with the social, economic, and political realities of the times. In an indirect way this line of argumentation offered also a message to old friends left in Romania who drifted from the avant-garde to a militant, engaged literature. And the proof that he was heard is to be found in an article published by a young author at the time, D. Trost, who, while reviewing Emil Cioran's *Book of Disappointments*, published in Bucharest the same year *The Unhappy Consciousness* appeared in Paris, compared the two "idealist" thinkers, Cioran and Fondane, remarking though that Benjamin Fondane knew and took at least into consideration the basic tenets of Marxist philosophy!

The other chapters of the book contain essays about authors directly relevant to the arguments exposed above: Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Husserl,

Bergson, Freud, Heidegger, and Shestov. A chapter is dedicated to André Gide, in an attempt to close the chapter of his involvement with a former "*maître à penser*" of the author and to explain why Gide had become irrelevant for him. Some of these chapters were rewritten texts of previously published essays and were, thus, necessarily limited in scope and extent; for instance, the essay on Heidegger, which dealt mainly with *What Is Metaphysics?* was heavily influenced by opinions and ideas expressed by other contemporary authors, in particular Rachel Bespaloff, a former follower of Shestov herself. The essay on Shestov was written before his book on Kierkegaard became available in its entirety to Fondane. (*Athens* and *Jerusalem* also appeared later, and Fondane wrote separate articles dedicated to these two works, see the bibliography.) What is most interesting in some of these essays is their potential for an "archeology" of Fondane's philosophical ideas and concepts: for instance, in "Nietzsche and the 'Supreme Cruelty,'" one finds for the first time—to the best of my knowledge—the expression "*irrésignation*" (as we have seen in Chapter 5, in one of his poems the term "*gaz irrésigné*" appeared as well). Also, the reading of Nietzsche in a Dostoevskyan key is interesting and surprising statements, unusual in philosophical essays, such as for instance "I dare say that Nietzsche is a contemporary of Adam," surprise the reader and doubtlessly push him/her to reflection.[25] In his essay on Kierkegaard, one finds Fondane's definition of the "*homme vivant*": this is a human being who is not merely *reflecting* upon existence but one who embodies the very movement of his existence toward the living ("*le mouvement même de cette existence vers le vivre*").[26] Here again, one observes the poet at work; the (true) philosopher would have continued this thought by asking, "living but how?." In fact, a few pages later, Fondane will hint again to this different modality of thought which is poetry, when he asked a few questions in a sequence which pointed clearly toward it: "Can we go beyond thinking? Can we save our lives? Can we re-integrate thought into the categories of life?"[27] The conclusion arrived at, "to go till the very end in a world of passion, of fear, of trembling, of anguish and of hope, means to 'exist'—reminds Rimbaud and the "poètes maudits." Finally, one finds in some of these chapters indirect definitions of existential philosophy; an example is offered by the observation made by Fondane that the Kierkegaardian predicament leads to the conclusion that "it is the absolute right of the individual to posit 'his predicament' as the focal point of the philosophical endeavor, even if by doing that he will blow it apart."[28] At times one notices also Fondane's tendency to over-

state some of his points; in their conversations, Shestov reproached him a too harsh judgment of Kierkegaard in the chapter *Shestov, Kierkegaard and the Serpent*. The same chapter contains however a thorough discussion of the concept of anguish, the question about a possible ontology within the frame of existential thought as well as another definition of the existential metaphysics. And perhaps most importantly, one finds there a direct comparison between two existential thinkers: while ready to suspend the ethical, Kierkegaard hoped to recover it when the absurd, through some magic act seemed able to re-establish a broken existence. Shestov on the other hand, gave the absurd a more metaphysical meaning; the absurd freed the human beings from the constraint of necessity and reinstated them forever in the realm of freedom.

After the publication of his second book of poetry *Titanic* in 1937, Fondane decided to collect a number of essays of literary criticism and philosophy in a volume which, because of its mixed composition, will be titled A False Treatise of Aesthetics (*Faux traité d'esthétique*). Its content, elaborated over a number of years, reflected—as we have seen—the maturation of the poet-philosopher during the mid-thirties (see also Chapter 4). This evolution was not simply a linear one: the order of the chapters in the new book did not follow the order in which they have been written. The preface was written in two steps, only Chapter VI was written entirely during the year 1937 and the beginning of '38 and this mainly to bridge the gap between the content of the two adjacent chapters. Chapters previously published (such as III and VII) have been substantially modified.[29] The leading idea of the book was hinted at by its subtitle: an "Essay Concerning the Crisis of the Notion of Reality." In a letter to Denis de Rougemont written in June 1939, Fondane complained that his work was viewed by the critics as an apology of the poetry while in fact it represented a lengthy argumentation for the redefinition of the *real* and *reality* in an existential framework, sketched already in his former *Unhappy Consciousness*. This new book had to be seen as a book of philosophy as much as one of literary criticism as was his previous book on Rimbaud and as his final, unfinished and posthumously published work on Baudelaire, written during the war years, will be.

If the nature of the *real* belongs to philosophy, the issue concerning that of its "crisis" is more difficult to define or classify: does it belong to the realm the social, the political or to that of the psychological? Is Fondane talking about the reality of the everyday life, about the contingent, or perhaps he refers to the

transcendent "reality" (or the reality of the transcendental)? If this would be the case though, is not one rather in the domain of the religious than in that of the philosophical? And how does poetry relate to this reality crisis? Clearly, the questions about the relationship between poetry and existential philosophy are recurring in this "*false* treaty of aesthetics." At a first (and superficial) glance, Fondane is discussing art and poetry in his book; he extensively talks in its pages both about the *poetical act* and the *poetical experience.* He postulates that the mission of poetry is predicated neither by its aesthetic implication nor by an ethical one.[30] In addition, the book discusses the difficulties facing poets and poetry, menaced by an adverse force at work in the world of contemporary literary criticism which endangers not only art but beyond it, life itself. At times, it seems that Fondane the poet acts as the standard bearer of Fondane the philosopher; this is not at all surprising after all in view of what has been said above. But beyond the sophisticated arguments discussed previously one might observe simply that since he actively "practiced" the art of poetry, he was fully qualified to inform the philosopher about the difficulties the poet has to cope with. On the other hand, Fondane the philosopher is speaking clearly and loudly when he writes that "poetry can express many things the philosopher cannot."[31] And indeed, in this *False Treaty*, the discourse belongs mainly to the realm of the philosophical even though its arguments and the rhetoric tools belong often to that of poetry. The reader oscillates permanently between these two worlds: as for instance while reading the author's explanations concerning the essence of the poetical act, one wonders whether a statement like "does the poetical act belong to the activity which generates it or rather to the poem, (representing) the object which reflects it?[32] Plato and his ideas concerning poetry and the poet's role within the City, are discussed next to the polemic Fondane has (again!) with André Breton and the surrealist movement. In the first chapter of the *False Treaty*, Fondane introduced the concept of the schizophrenic character of contemporary art and attacked Roger Caillois, viewed by him as a dangerous carrier of this virus of schizophrenia.[33] In chapter III, an earlier debate with the poet and the critic Jean Cassou, around the issue concerning the relationship between the rational thinking and the poetical feeling, is resuscitated[34] and Paul Valéry the poet, as well as Bergson the philosopher, will both be implicated in this dispute. A careful consideration of the arguments used by Fondane, while clearly indicating the strong influence of the Shestovian existential thought unveil again his sustained effort to overcome (at

least) some of the "de-constructive" aspects of his master's thought. The poet-philosopher in search of new conceptual tools invoked Lucien Lévy-Bruhl and his "*pensée de participation*" as a possible mechanism for the poetical act and as a factor underlying the poetical experience. Another reality, will claim Fondane, "*une autre realité plus vraie que celle du réel rugueux*,"[35] a reality perceived through a *sui generis* kind of experience, exists in parallel with that perceived rationally. He will call later this deeper, "real reality," "the experience of the abyss" (*l'expérience du gouffre*) and will extensively discuss it in his work on Baudelaire but for those familiar with his *Rimbaud le voyou,* it is clear that these ideas began taking shape during the early thirties.

The sixth chapter of the book develops the thought of an unconventional epistemology of this "*autre realité plus vraie*" which had the potential to lead to a truth different from that which characterizes the "conventional" reality. This, in continuation to the discussion carried on in *The Unhappy Consciousness*. In the dispute with Jean Cassou, Fondane made the point that rational human beings had always the tendency to seek the stable, the ordered, the understandable while running away from any unpleasant evidences of the arbitrary and the accidental.[36] Contrary to this, the poet brings up the imperfect, the impermanent, to remind those who seek stability and comfort that "death and suffering, misery, love and wrath, boredom, etc., *exist*."[37] If the parallel reality of the poet could be assumed to represent the "electromagnetic field of poetry," its *quanta* would be his poetical experiences: in the final chapter of the book, Fondane will state explicitly that "the poem is not an expression of the joy produced by playing with poetical sensitivities but *a modality of thinking which seeks the ultimate reality*."[38]

This same chapter indicated a change in some of Fondane's metaphorical constructs proposed earlier to illustrate his understanding of existential thought: the *conscience malheureuse* brought forth as a key concept in his earlier work will now be replaced by that of a *mal des fantômes*. Here, in a discussion regarding the relationship between the author (be him/her a poet or a philosopher) and the social structures encountered in the everyday life (the so called "reality"), the poet re-affirmed his refusal to serve a cause, any cause, since "*rien ne répugnait davantage au poète que de servir*."[39] He reserved for himself the right to be socially irrelevant, fighting for his right to walk through this world as a phantom ("*la 'liberté' d'être inactuel, de parcourir le monde en fantôme*")! Certainly, the poet-philosopher was fully aware of the difficulties imposed by such an atti-

tude, but he was trapped; he could not do otherwise. He had to redefine and adopt a differerent understanding of the "reality": for the poet, *real* will be (only) an experience seized and lived through an act of participation: "*ne doive ainsi être nommée que dans le bref instant où elle est vécue et saisie dans l'acte de participation-inspiration*."[40] The poet is somebody who is acting under the spell of inspiration and his/her reality is not an *object* but a *participation to* an object, a *state* (of being) realised through the poetical experience. The reality of separate entities applied to an individual object is merely a possibility, a potential reality which becomes actualized through the poetical experience. Thus, the division between seemingly separated entities is suspended, a new unifying term representing the act of writing poetry comes into being, explained Fondane.[41] Bergson claimed that the fragmentation of reality was due to rational thinking, to intelligence; he invoked intuition in order to explain the continuous character of the time perceived as duration (*durée*). Poetry plays a similar role for Benjamin Fondane: however, this "irrational" poetry does not precede the rational thinking but it rather comes after it and is obtained through a tremenduous effort.[42]

During the war years Fondane worked on his book about Baudelaire[43] which he will never bring to a final completion; as the books on Rimbaud and the *False Treaty*, it will contain as much philosophy as literary criticism. The reader will find the oscillation between the two very well exemplified for instance in chapter XVII, which begins with the question whether Baudelaire wrote the *Flowers of Evil* because of the way he experienced life or he actually lived the life he lived because of the *Fleurs du Mal* to continue with a long discussion of the sacred and the profane! This followed a chapter in which both Bachelard and Lévy-Bruhl were mentioned in the context of a participatory thinking found to be dominant in a world which accepted, still, the presence of the sacred. All these, are interconnected with ideas the reader encountered already in previous works of the author: "*La fascination qu'éprouve le profane pour le sacré est donc, au sein de cette pensé, parfaitement compréhensible; c'est la soif de participation à un monde réel et même plus réel que le positif*."[44] This is a Fondane already well beyond the "unhappy consciousness" stage; a thinker who incorporated quite a large amount of non-Shestovian ideas into his own philosophical thought, while in his poetry he struggled still with the *mal de fantômes*. His philosophical writing seems to be done now through frequent immersions into a Baudelairian abyss, as witness by the rich (almost "stuffy" one might say) and

multidimensional narrative of this book. In the end however, all these intellectual adventures turned out to be quite rewarding as they brought Benjamin Fondane closer to a much better definition of his own existential thought.

· 9 ·

BENJAMIN FONDANE IN SEARCH OF A *METASOPHIA*

In the note Benjamin Fondane sent to his wife from Drancy just before he was transferred at the end of May 1944 to Auschwitz, he pointed out that his study on Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, published before the outbreak of the war, should become part of a book titled *L'Etre et la Connaissance*.[1] In addition, the book was meant to include his most comprehensive articles on Shestov, published just before the death of his mentor in 1938,[2] together with a study of Stéphane Lupasco's ideas concerning his new "dynamic" logic built around the idea of the inclusion of the contradiction in the law of the excluded third.[3] The planned book was to represent Fondane's philosophical thought as it evolved after the death of Lev Shestov.

Between 1938 and 1944, Fondane published in *Cahiers du Sud* a few articles about Gaston Bachelard and Lupasco while working at the same time on his book on Baudelaire. Just before his arrest, he finished, in response to Jean Grenier's request, the draft of an essay titled *Le lundi existential et le dimanche de l'histoire*. It is quite clear that during these years Benjamin Fondane was deeply involved in an active search of his own, new brand of existential philosophy, a philosophy that did not seek knowledge (*n'est pas du domaine du "je*

sais") in traditional ways but one that would replace *intelligere* with the uncompromising search and use *le cri* as a search tool and as method.[4] To what extent and in what ways will Fondane's existential philosophy differ from that of Lev Shestov?

The two articles on Shestov represent excellent summaries of the Shestovian existential thought as Fondane understood it. One should keep in mind that the master agreed with the interpretation of the disciple: "You succeeded very well" was his remark in 1937 while discussing one of these presentations. However, at the beginning of 1938, while Fondane was preparing the second article for the prestigious philosophical journal edited by Lévy-Bruhl, Shestov told him that he must write, very concisely, a purely philosophical article from which any traces of eloquence must disappear.[5] After more than two months of intense work and three revisions of the ensuing drafts by Shestov the article was ready ("Shestov read for the third time my paper; this time he agrees"[6]): it represented, indeed, a well-written text describing an original and radical brand of existential philosophy. Shestov, wrote Fondane, "abandons the problem of knowledge in order to pose that of knowledge as a problem."[7] This statement became his guiding thought after his mentor's death.

I stated in the previous chapter that after the stage of unhappy consciousness, Fondane turned to that of the *mal de fantômes*, emphasizing the malaise of a being forced to confront the surrounding world with a feeling of estrangement imposed upon him by a reasoned and "reasonable" reality. On a personal level, his answer was an even more intense recourse to poetry but Shestov's intellectual "phantom" pushed him to articulate this sentiment of want philosophically as well. In *False Treaty of Aesthetics*, Fondane spoke about the pain the poet-philosopher experienced and ways to overcome it: through the *participatory* poetical act he was to become able to capture a new kind of reality. While this would have been a perfectly normal behavior in a world dominated by the sacred, in a totally profane world such an act becomes, if not illegitimate, at least painfully ridiculous. This realization, perhaps, originated the need Fondane felt to express in a more formal, more philosophical way these same thoughts. An existential philosopher acting as a poet will be continually exposed to unique, singular moments of inspiration (I believe that the ideas about the uniqueness of this moment were suggested to him—perhaps to a larger extent than by Bergson's works—by some of Gaston Bachelard's thoughts expressed in his two books published in 1935 and 1936, *L'intuition de l'instant* and *La*

dialectique de la durée, respectively). The singularity of the poetical act makes difficult its interpretation in a reasoned environment since the traces of the factual life, of the concrete, tend to fade away in the process. Shestov, wrote Fondane, was a relentless crusader in his fight against the evidence, he "dared deny the mere possibility of the evidence"[8]; can one describe, though, an experienced reality in terms of notions, ideas, metaphors that could escape the constraints of logic? The Russian philosopher always claimed that reality was given to humans through experiences that expose the arbitrariness, the singular, and the lack of order more often than the regular and the orderly. It is the human mind that sets the order and defines the regularities (an idea David Hume would have agreed with readily).[9] Fondane went even farther to affirm that Shestov demonstrated that knowledge was sinful, introducing, thus, in the epistemological discourse, a moral element that implied also a hint toward religious thinking. (On the same page we also find the statement, "Shestov believes that there is only one true way of thinking: that of the faith," but one should remember that all these were said in the context of the analysis of the philosopher's view of Kierkegaard). To Shestov's, Fondane added his own argument and this was an important one: if, in the act of reflecting upon reality, one would replace concepts by what he defined as "states of risk," which would mean that one grants to affectivity legitimate rights in the process, speculative thinking would collapse.[10] The need for the integration of affectivity in existential philosophy became the constant of Fondane's thinking after Shestov's death: in particular, during the war years he feverishly sought, in the works of Bachelard, Lévy-Bruhl and Lupasco, ideas and constructs that would make this desideratum possible.

From the analysis of Shestov's reading of Kierkegaard, Fondane singled out a few other key ideas to be followed through later: the fact that for the existential thinker, moving in the footsteps of Pascal, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Shestov, the truth is unveiled not through a methodical search based on reason and logic but by an implication of the philosopher's own existence in the search. Since nothing is more extreme for the thinker than an encounter with the transcendental—which means God if one has faith in the biblical message—it follows that thought must necessarily possess a second dimension and this is that of faith. Placing the biblical story of Abraham in a Kierkegaardian context, Fondane came to the conclusion that a possible state in which the human being enters in an *absolute relationship with the absolute* must exist. This would be a

state in which the ethical is suspended; as a result, human existence belongs to the domain of the absurd. However, now the concept of *absurd* is not related to a logical impossibility; in the state of absurd, as defined by Fondane, the human being enters in a direct contest (or is it conflict?) with God.[11]

Being a poet, Benjamin Fondane had the intuition—which Shestov missed—that there might be somewhere a privileged space, in which this encounter with the absolute occurs unhampered by logic or by social constraints and that would be the realm of the poet's unique, singular reality. He was persuaded that poetry was always there to ascertain exactly this fact: during the times dominated by the sacred, this was in evidence even in the absence of poetry and of the poet; later, as the profane made more inroads into the world of the sacred, at the point of contact between the two, poetry was to be born (see also p. 17 in chapter 4 of *Rencontres avec Léon Chestov*). The *pensée de participation*, dominant till that moment, was more and more replaced by rational thought; is it possible to return to a state in which the "participatory thought" will be reinstated in its rights, asked Fondane, and his answer was most definitely, yes. However, faith had to be recuperated as well: one is the guarantor of the other. One knows that because this situation did exist sometimes in the past. And Fondane set out to find the proof for this claim in Lucien Lévy-Bruhl's works.

In 1940, just before France was conquered by German armies, Benjamin Fondane published in two consecutive issues of the prestigious *Revue Philosophique* his long article "Lévy-Bruhl and the Metaphysics of Knowledge." The great sociologist and anthropologist died shortly before the publication of Fondane's long article, and at the time of the publication Fondane was a soldier fighting in a hopeless war.[12] The review rejected the title "philosopher" Fondane granted Lévy-Bruhl; the old and respected anthropologist wanted to be considered merely a researcher and a specialist in questions related to the mind of "primitive" peoples. Regardless, though, to what extent the great anthropologist-sociologist could have been considered (or not) a metaphysician, Benjamin Fondane found in his works the ideas needed to substantiate his claims about participatory thinking as a modality of approaching a reality different from that of the sciences and of a philosophy built exclusively upon reason and its single-valued, classical logic (*la philosophie "solaire"* as he called it). Rejecting the idea of the unity of the human mind, proposed by such thinkers as Jacques Maritain, Henry Bergson, and Émile Meyerson, Fondane pointed out that in

his book about the mental functions of the primitive, *Les fonctions mentales des primitives*, Lévy Bruhl identified a prelogical modality of thinking that "is not first and foremost preoccupied, as we moderns are, by the problem of the (internal) contradictions, a way of thinking characteristic of a participatory thought."[13] Also, he found stated in Lévy-Bruhl's work that "what we call 'objective' is synonymous with 'rational,' that is not reality as it is but rather our attitude toward the real."[14] The primitive adapts himself to reality and lives it without the help of the logical. In another of his works, *Mythologie primitive*, Lévy-Bruhl observed that the activity in a given space is distinct from the abstract representation of the space.[15] That did not mean that either the primitive or any person who would be guided by participatory thought refused reason; they always exhibited a reasonable behavior within their own frame of reference. But this reasonableness was not conditioned by the need to reflect upon it, pointed out Fondane. The corollary of this observation was that a kind of thinking that is not dominated by a rigid logic should be possible, in Fondane's own words, "*une pensée est possible qui n'est pas notre pensée logique*."[16] The second part of the article dealt with the issue of the nature of revelation, as well as that of the supernatural, and Fondane concluded that the "supernatural is not immanent to the human intellect but transcends it."[17] He further analyzed the nature of the relationship to the transcendental and the mechanisms relating the laws of nature to the reality domain and came to the conclusion that the experience accessible to the primitive is confined to a domain assumed to be impossible. Through this line of reasoning he proposed a transgression of the limitations of Shestovian thought: It is possible to participate in the human experience and live its true reality without the permanent need to interpret it, or, in Fondane's words, "*il est possible de 'participer' a l'être, en enjambant nos distinctions logiques*."[18] With this, the poet-philosopher exited the blind alley into which the radical Shestovian deconstruction has brought existential thinking; based on Lévy-Bruhl's arguments Benjamin Fondane concluded that a thinking freed of the constrains of logic, which ignores causality, rejects the law of identity and disregards the principle of contradiction can still claim the right to accede to a completely new realm of experience which in an act of penetrating the thick core of reality, "*l'épaisseur de l'être meme du réel*."[19] There was a risk in following this path, recognized Fondane, who in 1944 took a risk and followed its path.

The refusal of the tyranny of the law of the contradiction, the right of the "existential individual" (*le particulier existentiel*) to abandon a reality that is not

that of established philosophies, became, thus, the new guiding principles of Benjamin Fondane's existential philosophy. However, a way to integrate the singular, the contingent in a coherent philosophical discourse was yet to be found. If the concept was to be replaced by the existential state under which it was thought out, the affective had to be integrated in a comprehensible form acceptable to all discourse. Fondane believed that he found some new ideas in this direction in the works of his Romanian friend, philosopher Stéphane Lupasco.[20] In chapter 24 of the book on Baudelaire, Fondane wrote appreciatively: "It will be impossible to discuss here the profound and often very useful ideas of M. Lupasco insofar as the relationship between logic and affectivity is concerned."[21] His intuition insofar as the need to bring together the affective and the logical manifested itself very early on (see the chapter about the Romanian years and that immediately following it). In his book on Baudelaire, written during the war years, he summarized the situation in these words: "A quick glance toward the History of Philosophy shows that (from the very beginning), the fight against affectivity occupied the first row of philosophical thinking, its intensity increasing from Plato to the Stoics, only to triumph under the banner of Spinoza with his *non ridere, non lugere, neque detestari, sed intelligere*."[22] This unfortunate battle led, however, to a strange result: rational thinking based on logic became, sooner or later, conscious of its limits; this in turn created the feeling of anxiety. Fondane observed that even before this stage, the dominance of rational thinking had the tendency to empty the affective, to create an affective void (*vide affectiff*) and it seemed that Lupasco fully agreed with him when he wrote, "that the desire for logic is equivalent to the 'hope for a rigorous affective void.'"[23] (It will turn out later that their agreement was based on different basic starting points: what for one was an axiom was in fact a corollary for the other.). In any event, this void of affectivity was also causing anxiety and led to boredom: "*le vide affectif a engendré l'angoisse, l'inquietude, puis, finalement, l'ennui, l'ennui de vivre*."[24] The ennui makes the connection with Baudelaire; but Fondane did not stop there and continued and explained that boredom degenerates into cruelty. With that, the sequence was closed: crushing human affectivity in the name of reason leads ultimately to cruelty, that is, to the savage history peoples were living at the time. (In *Le Lundi existentiel et le Dimanche de l'histoire*, Fondane will talk about the "Hussars of History," those standard bearers of the cruelty generated by the dominance of reason).

In an article published in 1943 in *Cahiers du Sud*, Fondane explained clearly the importance and the significance of Stéphane Lupasco's new ideas: "Who would have believed that the soul of Empedocles would return among us in this century? Each time a Western philosopher proposes a new tune, as novel and original as this might be, we easily link it to the first original themes of Greek speculative thinking: that of Parmenides identity or the other about the eternal flux postulated by Heraclitus, reconciled by Plato, or rejected (both) in Pyrrhon's fashion. It is this theme of conciliation that seems to be dominant in Europe from Aristotle all the way through the Middle Ages. It is a strange conciliation, however, as it always transforms one of the two themes into a phantom, into a nonbeing. There was, in my opinion, only one Greek thinker who tried to reunite the two poles of the thinking mind by creating a union of opposites (*unité contradictoire et antagoniste*), thus, mixing reality and logic. This was Empedocles who thought that the two principles of Love and Strife govern the world, at times separately, sometimes together. He expressed this thought in hexameters, in primitive and coarse ways, but forcefully; Aristotle often reflected upon it, but later on, history lost interest in this idea. Nowadays, atomic physics brings it back to us and Lupasco explained it in his most recent work on microphysics."[25] In Lupasco's book *The Micro-Physical Experiment and Human Thinking* he applies his new epistemological ideas presented in his previous book, published before the war broke, titled *Affectivity and Dynamics of Logical Thinking* (original title, *Du devenir logique et de l'affectivité*).[26] Lupasco's work was important, therefore, for Benjamin Fondane because it promised to reopen the possibility of a philosophical discourse that would not exclude the "contradictory," the "flux," the "unsettled," the heterogeneous. For the existential thinker reality is just like that: unpredictable, contradictory, dominated by an affectivity that refuses the dictates of Aristotelian logic. With Lupasco, a new logic was proposed, a logic that seemed to have the potential to allow a sensible discussion of real life as it is lived and experienced and not the bland artifact described by the concepts devised by philosophers meant only to pass the test of laws of identity and of the excluded third.

In order to enable the reader to follow Fondane's arguments, I must introduce a few words of clarification about Lupasco's new logic of the included third. One has to remember that the young Romanian philosopher set out during the 1930s—about ten years after the outbreak of the new quantum mechanics—to explain the paradoxes of this newly developed physics dominated by

the need to clarify the totally unexpected behavior of atomic particles. Indeed, those tiny objects exhibited at times particle behavior and, at other times, wave-like behavior. Moreover, it turned out that light, which was considered in classical physics a wave phenomenon, could behave under certain conditions as tiny particles (photons) devoid of mass. In addition to these strange contradictions that scientific reasoning had to face in the recently developed quantum mechanics, the problem related to the relationship between the energy content of systems containing large numbers of particles, and its distribution and evolution in time began to preoccupy the world of natural sciences beyond the realm of physics. Physical systems in equilibrium are stable and have a well-defined individuality; but things seemed to behave very differently when it came to biological systems, which were not really at equilibrium, and still seemed to exhibit a well-defined, stable individuality. In addition, as the question about accounting for the energy balance in mental processes was raised,[27] Lupasco began by considering the energy balance and distribution issue: he postulated that in a state of equilibrium the energy is homogeneous (single valued) while away from it, there are many coexisting forms of energy; the non-equilibrium system will be a heterogeneous one. In physical systems energy passes from a heterogeneous to an increasingly homogeneous state; in biological ones, the contrary will be true, claimed Lupasco. In general, the evolving (dynamical) character and the contradiction between the two states will always be present. The state which comes to be fully realized is an *actual* one, the others would remain merely *virtual*. One can see therefore that according to this picture, any dynamical system evolves between the two poles of the *actual* and the *virtual*, of the *homogenous* and the *heterogeneous*. Any real situation is in fact one which inherently includes a contradiction between these poles, is *antagonistic* in Lupasco's parlance, and this intrinsic contradiction will determine the dynamical behavior of the system. Therefore, the logic describing such systems cannot be the static, classical (Aristotelian) one, based on the principles of identity and non-contradiction since at any time the "contradiction," the opposition between the *actual and the virtual* will be present in the system. A process inside such a dynamical entity will be described in terms of the actualization or virtualization of heterogeneity and/or homogeneity. When it comes to consciousness (or as Lupasco called it, the *neuro-psychic matter*), the object of our perception is positioned in the external, heterogeneous world: becoming conscious of something involves a process of spontaneous actualization through the neuronal

networks. The subject is the site of these actualizations while at the same time he is an "actualizer'. As the process is an unconscious one, one must conclude that the thinking subject represents an unconscious actualization of heterogeneity. Following this model, the mirror image of this process will be one of a "conscious virtualization of homogeneity." With these in mind, one may return now to Fondane's arguments.

In a fragment written during the war years,[28] probably around the same date as the article about Lupasco was written, one finds the following remarks made by Fondane under the title "Abyss" (*Gouffre*): "If abyss means only contradiction, there is nothing new here. It is just a new version of the old Buridan's donkey story. One will not be able to overcome its challenge remaining thus forever prisoners of the rules of logic. If this relation represents only a relationship between two terms, not a new third possibility, it does not have the right to exist, it is nothing, it does not lead to anything, it remains just some sort of a doubt, worse, it means paralyses." What did Fondane want to say here? For him, the *abyss* was an existential category, the state in which the human being confronted the "ultimate truths" of his/her existence. But how can one understand its meaning, its structure; can one talk in intelligible words about this state so crucial to our existence? The answer will be negative if one would limit oneself to the mere recognition of its contradictory, paradoxical character. Unless one can define in a new way the contradiction itself and create a new intermediary state between the two extremes in confrontation, a state which emerges from the contraries but is essentially different from them, one will not make any progress on the road toward a genuinely new philosophy, a real *metasophia*. And Fondane continued in his fragment: "however, the nature of the abyss manifests itself when the philosopher's donkey neglecting his existence leaves behind the rules of logical thinking and becomes something new, wrongly named the Absurd which in fact is also a concept belonging to the logic, (namely) that which denies it." This thought can be directly linked with something Fondane pointed out in his article on Lupasco; due to the latter's insight, "from now on we have to deal with a logic which is in its very depth one of the *becoming* (*devenir*, in original)."The barrier we place in front of the flow, of heterogeneity, of the discontinuity—Pascal's watch—becomes the carrier of the contradiction. What we call "logic," that is something governed by the law of non-contradiction, a thinking based on the law of identity, becomes in M. Lupasco's system a *becoming* which depends on an opposite dynamic process;

his is a thinking based on diversity (precisely that which the principle of non-contradiction intended to suppress)." The logic proposed by Lupasco was therefore one in which those two opposite becomings are linked together: "When we analyze a given phenomenon we should not try to ascertain, as a condition for its logical existence, that it cannot be contradicted; on the contrary we should seek that which contradicts, which opposes it. We should look for its other face, the contradictory which completes it." The corollary of this new way of reasoning is that there is "no distinction anymore between an objective reality and a subjective, illusory one; the two thoughts are equally real and/or un-real, subjective and objective, two inverse and opposite becomings sharing *the same* logical quality. That would mean a collapse of the Aristotelian logic: the discontinuous (the heterogeneous, the diverse, that which disappears) becomes a legitimate *rational* entity as is recognized to be the continuum (the homogeneous, the identical with itself at all times, the thing which is meant to be)."[29] Together they represent a pure logical entity, identical with the *existent* (that which exists, has existence); this was not realized before because at the level of the everyday experience it is difficult to realize the purely logical. In most cases, it is the dynamic of the identity (*le devenir d'identité*) which dominates and has the upper hand. To go the old way which is to choose between one of the two alternatives, means to give up this new possibility this newly emerging reality which transcends the poles of the old opposition. Not to be able to do it means to live the condition of the absurd defined by Fondane as "*une incertitude abstraite. . . une sensation pénible, puis angoissée, puis une pure douleur.*" One needs to understand Lupasco's theory, claimed Fondane, in order to be able to launch a thorough search that may lead in the end to a "mapping" of the *gouffre* and to the finding of a possible issue from the existential predicament.

Did Benjamin Fondane find the way out of the labyrinth using the keys provided to him by Stephane Lupasco? Probably not if we consider the story told by the latter in an article in memoriam, published in *Cahiers du Sud* in 1947.[30] According to Stephane Lupasco their last meeting occurred in February 1944, a few days prior to Benjamin Fondane's arrest. Just before they parted, Fondane said: "What we wanted, Shestov and myself, was to go—in case that your theory turns out to be correct—beyond even the individual existence (*le particulier existential*), this contingent variety of the concrete, if the contradiction and your new logic solves its problem." "But then," replied a dismayed and confused Lupasco, "you deal with pure affectivity, the only exclusively onto-

logical reality known to us, but this is something as opaque as it is absolute." "Beyond that even," replied Fondane. "Where?" asked Lupasco in despair. With these words spoken, they separated. "I shall see him again, for the last time (a few days later) for a few minutes at the police headquarters. What was this man looking for?"

I brought up this episode to convey, in a rather direct and blunt way, the conclusion that Fondane did not find what he was seeking in Lupasco's new logic. Was this his fault? Did he miss the message? Was the message poorly communicated, was it incomplete? In a long introduction to the volume *L'Être et la connaissance*, I explained at some length the intricacies of Lupasco's theories as they were known to Fondane. After the war, Lupasco further developed them and an emergent third term, originating in the dynamical movement from virtual to actual, from heterogeneity to homogeneity, was much better explained; I do not think, however, that the problem was related merely to the completeness of the new logical theory proposed by Lupasco. The real difficulty between the two stemmed from a different perception of the very concept of "affectivity." Lupasco always made the distinction between "affectivity" and what he defined as "relational phenomena," that is, those that define quantitatively the three types of matter to which his logic applied: the physical, the biological, and the neuropsychic matter. In this respect, he did not change his views even when his logical theories evolved; in a book published in 1985, three years before his death, Lupasco wrote: "From my very first writings, from my doctoral thesis till the most recent, I keep explaining the deep difference between that which has to do with the existent (*l'existence*) and those phenomena which belong to affectivity: pain, suffering, pleasure and displeasure, happiness."[31] That was a view Fondane could have not accepted. For him, such a separation could not be performed, the human existence being precisely defined by the heterogeneous mixture of uncontrolled affectivity and the capability for self-reflection. Fondane was convinced that an emerging third term could represent the affectivity made explicit by the dynamic of the evolution from one existential state into another, an idea that even in his later works Lupasco resisted. In *Logic and Contradiction*, published in 1949, Lupasco explained that the affective is a given, something which *is there*, a static, constant entity. Moreover, he claimed that that which is logical, *that is existential* is never a given since it is always something in movement (*jamais donné, mais devient*). Could Fondane have arrived to a similar conclusion, based on what he knew

about Lupasco's ideas in 1944? Certainly not. Would have he accepted it if the dialogue could have continued after the war? I doubt it. Following the *particulier existentiel* beyond any logical explanation might have led Fondane to an abandonment of philosophy and a return to poetry only. But who knows, with this traveler of the spirit who never came to the end of his travel?

I have described as briefly and as clearly as I could the main tenets of a philosophical construct that began with Shestov's deconstruction of the premises of classical philosophy and ended in a *sui generis* philosophical construct. Such a philosophy cannot be expressed in a "system"; but its sketchy character is not due solely to the author's refusal to consolidate his ideas in systematic ways. If he would have had a chance, he would have written that planned book that was supposed to thoroughly study as well the *être* (being) as the *connaissance* (knowledge). Perhaps in its final form, his philosophical construct would have contained implicitly both an epistemology and ontology. That would have made the life of his later commentators easier. I do not believe that that would have been Fondane's intent: this dangerous space in which the existential being lives his or her participatory existence, which I would call a "heroic space," can be discussed only in the realm of a "metasophia." Another by now forgotten philosopher thought about this, too, in a different context. Giovanni Papini, in his posthumously published diaries, *Pagine di Diario e di Appunti*, remarked in an entry of 1944, "I am thinking of a Metasophia, a superior knowledge, beyond the usual philosophical jargon that can be instated by poets and artists only."[32] Two years later he added, "There is need for a new way of knowing that transcends reason—and this can be realized through poetry, through arts, by accepting the whim of the genius, the enthusiasm, the furor, the craziness. One must overcome both heart and mind."[33]

· 10 ·

FONDANE'S RELIGIOUS THOUGHT

Jacques Maritain, in his book *Existence and the Existent,* written after WWII, stated that: "the existentialism of Kierkegaard, of Kafka, of Shestov, of Fondane, was an essentially religious irruption and claim, an agony of faith, the cry of subjectivity towards its God"[1] and added: "It was a religious protest in the guise of a philosophy." A few quotes brought from various texts written by Fondane seem to confirm such a claim. In the opening pages of *Athens and Jerusalem*, Shestov wrote explicitly, "'Athens and Jerusalem,' 'religious philosophy'—these expressions are practically identical; they have almost the same meaning."[2] Of course, philosophers, "the greatest representatives of the human spirit," as Shestov ironically referred to them (and among them Maritain as well), have rejected this unorthodox association and the many potentially difficult questions stemming from it; Shestov, however, never agreed to the dichotomy of "Athens *or* Jerusalem" obstinately claiming that one can only talk meaningfully about Athens *and* Jerusalem.

Maritain continued his line of argumentation to arrive to the conclusion that the philosophy proposed by Lev Shestov and Benjamin Fondane "was a philosophy against philosophy." All these statements taken together may cre-

ate some confusion, but one cannot leave the question about the source of this confusion unanswered: Is it introduced by Maritain or were the two not philosophers after all, but indeed, religious thinkers? This chapter will try to address the issue insofar as Benjamin Fondane is concerned.[3] To this somewhat general interrogation I would like to add another one that relates to the specific content of Fondane's religious thought. As we saw from the first chapter, his roots were Jewish and his relationship with Judaism, even if it varied over time in depth or intensity, in its extension or its scope, it remained always present. It is true—and perhaps somewhat surprising—that Fondane did not address this subject very often; a recent anthology of his writings about Judaism and Jewish thinking written in France over a period of about twenty years reveals a fairly meager content. The field is enlarged if we take into account his poetry. One should also keep in mind that as a young man in Romania, B. Fundoianu published quite a bit on Jewish subjects[4]; however, not only the lack of maturity of these writings but also—and, perhaps, mainly— the lack of a tight connection to a firm philosophical outlook makes them less appropriate for the present discussion. If anything, they witness a fairly good knowledge of the basics, acquired through a thorough Jewish education, a cultural treasure Fondane brought with him to Paris in 1923.

In order to establish the link between the religious dimension of Fondane's existential philosophy and Judaism, I shall return for a moment to the metaphors of the Existential Monday (and the Sunday of the History) and reflect upon the way Fondane changed them. The story begins with an entry in Kafka's diary from the fall of 1921: "An endless, dreary Sunday afternoon, an afternoon swallowing down whole years, its every hour a year. By turns walked despairingly down empty streets, and lay quietly on the couch. Occasionally astonished by the leaden, meaningless clouds almost uninterruptedly drifting by. 'You are reserved for a great Monday.' Fine, but Sunday will never end."[5] The last sentences have been chosen by Benjamin Fondane, with a small but significant modification, to serve as title for his last philosophical essay, "Le Lundi existential et le Dimanche de l'histoire." Kafka's boring Sunday became, thus, the "Sunday of history" (*le dimanche de l'histoire*). This "Sunday of history" will represent for him the realm in which things happen: love and hate, disputes with friends and with neighbors, wars between nations, farewells between lovers, fathers and sons, brothers and sisters. The "great Monday," on the other hand, became that other realm of the *real* reality he was talking about in *The Unhappy*

Consciousness and his writings that followed it; it stood also at times for the "reality" of Baudelaire's *abyss* as well. Whatever its nature, this "Existential Monday" will never be attained by someone who does not dare cross the borderline between the two realities he so often talked about. The "Existential Monday" is the realm in which an existence of participation defines the nature of reality. It is the realm in which human existence makes sense in terms that do not belong anymore to rational thought; it is the "heroic space" in which the "absolute faces the absolute," as Fondane put it. What is left to those who cannot make this leap, those who cannot extract themselves from the endless Sunday of History but who know that an Existential Monday exists? Shestov's answer was refuse the evidence of the Sunday and ask the Transcendence to show its face. Cry for God and hope that He will answer your call. In fact, that is exactly what Job did, and what Job got was the face of God. Was this Fondane's answer as well?

Shestov talked about faith, about the God of Abraham, about Job, about the Bible, he talked of Judaism (and sometimes of early Christianity as well, which, for him, was not essentially different from the former). Fondane felt that he had to go back to his roots and somewhat clarify things. Before he wrote his article "Léon Chestov à la recherche du Judaïsme perdu" (published in 1936 in *Revue Juive de Genève*), he did not seem to be preoccupied with "Jewish subjects." Up to that point, one could find only sparse and scattered hints to preoccupations with Jewish themes and when they occurred—usually outside his poetry— they had to do with their presence in modernity or in avant-garde writing. Such were the article on Chagall (1930) or various quotations from Jewish authors in his *Rimbaud le voyou*; nothing coherent or substantial, however. In his article on Shestov, Fondane explained what "Jewish" meant to him: he introduced a distinction between two concepts, that of being *specifically Jewish* and that of *essential Jewishness*. Lev Shestov was Jewish by birth but he considered that to be an irrelevant quality; there were many other important thinkers who were born Jewish but have nothing specifically and even less essentially Jewish in them ("*n'ont rien de spécifiquement et encore moins d'essentiellement juif*"[6]). *Specific* was for Fondane something issued from a historical, psychological, and biological evolution that had been consciously absorbed and integrated and that, in time, sought a way to become explicit, of expressing itself. *Essential* related to atemporal characteristics of a thinker who remains outside time and history (kind of *universals*) and rejects any limiting

boundary be it geographical, historical, or national. Such an author will express willingly, or even against his/her own intent, a message that, even if it was revealed historically to a specific people, became of utmost relevance to the destiny of all humanity.[7] In order to illustrate this last definition, Fondane brought Bergson, Freud, and Einstein as examples; the surprise arises, however, when he also mentioned Pascal, who addressed his prayer to the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and Kierkegaard, who rejected Hegel for the "private thinkers," Job and Abraham. Jews cannot be Jews as Germans are Germans or Guatemalans are the indigenous people of Guatemala: one cannot pretend to be the chosen people without consequences.

These were the basic axioms laid down by Benjamin Fondane for discussion of the issue related to Lev Shestov's search for a lost Judaism. Up to the date of writing his article, Benjamin Fondane presented his teacher under different guises and with different purposes (see the chapter "Benjamin Fondane, the Disciple" in my book on Shestov). In these articles, however, the accent was on the nature of Shestov's own existential thinking and its departure from the accepted, mainstream philosophical approaches of the time.[8] Now, on the occasion of the seventieth birthday of his mentor, Fondane took the opportunity to address this special and delicate issue, never explicitly mentioned in his previous works: Shestov's relevance for the contemporary debate concerning the essence of Judaism and its modern embodiments. Some discussions between the teacher and his pupil concerning these topics were recorded in Fondane's notes related to his intellectual exchanges with Shestov (*Rencontres avec Léon Chestov*, published in 1982). By the time Fondane began recording their conversations (1933), Shestov was already a consecrated author and his standing as religious thinker was prevalent, it seems, over that of philosopher, in France at least; in Russia, until the revolution he was considered more of a philosopher and a literary-cultural critic than religious thinker. His writings on Plotinus, St. Augustine, medieval philosophers, and religious thinkers such as St. Thomas, and his essays on Pascal, Luther, and Kierkegaard were all published in France after 1920. Shestov had a long-lasting friendship with Russian religious thinker Nikolai Berdyaev, to whom Fondane was also loosely associated, and with Martin Buber.

The Jewish topic approached in 1936 was, therefore, not something entirely new for Fondane. What was new was his willingness to enter this discussion, and once started, he did not abandon it. Fondane learned from his master, over

the years, that the individual human being with his little understood whims and impulses, his endless sufferings stemming from a ceaseless engagement in a confrontation with adversities externally imposed, needs—in addition to the possibility of rational understanding of fate—an ability to transgress suffering by faith in an independent, absolute, transcendental God. When Benjamin Fondane applied these general ideas to the specific issue of the fate of the Jews in a surrounding world, which was becoming every day more adverse and more dangerous, he was led to reflect upon the essence of Judaism as well.

After Kant's attempt to create an autonomous ethic based exclusively on human rationality, the emancipated Jew, who "knew" that his essence was defined through a certain moral attitude, became a prisoner of this self-definition anchored in the ethics of good and evil: "*on a fait croire aux Juifs qu'ils étaient grands par leur morale*," wrote Fondane in his article.[9] After which, he made the surprising observation that it was not Maimonides, with his (too) high esteem from the rational understanding and interpretation of the Holy Writ, but the Christian thinker Blaise Pascal who pointed out to the Jews that their relationship with the Bible had to be based on premises different from those of the "*savantes et philosophes*." Moreover, the tradition of a Judaism based on the moral imperative has been diverted into something else (*aliénée*, wrote Fondane), the "autonomous" ethics of the Jews had become the sin of pride, of arrogance, carried on by Jewish people throughout their entire history. Shestov came, according to Fondane, to reestablish things, to put them in their right place; thus, he became a modern "guide of the perplexed" (if not the new "founding father" of an authentic Judaism). Fondane explained that the God "assassinated" by Nietzsche was, according to Shestov, the God of the Good as defined by the moral law introduced by Greek philosophy and not that of the Bible: "*Le dieu assassiné de Nietzsche, n'etait autre que le dieu des philosophes grecs, et nullement le Dieu de L'Ancien Testament*." The metaphysical interpretation of the Jewish tradition of the Almighty, Transcendental God of ancient Judaism was replaced by Spinoza and by Moses Mendelssohn with a God anchored in ethics; the only way out of this false posture open to the contemporary Jew was that of the return to the primeval Judaism of the Fathers, of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, claimed a Fondane walking in the footsteps of Shestov. This return, however, cannot be implemented by following a way that led to catastrophe in the past: the sin of knowledge that sent Jews into exile several times cannot be the leading flame that will bring them back to para-

dise ("*ce n'est pas le péché de savoir qui, nous ayant chassé du paradis, nous y ramènera*"), concluded Fondane. I believe that in this criticism of an exceedingly "ethical Judaism" there are hints against the Jewish orthodoxy as well; the supremacy of the Law and the unwillingness of Orthodox Judaism to yield to its tremendous pressure, not even under extreme conditions, was linked in Fondane's mind with this subservient attitude to reason and its servants, the law and logic, and these ideas will reappear in his last work, *Le lundi existentiel* as well.

On this background, it should not be surprising to discover that Benjamin Fondane will write two years later to Jacque Maritain[10] this quite out of the ordinary statement: "*En ce qui concerne Chestov, vous faites erreur. Sa conception n'est pas spécifique au juif—mais à la pensée juive—puisque Kierkegaard, Luther, voire un Tertullien pensent souvent exactement comme lui*."[11] The secular Jew, argued Fondane (referring to a conference on the theme of the status of the Jews in Europe, "Les Juifs parmi les nations," delivered by Maritain at about the time of the writing of the letter), already immersed in Western culture or the rabbi toiling night and day over his Talmudic texts, may share a way of thinking that reflects their Jewishness; but this is a way of thinking fallen under the spell of the all-powerful rationality. It is a way of thinking that brought to mankind, after the fall from Eden, a knowledge supposed to be of divine origin. Through it, man discovered the law, the purpose, the "truth" obtained through logical demonstration and scientific reasoning. Soon after, God became the prisoner of the law brought in the world by man. This way of thinking led to an autonomous ethic adopted not only by Christian theology but also by Maimonides, Spinoza, and, later, Kant.

Shestov fought a life-long battle against the tyranny of these "necessary truths": "*Il fait*," wrote Fondane in the article of 1936, "*une analyse meurtrière de notre progrès, de notre savoir, de notre morale*." Before the fall man had knowledge, but he *knew* only God and through his knowledge of Him, he knew the world. This was the essence of Jewish thinking, that *position metaphysique du Judaisme* Fondane mentioned it in his article; this was the way in which Abraham and Job reasoned and acted in the world. One cannot know if God Almighty is just or perfect; human beings forced Him to be such. An ethic was devised for God to complain with. Shestov made this point clear; that is why, according to Fondane, he had to be considered "*le philosophe juif par excellence*." Shestov did much more than to bring Judaism back to its point of departure,

to its primeval, pure state, uncontaminated by Greek philosophical thinking; Fondane believed that the corollary of his master's deconstruction of religious thought was that God was not dead as Nietzsche claimed: genuine *Jewish thinking* was defined by its ceaseless wrestling with the idea of the absence of God. "*Si le Juif, seul dans l'antiquité, a temoigné de la présence effective de Dieu, du moins pourrait-il, dans le monde moderne, et contre le monde moderne, être seul à témoigner, avec la même angoisse, de l'absence de Dieu!*"[12] he wrote.

One should not be surprised, therefore, to read in Maritain's essay on existentialism, published immediately after the end of WWII, that Fondane's existential thinking was "an essentially religious irruption and claim, an agony of faith, the cry of the subjectivity towards its God," as quoted above. But the philosophizing neo-Thomist theologian was too preoccupied to understand the phenomenon of the "religious protest *in the guise of a philosophy*" (Maritain's emphasis); he completely missed the point Fondane and his master tried to make. In a way, one may say that the argument between Fondane and Maritain went back to Pascal's protest against Descartes' attempts to exclude the revealed truth from philosophy.

Benjamin Fondane was not in search of "a religious protest in the guise of a philosophy": his position was rather an existential one, that is, he was embarked on a search that made sense in a multidimensional epistemological space that also required religious thinking. In the letter to Maritain he wrote: "*Rien n'est clair en tout cela, toute est embrouillé, confus et cependant, certes, la seule chose claire c'est que la clef de l'énigme est dans l'Ecriture*." Yet for Fondane this fundamental carrier of the truth, the Bible, could not be understood without a purification of the mind from the residuals of a thinking governed by the all-powerful necessity, without getting rid of Athens and the biblical serpent. To reach this state, one has to rethink the Bible through a new philosophy. In a letter to Martin Buber, Shestov mentioned that "an infinitely profound and important truth has been revealed to us through the Bible. But the power of the serpent is such, that we are unable to recognize this truth."[13] Once Adam, still holding on to his half-eaten apple, found his way to Athens, it was impossible to separate the two, religion and philosophy. *Athens and Jerusalem*, the last work of Shestov, can be seen as representing—among other things—the blueprint for a history of this development. The question, What does "philosophy" mean in this context? is very important.

Philosophy might be defined as the act of reflecting upon "meaning," whether it is the meaning of a simple human act in everyday life or the meaning of the relationship between man and God (or the transcendental, or of the lack of it, if one prefers). Human existence is simply an event if not reflected upon but becomes a philosophical concept as soon as it is subjected to scrutiny. Is there anything in-between these two possibilities? A concept has an essence that defines it (as concept), otherwise it would be a mere object, the concrete; thus the concept of *existence* implies an essence, something that defines it. Our intellect makes essences intelligible to us. "If you abolish essence, or that which *esse* posits, by that very act you abolish existence, or *esse*," wrote Maritain.[14] Therefore, true existential thinking (existentialism), Maritain continues, will be represented by a philosophy that affirms "the primacy of existence, but as implying and preserving essences…and as manifesting the supreme victory of the intellect and intelligibility." Fondane, on the contrary, wanted to be able to reflect upon the concrete, the individual, or, as he called it, "*le particulier existentiel*." A philosophy of the individual, of the accidental, of the nonessential, according to Maritain's Thomist definition, was the existential philosophy Benjamin Fondane was searching.

The apparent arbitrariness of such a philosophy of the contingent requires some kind of a resonance with the arbitrary nature of an Almighty, absolutely Transcendental God, unconstrained by the rules of logic. This is the God of the Old Testament, able to do everything and anything, to undo Job's misfortunes, or even cancel Socrates' death, a vexing point Shestov liked to make quite often. But a man frozen in the molds imposed by omnipotent rationality cannot follow an unbound, living God. Man has, therefore, two choices: either to freeze God by submitting Him to the rigors of the laws of logic, or to free himself from their bondage, find his way back to the Garden of Eden, and talk again to the free God of the Bible. But can man "think" Paradise? According to Fondane primeval Judaism represented a specific way of living in the world rather than a way of interacting with God. Indeed, Micah, the prophet expressed this as follows: (Judaism means) "to do justice and to love mercy and to walk humbly with thy God." However, the way we act in the world is strongly connected to the way we interact with the Transcendental. It follows, however, that the ways to act and to behave in concrete circumstances of Fondane's *homo judaicus* (as illustrated by Abraham and Job, for instance), his ways to think and judge the meaning of his own acts and the events he responds to, will be quite

unusual and, therefore, difficult to understand to the modern, post-Enlightenment man. Shestov annoyed many readers with his refusal to yield to evidences, with his often quoted (Dostoyevsky's) underground man and his recurring sentence about Socrates' revival if God only wanted it. In turn, Fondane was talking about "a second dimension of thinking"—he went further than Shestov in his attempts to give a philosophical meaning to this, in essence, Shestovian idea—and about the need to replace a philosophy based on the problem of the knowledge with one in which "knowledge becomes the problem," a philosophy in which *"le cri est la methode."* All these may not mean very much to the philosopher of philosophers; but for a human "walking with his/her God" or for a being lost in the world and in search of Him, such an approach might become his walking stick as well as his compass.

After having presented and discussed these two Fondanian documents we may now return to the question "Was Benjamin Fondane a Jewish thinker according to his own definitions?" Fondane was certainly a poet and, under Shestov's influence and guidance, he had become a philosopher too. Until the master's death, he acted, if not as a disciple, at least as a follower. Shestov established a link between his existential philosophy and a certain kind of Judaism; he proposed and discussed it abundantly in his last two works, *Kierkegaard and Existential Philosophy* and *Athens and Jerusalem*. In his last philosophical essay written shortly before his arrest and published posthumously, "Existential Monday and History's Sunday," Fondane observed that existential philosophy was not an outcome of classical Greek philosophy but "a daughter of the thinking of the book of Genesis" ("*elle n'est pas d'avantage d'Athènes, mais fille de la pensée de la Genèse*"). This was a concisely expressed statement of allegiance to Shestov several years after his death; however, as in the case of other aspects of the existential thinking in this direction, too, Fondane went on and evolved along his own, individual path. The poet explored directions the philosopher either did not dare or did not know how to approach. Indeed, after Shestov's death, in his poetry and in his writings about Baudelaire and Kafka among others, Fondane pursued his own search insofar as *his* Judaism and the nature of Jewish thinking were concerned and, indirectly, maintained his dialogues with Shestov and Maritain. There is something obstinate in his return to some ideas; one feels at times a passion in his argument disproportionate with its content, and in many instances God was invoked in ways uncommon in or

incompatible with philosophical discourse: Was Benjamin Fondane (perhaps) a mystic?

Shestov did not like to be called a "mystic" as the word was used to "explain everything while it means nothing."[15] This uttering was provoked, in fact, by a statement made by Jean Cassou, who defined Shestov as a great Russian mystic, "*un grand mystique russe*"; he certainly knew very well that mysticism can explain at times (and about some thinkers) quite a bit; after all, he wrote extensively on Plotin and about Kierkegaard as well. He was against the connotation of "stating the existential problem outside the realm of philosophy"; the discourse of the "mystic"—to the extent that such a thing exists—not being philosophical is not worth the effort toward understanding it. After all, the old master was not upset when his young follower titled his conference in Buenos Aires in 1929, "Un nouveau visage de Dieu: Léon Chestov, mystique russe."

On the other hand, Fondane freely used the concept in his youth. In the sequence of articles "Judaism and Hellenism," published in 1919 in *Mântuirea* at the age of twenty-one, he wrote four pieces on Jewish mysticism. Even before that, the notion of mysticism was used by young Fundoianu in various guises: Job and Isaiah's uttering were defined as "mystical," the Yiddish writer Y. L. Peretz was a "teller of Jewish mysticism," Chagall's rabbis represented "mystical figures." In the series of articles published in 1919, Fondane demonstrated a surprisingly good command of many basic ideas related to Jewish mysticism as expressed both in the Lurian Kabala and in Hassidism. After observing that Jewish mysticism had been present all along in Jewish history, the author made a distinction between a "political" mysticism, active before the fall of Jerusalem in Roman times, and the later, exilic, "esoteric" mysticism. "Philo the Jew," wrote Fondane, "was born during the first century AD and with him the most important chapter in the history of mysticism: both the Kabala and Gnosticism were born with Philo."[16] Many important names, such as Shimon Bar Yochai, Abulafia, Moise de Leon, Isaac Luria, Haim Vittal, and a wealth of Kabalistic works were mentioned. Not surprisingly, perhaps, as modern research concerning the kabalistic writings was at the time in its infancy, the distinctions between the Jewish Kabala and the Christian Cabala were unclear at times to the author. A daring Fundoianu made in one of these texts an attempt to separate the spirit of pre-Hassidic Kabala from the mystical thought following Rabbi Nachman of Breslau and the Baal Shem. The scholarly quality of the articles is not really the important point in the context of our present discussion; what

is significant, however, is the fact that young Fondane demonstrated at this early stage an impressive knowledge of the basic concepts of esoteric Judaism, and this knowledge will stay with him in later years. His French poetry will carry many traces of these notions of mystical origins and his "one must be friends of the silence" was a saying overwhelmingly present in his works, poetical as well as philosophic, during his last years.

At the time he began writing the book on Rimbaud, the question about the mystic's ways came up in a non-Jewish setting. Was the French poet "*un mystique à l'état sauvage*" as Paul Claudel considered him? From the very beginning (the second chapter), Fondane defined a category of human beings set apart by their tendency to "resonate" with a feeling of unhappiness, of suffering that was present in the innermost fabric of their souls, independent of any external factors, of any traumatic personal experience. These people live suffering in a very intense and, at the same time, peculiar way: "(*ils*) *vivent en quelque sorte dans une ambiance morale où la souffrance apparaît non seulement comme possible et inevitable, mais comme imminente et souhaitable*."[17] I believe that, at that time, Fondane did not yet know Kafka; later, in his book on Baudelaire, he discussed him quite extensively and this should not be surprising considering the quote above. Kafka himself belonged to this category of people who experienced "altered states of consciousness" as one would define mystical experiences in contemporary parlance. His friend Milena Jesenska spoke of his clairvoyance and Kafka himself talked to Rudolf Steiner about it. What is the structure of this peculiar human soul or consciousness, sensitive to an external entity perceived only in a diffuse way which prompts one to acts of creation difficult not only to control but also to explain after the fact? Is anybody—blessed or cursed—with this quality a potential mystic? And how does mysticism devoid of any religious belief play out? These were the questions Benjamin Fondane set out to answer in the context of Rimbaud's life and poetical work, and some Jewish aspects relevant to the discussion found their way into it also.

Was "the great Jewish tradition which was later estranged," as Fondane put it in his article on Shestov in 1936, that of a primeval Jewish mysticism? Was Benjamin Fondane, in a certain way, similar perhaps to that of Kafka, for instance, a mystical author? In most of his later "Jewish writings" he seemed to prefer to remain closer to the text and the spirit of the Bible than to that of esoteric tradition and its concepts. He must have meditated upon the ways in which a God who created the world, and kept creating it every day, worked. It

must have occurred to him that God could as well undo at any time everything that had been done by His own will. To all these queries, and to the most mysterious of all, perhaps, that related to the question why would He remain silent in front of all the suffering witnessed (and lived) by Fondane and his contemporaries, he tried to find answers in the intricate messages transmitted by biblical text.

The "*révolté avant toute expérience*," the metaphysical being (later to become the "*existential* being")[18] who suffers even before any event that produces suffering has made its appearance has to bring his complaints to God (the case of Job) or to the gods (Sophocles' tragedies), either through verses, a tragic play, or through direct complaint (*vox clamavit*). Beyond this formal act, however, remains the need to enter into some sort of a direct contact with the Absolute Other, the transcendental entity. And in many cases this represents an insurmountable difficulty; either because the traditional means of establishing contacts such as religious practices, rituals, and so forth were lost or because they have become imperfect, or totally disqualified even, due to the interaction with other, alien cultures. That was the case for Rimbaud, for Kafka, and for Benjamin Fondane as well. For the latter, as for the Jewish author from Prague, the problem was, indeed, twofold: although tradition was still present, it was weakened by the overwhelming influence of external forces of modernism. Kafka, in a letter to his friend Max Brod wrote in 1921: "To escape from Judaism—in most cases with the ambiguous consent of the fathers—that is what those who began writing in German wanted; that is what they wanted but their hind legs were still stuck to the Jewishness of their fathers, while their front legs could find no solid ground. The despair engendered by their situation was the source of their inspiration."[19] Fondane could have made a similar statement during the 1920s, in both Bucharest and Paris; later, like Kafka, he embarked on a road to rediscover the lost Judaism he was aspiring to.

If we return now to his book on Rimbaud, in which Fondane spoke explicitly of the Jewish Kabala and its practitioners, we notice that he made an astute observation while speaking of mystical thought: he pointed out that the use of the esoteric is not enough since its approach might be, in its essence, rational: "*Les cabalistes et Rimbaud utilisent la raison à chaud. . . mais c'est toujours de la raison qu'il retourne.*"[20] In order to overcome this self-imposed limitation one must go beyond the mere practice of the radical revolt: Rimbaud did it through a drifting toward madness, "*déraison*," *encrapulement*," even. The true mystics

must force even God to abandon his rational ways, "*annuler sa liberté d'action*." In a note added to the text, Fondane mentioned again Y. L. Peretz and the play *Dybbuk*, by Ansky. His understanding of the kabalistic way as an attempt to achieve a miracle by *forcing* God's hand is more in tune with the Christian Cabala than with the Jewish esoteric tradition, but this is a matter for another discussion. The *Book of Zohar* was also mentioned in *Rimbaud le voyou*, in connection with the esoteric value of the scream (*le cri*) as means of contacting God: yelling and/or crying, according to this Kabalistic wisdom is superior even to the act of praying, explained Fondane. And poetry hierarchically was following prayer. However, this puts poetry in line with the prayer and *the cry* as acts through which human beings might attempt to establish a contact with God. And indeed, for Benjamin Fondane, the act of writing poetry represented the mystical act of talking to the transcendental, at times in a very subdued tone, at other times full of anger. One may want to return to the question posed previously: Was, therefore, Fondane a mystic?

In the same book on Rimbaud, Fondane discussed for the first time in an explicit manner the problem of evil, which meant, implicitly, that of ethics. Theologians teach us, he wrote, that the human being had been endowed with the ability to make moral choices: but this so-called liberty of choice represents, in fact, a limitation, not a real freedom: "*la liberté qu'ils (les théologiens et les philosophes laics) nous offrent, celle du choix entre le Bien et le Mal, n'est, tout au contraire, que la preuve absolue que nous ne sommes pas des êtres libres*."[21] Evil and good are defined in the real world of the ethics ("*Le Réel: voila l'ennemi!*" he wrote later in the book[22]). But the metaphysical man lives in another reality, that of true life (*la vrai vie*). These differentiations between the immediate reality and one existing beyond and independently of it, a reality defined by a genuine dialogue with the transcendental God was presented and discussed in detail in *La conscience malheureuse*. It is interesting to point out that the idea expressed by Fondane is opposed to some extent to that of the canonical Judaism: "*Là ou il ya Bien et Mal, il y a réel, il y a l'éthique*."[23] This issue of the Evil and the Good in Fondane, as in Shestov's, works will not be an easy one to settle.

In conclusion: What should be the answer to the question posed by Jacques Maritain's remarks? Of course, it will depend to a large extent on the definition one adopts for the signifier "religious thinker" and this is not a trivial issue. Maritain did not seem to hesitate, but, after all, is someone who "expresses cries of subjectivity toward God" necessarily a religious thinker? Does a reli-

gious protest suppose a religious thought? Religion itself is not an easy concept; Mircea Eliade believed that the core of religious experience was that of the experience of the sacred. But this is only one among many definitions of religion. Fondane was quite preoccupied by the concept of the "sacred" but not at all in the sense in which Eliade spoke about it. "Faith" could be a key word to be used in this context but then Walter Kaufman wrote an entire book on the *Faith of a Heretic*, in which he explained that "faith means intense, usually confident, belief that is not based on evidence sufficient to command assent from every reasonable person."[23] Since, in the footsteps of Shestov, Benjamin Fondane did reject the constraining power of evidence substituting to it the need for persuasion, I cannot use this definition in the context of our discussion here. Besides, Fondane, to the best of my knowledge, never used the concept of *sola fide*.

I could have transformed the question about Fondane as a religious thinker into a different one: was Fondane a Jewish thinker? Here I could have used his own definitions; of no avail, though, because I would not have been able to distinguish between the Jewish "specificity" and the Jewish "essence." Several attempts have been made to define Fondane's *pensée juive*; I am afraid that in order to position him in this respect according to his own definitions or to those proposed by other Jewish thinkers of the twentieth century, such as Martin Buber, Franz Rosenzweig, Emmanuel Levinas, or Rav Soloveichik, the confines of a book chapter would not suffice. In a collection of "scattered thoughts" at the end of my previous book about Lev Shestov, I wrote that it is not easy to position him within Judaism because of the difficulty to position Judaism itself; with the risk of repeating myself, I would say the same thing now about Benjamin Fondane. I have a good reason (or perhaps a good cover?) for doing that: after trying to explain the essence of Buber's understanding of Judaism in terms of the I-Thou relationship, the concept of the meeting, and so on, Levinas abruptly stopped his line of argumentation and wrote, "I will never go beyond this statement because I do not know how to summarize Judaism. Because I cannot, one cannot, summarize Judaism."[24] Therefore, I shall also stop—for the moment—this discussion here.

· 11 ·

LECTURE NOTES CONCERNING SOME OF BENJAMIN FONDANE'S WRITINGS DURING THE WAR YEARS

With the exception of a few articles published in *Cahiers du Sud* during the war years, Fondane wrote poetry and rewrote many poems published earlier, completed his book on Baudelaire (by 1943) and at the very end (1944), sent to Jean Grenier a draft of an essay on existential thinking, "Le Lundi existential et le Dimanche de l'histoire." However, I always had the uncomfortable feeling of taking an unfair advantage of the author and his texts when, after reading a work in progress, I attempted to interpret and write critically about it. I mentioned, occasionally, these writings in various thematic chapters of this book, but in my explicit and more detailed considerations I would like to give my text also the character of a work in progress, of notes of lecture rather than the form of a critical essay.

Fondane used to endlessly revisit everything he wrote, whether it was poetry or philosophical writing. In his "literary testament," he gave indications about changes to be made and the way unpublished works should be organized in case he was not be there to do it himself. All the mentioned texts were left, due to the circumstances, unrevised by their author. (The same is true with the notes concerning his conversations with Shestov, and for the same reasons I did not discuss this book in any detail.) One can and, certainly, one should relate to them but always keep in mind that the ideas expressed might have been changed, altered, or even discarded by their author during a later rereading under less adverse circumstances.

Baudelaire et l'expérience du Gouffre

The book was written during the war years and most of it was accomplished by 1943. It represents, in fact, a collection of independent essays, some confined to one single chapter, others, more extensive, are spread over several chapters. Without any doubt, if he had had a chance, Fondane would have reviewed the manuscript and perhaps would have rewritten some of these chapters.

At about the same time (1942–1943), Pierre Jean Jouve wrote a long essay on Baudelaire. It is interesting to see how much the two diverge insofar as their main statement about Baudelaire is concerned: while Jean Jouve considered the aesthetic as the supreme value for Baudelaire, Fondane discards the legitimacy of the aesthetic by the second section of his book, which begins with a Pythagorean statement about infinity (*apeiron*) and proceeds to explain why the ugly and the evil are illegitimately philosophical and, as a result, are aesthetical concepts as well: "*Que l'infini fût le mal, la faute, Baudelaire l'avait compris*." The reader realizes early that Fondane's *Baudelaire* is not a book of literary criticism but a philosophical work that explains, in fact, why Baudelaire remained incomprehensible to his contemporaries—or, for that matter, to all those who will not use existential philosophy as an interpretative tool. Does that mean that the book is dominated by Shestov's philosophical outlook? At times, Shestov is very present indeed, see chapter 17, for instance, but Lupasco, Eliot, and Kafka, to mention only a few, are also very important in Fondane's argument.

Baudelaire is introduced through Paul Valéry's essay on him but, as one reads the first pages, one has a strange feeling of *déjà-vu*: for those who have

read *Faux traité d'esthetique*, the first two chapters sound like a continuation of this essay about the nature of the poetical act. The "aesthetic" is the product of civilizations that have de-sacralized both nature and thought by replacing them with an entirely profane nature and a thinking dominated by law and logic. At the price of possibly looking foolish, the poet must reject these assumptions: Fondane quoted Pushkin (he probably learned it from Shestov), who said that the poet—any real poet—must be a bit stupid. Baudelaire, influenced by E. A. Poe—learned how to use the reality of the ugly, of the formless, of evil, "*les horreurs qui composent le sanctuaire de l'art*" (how far this is from both Valéry and Jouve!), in order to build a bridge over the abyss ("*jeter un voile sur les terreurs du Gouffre*"). Philosophers cannot do it: neither Hegel nor Kant, nor Schopenhauer mentioned the abyss or taught anybody how to handle it. He concludes: "*La philosophie est incapable d'admettre l'existence du Gouffre de la Pythie; et le poète, lui, est incapable, malgré sa bonne volonté de les écarter de son drame*."[1] In a way, that is the essence of the article Fondane wrote in 1936 in response to Jean Cassou's *Defence of Poetry*. This statement expresses the intimate link between philosophy and poetry, a constant of Fondane's thought after the publication of *Faux traité* in 1938—also the year Lev Shestov died in Paris.

Baudelaire wrote, at the very beginning of the *Fleurs du mal*, "*La sottise, l'erreur, le péché la lésine/Occupent nos esprits et travaille nos corps*," but he tried to extract the beauty of Evil ("*extraire la beauté du Mal*") while Jean Jouve believed that "*toujours, par un effort considerable, l'esprit montre le gouffre et parvient à s'affranchir*,"[2] not unlike Cioran, another wanderer through the Abyss.

Fondane seems to underestimate Poe's influence on Baudelaire (pp. 40, 42), and, again, he finds himself in complete opposition with Jean Jouve who observed that following Poe, Baudelaire comes to the conclusion that poetry has only one object: itself: "*La poésie n'a pas la Verité pour objet, elle n'a qu'elle même*" (*Le tombeau de Baudelaire*, p. 31). In fact, Jouve quoted earlier Baudelaire himself about Poe, "*Il croyait, en vrai poète qu'il était, que le but de la poésie est de même nature que son principe, et qu'elle ne doit pas avoir en vue autre chose qu'elle même*" (ibid., p. 13).

At the beginning of chapter 4, Fondane observes, this time in agreement with Valéry (see the fragment quoted in chapter 1, p. 13), that Baudelaire's thought is at the origin of practically all literary theories (trends) that followed him, T. S. Eliot included. Valéry wrote that if there were other, better French poets, none was more important to French poetry than Baudelaire (p. 13). The

masque theory proposed by Jouve is mentioned by Fondane as well without the explicit mention of the mask: "*Toute l'intelligence de Baudelaire s'emploie à faire passer pour premier ce qui n'est chez lui que second*" (p. 48). Also, there is an important statement on poetry found in this chapter: "*Nul poète, en effet, n'ignore que la vérité poetique se compose et se produit d'une quantité determine d'actes qui supposent le mensonge moral et langagier. . . Faut-il. . . cacher ces 'misères' du métier, les tenir pour honteuses*?" Baudelaire does not try to hide these aspects, as Valéry does. Is this an attempt to understand Baudelaire's penchant toward scandal?

Chapter 5 contains the first approach to directly address the issue concerning Baudelaire's poetry at a theoretical level. It discusses his critical spirit (*esprit critique*). Chapter 6 continues the discussion of the theme of critical spirit and includes another negative reference to Poe (p. 68); *ennui* is mentioned on p. 71, and the problem of the "double" structure of the artist's soul is brought up as well (p. 75). Chapter 7 discusses the role of the romantic movement in reinstating poetry against the encyclopedic spirit (totally antipoetic to the point, writes Fondane, that Diderot considered Voltaire the poet par excellence), and the names of Villon, Ronsard, Diderot Racine, Saint-Beuve, Thóphile Gautier, Hugo, Valéry, and Nerval are invoked.

T. S. Eliot is introduced in chapter 8, which contains, again, a few philosophical comments. I am afraid though that Fondane did not understand either Eliot or Dante. Mallarmé is also involved. However, one finds a remarkable statement about Baudelaire in this chapter: "*Pour lui, la vie n'est pas seulement impuissante au concept, mais péché; et l'individualité n'est pas seulement l'inintelligible, mais le mal. La haine qu'il a pour son moi n'est pas seulement philosophique, elle est sainte—aborrecimiento santo di si mismo—tout comme pour saint Jean de la Croix. Vaincre et nier son moi, le salut est ce prix*!" (p. 92). Baudelaire is trying to run away from the *vide, le noir et le nu* but he cannot escape them: "*Sur le fond de mes nuits, Dieu de son doigt savant/Dessine un cauchemar multiforme et sans trêve*." The contingent and the eternal are mixed, concludes Fondane (p. 93).

Chapter 9 begins with a discussion of "*dandysme*": "*le principe digue que Baudelaire essaya de dresser contre le 'triste moi*.'" Eliot, "le périssable," and Baudelaire are discussed. Important observation made by Fondane: "*Il se trouve que la grande nouveauté de Baudelaire—la nouveauté de sa poésie—est précisément dans la conscience qu'il a de l'irréalité de l'évasion; et de la conscience qu'il a de l'artificiel, qu'il est artificiel*" (p. 103). The right of the poet to be stupid, to fight again and again a lost battle is invoked as an explanation of Baudelaire state-

ments on behalf of "*l'art pour l'art*." He had to overcome the *Gouffre* ("*la seule chose qu'il exècre mais qu'il tenait pour réelle*") and the aesthetic was the only answer. Beauty represented victory in this battle (see p. 105). Did Fondane forget his dislike of the aesthetic?

Chapter 10 begins with a negative remark by Mérimée about Baudelaire. After opening with the question "Was Baudelaire a crazy but gifted mad poet?" and by invoking Saint-Beuve, Hugo, and the always present in the background Paul Valéry, Fondane arrives at the issue of "the man who does not think as others do," the man of exception, the singular. Unfortunately, he concludes "*Baudelaire est le premier à partager leur avis*" (p. 112) and asks "*ne vaudrait-il pas mieux haïr le genie si on ne peut être d'accord avec nous, s'il veut que nous le tenions pour un genie*?" (p. 113).

The subtitle of Chapter 11 could have been "*que peut expliquer le biographe/ la biographie?*" Or, perhaps, "*le point de vue du biographe*" (see pp. 116–17). Fondane recognizes that "*un lien, et profound, existe entre l'oeuvre et son créateur.*" Huxley is brought in *à propos* a statement about Proust.

Finally, chapter 12 is dedicated to…Baudelaire! *Que la 'sérénité du Beau' n'a pas presidé aux oeuvres de Baudelaire et que celui-ci etait un home effaré et tremblent devant les secretes de la mort , de la nuit, et de l'inconnu, nous l'avons vu*"(p. 123). Biographical details, the relations with his mother, psychoanalysis, and Kierkegaard are invoked together with Dr. Laforgue, Poe, and Mariette "*la servante à grand Coeur.*" The next one continues along these lines. One finds a reference to St. Peter's denial in the context of a work by Seillères. The author writes that Baudelaire's poem calls for a Bolshevik Attila who would lead the commoners to a final confrontation with civilization. It is interesting to remember that what Fondane wrote might have been under the influence of the lecture of Baudelaire's poem, a play with the same title. Here we might have found also the origin of Fondane's famous *irrésignation*. Indeed, he quotes from a letter written by Baudelaire to his mother on December 20, 1855: "*Je ne veux pas crever obscurément…je ne me résignerai jamais*" (p. 134).

Chapter 14 is very important because it contains a piece of information enabling to date the writing of the book: "le Mal n'existe plus. Il faudra les guerres de 1914–1918 et de 1939–1943 pour que …" (p. 147). Also, one finds here the discussion of the relationship between Hugo and Baudelaire in the context of the God-Satan issue. Fondane quotes Hugo's verse, "*Le Devoir est un dieu qui ne veut pas d'athée*" and beautifully states that it reduces to a single

alexandrine Kant's entire ethics (p. 149). One finds here, again, a comment about the philosophical content of the poetical work (see p. 151) and a new angle on the Poe-Baudelaire relationship: Baudelaire embraced Poe and de Maistre mainly to escape the moral pressure of Victor Hugo. ("*Tous les deux posent le Mal au centre de leur système*"). One also finds here a discussion of the concept of cruelty, which Fondane will completely reject later in this same work (see p. 333, "*La cruauté est fille de l'Ennui*").

Chapter 16 discusses the issue of Baudelaire's relationship with his mother, This brings Fondane to contradict Bachelard and introduce the magic thinking of the primitives (p. 168). Piaget is brought in as well.

From chapter 17: Several very important ideas are presented in this chapter: "*Baudelaire écrivit-il ses* Fleurs du Mal *parce qu'il avait vécu telle expérience, ou bien a-t-il vécu cette experience* parce que il *devait écrire les* Fleurs du Mal?' (p. 175) and "*La fascination qu'éprouve le profane pour le sacré est donc, au sein de cette pensé, parfaitement compréhensible; c'est la soif de* participation *à un monde réel et même plus réel que le positif*" (p. 182).

This chapter deals also with magic thinking, a given for Fondane: "*la pensée magique n'est pas toujours magique, elle fait face au réel, invente et utilize des "techniques*"; *elle met en jeu une espèce de savoir positif qui, bien que fondé sur une causalité surnaturelle fait appel à un ordre constant dont on peut exprimer et utiliser les constances*" (pp. 187–88), and with the relationship between the sacred and the profane. He observes that "*notre penser logique imagine le sacré comme* du profane élargi, *perfectionné, divinisé*" (ibid.) and rejects the sociologic argument about the utility of the concept of sacred: "*C'est poser a priori, que le surnaturel n'est qu'une creation de l'homme*" (p. 189). An interesting point, to be compared with I. P. Culianu (Eliade?), in connection with the deliberate renouncement to the idea of the sacred even if that leads to a destruction of the social order, that is, of the profane. The definition of the profane: "*L'ordre du profane n'est que l'envers de points en points de la ligne idéale trace par le monde du sacré*" (p. 195).

Chapter 18 is mostly a philosophical one. It is an important chapter since it brings into discussion the issue of the "*science du singulier*" and hints at Fondane's indebtedness to Shestov (see p. 191). Also a discussion on Poe, to be followed later (on p. 280), is triggered here. But is not Fondane forcing an open door here when he dramatically writes that art and philosophy can only deal with ideas of intelligible things? Isn't that a trivial statement?

In chapter 19 Benjamin Fondane offers a nice motto for disciplinarian thinking: "*Le tout est de trouver l'impératif auquel il faut obéir; il n'y a plus qu'a obéir*" (p. 202). A quotation from chapter 20:

> Mais qu'est-ce qui n'est pas un mythe, grand Dieu? Qui a jamais vu l'impératif catégorique, la proposition synthétique *a priori*, le Devoir, voir l'Honnêteté Intellectuelle?…Il est impossible de prouver le Diable empiriquement, cela est vrai; mais aussi impossible que de prouver l'existence de Paris mathématiquement ou théologiquement. Chaque méthode pose un language et par là un mystère; toute chose debute par un mythe (p. 220).

An interesting idea: "*Il n'st theme plus frequent dans l'histoire de l'esprit que celui des "énormes pouvoirs" dont nous parle Balzac; et ce theme est inseparable de celui du "moi Haïssable"; on n'obtint les premiers qu'aux dépens du second*" (p. 212). A major theme of Baudelarian analysis is proposed here: "*Il y a dans Baudelaire une mystique du bien qui, échouée, ne fait pas place à la seule ruée confuse du mal, mais à des Fleurs du mal, à un discours délibéré sur les revelations communiqués par le gouffre*" (ibid). This sounds like a direct response to Jean Jouve.

One finds in this chapter an important statement about Fondane's belief about…*belief*: "*Il y a une belle difference entre Dieu…et l'Idéal, le Devoir, le sublime…Dieu ne fait que donner gratuitement mais, il est vrai, arbitrairement; alors que l'Idéal, et le Devoir et le Sublime ne donnent rien, mais exigent, exigent, exigent*." That is why Fondane never could have accepted a formal(ized) religion: he wanted a dialogue with a giving God, not a constraining one. Shestov said it in a different way, he wanted to be persuaded. But can this be interpreted as a preference accorded to *Grace* over the *Law*?

To be a mere receiver you do not need to move at all; once you accept a present from the Devoir and/or the Sublime, says Fondane you must get out of yourself ("*on sort de soi*"), which means that you are at the mercy of your nature, of your lower instincts. You are clued to sadness and to the *ennui* ("*on est abîmé "en la tristesse et ennui*," p. 219). See also the chapter regarding Fondane's religious thought.

Chapter 21 introduces the *Gouffre* of both Baudelaire and Pascal. Also, philosophy and poetry are touched upon again: "*Ce n'est pas ce que chante le poète qui semble un mal au philosophe, mais le fait même de chanter*." Plato is on trial here; one thinks of the *Faux traité* again.

Chapter 22 is dedicated to Dante; but this chapter is important not only because of that but also because it reflects on Fondane's ideas about religion.

Piero Boitani wrote extensively about Dante but also very interesting things about the Ulysses motif in Fondane's poetry.

In chapter 23 one finds the motivation for a book about Baudelaire: "*Ce qui fait son importance c'est d'avoir su exprimer une experience unique en son genre, c'est qu'il a été le siège d'une experience unique*" (p. 247; this could also serve as the motto for a study about Fondane's Baudelaire). However, Fondane sees perhaps too much in Baudelaire's titillations: after having understood the inner contradictions he experienced Fondane tried to find novel cognitive frames to express them, "*non pas tant pour expliquer un événiment né en dehors de son intelligence, que pour le situé à sa place privilegié*." But this positioning, the choice of the preference, the privileged position granted to the unexplained occurrence is subjective. One may or may not make this choice. Fondane speaks as if this is something objective and this is his issue. Hartmann and his *Wissen des Nichtwissens* is invoked to explain that there are direct intellectual intuitions that enable us to known something that remains unknown rationally (Bergson and others said it and Blaga made formal the two types of knowledge).

Chapter 24: Art, beauty, pure idea and aesthetic pleasure, music, Jean Jouve, and Heidegger are mentioned; important for an anti-aesthetic theory discussion.

In chapter 25 Pope, Swift, Thackeray, and Kafka are mentioned in a discussion concerning the depth of the frustration felt in their fight against the hypocrisy these authors experienced. They go under to prepare the revolution that will free them of this hated world of falsity and pretention. Is this the revolution Nietzsche was talking about? No, it is a new one, Kafka is its prophet. Reconsider. In the second part of this chapter (rarely does Fondane divide a chapter into parts), Poe's *Marginalia* is invoked. There is in that which is unexpressible a value asserts Fondane, following Poe's logic. The trouble is that if the book were written we would not know what to do with it (see p. 285).

Chapter 26 discusses B.'s religious experience. He seeks God even if he cannot define the object of his research (see p. 296) and Fondane adds, "*Il veut un Dieu* qui s'interesse à sa destinée, *un dieu d'amour, vivant*" (ibid.). This is one of the main difficulties with Fondane: he assigns his heroes the same wishes he had. There are in this chapter interesting points about the relation between God and Satan in B.'s mind (p. 298), followed by the question, where from stem the contradictions (worshiping a Satan who resembles God and hating a God that has Satanic features, is "Luciferic")?: "*Le désordre est-il dans l'intelligence de*

Baudelaire, ou bien dans celle de ceux qui lui ont appris à raisonner" (p. 298)? This leads to a criticism of institutionalized religion build around a church.

Fondane's religious outlook is evidenced when he assigns to Baudelaire a "*besoin de Dieu*" instead of a "*besoin de 'commaître' Dieu*" (p. 300).

The notion of *Non-lieu* is mentioned on p. 301. Also the poet's stupidity is brought up again: "*la manqué d'esprit* necessary to fill in the gap between Dante's *seguir virtute e conescenza* and *de profundis clamavi* (ibid.).

Chapter 27 could be subtitled "Baudelaire as pretext." It contains a long and important discussion about the nature of the religious belief that is "*sentiment, emotion, affectivité et nulement pensée*" (p. 308). Comte spoke of three phases in the development of human thought, the religious being the first, the metaphysical the second, and the positivist the third. Fondane claims that the three modalities are mixed up in any modern man, including, of course, Baudelaire, but the nature of religious thinking in modernity is different from that of the primitive man. Lévy-Bruhl is invoked and also Kafka. This is important for understanding Fondane's philosophical outlook.

Chapter 28 is mostly about Kafka. But there is an important, motto quality, statement included: "*Ne peut-on connaître une chose inintelligible* en tant qu'inintelligible *justement*?" (p. 312). There is a hint to the key of the idea of the "*dimanche de l'histoire*" as opposed to the "*lundi existentiel*": "*on avait oublié que le moi pouvait être égorgé—cela l'histoire le peut—mais que personne ne pouvait l'empecher de crier*" (p. 318).

> *Pourquoi, à quoi bon "l'ordre rationel*? Le fait de questioner, d'espérer que la logique ne résisterai pas à un home qui veut vivre, pourquoi ne serait-ce pas une pensée? Pourquoi, en somme, *Spiritus flat ubi vult* (ou encore: ce n'est pas l'homme qui a été fait pour le Sabbat, mais le Sabbat pour l'homme) serait une maxime cruelle et humiliante, alors que par contre, "le mal est un moment nécessaire" serait une maxime apaisante? (p. 320.[3] See also *Le lundi existentiel*.)

On page 321 definitions of *religion* and *religiosity* and Kafka again.

Chapter 29 is a key chapter to be discussed at length in any extensive study of this book. This is the chapter that contains some of the ideas about Lupasco mentioned in one of the previous chapters. It begins with a definition of a cosmic *ennui*, Baudelaire's boredom. What is *ennui* asks Fondane, "*le sentiment qu'a l'inexistent de son existence ou plutôt le sentiment qu'a l'existence qu'elle n'existe pas*" (p. 325)? And this, obviously leads to Lupasco. This is the place where

Fondane makes the connection between *ennui* and *cruauté*: Baudelaire also linked the two but in a very different way from Fondane.

Chapter 30, somewhat detached, containing a critique of Valéry and Eliot seems unrelated with both the previous and the following chapters. Indeed, chapter 31, which could be subtitled, "Baudelaire's poetry: great success or abysmal failure?" ("*Poésie de B., échec ou réussite?*") contains an important statement about poetry: "*L'artist en lui sent, plutôt qu'il ne parvient à dire que l'expression artistique ne peut participer de l'essence du Beau que dans la mesure où elle épouse , embrasse et vit,—le vivant, le sensible, le laid*" (p. 357).

Chapter 32 contains a discussion of a few key ideas developed by Fondane in his book about Baudelaire as well as in various essays: the new existential consciousness is mentioned (*d'autres lois mentales*) (p. 361), *l'esthetique d'Ulisse* (ibid), "the truth about poetry" (p. 368) as well as "the need for poetry" (p. 369).

Chapter 33, which was added after the book was finished (?), illustrates the character of a work in progress I mentioned previously. Fondane writes, "*Notre livre était achevé, lorsque le hazard, ou la chance, nous fit tomber entre les mains un livre de Bernard Shaw*" (p. 370). Even stranger, perhaps, chapter 34 begins with a quote in English; the discussion moves from Huxley to Eliot and from Shakespeare to Dostoevsky. Yet, only after these two last chapters does Fondane write FIN at the end of the text.

Fondane had a premonition concerning the book, its quality, and its fate; in a brief foreword he wrote, "The author does not even hope that this book will be liked and even to a lesser extent that the readers will consider it a serious, profound, and unbiased truth statement." In spite of all this, he asked the reader to be patient and forthcoming; and indeed, every chapter has to be read patiently and carefully. When this is done, and done several times, an amazing wealth of ideas come forth and overwhelms the reader. I am still at this stage.

Le mal de fantômes

The collection *Le mal de fantômes* is composed of twenty-three short poems (*tableaux*, in Fondane's language), preceded by a preface titled "Non-Lieu." One thinks of André Breton's poem with the same title, ending with the line, "*Jamais la liberté que pour la liberté.*" This poem was published more than ten years earlier; did Fondane remember it while writing his introductory words? The first sentences in this brief statement, "I wished to write these poems in the all-

devouring taste of my century. If I resisted it, what could have been the source of this resistance?" hints to a powerful and inexplicable inner drive. The second thought that catches our attention confirms this feeling that Fondane's writing is guided by something stronger than the poet, more deliberate, which pulls him back and pushes him forward ("*quelque chose de plus fort que moi, de plus* délibéré, *me tire en arrièrre, me propulse en avant*").[4] Is this the bond, the jump Jean Lescure was talking about in *Fondane, le Gouffre et le Mur*? Yes and no, since the jump was needed to avoid a given state of mind while this poem is written from *within* a well-defined existential situation. However, the unsettled nature of the poet, the need to act and react permanently, his perpetual *irré-signation* might represent an affective common denominator of both these reactions.

This given existential situation was that of a person who, in spite of being relentlessly pursued by a vicious and cruel enemy, refuses to give in and to recognize the historical necessity of this situation, its objective nature. At the same time, though, his singular predicament is also that of a multitude. Moreover, it is also, to some extent, a repeat of an ever-recurrent phenomenon. And to make things even more difficult, it is a situation not necessarily specific to the Jew even though at this particular moment, in a Paris occupied by German soldiers, it was. The feeling that Fondane was engaged in a dialogue with his contemporaries is enhanced by the recognition that he is acutely aware of the poetical form, its essence and its limitations; still by refusing the rumbling march of history he puts himself outside the mainstream. In a way, that was exactly what Leon-Gabriel Gros reproached him; after the war, Gros wrote, in an overview of contemporary French poetry, that time had come to judge poetical works not only by their value as witnesses, not by their "sincerity" first and foremost, but rather by their "efficiency," their quality as experiments in the realm of the language rather than in that of the immediate reality: "*Le temps est sans doute venu où nous jugerons les oeuvres moins sur leur valeur de témoignage que sur leur efficacité. . . l'ére des documents psychologiques est. . . depassée, celle d'une literature nouvelle lui succede, d'une literature dont nous exigeons certes qu'elle soit le reflet d'une experience du drame vécu. . . mais aussi, pour ne pas dire d'abord, un exercise de langage et plus exactement encore une demonstration des possibilities que nous offre le langage*."[5] Or Benjamin Fondane wanted just the opposite: "Something stronger than myself. . . *forces* me to express by means of a multitude of unrelated and incompatible lyric structures, the confusion of a mind

obsessed pell-mell, by wishes, by feelings, by superstitions and puns, by darkness and fundamental principles."[6]

In his correspondence with Gros and Ballard, Fondane the poet pointed out the unity of the poem and the fact that it had to be read without interruption from beginning to end. Indeed, one of the strange qualities of Fondane's poetry is that of having an intricate structure that cannot be understood unless considered in its entirety. The opening verse, "*D'autres que nous ont fait la traversé*," represents also the closing statement of the poem "D'AUTRES QUE NOUS ONT FAIT LA TRAVERSÉ" (capitals in text).[7] The introductory first *tableau* is a poem about people running away toward other shores under the menace of "*l'immense bruit d'empire et de bottes/EN MARCHE*" (capitals in text). The entire world is the scene of this frantic movement and the time seems to become endless, "*Ces jours sans horizon, ces mers sans pli,/ces continents sans nom*." We do not know who these fleeting people are ("*pêcheurs de perles de l'oubli*") nor do we have any clue about the motifs of their panic: "*Qui leur avait jeté autour du cou/le noeud colant, têtu, de l'Aventure*." The second poem reminds us that the fates of pirates and whale hunters are not dissimilar: they too err and live to witness the ephemeral, "*À peine un fin sillage de leur court/périple/ Noms sur une pierre/encres/séchés sur un registre*." But then, at night, during these moments that freeze the flux of movement ("*où ce qui est demeure en ce qui change*") the image of the wanderers who tired, have to anchor their desperate solitude, comes back (third *tableau*). Definitely, we are warned that the harpoon throwers are not the heroes of the tale told by the poet; they are asleep at night resting while awaiting the challenges of the next morning. The forth poem unveils the feelings of the fugitives who have to confront difficult nights under frozen skies, "*nuit dure/étoiles froides*," as they wander from Marseille to Genoa, and from there on to Port Said. These are not the harbors of pirates and harpoon throwers but rather those of the young girl who remembers the lost towers of a lost Europe. These are people chased from their dwellings hoping to find a remote, uncertain harbor. Here I must quote Fondane's beautiful verses in their entirety:

> et la fillette nue sous sa robe/qui souriat—où donc?—en effeuillant/les tours penchées aux aubes de l'Europe?/ On a beau dire: ca tient chaud au Coeur/tous ces riens!/ Pourtant, nous les quittâmes…/Il nous fallait partir…/Mais cette odeur/De pluie tendre la fillette nue/les tours penchées l'Europe. Tout cela/ca chante encore en nous, et ça remue.[8]

At the end of this fourth poem the word *phantom* appears for the first time: those who are old and tired give up this seemingly endless odyssey, becoming the fading beings (*êtres évanouissantes*), phantoms. "*Fantômes délicats fumant leur pipes*."

Not all give up, in spite of the seemingly endless night; the young, the poet tells us in the fifth *tableau*, still have, at times, the privilege of sleep. I interrupt here my "narrative" of the text to insert an observation related to the poetical devices used by Fondane: in the most recent version of the *Mal de fântomes*, the editor added a variant that enables, by comparison, to understand the difficulty the reader must confront in her/his hermeneutical-critical exercise. The original text[9] reads as follows:

> Des conquérants, des jeunes…Dans la nuit,/les yeux ouverts si doux en leur coquille/ muqueuse tendre où brille le regard,/comme une flêche en pointe, de sauvage—sans regarder le pont sous leur hamac.

The editors of the most recent rendering of the poem (the Verier Poche version), add at the end of this fifth *tableau* a note indicating a variant marked on the manuscript. Since it is assumed that the published version of the poem is that resent by Fondane to Gros in December 1943, this note is somewhat confusing (in particular since in the list sent to Ballard in January, Fondane requests for this *tableau* as a correction: the introduction of the sentence, *qui en été, soudain emplit le fruit*, in the first stanza. One assumes, therefore, that the final version should have read:

> Des conquérants, des jeunes…Dans la nuit,/les yeux ouverts, si chauds, sous le silence/qui en été, soudain emplit le fruit/ et met dans ce qui fuit un bruit de neige, sans regarder le pont sous leur hamac.

This is not a small and insignificant change; the two images, the original one and the one that replaces it, have quite different meanings, which suggests different interpretations. Indeed, in his letter to Gros accompanying the second version, Fondane points out the depth and the significance of the changes introduced: "*il me semble*" he writes, "*que le poème est moins rugueux à présente, davantage tapis de billiard*."[10] Gros pointed out— in a letter that has not been found—a discrepancy between the spirit of the poem and its narrative. That was as issue he was sensitive to; for the critic at that time, two types of French poetry coexisted: one, under the influence of the surrealist movement was closed upon itself, abstract, atemporal, while the other was open toward the surround-

ing world and tended to involve historical events. One might wonder from where the disagreement stems between the two since the opposition to poetry in the Mallarmé-Valéry lineage or to that written under the influence of André Breton's surrealist aesthetics was shared, in fact, by both Gros and Fondane.

I've mentioned more than once Fondane's almost compulsive need to return and rewrite his poems; here I want only to single out a central Fondanian aesthetical creed: the poetical statement is made through an elaborated structure that goes beyond the metaphor or the meaning of poetical units, verses, stance, or even the individual poem: "*C'est à l'ENSEMBLE que j'ai porté mon attention. Il ne faut pas que le 'beau vers' engraisse au dépense de la strophe, celle—ci au dépense du poème, et chaque poème au dépense du tout*" (ibid.). This points out the fact that the structure of his poems is such that "modular changes" of the kind shown here can be inserted without modifying its general sense while significantly impacting the local imagistic equilibrium of the text. With these in mind, we can return to the sixth *tableau*.

This represents a contentious point since it was rejected by the editors in spite of the changes made by the poet. It contain the constructs of *us*, *other(s)*, *the same*, and *they* singled out in capital letters as well as the *jeu-de-mots* between "*D'autres nous*" and "*D'autres que NOUS*" as basic building blocks of the poem. Gros probably had a difficult time in understanding how these word games connect the spirit of the verse with its reality content: Who is supposed to see who? Does the wave see the phantom or is the phantom the one who contemplates the wave? Is this always the same wave seen by the same eyes or do different eyes scrutinize different horizons? For Fondane, this moment of confusion was important since it offered the occasion to state the permanence of the suffering contrasted with the ephemeral nature of historical events: "*D'autres que NOUS—vraiment? Les MÊMES mers?/Qu'en savent-ils, le diable les emporte!/ Mangés par des requins eux-mêmes morts,/sous des étoiles mortes, aux mers mortes*."

The seventh *tableau* brings in the individual and his struggle with himself: "*D'autre que nous ont fait les argonautes/dans le bas-fonds d'eux-mêmes*!"Also, as if he intends to dissipate the suspicion that this poetry of distress is referring only to the dire fate of the Jewish people in a Europe already deeply embarked on the road to the Holocaust, Fondane explains that these people/phantoms on the run are not gold seekers belonging to one hated race: they represent the scum of all and any of the large human agglomerations, "*splendide écume des métropoles/Fortes races brassant des mondes. Ravisseurs. Danseurs*." In his letter to

Gros, Fondane explained that "the (initial) theme of the immigrant fused with the body (of the poem), becoming, thus, rather an underground current."[11] The following *tableau*, consisting of only three verses posed at first a problem, but it was accepted once it became clear that the existence of a division among the phantoms is stated in this brief interlude: "*Ont-ils vécu leur songe? Ont-ils vaincus?/Ont-ils mené à bien la traverse. . .—Et nous?*" The reader now sees clearly that there is a rift within this huge mass of unsettled and fugitive beings, be they alive at present or the phantoms of those who lived once upon a time. Those belonging to the group defined as "Us" are granted a well-defined description: pregnant women and elderly people, the symbols of the feeble, powerless victims of this huge serpent that relentlessly follows them: "*La Terre nous est un long boa dont l'amitié est incertaine et fourbe*." The tenth *tableau*, as the sixth, was also rejected by Gros and Ballard; while in the case of the former it was, it seems, a matter of lack of comprehension, in the case of this tenth poem, the two probably were taken aback by the seemingly prosaic quality of the text, which begins with "*vaincus d'hier, vomis par la marée*" and ends the first stanza with "*la nuit est une barque aux terres amarrée*." Other verses give also a strong (and strange) impression of an antipoetical discourse; the two critics, living far from occupied Paris, were not too sensitive to the rhetoric of the anti-Semitic press of the time nor did they witness the famous "raffles" in the capital city. If they did, they probably would not have been so dismayed by "prosaic" verses like, "*Ils avançaient sans avancer, dans l'oeil de la police/(du même élan qui porte le gibier/vers le chasseur, la faim dans les entrailles,/et les chapeaux uses chez le fripier*." From 11 to 15 the *tableaux* seem to evolve in a crescendo of increasingly better outlined depictions of the typical immigrant story: the Statue of Liberty is mentioned, the painful solitude of the dwellers of the lower deck of big steamships en route toward the American shores—as we have seen portrayed in the movies and as Fondane witnessed firsthand while crossing the ocean during his two trips to Argentina—are painted with large strokes of (very) black ink. What a difference a surrounding chaotic world ("*un monde à la derive*") makes for these poor, lost souls? They can, however, imagine all the great moments of this time out of joint; Jesus, Socrates, and even Pascal are mentioned but what good does it do? There is no possible reconciliation with this fate, misery creates misery; no peace of mind can be found within this void that music cannot penetrate (what a stunning description of the reality Fondane will live soon in Auschwitz!). In the fifteenth *tableau*, the great sickness, *Le mal de fântomes*,

is defined: "*Quelle musique peut guérir le coeur captive, le mal de ce fantôme las de toujour renaître, pour périr*?" The poet hints to the destroyed Temple and harps playing songs of prizes on the banks of a river; while Babylon is not mentioned explicitly, it is written in a style reminding us of Psalms, "*C'etait au bord des fleuves. (Nous y sommes)*." This "we still are on the bank of a river" was obviously ambivalent—if not subversive—and it is surprising that it was accepted for publication in Marseille in 1944; was not Paris, where the poet was writing, a city built on the two banks of the river Seine?

The next three *tableaux* dissipated any doubt: the sixteenth starts with "God of my forefathers" and Fondane, himself, in his correspondence with the two editors from Marseille, agreed that, under the circumstances, the three poems could not be published. I believe that 14, which refers to the "bastards of the ephemeral" who would trade eternity for a flimsy moment of "normalcy," contains also a strong hint to the Jewish predicament in a Nazi-dominated Europe. It is not clear to me where from the opposition to the inclusion of the twentieth *tableau* stemmed: it is a benign, if not a bit repetitious and pale introduction, to the last three poems of *Le mal de fantôme*. Two out of the three create the impression of a dream in which a sequence of half visible images describing an apocalypse bring forth hope and despair at the same time. Fear is the dominant emotion: "*dans la nuit,/ tout seuls dans l'infini de ces systems/ qui grouilles en tous sens, nous avons peur.*" Hopelessness is suggested by the metaphor of the tear, a tiny drop in the immensity of the Atlantic Ocean ("*une larme—dont s'accroît la masse d'eau de l'Atlantique*").

The poem remained unfinished. But a poem describing a haunted soul, Fondane himself describes it as such in "Non-Lieu," "*un esprit que hantent, pêle-mêle, des voeux, des presages, des superstitions, des calembours, des ténèbres et des essences*," can never be finished.

NOTES

Chapter 1

1. Most of the relevant documents were written in Romanian (see the attached bibliography). There are a few translations into French and occasionally various authors have given talks or written articles—again, in French mainly—concerning the Romanian years of Benjamin Fondane. The interested reader can find relevant information on this theme in *Cahiers Benjamin Fondane*, published since 1997.
2. The Fondane collection at the Beinecke Library at Yale University and some at the Doucet Collection in Paris. See, also, Leon Volovici, "Le paradis perdu," *Cahiers Benjamin Fondane*, no. 2 (1998): 3.
3. *Pagini dintr-un confesional* (Pages of a confessional), in *Strigat intru eternitate*, Collected Texts edited by Geo Serban (Bucharest: Realitatea Evreiasca, 1998), p. 127, my translation from Romanian.
4. See details in Remus Zestroiu, *Les annés de formation de B. Fundoianu*, *Cahiers Benjamin Fondane* 2, 1998, p. 12
5. The fragment is from an article published by Fondane in 1919; see Leon Volovici, *Métamorphoses de l'identité*, *Europe*, no. 827 (March 1998), p.8.
6. A very good review of this 'Romanian background' can be found in Roxana Sorescu's Chronology included in the recently published first volume of Fondane's collected works, *Opere I*, Bucharest: Editura Art, 2011, p. 13
7. See also, Paul Daniel, *Destinul unui poet* in B. Fundoianu, *Poezii* (Bucharest: Minerva, 1978)
8. See Eric Freedman, "Benjamin Fondane: Philoctetes and the Scream of Exile," *Cardoso Studies in Law and Literature*, 6, no. 1 (Spring–Summer 1994): 55.

9. The series "Judaism and Hellenism," a long commentary based on Buber's *Vom Geist des Judentums*, appeared in *Mântuirea*; a French translation of these texts can be found in Monique Jutrin, *Benjamin Fondane à la recherche du Judaïsme* (Paris: Parole et Silence, 2009).
10. Here, as well in further quotes in this chapter, I shall use the volume of collected prose, B. Fundoianu, *Imagini si carti* (Bucharest: Minerva, 1980). This quote is from p. 133 for this quote. All translations from Romanian are mine unless another translator is mentioned specifically.
11. Ibid., p. 363.
12. Fundoianu dedicated a long article to Bacovia in *Rampa* in 1920; see *Imagini si Carti*, p. 323.
13. Mircea Martin, "Poezia lui B. Fundoianu sau peisajul vazut cu ochii inchisi," in B. Fundoianu, *Poezii* (Bucharest: Minerva, 1978).
14. *Imagini si carti*, p. 183.
15. I am relying heavily for these details on the extensive body of notes added by Paul Daniel, the poet's brother-in-law, and G. Zarafu to the volume of collected poems *Poezii*, published in 1978.
16. This story probably would have been irrelevant if the circumstances of Fondane's death had not been tragic. During WWI, when Romania fought against Germany and its allies, the Austro-Hungarian and Turkish kingdoms, Bucharest was occupied at some point by the German armies. Those who stayed and "collaborated" to some extent by their mere presence or those who considered Germany a possible ally after the war (this was not, however, the same kind of collaboration as that to be witnessed in occupied Paris during WWII) were brought to justice after the war. Among them was Tudor Arghezi, who, following his trial, was sentenced to prison. Young Fondane would walk by foot a considerable distance to visit him in prison; his insistence annoyed the master who wrote a nasty note in his journal a couple of years later. When he learned, in 1945, about Fondane's fate, Arghezi wrote a beautiful mea culpa article. It must be said that Fondane did not feel offended at the time and, in 1927, sent for publication in *Integral* a very laudatory article about the greatest Romanian modernist poet, Tudor Arghezi.
17. Tudor Arghezi, *Printre psalmi* (Bucharest: Editura Art, 2010). Roxana Sorescu edited this anthology and wrote a comprehensive introductory essay in which she discusses the genre and its multiple meanings in the case of Arghezi.
18. From the article "Traducerea Bibliei," in *Imagini si Carti*, p. 334.
19. My translation from the volume *Poezii*, p. 108.
20. It must be said, however, that at the time Fundoianu wrote his first psalm-poems, very few of Arghezi's poems with similar themes were in print. Most of his psalms were published during the 1920s and on.
21. My translation from the volume *Poezii*, p. 108.
22. See Mircea Martin's introduction to the the first volume of Fondane's collected works, *Poezii* recently published (2011).

23. B. Fundoianu, *Imagini si carti din Franta* (Bucharest: Institutul Cultural Român, 2006), p. 39.
24. Ibid., 49.
25. Ibid.
26. Ibid., p. 105.
27. Ibid., p. 107.
28. A good succinct description of Fondane's activities as a playwright can be found in *Cahiers Benjamin Fondane*, no. 11, 2008, dedicated, to a large extent, to his theater.
29. Published in *Rampa* in 1919, see *Imagini si carti*, p. 270.
30. "Cuvinte despre teatru" in *Imagini si carti*, p. 278.
31. *Poezii*, p. 113.
32. Insula I (Bucuresti: Branisteanu, 1923), p. 2.

Chapter 2

1. See the exchanges with the family reproduced in *Strigat intru eternitate*, pp. 157–62.
2. "This volume belongs to a poet who died in 1923, at the age of about twenty-four. Since, his traces have been lost somewhere on the continent. Those who saw him in a film studio or in an insurance company office, will remember a cold person totally insensitive to the tasks he was entrusted with, unable to shed a tear for a past in which he invested quite a significant amount of energy." Benjamin Fondane, *Paysages/Privelisti* (Pitesti: Paralela 45, 1999), bilingual French-Romanian edition, p. 9.
3. André Breton, in his article, quotes Jacques-Emile Blanche who wrote, "Dada will survive only by ceasing to exist"; see André Breton, *The Lost Steps* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996), p. 56.
4. Jacques Rivière, *Nouvelles Etudes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1947), p. 310: "Il faudra que le monde irréel que (l'écrivain) a pour mission de susciter naisse seulement de son application à reproduire le réel et que le mensonge artistique ne soit plus engendré que par la passion de la vérité."
5. Benjamin Fondane, *Entretiens avec Léon Chestov* (Paris: Plasma, 1982), p. 42; an English version prepared by a mysterious Ariane K. can be found on the Internet at http://shestov.by.fon/fondane_1.html. I used the French original and whenever I quote from this book, I will use my translations from French. As with the translations from Romanian, unless otherwise specified, the translations are mine.
6. Ibid., p. 42.
7. The article was published in a collection of Benjamin Fondane's avant-garde works included in Petre Ralieanu and Michel Carassou, eds., *Fundoianu-Fondane et l'avant-garde* (Paris: Paris Méditerrannée, 1999).
8. The articles are contained in José Pierre, *Tracts surréalistes et déclarations collectives, 1922–1939 Tome 1* (Paris: Le Terrain Vague, 1980).

9. Ibid., p. 28.
10. Ibid., p. 29.
11. Ibid., p. 23.
12. *Fundoianu-Fondane et l'avant-garde*, p. 33.
13. From Lev Volovici, "Between Paris and Bucharest: Letters sent by Fondane to His Family," *Cahiers Benjamin Fondane*, no. 5 (2001–2002): 85.
14. A manuscript of this work has been entrusted by Ms. Jeanne Tissier, Fondane's sister-in-law, to Monique Jutrin; see her article "Une découverte: Le manuscrit *du Faux traité d'esthétique* de 1925," in *Cahiers Benjamin Fondane*, no. 5 (2001–2002): 56. With the exception of "Faux concepts de l'art classique," the conserved chapters and fragments have not been published.
15. "We moved in together to 19 rue Monge where we have two rooms and a kitchen," wrote Fondane to his sister Rodica in 1925. See Volovici, "Between Paris and Bucharest."
16. Volovici, "Between Paris and Bucharest," p. 87. M. H. Maxy was an editor of *Integral* and a well-known avant-garde painter in pre–WWII Romania. Both Ion Pillat and Perpessicius were fellow poets, very active in the period between the two World Wars.
17. Benjamin Fondane, *Écrits pour le cinéma* (Paris: Verdier, 2007), p. 61.
18. *Foi et Dogme*, private communication, Monique Jutrin.
19. *Cahiers Benjamin Fondane*, no. 10 (2007): 169.
20. Ibid.
21. Ibid., p. 170.
22. Ibid., p. 171; "Valéry's system is vitiated by the fact that his thought is submissive to this logical drunkenness, which represents, probably, the worst vice of the century."
23. Olivier Salazar-Ferrer discussed this issue in an article titled "Benjamin Fondane et Les enjeux du classicisme," considering not only the literary but also the political undertones of the dispute; see *Cahiers Benjamin Fondane*, no. 10 (2007): 177.
24. "The word 'classic' is a pleonasm; it does signify art," ibid, p. 174.
25. This chapter has not been published so far to the best of my knowledge; I am quoting from a retyped copy I received from Monique Jutrin a few years ago as private communication.
26. Ibid.
27. See Monique Jutrin's article on this subject in *Cahiers Benjamin Fondane*, no. 10 (2007), p.19.
28. Benjamin Fondane, *Rencontres avec Léon Chestov* (Paris: Plasma, 1982), p. 20.

Chapter 3

1. The article is published in a volume dedicated to the contacts Benjamin Fondane kept with his Romanian friends during the first years after his immigration (roughly between

1924 and 1936): Petre Raileanu and Michel Carassou, eds., *Fundoianu-Fondane et l'avant-garde* (Paris/Bucharest: Paris Méditerranée/Fondation Culturelle Roumaine, 1999).

2. Ibid., p. 82. The first attempt Fondane made to publish a book of literary critique in France in 1925 was discussed in the previous chapter.
3. André Breton, *The Lost Steps* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996), p. 51.
4. Ibid., 74.
5. In the book *Miroirs du surréalisme* (Lausanne: L'Age d'Homme, 1988), Yves Bridel discusses this point in detail as well as other interesting issues related to the origins of the movement and the influence of the *NRF* authors on its early years.
6. *Fundoianu-Fondane et l'avant-garde*, p. 40: "They had to create a nebulous conceptual realm in which a star would justify the long range wish." This sounds very much like Gide and Rivière a few years earlier.
7. Léon Shestov was in Moscow in 1917 at the time of the Bolshevik revolution and later survived some of the most difficult moments of the civil war in Kiev. He left Russia in 1920 but his knowledge of the language, and contacts with friends left behind, and the Russian's immigration to Western Europe enabled him to accurately understand the realities unfolding in Communist Russia. During the French years, he was Fondane's guide not only in philosophy but also in the domain of the political as well.
8. Raileanu and Carassou, *Fundoianu-Fondane et l'Avant-garde*, p. 44.
9. The marvelous "*merveilleux*" was invoked by the surrealists as one of the foundational principles of their movement.
10. Raileanu and Carassou, *Fundoianu-Fondane et l'Avant-garde*, p. 49.
11. Ibid., p. 72.
12. "While in the past poetry was the witness of the lively forces of the time, today poetry might only show its meaninglessness" (ibid., p. 54).
13. "Creation is not a trade. Life is not method. Poets wanted to be liked, should not they be ashamed?" (ibid., p. 55).
14. Ibid.
15. I reproduce the quote from this famous letter as it is brought by Fondane in *Rimbaud le voyou* (Paris: Denoël et Steele, 1933), p. 46: "Maintenant, je m'encrapule de plus en plus… je veux être poète et travaille à me rendre voyant…Il s'agit d'arriver à l'inconnu par le dérèglement de tous les senses. Les souffrances sont énormes, mais il faut être fort, être né poète, et je me suis reconnu poète. On devrait dire: on me pense…Je est un autre. Tant pis pour le bois qui se trouve violon." For details about this letter, its context, and the discussions around a concept such as "*s'encrapuler*" or the famous statement, "*Je est un autre*," see Enid Starkie, *Arthur Rimbaud* (New York: New Directions, 1961).
16. "One cannot forgive Rimbaud for pretending that he liberated himself, while in fact he returned to prison." Breton's quote appears in a note on p. 48 in Fondane, *Rimbaud le voyou*.
17. The original quote is, "Il devint entre tous le grande malade, le grand criminal, le grande maudit et le suprême savant! Car il arrive à l'Inconnu!…Et quand, affolé, il finira par perdre l'intelligence de ses visions, il les a vues," Fondane, *Rimbaud le voyou*, p. 47.

18. "Human beings can, by following a so-called mystical path, achieve the ability to directly perceive a different world, inaccessible to their senses and incomprehensible by their reason," (ibid., p. 235).
19. Ibid., p. 236: "Instead of 'positioning' Rimbaud between Dostoevsky and Kierkegaard, at the center of the Western culture where he represents both a crisis and a summit, M. Renéville with Rimbaud's pure thought in hand, set out to find for him pristine sources and take him on a bookish trip across the history of Indian philosophy, Kabala and Gnosticism."
20. Benjamin Fondane, *Faux traité d'esthétique* (Paris: Paris Méditerrannée, 1998), p. 37.
21. Literature about surrealism is exceedingly abundant; many works of Breton have been translated into English. As a primer in English, I would recommend Mark Polizzoti, *André Breton Selections* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); and Breton's *The Lost Steps* (1996). For basic understanding of the surrealist movement, see Ferdinand Alquié, *The Philosophy of Surrealism* (Ann Arbor: UMI Press, 1965); and Haim N. Finkelstein, *Surrealism and the Crisis of the Object* (Ann Arbor: UMI Press, 1979).
22. Fondane contrasts the "*pensée de laboratoire*" with the "*pensée vecue*"; in the mentioned "note" inserted in his book on Rimbaud, he discusses polemically the book *L'Oeuvre logique de Rimbaud*, by André Dhotel, published in 1933. Even though the first version of the book was finished sometime in 1930 ("je donne le dernier coup de main de mon *Rimbaud le voyou*," he wrote in February 1930 to his friend Claude Sernet; see Raileanu and Carassou, *Fundoianu-Fondane et l'avant-garde*, p. 68), Fondane will make modifications in his text until the very last moment.
23. Fondane, *Faux traité*, pp. 39–40: "A reason that denies itself on reasonable grounds is still an act of reason. There is nothing at work today in our crazy Europe, which is not a product, or a subproduct, of reason; not even the lack of reason (the unreasonable). I am embarrassed to have to remind here this common place."
24. Ibid., p. 60: "Any error in the interpretation of the human being results in an erroneous interpretation of the universe."
25. I am fully aware that the notion of *spirit* is an outdated one in our postmodernist parlance; I use it here to define that specific quality that defines a thought, a movement, and an ideology. I am also aware that "the spirit" today is not considered a "universal," that, if it exists at all, will depend on context, point of view, and so forth. However, I am trying here to define the terms of my analysis in a system of reference congenial with that of Benjamin Fondane at the time of the writing.
26. The interview was reprinted in the collection of articles dedicated to Benjamin Fondane during the centennial year 1998, Geo Serban, ed., *Strigat intru singuratate* (Bucharest: Caietele Culturale Realitatea Evreiasca, 1998), pp. 140–44.
27. "2x2," in Benjamin Fondane, *Écrits pour le cinéma* (Paris: Verdier, 2007), p. 21: "L'objectif contre le cinema—voila le drame d'après demain."
28. Ibid., p. 24.
29. Ibid., p. 26.

30. Benjamin Fondane's "Scenarii intournables," in Rudolf E. Kuenzli, ed., *Dada and Surrealist Film* (Cambridge Mass.: MIT Press, 1996); and Nadja Cohen "'Paupières mûres'" un scenario intournable," *Fabula LHT*, no. 2, (2006); and *La Part de l'oeil*, no. 25–26, 2011. *Écrits*, p. 49: "He pulls out from his pocket a pistol and shots at the mirror/in the mirror one sees him falling/several roosters, one atop the other, on a few small bed-side tables."

Chapter 4

1. See my article *Fondane et la relativité* and the translation of the article into French, in *Cahiers Benjamin Fondane*, 5, (2001–2002), p. 65.
2. Ibid.
3. *Rencontres*, p.18
4. Ibid., p. 22
5. Ibid., p.24
6. Ibid. See also, Michel Carassou, *Fondane parle de Chestov* in *Europe*, no. 827 (1998), p. 107.
7. *Vie* II, p. 29
8. Fondane, *Rencontres*, p. 176.
9. Fondane, *Rimbaud le voyou* (Paris: Denoël et Steele, 1933), p. 19.
10. Ibid., p. 34.
11. "*Husserl arrive sur les lieux du drame avec maints prejudges qu'il n'a jamais tenté d'analyser,*" in "Edmund Husserl et l'oeuf de Colomb du réel," *Europe*, no. 15 (June 1930): 338.
12. "*Même le lecteur aussi peu initié que possible, aussi peu que moi, aux problems philosophiques, sais d'ejà ce dont il s'agit*," ibid. p. 333
13. See the discussions around this issue in *Cahiers Benjamin Fondane*, 13 (2010), in particular the articles of Till R. Kuhnle, Alice Gonzi, Geneviève Piron and Maria Villela-Petit.
14. The letters are included in Alain Borer, *Benjamin Fondane et Rimbaud le voyou,* Jungle, Histoires du réel, no. 9, 1986
15. In *Le Befroi*, Revue Philosophique et Littéraire, VI, September 1988, p. 32.
16. *Rimbaud le voyou*, p. 50: 'Never, perhaps, since the cabbalists, prophets, fools and false Messiahs an attempts such as that of Rimbaud and his theory of the Seer (*voyant)* was attempted. To use reason and reality . . . in order to conquer by force the Unknown . . . is bound to enhance the human potentialities'."
17. Ibid., pp. 74–79.
18. Ibid., p. 160: 'I shall call an Idea everything which have served to justify the killing of blacks by whites, Jews by Germans, communists by bourgeois, Trotsky followers by communists . . . I do not know of an ides which is not responsible for at least one hundred thousand killings'."
19. See the correspondence between the two and my article on this subject, *Le dialogue manqué,* in *Europe*, no. 827, (1998), pp. 128–42.

20. The difference between the two texts is discussed at some length in my article *Réflexions sur la genèse et le context de La* conscience malheureuse, *Cahiers Benjamin Fondane*, 12, (2009), 36.
21. Les Cahiers du Sud, Marseille, April 1935, p. 305
22. Fondane, *La conscience malheureuse* (Paris: Denoël et Steele, 1936), p. x.
23. Ibid., p. 12.
24. Ibid., p. 267.
25. Fondane, *Faux traité d'esthhétique* (Paris: Editions Paris Méditerranée, 1998), p. 108: "Reality is defined only during this brief instant when it is seized and lived through an act of participation-inspiration."
26. That is, *A* must always be identical to *A* and *non-A* is always and under any circumstance radically different and distinct from *A*.
27. Fondane, *Le lundi existentiel et le Dimanche de l'histoire* (Monaco: Editions du Rocher, 1990), p. 23.
28. Ibid.
29. Michael Finkenthal, *Lev Shestov: Existential Philosopher and Religious Thinker* (New York: Peter Lang, 2010).
30. My translation from French; Fondane, *La conscience malheureuse*, p. xix.

Chapter 5

1. Fondane, *Paysages/Privelisti*, bilingual (French-Romanian) ed. (Bucharest: Paralela 45, 1999), p. 9. Translation into French by Odile Serre; the English translations from Romanian are mine.
2. Ibid., p. 13.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid., p. 15.
5. "To destroy a shameful past for which I did not want to blush anymore," (ibid.).
6. "Projet Ulysse 1927," a typed page with this title was reprinted in Benjamin Fondane, *Le voyageur n'a pas fini de voyager*, Patrice Beray and Michel Carassou, eds. (Paris: Paris Méditerranée, 1996), p. 41. See also Monique Jutrin's discussion of the volume in *Cahiers Benjamin Fondane*, no. 11 (2008): 117–29.
7. Ibid., p. 120.
8. "The poem was conceived around 1929" and "It was a realization of the real through the everyday (life) experience" (ibid.).
9. There are contemporary collections of Fondane's poems that differ slightly among themselves. I shall use the Verdier Poche edition of Fondane's *Le mal de fantômes* (Paris: Verdier, 2006), apparently the most updated at the time.

10. See Ricardo Nirenberg, "Benjamin Fondane et Victoria Ocampo," *Cahiers Benjamin Fondane*, no. 1, (1997): 6, dedicated to the poet's visit to Argentina.
11. Sequence 39, my translation.
12. In *Cahiers Benjamin Fondane*, no. 12 (2009): 12–22, Monique Jutrin presents a thorough description of the origin and the background of this volume.
13. A very detailed and interesting discussion of this poem is in Claire Gruson's article "Toute l'Histoire me suit," *Cahiers Benjamin Fondane*, no. 12 (2009): 23.
14. Ibid., p. 33.
15. George Ribemont-Dessaigne, *Déjà jadis* (Paris: Julliard, 1958), p. 55. Many interesting background documents can be found in Petre Raileanu, ed., *The Romanian Avant-Garde* (Bucharest: Romanian Cultural Foundation, 1999).
16. An excellent article by Eric Freedman on Fondane's collaboration with French literary and philosophical reviews is to be found in *Cahiers Benjamin Fondane*, no. 6 (2003): 13–23. In the same issue, Monique Jutrin wrote an article about the poet's collaboration with periodicals published in Brussels (pp. 32–37).
17. See Ribemont's letter of 1930, in Raileanu and Carassou, *Fundoianu-Fondane et l'avant-garde* (Paris: Méditerrannée), p. 70.
18. From a letter written by Jean Ballard to Boris de Schloezer, Lev Shestov's translator into French, in 1947, quoted by Claire Gruson in her article regarding Fondane's collaboration with *Cahiers du Sud*, in *Rencontres autour de Benjamin Fondane* (Paris: Parole et Silence, 2002), p. 77.
19. Ibid., p. 78.
20. See details about both these reviews in Eric de Lussy, "La réception de l'oeuvre poétique," *Cahiers Benjamin Fondane*, no. 11 (2008): 170.
21. Fondane wrote the script, following a book by the renowned Swiss writer Ramuz. See an in-depth discussion of this issue in *Cahiers Benjamin Fondane*, no. 3 (1999), in particular the articles of Alain Virmaux in this and the next issue of the review.
22. Rudolph E. Kuenzli, *Dada and Surrealist Film* (Cambridge Mass.: MIT Press, 1996).
23. For details, see Monique Jutrin's article mentioned above, in *Cahiers Benjamin Fondane*, no. 6 (2003).
24. The letter was published in the 1978 issue of *Non Lieu*, p. 31.
25. See Fondane's letter of 1930 to Antonin Artaud, published in *Le voyageur n'a pas fini de voyager* (1996).
26. A thorough discussion of this topic can be found in Ramona Fotiade, *Conceptions of the Absurd* (Oxford: Legenda, 2001).
27. Non Lieu, p. 31
28. "Equal to the greatest," (ibid., p. 32).
29. Benjamin Fondane, "Poésie et métaphysique" in *Schweitzer Annalen* I, (Genève, 1936).
30. Ibid., p. 358.

31. Ibid., p. 360.
32. David Gascoyne, *Rencontres avec Benjamin Fondane* (Paris: Arcane 17, 1984), p. 17.
33. The letter sent from England was written in French: "*Il n'y a pas la moindre raison pour que je vous écrive; je ne vous connais pas; je ne suis pas des ceux qui écrivent comme par hazard à des auteurs qu'ils ont lus. Cependant, je ressens un grand désir de communiquer, de signaler quelque fait a quelqun*," (ibid., p. 3).
34. Arta Lucescu-Boutcher's interview with David Gascoyne in *Rediscovering Benjamin Fondane* (New York: Peter Lang, 2003), p. 75.
35. "Fondane replied to my letter of admiration and unsolicited confidence . . . I carried (it) in my pocket for years"; see Ramona Fotiade's comments and her interview with David Gascoyne in *Bulletin de la Société d'Etudes Benjamin Fondane* (BSEBF), no. 3 (1995): 2.
36. Gascoyne, *Rencontres avec Benjamin Fondane*, p. 10: "If one believes that there is a certain value to the act of crying, what triggers in us the suffering?"
37. Fotiade, BSEBF quoted above, p. 3.
38. '(Surrealism) seemed to be a bomb that could blow-up this flat and mediocre world, I detested'," *Rencontres avec Benjamin Fondane*, p. 6.
39. Ibid.
40. *Rediscovering BF*, p. 83
41. Fotiade, BSEBF, p. 6.
42. *Rediscovering*, p. 80.
43. David Gascoyne, *Paris Journal 1937–1939* (London: The Enitharmon Press, 1978), p.90.
44. Benjamin Fondane, *Rencontres avec Léon Chestov* (Paris: Editions Plasma, 1982), p.167.
45. Ibid.
46. From the interview with Ramona Fotiade quoted above, BSEBF, 3, p. 5.
47. See the note of the editor at the end of *Le mal de fantômes*, (Paris: Éditions Verdier, 2006)
48. The entire correspondence between Fondane and *Cahiers du Sud* insofar as this incident is concerned can be found in Monique Jutrin, Gheorghe Has, and Ion Pop, eds. *Benjamin Fondane et les Cahiers du Sud, Correspondence* (Bucharest: Editions de la Fondation Culturelle Roumaine, 1998), pp. 212–21 and 225–41.
49. See letter #139, of December 7, 1943 in the previously quoted volume.
50. Ibid., p. 228: 'Any cut runs the risk of ruining the entire thing, it not only diminishes the intensity of the text but its structure (architecture) as well'."
51. *Cahiers Benjamin Fondane*, 1(Automne 1997), p. 50: 'they say we are talented, possess critical insight, a penetrating eye, etc.—but all these is nothing but indifference'."
52. The correspondence between Fondane and Fouchet is published in *Cahiers Benjamin Fondane* 6, 2003, pp. 46–49.
53. The letter was published in *Benjamin Fondane, Non Lieu* (Paris: Editions Non Lieu, 1978), p. 116: 'we are here…a bit lost, a bit upset, but still in good shape and full of hope. But we

hope that this situation will not go on for long since every day is difficult and the loneliness becomes overwhelming'."

54. Speaking impersonally of himself, Fondane writes, "(*Le poète*) *a été le premier à romper avec la poétique d'alors, le premier à aborder le long poème, le theme unique, le 'sujet,' et à réintroduire dans le poème un peu de l'homme*," (ibid., p. 117).
55. Jean Lescurre, *Poésie et liberté* (Paris: IMEC, 1998).
56. See Monique Jutrin, "Réflexion autour d'une panorama de la poésie 1933–43," *Cahiers Benjamin Fondane*, no. 7 (2004): 44.
57. In a letter addressed to Fondane in 1933 (*Benjamin Fondane, Non Lieu*, p. 35), Roger Gilbert-Lecomte suggested to him to try to write a "perfect poem." Gros was familiar with this long French tradition, but Fondane refused the challenge.
58. Lescurre, *Poésie et liberté*, p. 30: "One will never understand Fondane's contribution to literature and to contemporary poetry in particular if one continues to refuse to understand this sudden mutation: he warned that a violent (extreme) change in human consciousness is possible." I will mention in a later chapter Giovanni Papini's "mutare la mente."

Chapter 6

1. The article, titled "O functiune sociala" (A Social Function), was published in *Rampa* in August 1921. It is reproduced in the collection of Fondane's political writings published in Romanian, edited by Mircea Martin and Ion Pop, *Scriitorul in fata revolutiei* (Bucharest: Editura Institutului Cultural Roman, 2004). A collection of the French political texts, introduced by Louis Janover, was published in Paris in 1997.
2. Martin and Pop, *Scriitorul*, p. 62; my translation.
3. Both are included in Scriitor*ul* 4. Martin and Pop, *Scriitorul*, p. 78.
5. Ibid., p. 79.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid., p. 80.
8. "*Transformer le monde a dit Marx*; *changer la vie*, *a dit Rimbaud: ces deux mots d'ordre pour nous ne font qu'un*" was André Breton's credo.
9. Fondane, *Scriitorul in fata revolutiei*, p. 112.
10. Ibid., p. 113.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid. p. 119.
13. Ibid. p. 120.
14. Ibid., p. 125.
15. Ibid., p. 129.

16. A very thorough and complete description of the evolution of French political life during the interwar years can be found in "real time" in English: Alexander Werth, *The Twilight of France* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1942). The quotes are from p. 288.
17. Ibid., p. 291.
18. "Everything I attempted soon reached gigantic proportions; I had to destroy the written text and start anew each time. This went on for about a month and I thought that I would have to give up": my translation from letter #86 in Jutrin, Has, and Pop, *Benjamin Fondane et les Cahiers du Sud, Correspondance*, p. 150.
19. The article is reproduced in Fondane, *Le Lundi existentiel et le Dimanche de l'histoire* (Monaco: Éditions du Rocher, 1990), pp. 123–48.
20. Ibid., p. 124; my translation from French.
21. Ibid.
22. Even today, some "revisionist" historians tend to interpret the events of the interwar period and the clash between the Right and the Left during the years preceding WWII in terms of the consequences of an unfinished French revolution or as having been inspired by certain ideas of the European Enlightenment.
23. Ibid., p. 125.
24. Ibid., p. 127.
25. Ibid., pp. 129–30; *apud* Enneads II, 9, VII, as quoted by Benjamin Fondane.
26. Ibid., p. 131.
27. Ibid., p. 135.
28. Ibid.
29. Ibid.
30. Ibid., p. 140.
31. Ibid.
32. Fondane quoted previously in his essay the story of Goebbels who contrasted the death of one of the murderers of the Austrian Chancelor Dolfuss (killed in 1934), Otto Planetta—who died crying "Heil Hitler" and "Long live Germany"—with that of Jesus who lamented on the cross and asked God why he forgot him. This was another argument in favor of the daring but rather uncomfortable idea that the Nazi ideology was rational and a mere by-product of the same overoptimistic humanism originating in the Enlightenment. Today the argument is invoked by many historians and it is considered neither too daring nor strange.
33. Ibid., p. 145.
34. Ibid.
35. It seems that Fondane could have avoided, as a French citizen married to a Christian, the deportation to Auschwitz. He chose, however, to go with his sister Line who would not have had this "privilege" (she was not naturalized French). The exact quote is: "Le courage à la nue vérité est plus atroce que le sacrifice de soi; les terreurs de l'esprit humilié sont autrement plus tragiques que les tremblements de la chair," (ibid., p. 145).

Chapter 7

1. See the volume Fondane, *Écrits pour le cinéma* (Paris: Verdier, 2007); the articles on this subject published by Alain Virmaux and Olivier Salazar Ferrer in *Cahiers Benjamin Fondane*, nos. 1, 2, 3, 6, 7, and 11; as well as those of Richard Abel and Peter Christensen in Rudolf E. Kuenzli, *Dada and Surrealist Film* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1996).
2. Fondane, *Écrits pour le cinema*, p. 59.
3. See, for details, Alain Virmaux, "Un article pugnace," *Cahiers Benjamin Fondane*, no. 2 (1998): 81–86.
4. A very interesting analysis of some of the major ideas included in these works can be found in Peter Christensen's article included in Kuenzli, *Dada and Surrealist Film*. See also Ramona Fotiade's comments in Fondane, *Écrits pour le cinema*.
5. Fondane, *Écrits pour le cinema*, p. 66.
6. "The only art that is as old as the woman one loves," (ibid. p. 67).
7. "Le movement visuel, et ses infini possibilités de montage, le langage mimique et ses infini possibiliés d'expression," (ibid., p. 95).
8. Ibid., pp. 95–96.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
11. See, for instance, the preface to Bert Cardullo, *Theater and Cinema* (Palo Alto, Calif.: Academica, 2011), containing a collection of articles written between 1916 and 1966 on the theme concerning the contrasts in media.
12. Fondane, *Écrits pour le cinema*, pp. 95–96.
13. Ibid., p. 97.
14. Ibid., p. 98.
15. See Alain Virmaux in *Cahiers Benjamin Fondane* 3 (1999) 16.
16. See Ricardo Nirenberg, "Benjamin Fondane et Victoria Ocampo," *Cahiers Benjamin* Fondane, no. 1 (1997): 6–10.
17. *Cahiers Benjamin Fondane*, no. 1 (1997) is dedicated to this second trip Fondane made to Argentina and it contains many details about *Tararira*.
18. Ibid., letter published by Louis Soller in *Cahiers Benjamin Fondane* (1997).
19. See Carmen Oszi, "Une farce burlesque" *Cahiers Benjamin Fondane*, no. 11 (2008): 21–33.
20. Details about the *Insula* episode, mentioned previously, can be found in Hélène Lenz's article in *Cahiers Benjamin Fondane*, no. 11 (2008): 33–39.
21. See Eric Freedman in *Cahiers Benjamin Fondane*, no. 11 (2008): 97
22. Benjamin Fondane, *Le festin du Balthazar* (St-Nazaire: Arcane 17; Paris: Distribution Distique, 1985).
23. A very long and thorough presentation of the play and its discussion in the context of Pedro Calderón de la Barca's *La cena del rey Baltasar* (Berlin and New York: de Gruyter,

1971), accompanied by a positioning of its messages in the context of existential philosophy, was recently published by Till Kühnle, "Un festin pour en finir avec l'histoire," *Cahiers Benjamin Fondane*, no. 11 (2008): 55–79.

24. In "Philoctetes: A Dramatic Poem," *Cardozo Studies for Law and Literature*, 6, no. 1 (1994): 1–49, Eric Freedman's translation.
25. "Arguments, texts intended to justify his loves and his hatreds, more his hatreds rather than loves, his hatred of the social interdictions, of family, of the crowds and of those who represent the religious ceremonial." My translation from Fondane, *La conscience malheureuse* (Paris: Denoël et Steele, 1936), p. 71.
26. Freedman, Symposium dedicated to Benjamin Fondane, pp. 3–4.
27. See Eric Freedman's accompanying commentary in Symposium dedicated to Benjamin Fondane, p. 56.
28. Ibid.
29. Ibid.
30. Freedman, Accompanying commentary in Symposium, p. 11.
31. Ibid., p. 15.
32. Ibid., p. 20.
33. Ibid., p. 25.
34. Ibid., p. 28.
35. Ibid., p. 32.
36. Ibid., p. 34.
37. Ibid., p. 38.
38. Ibid., p. 45; these uttering are very much like the words included toward the end of Fondane's article of May 1939 in *Cahiers du Sud*.

Chapter 8

1. In an article titled "The Unhappy Conscience of Benjamin Fondane," in *Benjamin Fondane ou l'épreuve du paradoxe*, ed. Dorin Stefanescu (Cluj: Eikon, 2010), I discussed in detail a comparison between the two texts. I single out this fact here in order to emphasize the support and interest *Cahiers du Sud* manifested for Fondane's philosophical writings. It was somewhat different when it came to his poetry as we shall see in chapter 11.
2. Bruce Baugh explained that for Wahl, Hegel was not the idealist thinker from Berlin lost in speculations about an abstract Spirit but rather a philosopher deeply preoccupied with existential thought: self-reflection, consciousness, lead to a feeling of anguish that would be practically impossible to appease as long as human history remains an ongoing process (in Hegel's view, at the end of it an equilibrium will be reached and in this state the individual and the general will be reconciled). However, as long as we are on the march, the existential crisis will be present and all pervasive. See his article "Fondane, Wahl and Hegel," *Cahiers Benjamin Fondane*, no. 10 (2007): 185.

3. "Le rêve du metaphysician, c'est de reconquérir le paradis que nous avons perdu par la faute de la réflexion, que nous avons perdu parce que nous avons mangé du fruit de l'abre du vrai et du faux," Jena Wahl, *Vers le concret* (Paris: Vrin 1932), p. 194.
4. Gabriel Marcel was a follower of Shestov during the early days of his philosophical career; see Fondane, *Rencontres avec Léon Chestov* (Paris: Plasma, 1982), p. 79.
5. Ibid., p. 100.
6. "As citizens of the social unhappiness, we are political beings," Fondane, *La conscience malheureuse*, p. ix.
7. Ibid., pp. ix–x.
8. First live your life and only after study philosophy.
9. "*L'acte même par lequel l'existant pose sa propre existence, l'acte même du vivant, cherchant en lui et hors de lui, avec ou contre les évidences" les possibilities mêmes du vivre*," Fondane, *La conscience malheureuse*, pp. x–xi.
10. "*Refoulement aussi angoissant qu'inutile d'une réalité qui ne se donne et n'est present qu'au plus intime et au plus secret de l'individu," in Fondane's own words* (ibid., p. xi).
11. "Human beings cannot avoid eternally to return to the question concerning their existence," (ibid., p. xvi).
12. "*Qu'est-ce qu'un philosophe pour lequel la liberté ne commence que là où la connaissance finit*?" (ibid., p. xxiv).
13. Ibid.
14. "*Une analyse tant soit superficielle des mythes les plus primitives permet largement d'y reconnaître une collaboration effective et manifeste de la raison*," (ibid., p. 7).
15. In Fondane's *Cahiers du Sud* article, p. 308.
16. "*Un monde de contradictions insolubles où* ce qui est *porte le signe du malaise, où l'Être nous est donné sous le mode de la conscience déchiquetée et malheureuse*," (ibid.).
17. "(The failure) is, as in the case of knowledge, an accident in the planning of the creator". Ibid., p. 11.
18. "*Cette logique et ce principe de contradiction sont absolument négligés par la pensée de l'existence*," wrote Fondane (ibid., p. 21). That is why he was so eager to study Stéphane Lupasco's theories during the following years.
19. "*Il est certain que l'existence et la pensée ne grandissent pas de concert*," (ibid., p. 39).
20. "Where the concept flourishes, the concrete is buried," (ibid., p. 42).
21. Ibid. p. 48.
22. Ibid., p.52.
23. Ibid., p. 53.
24. "The abstraction is still alive! To the point that the individual does not represent in its reality but the Totality of Social Relationships, that is, a mere appearance of an individual (being)," (ibid., p. 57).
25. Ibid., p. 66.

26. Ibid., p. 203.
27. Ibid., p. 206.
28. "*C'est le droit absolute de l'individu de mettre 'son drame' au centre du problème philosophique, dût-il faire éclater celui-ci en morceaux*," (ibid., p. 225).
29. See Monique Jutrin's article on this subject in *Cahiers Benjamin Fondane* 10 (2007): 19–27.
30. Benjamin Fondane, *Faux traité d'esthétique* (Paris: Paris Méditerrannée, 1998), p. 36.
31. Ibid., p. 30, "*La poésie peut penser bien des choses qui ont été refusée à la philosophie*."
32. *L'acte poétique, est-il dans l'activité qui le produit ou bien dans l'objet—le poème—qui la reproduit*?" (ibid., p. 27).
33. Ibid., p. 45. Fondane even intended at some point to subtitle the book "The Poet and the Schizophrenic."
34. See, for instance, ibid., p. 80 passim.
35. "Another reality, closer to the truth than this rough reality," (ibid., p. 140).
36. The article, titled "Poésie et Métaphysique," was published in *Schweizer Annalen* I, 1936, p. 357
37. Ibid., p. 359.
38. Fondane, *Faux traité*, p. 140: "*La poésie n'est pas une 'jouissance de la sensibilité' mais une pensée aux prises avec le réel ultime*."
39. Ibid., p. 125: "Nothing will displease the poet more than to serve (a cause)."
40. "*Ne doive ainsi être nommée que dans le bref instant où elle est vécue et saisie dans l'acte de participation-inspiration*," (ibid., p. 108).
41. "*La démarche propre de la poésie, n'a nullement pour tâche de solidifier les objets, de les spatialiser …mais tout au contraire…de supprimer asymptotiquement les objets et l'espace qui les supporte*," (ibid., p. 109).
42. The entire exact quote in which this very important point is made is "*L'expérience fait voir qu'il le suit; et il faut chasser la conscience, et la faire taire de force, si l'on veut que l'absurdité puisse ouvrir ses beaux-yeux*," (ibid., p. 113).
43. Fondane's *Baudelaire et l'expérience du gouffre* (Baudelaire and the Experience of Abyss) was posthumously published in 1947; here I use the edition published in Paris at Seghers in 1972. In chapter 14 Fondane mentions the First World War and the War of 1939–1943 (p. 147).
44. "The fascination the profane manifests toward the sacred is perfectly understandable, within this way of thinking; it is due to the thirst for participation in a real world, more real than the positive one" (that is, that which is assumed to be such by the rational thought), (ibid., p. 182).

Chapter 9

1. "*J'espérais pouvoir refaire le texte au point de vue des problèmes poses par les nouvelles logique*," quoted in BSEBF, no. 2 (Autumn 1994): 9.
2. "*A propos du livre de Léon Chestov: Kierkegaard et la philosophie existentielle*," *Revue philosophique de la France et de l'étranger*, no. 5 (1937): 381–414; and "Léon Chestov et la lutte contre les évidences," *Revue de philosophie*, no. 7–8 (1938): 13–50. Both articles are reproduced in Fondane, *Rencontres avec Léon Chestov*.
3. This work was published as *L'Etre et la connaissance* (Paris: Paris Mediterranée, 1998).
4. "Leon Shestov and His Fight against the Evidence," in *Rencontres avec Léon Chestov*, p. 249.
5. Fondane, *Rencontres*, p. 146.
6. Ibid., p. 150.
7. Ibid., p. 215.
8. Ibid., p. 184.
9. Fondane wrote, "*Seule donc la pensée crée la liberté ou la necessité, l'ordre ou l'arbitraire*," (ibid., p. 185).
10. "*Il suffit d'introduire dans la pensée non les notions mais les états de risque, de danger, pour que la pensée speculative s'écroule piteusement*," (ibid.).
11. *Il "entrera en 'contestation' avec Dieu*," (ibid., p. 205).
12. The article was found too long by the editors who announced it as being part of a book in preparation, to be titled *Lévy-Bruhl, A Metaphysician against His Will*.
13. *Revue philosophique*, vol. 129 (1940): 297.
14. Ibid., p. 298.
15. Ibid., p. 303.
16. Ibid., p. 304.
17. *Revue philosophique*, vol. 130: 39–40.
18. "It is possible to participate in the existence (being) while neglecting our logical distinctions" (ibid., p. 47).
19. Ibid., p. 46.
20. See also Stéphane Lupasco, *L'homme et l'oeuvre*, eds. Horia Badescu and Basarab Nicolescu (Monaco: Edition du Rocher, 1999), and references therein.
21. Fondane, *Baudelaire et l'expérience du gouffre* (Paris: Seghers, 1972), p. 329.
22. Ibid., p. 330. Kant's *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason Alone* (1793) represented the *summum* of this attitude.
23. The quote continues in the original: "*et que ce vide affectif conduit nécessairement de la 'sérénité' à l'angoisse, à l'inquietude et finalement, à l'ennui*," (ibid., p. 239). This sequence of "logical inferences" is important for understanding the late works of Fondane and their finality.

24. "The affective void generates anxiety, worries, and, finally, boredom, the state of becoming bored of living," (ibid., p. 330).
25. Now we would replace the concept of microphysics with that of quantum physics; in the following I shall use the modern terminology. The original title of Lupasco's book was *L'experience micro-physique et la pensée humaine*.
26. I used the reprinted version of the original article *D'Empédocle à Stéphane Lupasco ou "La solitude du logique"* in Benjamin Fondane, *Le Lundi existentiel* (Monaco: Editions du Rocher, 1990), pp. 168–69.
27. For the first time, these things were discussed in great detail in Lupasco's work, originally published in 1935, mentioned in note 20. Later on, the author published many books on these subjects; an up-to-date bibliography on his works can be found in *A la confluence de deux cultures: Lupasco aujourd'hui*, ed. Basarab Nicolescu (Paris: Oxus 2010).
28. See the entire fragment and my commentary in *Cahiers Benjamin Fondane*, no. 8 (2005): 24 passim.
29. Some of the concepts used by Fondane are difficult to translate. He writes: "*Le discontinue (l'hétérogène, le divers, la disparition) devint un facteur rationnel au même titre que le continu (l'homogène, l'identique, l'apparition)!*"
30. In the commemorative issue dedicated to Benjamin Fondane by *Cahiers du Sud*, no. 382 (1947): 178.
31. Stéphane Lupasco, *L'Homme et ses trois éthiques* (Monaco: Editions du Rocher, 1985), p. 43. In his approach, Lupasco will remain close to the Cartesian view of affectivity.
32. Giovani Papini, *Scritti Postumi* (Roma: Mondadori, 1966), p. 273, my translation from Italian.
33. Ibid., p. 396. Papini writes a somewhat ambiguous but very expressive sentence: "*Mutare il cuore e la mente*."

Chapter 10

1. The translation of the original book, wrote immediately after the war ended, was published in English by Pantheon Books in 1948 in New York; the quote is on p. 131.
2. Lev Shestov, *Athens and Jerusalem* (New York: Simon & Shuster, 1968), p. 48.
3. I treated this issue in connection with Shestov in my book, *Lev Shestov: Existential Philosopher and Religious Thinker* (New York: Peter Lang, 2010).
4. Monique Jutrin, *Benjamin Fondane à la recherché du Judaïsme* (Paris: Parole et Silence, 2009).
5. Franz Kafka, *The Diaries of Franz Kafka*, ed. Max Brod (New York: Shoken Books, 1949), vol. 2, p. 200.
6. Benjamin Fondane, "Léon Chestov à la recherche du Judaïsme perdu," *Revue Juive de Genève*, no. 4 (1936): 326–28.
7. "*J'appelle 'essentiels' les traits d'une figure qui se situe hors du temps, hors de l'histoire, hors des bornes d'une structure définie: géographique, historique, nationale, et qui s'attache à exprimer,*

ou exprime malgré soi, la densité d'une révélation qui, bien que confié à un seul peuple, intéresse au plus haut degré le salut de l'humanité en général," (ibid.)

8. See the conference on Shestov, "Un nouveau visage de Dieu: Léon Chestov mystique russe," given during his first visit in Argentina in 1929, *Europe*, no. 827 (March 1998); the article "Un philosophe tragique: Leon Chestov," *Europe*, no. 19 (1929): 142; and two chapters on Shestov in Fondane, *La conscience malheureuse* (1936), one of which, "Chestov, Kierkegaard et le serpent," had been published originally in *Cahiers du Sud* in 1934. To these, one should add two articles written later included in *Rencontres avec Léon Chestov* (1982).
9. "Jews began to believe that they have a high moral standing due to their ethics."
10. Michel Carassou and René Mougel, eds. *Fondane-Maritain Correspondance* (Paris: Paris Mediterranée, 1997).
11. "Insofar as Shestov is concerned, you are wrong. *His way of thinking is not specific to the Jew but to Jewish thinking*; often, Kierkegaard, Luther, even Tertullian would think like him." Letter of February 28, 1938, in Carassou and Mougel, *Fondane-Maritain Correspondence*, p. 38; the italics belong to Fondane.
12. "If during antiquity the Jew was God's only witness, in the modern world—and against his will—the Jew, as anxiously as ever, will be the only one who will be the witness of God's absence," (ibid.).
13. Nathalie Baranoff-Chestov, *Vie de Léon Chestov* (Paris: Presse libre, 1983), 2:126.
14. Jacques Maritain, *Existence and the Existent* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1947), p. 13. Of course, I follow here the discourse of the time; all this talk about "essences" might seem outmoded (at best) to the postmodern reader.
15. Fondane, *Rencontres*, p. 95.
16. Jutrin, *Benjamin Fondane* à *la recherche du Judaisme*, p. 107.
17. Fondane, *Rimbaud le voyou* (Paris: Denoël et Steele, 1933), p. 27.
18. Later in his text on Rimbaud, Fondane will define a "*tempérament métaphysique*" as follows: "*non un home qui s'adonne sciamment à la recherché du transcendant, mais un home qui a soif du transcendant, pour qui le réel est absent et dont le comportement reflète ce double movement de gourmandisse et d'horreur de Dieu*," (note, p. 67).
19. Quoted by Gershon Shaked in *Identity: Jewish Literatures in European Languages* (Haifa: Haifa University Press, 2006), p. 19.
20. Fondane, *Rimbaud le voyou*, p. 51.
21. Ibid., p. 98.
22. Ibid., p. 182.
23. Ibid.
24. Walter Kaufmann, *The Faith of a Heretic* (New York: Anchor Books, 1963), p. 2.
25. Emmanuel Levinas, *Outside the Subject* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1994), p. 17.

Chapter 11

1. Benjamin Fondane, *Baudelaire et l'expérience du gouffre* (Paris: Seghers, 1973), p. 43. In the continuation, I shall indicate the page numbers in text.
2. Pierre Jean Jouve, *Le tombeau de Baudelaire* (Paris: Seuil, 1958), p. 29.
3. Hegel, see quote on p. 313. Baudelaire is the one who wrote that the Latin saying is "cruelle et humiliante," see p. 296.
4. Fondane, *Le mal de fantômes* (Paris: Verdier, 2006), p. 77.
5. Léon-Gabriel Gros, *Poètes contemporaines*, vol 2 (Paris: Cahiers du Sud, 1951), pp. 224–45.
6. Fondane, *Le mal*, p. 77, my translation.
7. The first steps of a thorough textual analysis of the poem was sketched by Elisabeth Stambor, *Rencontres autour de Benjamin Fondane poète et philosophe* (Paris: Parole et Silence, 2002), pp. 149–57.
8. It is very difficult to translate Fondane; for the benefit of those who do not read French, here is a literal and prosaic rendering of a poetical text par excellence: "and the naked body of the young girl/smiling—where?—while tearing apart at dawn the leaning towers of Europe?/One could say, all these flimsy things do good! Still, we left them . . . /We had to go . . . /But this smell of a fine rain the naked girl/the leaning towers Europe. All these/ are reverberating inside ourselves, and make us cry" (*Le mal*, p. 81).
9. Elisabeth Stambor believes that there were three versions of the poem: the first was the one originally sent to *Cahiers de Sud* during the summer of 1943, the second, he sent to Léon-Gabriel Gros in December 1943, and finally, a third version that included the changes attached to the letter to Ballard in January 1944 (see above quoted reference). The 2006 Verdier edition retains that published by Patrice Berray at Paris Meditterranée in 1996 and is based on the manuscript conserved in the Doucet Collection, which, according to Stambor, is the version sent by the author to Léon-Gabriel Gros in December 1943.
10. Carassou and Mougel, *Fondane–Maritain Correspondance* (1997), p. 227: "I believe that now the poem comes out less rough than before, more smooth (refined)."
11. "*Le theme de l'émigrant s'est fondu dans la masse, il n'est plus qu'un courrent souterrain*" (Carassou and Mougel, *Correspondence*, p. 227).

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Note: There are two bibliographical lists, one with works written in Romanian and the other written in French. Fondane's French poetry is collected in the volume *Le mal des fantômes*, and this is the only French poetry collection included in the list. Fondane's writings on cinema and his political articles have been brought together in individual volumes; therefore, they are quoted collectively, with the exception of *Trois Scenarii*. Other articles—related to poetry, criticism, philosophy, and so forth—written in French have not been yet been collected into a volume. Therefore, there is not a separate list for them; those quoted in text are referenced in the endnotes. Attached, however, to the list of secondary sources is Eric Freedman's comprehensive *Bibliographie de l'oeuvre de Benjamin Fondane*, which contains a chronological list of all these works. The Romanian articles are included in B. Fundoianu's *Imagini si carti*, which appears in the Romanian primary sources. Secondary sources—both books and articles—in various languages are gathered in one single list.

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