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## **NOTE TO USERS**

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BENJAMIN FONDANE

by

ARTA D. LUCESCU-BOUTCHER

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in French in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York.

1998

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## Approval Page

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in French in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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## Abstract

BENJAMIN FONDANE

by

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This dissertation was written in memory of Benjamin Fondane, a poet, dramaturge, and existential thinker who produced most of his literary works in Paris. Fondane was born in Iași ( Roumania) where he began his writing career. In Roumania, although he gained much recognition as a writer, Fondane longed for Paris and the literary milieu which he felt could enhance his writing. In 1923 Fondane moved to Paris and in 1927 he became a close friend of the noted Russian philosopher Léon Shestov. Slowly, Fondane became his disciple as his poetry began to incorporate Shestov's existential philosophy. Fondane's poetry was transformed: no longer portraying bucolic images of Moldavian pastures, his verse now gained universal insight while depicting the sorrow of the poet in exile or the agony of the Jew in Diaspora.

In Fondane's French verse, we note his fascination with the tragic - it pertains to "a category of seriousness" which is the prime element of existential

thought, explains the noted French philosopher Jean Wahl in his study Philosophies of Existence. One should not confuse “existentialism” with “existential thought”, a philosophy which concerns itself mostly with the problem of existence. Fondane shared Shestov’s belief that one’s spirit is elevated through personal suffering.

Fondane wrote several collections of poems: Ulysse, Titanic, L’Exode, which he published along with his philosophical essays. La Conscience malheureuse contains most of these essays. In Faux traité d’esthétique, Fondane presents his philosophy regarding poetry: he declines the importance of aesthetics in favor of the verse that dares to remain a part of life. He believes in the magic of poetic creativity, and in its incredible force as it goes beyond logic and beyond the self. The poet also presents his discontentment with Surrealism: in his opinion an alliance between Marxism and Surrealism would only bring about the loss of freedom necessary to create.

Fondane’s poetics was not in search of answers. He realized that the joy of existence consists in our continual search rather than a presumptuous explanation of the meaning of life.

Benjamin Fondane was gassed in Auschwitz in 1944 two weeks before the camp’s liberation.

## BENJAMIN FONDANE

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## PART ONE: THE POETICS OF BENJAMIN FONDANE AND HIS LIFE

### CH. I : BEGINNINGS

The goal of this study is to analyze Benjamin Fondane's literary works while presenting their importance today. As an existential thinker, and disciple of the Russian philosopher, Léon Shestov, Benjamin Fondane focused on metaphysical questions concerning the problematic concept of existence. Fondane was not only a poet but also a philosopher, a dramaturge, cinematographer, and literary critic. We will present what we feel is essentially the most important aspect of his writings, the focus of this study being poetry and the way it relates to existential thought. Other aspects of Benjamin Fondane's creative endeavors will also be presented yet mostly in relationship to his poetics. In order for Benjamin Fondane to become more accessible to the American reader, translations of his most important works will be included; these translations will constitute the most comprehensive collection of his works in English.

#### 1. A Summary

We begin with a short summary of the chapters to follow. Chapter One deals with the elements of writing which were depicted in his early Roumanian verse, bucolic or expressionistic; they already centered on ideas of existential thought such as the absurd, the persecution of Jews, suffering and "le cri"- the cry against injustice. In Chapter II, The Metamorphosis of a Roumanian Writer in Paris, existential thought becomes a passage out of the idealism of his Roumanian writings. Once in Paris, Fondane joins in with the dada and the

surrealist movements without finding these voices to be essential to his own comprehension of literary creation. Meeting with Léon Shestov gives Fondane the voice he was searching for: that of the poet whose goal is to question the meaning of suffering while following an inner spiritual journey. Existential thought is then incorporated in Fondane's works and it becomes a way of questioning the mystery of life.

Chapter III, Surrealism and Fondane, presents Fondane's explorations into Surrealism, and the application of Surrealism to cinema; he develops the idea of the pure film which he will later on apply to the cinematographic productions of "Rapt" and "Tararira". His first publications in French are also introduced in this chapter; they are two collections of poems, Trois Scenarii Cinépoèmes and Ulysse. A collection of surrealist poems, Trois Scenarii Cinépoèmes contains elements of the absurd intertwined with visual images which lead to the realization of the cinematographic poem - neither poem nor film. Ulysse also contains elements of Surrealism in its poems, yet the poet's main voyage into the unknown essence of existence is the journey of a poet and philosopher of existential thought.

In Chapter IV, Rimbaud le Voyou, we are presenting Fondane's interpretation of the poet as a vagabond. Fondane claims that it is the vagabond who brings forth the essential elements clarifying Rimbaud's works and life. At the same time, this study is a critique of Surrealism - a literary movement which misunderstood Rimbaud (according to Fondane).

Fondane's philosophy and poetics of existential thought are presented in:

Chapter V, Reflections of Existential Thought. The key concepts of existential thought being existence as well as transcendence, this philosophy distinguishes itself by being spiritual in nature. It is a poetics which struggles to free itself from established thought by centering all questions on the meaning of existence, and by placing the existent at the core of life itself. We illustrate one example of established thought: people's limited interpretation of life's events as being either positive or negative. In order to escape such limiting thoughts, we must accept the fact that reason alone is not sufficient, and that neither life nor death can be explained through logic -objective in nature, reason and logic lack spiritual depth. Ultimately, life must be understood via the soul.

Chapters VI and VII present the living testimonies of two writers who knew Fondane personally. The former, Meeting with Emil Cioran, is an interview with the noted Roumanian philosopher who gave me a more thorough understanding of Benjamin Fondane - the writer and human being. Cioran explains that Fondane was a modest, noble man, fascinated with the tragic because of the extreme historic times in which he was engaged. Cioran states that all the people who knew Fondane "felt a special presence", and were attracted by his theories; their content was "ouvermé" because of placing questions at the center of his philosophy rather than looking for an ideal answer. Regarding the religious significance of his writings, Cioran explains that Fondane was "detached from religion" as we understand it; for our poet "being religious was a way of surpassing this world" with questions of existential thought. We also gain much insight into Fondane's life when reading the statements of the noted British

surrealist poet, David Gascoyne. Chapter VII, Interview with David Gascoyne, clarifies such issues as the reason for which Fondane opted to break away from Surrealism. According to Gascoyne, Fondane was a “clenched fist” ready to point his finger at life’s injustices. Both the Surrealists and the existential thinkers fought against suffering yet the Surrealists did not see the need for spirituality. To Fondane life is meaningful when it relates to the spirit and when it questions the state of suffering in which it was abandoned; one has to acknowledge the need for change.

As for the concluding chapter, we follow Fondane’s motto which is to leave the reader with an open-ended discussion. We present The Short Biography of Benjamin Fondane as an Appendix; it gives the poet his own voice as some of his ideas and life decisions are presented. Although his great desire was to become a famous writer, Fondane recognized the privilege of being unknown, the privilege of not having to compromise his ideas. Our poet did not write for art’s sake; his poetics aimed for freedom: that of emigrants, Jews, and all independent thinkers who believe in humanitarian issues. Fondane’s life ended in Auschwitz because he refused to part with those he loved, and because he had faith that the Nazi regime would soon come to an end. In fact, the camp was liberated two weeks after his death.

## 2. Benjamin Fundoianu in Roumania

Benjamin Fondane was born Benjamin Wechsler in 1898, in Iași - in the region of Moldavia. According to Paul Daniel, who wrote the preface to his first collection of poems, Privești, he knew that his destiny was to be a writer when he was just eight years old: "It appears to me that writing poetry should not be an exceptional state of life. It should be, for every man, a part of his natural way of life."<sup>1</sup> Benjamin Wechsler's childhood was cradled by a warm cultural environment. His mother, Adela Schwartzfeld, recited poetry while she so often sang to her young child, and although Fundoianu never met his grandfather, Benjamin Schwartzfeld, he avidly read all of the books inherited from him. In order to better understand how the author's writings were a portrayal of his life, the Jewish link -ethnic and religious, will be crucial to our analysis. The maneuvers of the antisemitic organizations and the grave economic crisis which affected Roumania in 1899-1900 had ill-fated consequences...an emigration movement that had begun in 1899 suddenly became a real exodus..."<sup>2</sup> declares Carol Iancu in his study, Les Juifs en Roumanie. We know for example that many Jews, who were escaping on foot, were forced to return home where the possibility of survival was very slim. Fundoianu witnessed some of these tragic events:

"Every night waiting for the same carriage

unloading the same Jews - they are returning.

At home we know of the boats departing for New York

and the shore where the ocean has unloaded our limbs."<sup>3</sup>

This is a poem he wrote in 1922, and it is part of a series of poems entitled "Hertza"; Hertza is a Roumanian town (in Moldavia) which holds all of Fundoianu's childhood memories. The town of Hertza is only a few kilometers away from Fundoaia - a region of Moldavia that had once belonged to the Weschler family (at the time when Benjamin Weschler was born, its name was only a memory). In 1912, Benjamin Weschler published his first poems under the name of "I.G.Ofir", and in 1914 he adopted the name of "Fondoianu" which later on became "Fundoianu". While Fundoianu's Jewish origin will be a major factor in his development as a writer, the poet's link to his Roumanian background will also constitute an essential part of his poetics.

As a youngster, Fundoianu wrote poetry and kept a journal entitled Pages from a Confessional. His first poems were then read and recognized by the Roumanian symbolist poet Ion Minulescu. Minulescu deeply appreciated French literature and he shared his interest with his young friend. European writers and philosophers were often the center of their discussions and literary critiques. Minulescu helped him publish his first poems and articles. Fundoianu's literary beginnings were not easy: "...the seven articles which I was publishing every week in order not to earn my bread, does Aderca know how many hours of the day and of the night were necessary in order to prepare them?"<sup>4</sup> Fundoianu was influenced by many foreign authors but he also followed in the footsteps of his own Roumanian predecessors. The following few verses from Priveleşti were influenced by the poetry of the symbolist poet Mihail Eminescu, celebrated as one of Roumania's best poets:

“See how white is the night, the stars have fallen out...  
 Almost white the skin of the woods in the moon;  
 the lunar silence, the violet of the moon  
 and crosses mark the place where the stars have fallen.”<sup>5</sup>

The imagery of the “stars”, which appears in this poem -dating from 1917, is the main element that characterizes Eminescu’s famous poem entitled “Luceafărul” - the “North Star”. This poem identifies the spiritual search of the poet with the “North Star” as the immanent presence of everlasting life in the universe. What we are trying to establish here is the development of Fundoianu’s early poetry, the poetic movements he had followed, and the ways in which we can define it. Bucolic imagery was very often used by Fundoianu and with it he brought the beauty of his native country into the being of the poem; here are some verses he wrote when he was eighteen years old:

“White flowers on trees; they are sleeping as many women do,  
 I look for them only in passing.  
 Like Diogenes, forehead in my hands I shout:  
 Should all trees have such splendid fruits!”<sup>6</sup>

However, as one continues the reading of this poem, one encounters surprising elements of a different nature:

“When I die, if ever, I will no longer see them under the willow tree,  
 and in the night to follow flickering with wolves,  
 a passing naive stranger might step on me  
 just when the body earth again will be.”<sup>7</sup>

Dumitru Micu, who wrote the preface to Poezii (Poems)-a posthumous collection of poems published in 1983, points out the "desolate imagery" of a writer who has gone beyond mere lyricism. And Marin Bucur, who wrote Priveleştile poeziei (The imagery of poetics) -a thorough analysis of Fundoianu's poetry, mentions the fact that the "bovarysme" of Jules de Gaultier was also present in Fundoianu's early verse showing: "...how the relationship of ethics and esthetics functions -from the point of view of creation, of harmony and discord between what morality holds and what the arts offer..."<sup>8</sup> Bovarysme was closely bound to the "imaginary", the discord presenting itself between the imagery of the unreal and that of mere reality. Defining Fundoianu's early poetry as nothing more than bucolic is not accurate since the element of "bovarysme" is also present in his works. This element will later on lead his poetics into the realm of existential thought.

It is also important to note Ovid Chromalniceanu's theory which defines Fundoianu's early poetry as expressionistic: "...just like in the works of the German and Austrian poets Heym or Trakl, expressionistic grimaces suddenly place shadows on the visage of nature."<sup>9</sup> Regardless of the various influences that are recognized in Fundoianu's early poetry, what distinguishes his Roumanian poems is the unique set of characteristics mentioned above ;they subject the reader to the contemplation of intense human suffering such as the portrayal of Jews in "Hertza" or the acknowledgement of death. These traits will prevail in his later writings.

In Roumania, Fundoianu wrote a great number of literary essays focusing

mostly on foreign texts. The poet was a well-read intellectual whose interests rose above the horizons of his own country. In a unique and personal way, he incorporated some of these writers' ideas and theories. Nevertheless, this is not to say that Fundoianu did not also appreciate some of the writers of his own country; the poet Tudor Arghezi for example. In his book Introduction to the Masterpieces of B.Fundoianu, Mircea Martin signals that Benjamin Fundoianu admired Tudor Arghezi at the time when Arghezi's exceptional talent was not yet recognized. In Fundoianu's own words: "We like Arghezi and yet he irritates us, he devastates us and he fills us with disgust; for nowhere is the diamond more corrupt on the ashes, and the caterpillar more attached to its leaf" 10. The devastating act of the metaphysical representation of human suffering is what Fundoianu extracts from Arghezi and later on preserves in his own poetics; in the following verses we can feel how Fundoianu accentuates the same elements (found in Arghezi's poems) at an even deeper level:

"And men again passing through one more day, mediocre,  
and with a knife the daylight he is stabbing.

-But if you can, look here, in the baking of the earth,  
under the kneeling flame at the head of the night,  
there is the unknown, terrible figure of force."<sup>11</sup>

Roumanian critics tend to define Fundoianu's early poetry in very definite terms yet Fundoianu's last Roumanian verses were written in his early twenties. After his permanent move to France in 1923, many changes occurred in Fundoianu's poetry.

In 1922, Fundoianu published Cărți si Imagini din Franța (Books and Images from France) , a study of the most distinguished French writers of the time and a disturbing presence to the mind of the young poet; he felt that Roumanian literature was only a poor imitation of its influence from abroad: "Not having a literary past, nor a tradition, we borrowed from everywhere, we assimilated and we assimilated badly."<sup>12</sup> This was a statement Fundoianu made in the book's preface which he entitled "Lămurire" meaning "explanation". Although its apologetic title was only ironical, one should not underestimate the value of the entire book which contains interesting articles of exceptional talent. Needless to say, the Roumanian public did not appreciate this book. We are going to analyze the reasons which might have brought Fundoianu to such extreme conclusions. In La Poésie roumaine contemporaine (written in 1934), Mario Roques points out that the history of Roumanian literature was only approximately one hundred years old: "Roumanian poetry does not have a long history, I understand by that literary, artistic poetry, and not that coming from Roumanian folklore..."<sup>13</sup> In this case literature is understood only within the boundaries of the written literary text. Fundoianu's definition of literature is based on the assumption that literature refers to written human expression which had reached an unsurpassable plateau: "...can this new literature be more mystical than that of Claudel, Jammes, Peguy, the ultimate of symbolism? Could it be deeper and more human than that of Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy?"<sup>14</sup> Fondane assumes that one cannot write any better than these writers have done already, and when he states this, he also includes the Roumanian writers he

admired at the time.

It is certain that Fundoianu's declaration in "Lămurire" was strictly a reference to the written literary text. Yet for us it is also necessary to acknowledge the old historic religious texts, which were considered to have literary value; in his book, The History of Old Roumanian Literature, N. Cartoian mentions that up until the middle of the seventeenth century "...the written text first appears in the holy texts and then shapes itself as a literary language..."<sup>15</sup> Fundoianu's notion of literature did not include this very important aspect of Roumanian culture yet he did acknowledge the uniqueness of the Roumanian spirit and folklore. In an article he writes about Paul Claudel, he mentions the legend of "Meșterul Manole" (Master Manole): it is the story of a carpenter who had to build a monastery and whatever he built during the day would fall apart at night. The only way he was able to complete his job was by cementing his own pregnant wife within the walls of the monastery thus putting an end to his own spiritual life. The symbolism seen by Fundoianu in this old Roumanian legend was that of the conflict between life and poetry and the sacrifice it takes to dedicate one's life to the arts: "Any drama must be that of Manole's tragedy. It must exist not as an action but as the symbolic conflict between life and poetry - between life and the arts."<sup>16</sup>

Another explanation for the declaration Fundoianu makes in the preface of Cărți și Imagini din Franța, is his intense desire to be known as a writer; he realized that those who expressed themselves in French were able to gain universal attention. Fundoianu's extreme comments criticizing the status of

Roumanian literature were nevertheless followed by many articles containing outstanding representations of Roumanian authors. Fundoianu praised Mihail Eminescu and Tudor Arghezi especially for the fact that they were both Roumanian writers who had been able to maintain their authenticity in spite of the increased influence from abroad: "A writer is not judged by his ideas. He is known according to what he creates with the language."<sup>17</sup> And when he states that, it is not the uniqueness of the French literary movements that counts but rather unique talent that persists in spite of its origin; Fundoianu also refers to himself: "Those of us new writers, we borrow material from France -today's correspondent. We call ourselves symbolists, because we need a label of some kind. A school does not protect anyone and it does not have any force. Talent is the only form of selection."<sup>18</sup>

We mentioned already that Fundoianu's reputation as a writer was well established when he left Roumania in 1923; for this reason alone, it is important to understand some of the factors which made him decide to move to France. His admiration for the West was more than obvious yet there was one other personal matter: his sister Line had moved to Austria. He was very attached to Line and once abroad, he will very much remain part of her life. Other disappointments might have been at the core of his decision to emigrate: the way his book, Cărți și Imagini din Franța had been received -the only publication which had not been appreciated by Roumanian critics, the financial difficulties he had with his theatrical company, "Insula", and last but not least, the rising antisemitic movement in Roumania.

In order to better understand Fondane's beginnings as an author in Roumania, it is important to analyze his theatrical concept. The opening performance of his company, "Insula", was a presentation of Maeterlinck's "Death of Tentagiles". It was an avant-garde representation which was similar to Antonin Artaud's theater, and it was received with much acclaim. Monique Jutrin points out that Maeterlinck's verse was "un théâtre sans parole" -similar in a way to what will later develop in Fundoianu's poetry, that is the existential cry of human suffering. The "Death of Tentagiles" is a play that represents death as the dark force of life, impossible to separate from the positive experience of life. Fundoianu wrote two plays for his theater company: "Balthazar's Feast" and "Philoctetes" -they are similar in character to that of Maeterlinck's plays. "Balthazar's Feast" will be the only one that will be staged at "Insula". He would rewrite both of these plays in France. In "Le Festin de Balthazar" we have people and life represented as masks: Reason, Folly, Spirit, and Death. In an unpublished manuscript, Fundoianu describes the main character of the play: Balthazar (king and son of Nabuchodonosor), who would not mind being punished in order to attain God, offends and provokes him in order to oblige him to appear but his effort is to no avail: "Balthazar, qui voudrait être puni pour pouvoir toucher Dieu, a beau l'offenser, le provoquer, pour l'obliger à se montrer; Dieu est devenu opaque; il est redevenu le deus absconditus de Pascal...le dieu caché" 19. Balthazar's nostalgia lies in the contemplation of the Golden Age when miracles were still possible; desperately he cries out at the end of the play:

“what will men do  
if they are forced -forced -to become God?”<sup>20</sup>

Fundoianu started writing this play in Roumania in 1922, and then finished it in 1932 - in Paris. World War II gave a tragic answer to Balthazar’s mystical question.

“Le Festin de Balthazar” was read by his close friend and mentor, Léon Shestov. And we have Shestov’s reaction to this play in Rencontres avec Léon Chestov :”...il me semble que c’eut été mieux de faire voir que, pour Balthazar, sa victoire était plutôt son échec”<sup>21</sup>. According to Shestov, king Balthazar’s triumph should have been presented as a failure. Daniel is the character who represents the ordinary human being who has learned to lead a life freed of any totalitarian system; his respect and love for humanity does not need the constant teachings of an absent God. Thus the “miracle” of the Golden Age had been replaced by the presence of the goodness of mankind - found in Daniel.

In “Philoctetes”, we are dealing with the mythological representation of suffering in the incarnation of the exiled king, Philoctetes:

“I was thrown here, suffering the weight of the world  
on my shoulders - and I continued to live  
I gave up wanting a reckoning  
I tamed my desires and my doubts  
I triumphed over myself  
and asked for nothing -  
I killed my suffering, and you don’t care! stone!”<sup>22</sup>

The existential nature of these texts is evident and in a later chapter we will devote a major part of our analysis to this important aspect in Fundoianu's literary development.

"Peter's Denial" is another play he wrote in Roumania; it is a play that presents the absurdity of life when one has to comply with someone else's belief while being tortured. Peter is one of the disciples of Jesus and the verses which depict the act of unfaithfulness towards God - the actual wording of the denial, alternate with his prayer. Ultimately, the reader is the witness to the torment that men inflict upon men in the name of God. And Peter's cry against injustice and suffering will resurface in many of Fundoianu's later poems.

Fundoianu leaves Roumania to pursue his dream of becoming a well-recognized author. In France Benjamin Fundoianu will become Benjamin Fondane yet in spite of many transformations, he will remember his origins, and the poet's native roots will forever be inscribed in the spirit of his poetics.

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Cardozo Studies in Law and Literature 6.1 (1994): 3-49.

## CH.II: A ROUMANIAN WRITER IN PARIS

In France, Fundoianu's writings show the same strength of character as in Roumania, yet a metamorphosis occurs: Benjamin Fundoianu becomes Benjamin Fondane. He is recognized as a French author while his Jewish and Roumanian roots continue to play an important role. In this chapter we will try to understand what happens in the poet's life as he undergoes this major transformation. How did he really feel when he first moved to Paris in 1923, and how did the nature of his writing change? A great admirer of many French authors, he was not a follower of dada or Surrealism although he was influenced by both of these movements. Fondane decided to follow the teachings of Léon Shestov - the noted existential philosopher of Russian origin, whom he had admired for many years in Roumania: "...no one other than Shestov (or maybe Baudelaire with some of his poems) has been able to continue Pascal's thoughts -since they had been interrupted three hundred years ago." <sup>1</sup> He meets Léon Shestov in 1924 and he becomes a friend and disciple of the existential philosopher. Fundoianu undergoes a metamorphosis, that of all emigrant writers; nevertheless, while Fondane's poetry will attain a unique mode of expression, part of him will always be known as Fundoianu.

In Roumania, Fondane was able to justify existence through poetry and he had faith in the splendor of aesthetics. Once in Paris, four years of silence followed. Since the language was not really a barrier, it is evident that the voice

of the poet was going through a crisis, and Jules de Gaultier's theory, that of Bovarysme (note Fondane's article, "Jules de Gaultier in the Arts"), was important for Benjamin Fondane since he was so far removed from his origins, and he had to envision many transformations. Fondane awakened from the deep sleep of idealism, and began to incorporate existential thought into his own poetics : "De cette ivresse, à l'époque ou je rencontrai Chestov, je m'étais délivré tout seul. Mon passage à travers l'idéalisme fut bref"<sup>2</sup>. At the time of his arrival in Paris, Surrealism was gaining more and more recognition yet Fondane tried a different path. An inner journey had begun and later on revealed itself to be the new poetics of Benjamin Fondane.

The nostalgia he felt for his severed roots became evident as he engaged in the publication of Privești (Landscapes) - the complete collection of his Roumanian poems. Privești was published in Bucharest in 1930, and Fundoianu dedicated this book's preface to an unknown poet- no longer living. In fact he was referring to himself: the Roumanian poet he had once been, the poet he could no longer be: "The present volume pertains to a dead poet who in 1923 was about twenty-four years old. Since then there is no trace of him on the continent. Those who saw him somewhere at the movies, or in the office of an insurance company, met a cold person who had no feelings for his present life and no tears about a past in which he had invested the energy needed for a meaningful life."<sup>3</sup> The preface to this book was published seven years after his arrival in Paris -when he had already begun to write and publish in France, yet he was still reminiscing about his past. After this acute crisis, Fondane resumed

his life as a poet with the first French publication entitled Trois scenarii - cinépoèmes (published in 1928).

Although from 1923 to 1927, Fondane did not publish anything in France, he contributed many articles to Roumanian literary magazines such as "Unu", "Integral" (in close collaboration with Tristan Tzara), and "Adevărul literar si artistic". When reading one of these articles, we can observe how the writer's thoughts were developing. For example, in his article, "Surrealists and the revolution" -published in "Integral" in 1927, he expresses his dissatisfaction with the surrealist ideology, an ideology he considered to be a "metaphysics of self-interest". Fondane is against the association of poetry and politics, an ideology which he believes can destroy the very freedom ingrained in the essence of poetry: "Qu'une recherche de l'esprit si radicale, si extrême, méprisant toute thérapeutique, aboutisse à une solution, trouve une discipline qui satisfasse pleinement son besoin d'anarchie, s'accorde avec le réel sur un programme de déterminisme historique - en l'espèce de Marx - il y a de quoi s'étonner plus que d'une ville prise ou d'un raz de marée"<sup>4</sup>. In Roumania, due to his extreme appreciation for French literature, Fondane would not have been able to criticize a famous writer such as André Breton, but in France he fully understood the problems associated with the surrealist movement. In the same article, "Les surréalistes et la révolution", one can gain some insight into his new poetics inspired by Shestov's existential philosophy: "nous voulons que la poésie supplante la Raison (we wish for poetry to supplant Reason)"<sup>5</sup>. For both Shestov and Fondane, poetry was mainly an experience of the spirit which could

not relate to a pragmatic element such as "Reason". Since its source is found outside the spirit, "Reason" has been unable to enlighten men; one might say that Shestov and Fondane believed in Blaise Pascal's aphorism: "Le coeur a ses raisons que la raison ne connaît point; on le sait en mille choses"<sup>6</sup>. What Pascal was saying is that true light comes from within and there is no need for a rational explanation in order for it to exist.

During these years of silence the nature of Fondane's readings changed: he read more and more philosophy as his friendship with Shestov became stronger. One such important reading is mentioned in an article he wrote in memory of Léon Shestov: "Sur les rives de l'Ilissus -Après la mort de Léon Chestov" about Henri Bergson. Fondane found Shestov's answer to be the most remarkable; for example, when Shestov centers all life's experiences around "ce moi réel, ce moi vivant" (this real me, this me who is alive), he relates it to the drama of the human being making it the focus of his interest, and accepting it in its fullness with all its imperfections and unique disparities ; the absurd then becomes a natural development of being alive. According to Fondane, Shestov incorporated the absurd in his philosophy while Bergson limited himself to a definition presenting the absurd in terms of its estrangement; in Shestov's words: <<There comes a moment where any individual can lose his assurance, and can no longer control his life; due to his "character", he becomes desperate, and clings to the absurd: it is then that his true personality becomes apparent...>> 7. Aside from Bergson, Fondane read many other writers and he mentions some of these authors in his book, Rencontres avec Léon Chestov :

Søren Kierkegaard, Martin Buber, Friedrich Nietzsche, Lucien Levy-Bruhl, etc.

Trois scénarii-cinépèmes is a collection of surrealist, cinematographic poems ; it has a special illustration of Benjamin Fondane by the noted photographer Man Ray. The preface, "2 X 2", refers to cinema as the new, exciting medium of the times. In this preface, we note Fondane's struggle as he was redefining the meaning of his own poetics: "C'est qu'une partie de moi-même que la poésie refoulait, pour pouvoir poser ses propres questions, angoissantes, vient de trouver dans le cinéma un haut parleur à toute épreuve. Que vaut-elle? mais que vaud-je?"<sup>8</sup>. He continues by arguing that a writer no longer writes for himself but rather in order to touch the other -like a telephone receiver; creativity then becomes a sort of "faux appui". Fondane was then in search of a different path and he despised "l'esprit de l'échelle" - the idea of becoming a complete writer only and if recognized by the public. This same idea is expressed in the article "Interview avec moi-même": "...être connu, c'est déjà avoir choisi, c'est avoir un visage, c'est avoir une fausse attitude, c'est déjà déraisonner face au public." <sup>9</sup> It is obvious from this statement that he was not interested only in fame or in following what was popular at the time.

Fondane could not accept the idea of finality when referring to art and literature, explains Michel Carassou in Ecrits pour le cinéma: "son refus de finalités prêtées à l'art et à la littérature le rendirent très proche du mouvement dada dont il ne pouvait manquer de percevoir les échos à Bucharest..."<sup>10</sup>. Although the dada movement appealed to him, he had the need to go beyond the recognition of the end of a literary era which had become obsolete; he could

not give up creativity as a means of expression, and he went on writing poetry which was in tune with his own times. The cinematographic poems he then wrote, Cinépoèmes, are not meant to be filmed, and we can then wonder whether or not they are meant to be read. In any case, they are a testimony to the surrealist period in Fondane's creativity ; here is a sample of these surreal thoughts which are all numbered:

- "1 une ombre court le long d'un mur mal éclairé sur lequel court parallèlement une main indicatrice blanche
- 2 une autre ombre sur le même mur la main indicatrice court dans le sens contraire
- 3 la tête d'un réverbère à deux bougies deux flammes dont le regard humain
- 4 plonge désespérément dans la nuit éclairant d'un réflecteur mobile à droite et à gauche des formes ternes: enseignes vitrines hésite sur...." II

In the pursuit of his own poetics, Fondane decided to mend his own path just like the poets who adhered to the "Grand Jeu" -a literary movement which was condemned by surrealists although it had been their prime source of inspiration. Fondane was never a member of "Le Grand Jeu" but his friends Claude Sernet and Monny de Bouilly were members of this literary movement which had a brief existence -it lasted from 1928 to 1930. It is important to mention for its unique and popular ideas, some of which Fondane incorporated in his own poetics. In his study on René Daumal, the leader of "Le Grand Jeu",

Jean Bies refers to the three most important ideas which defined the group's ideology: "... the process of rationalism, limited to the obvious; the search for the "absolute word", giving language its intuitive character and its original power, and to poetry its value- that of the spiritual exercise; the rediscovery of religion as a fact and in its complete purity, thus dismissing a metaphysics in action..."<sup>12</sup> We will note in Fondane's poetics, over and over again, his discontent with the idea of "reason", what he actually called "speculative thought" and its relationship to the absurd. As for the search of meaningful verse, Fondane will never lose faith in poetry and in its redeeming qualities. According to him, its truth has not been subjected to the fluctuations of history: "...ces évidences des poètes n'ont pas subi les fluctuations de l'histoire, n'ont pas connu les lendemain pénibles...: elles ont survécu, survivent et survivront"<sup>13</sup>. The third element mentioned by Jean Bies is that of the spiritual and we shall see how Fondane's poetics relates to the biblical stories of Abraham and Job.

Benjamin Fondane was a member of the literary movement "Discontinuité" which was led by his two friends, Arthur Adamov and Claude Sernet. It was founded in 1928 and it had a very brief existence. However, Fondane continued to implement the basic concept of "Discontinuité" in his later works. Michel Carassou explains that the world appeared as discontinuous to those who adhered to this movement, and that after the 1917 Russian revolution, it became evident to the members of this association that the concept of revolution was not capable of transforming men in a radical way: "la révolution semblait incapable de promouvoir une transformation radicale de l'homme"<sup>14</sup>.

Fondane was against an association of literature and politics; for him the only possible hope of changing the world was through the creative mind of the poet, and through a metaphysical transformation of the human soul which valued, most of all, freedom of thought, and freedom of expression.

"Philoctète"\*, the dramatic poem which he started to write in Roumania in 1922, was rewritten several times in France without ever being published. It reveals the author's state of mind during the years of his metamorphosis in France. The translator, Eric Freedman, remarks that Philoctetes "is the mirror of the poet in exile and in solitude"<sup>15</sup>. In fact, Fondane depicts Sophocles' hero at the point where he finds himself immobilized on a deserted island. The silence of this isolation leads Philoctetes to an inner search which makes him reflect upon the metaphysical essence of life:

"A day will no doubt come -that of Judgement!

but who is he who will judge

who is he who in the flame

.....

will teach us through death

the darkened meaning of life

Who?" 16

Similarly, Fondane follows the interior light of a spiritual voyage which questions the essence of existence. In his book, The Exile of the Word, André Néher

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<sup>1</sup> \*Note: This play was translated into English and published in 1992 in "Cardozo Studies in Law and Literature" - a special number on Benjamin Fondane.

makes the following profound statement about the significance of silence: "Through silence the world regains the seriousness of its essence and the intrinsic value of each of its components." 17 And silence was the key to the transformations Fondane chose to experience by moving to France. It was the only way he could rise above his previous understanding of life and its interpretation through poetry. Fondane's dramatic poem concludes with Neoptolemus who accepts the sword of the dying hero, Philoctetes; he then knows that his wishes will be carried out by his disciple, Neoptolemus. In a similar manner, Benjamin Fondane will become Shestov's spiritual heir.

While writing "Philoctète" Fondane meets the Russian philosopher Léon Shestov (at Jules de Gaultier's house) who was then living in Paris. What a surprise it must have been to have the honor of knowing Shestov personally: "Mon émotion fut vive, et telle je l'exprimai, je crois." 18 While exchanging ideas with his young friend, Shestov felt that he was truly communicating with Fondane. It is Léon Shestov who points out the importance and significance of the biblical stories of Abraham and Job, and this was a major topic of discussion between the two thinkers. Another very important acquaintance is that of Constantin Brâncuși ; Fondane writes an article praising the Roumanian sculptor. It compares his works with those of Mallarmé: "N'écrire qu'un seul poème, toujours le même, ambition qui faisait l'angoisse de Mallarmé et sa tentation, voici que Brâncuși le réalise, il ne touche à l'absolu qu'à travers une série infinie d'imperfections légitimes..." 19 Unfortunately, their friendship was short lived due to their different political views and the rise of fascism in France.

In 1967 the renowned French poet, Yves Bonnefoy, wrote an introduction to Shestov's book Athènes et Jérusalem and this is how he explains Shestov's philosophy: <<...pour Chestov il est évident que ces "horreurs" de l'existence de l'homme ne sont en fait que les coups que Dieu lui porte, non pour qu'il souffre, mais qu'il s'éveille>><sup>20</sup> ; according to Shestov, continues Yves Bonnefoy, "Le pouvoir de Dieu, et de l'homme confiant en Dieu, c'est de réaliser à chaque instant une plénitude, sans chercher à "connaître", qui est le mal>><sup>21</sup>. In fact Western civilization is not the only one to acknowledge this truth; today, Deepak Chopra, whose philosophy is based on Hinduism, remarks the same thing: "the world of good and bad, right and wrong, light and shadow" <sup>22</sup> is only an illusion, real only to those whose identity is defined by their ego rather than their spirit. Nevertheless, as Fondane rose above the dichotomy of good and evil, he focused on the need to awaken from the apathy and comfort of those who dismiss the presence of suffering, his existential poetic cry being an echo of Blaise Pascal's agony.

The existential philosophical thought must not be confused with the literary movement entitled Existentialism. The most important characteristic of existential philosophical thought is the intense preoccupation with existence, and what it might signify on a metaphysical level. In Ulysse- the first collection of poems that Fondane published in France (in 1933), there is a poem dedicated to Shestov; in this poem Fondane praises the philosopher for his unique spirit and daring character. Existential thought, as it was understood by Shestov, and later by Fondane, has the ability to awaken men from their lethargic state so that they

may act, and bring about change in the present state of existence. Here are some verses attesting to these ideas:

“peu importe l'esprit qui n'a soif que de soi  
 qui bascule au tangage, que le roulis jette à terre,  
 mais qui ne peut incliner l'axe de l'océan  
 ni découvrir un monde  
 craignant de rien changer au sens des Ecritures.”<sup>23</sup>

In his essay, Faux traité d'esthétique (published in 1938), Fondane defined his new poetics; he states that beauty alone must not be the goal of poetry since the essential lies in the message of the poem. In Fondane's poetry, this message is connected with existential philosophy: <<I shall never stop shouting that existential thought is real, and not a “joyful act of sensitiveness”>><sup>24</sup>. The special character of this new poetics can be observed in Faux traité d'esthétique as he dared criticize the surrealist movement, and the idea of complete negation in poetry: “Qui eut cru que ce qui avait été la négation totale de la poésie, nous sera présenté un jour comme une affirmation non moins totale, comme le suprême moyen d'atteindre les plus hauts sommets de la poésie?”<sup>25</sup>. Fondane declared that poetry is a natural phenomenon and only through the experience of writing, can the poet sense his own existence. It is of utmost importance for the poet to believe in poetry, and in its powerful, magical message ;the existential poet can do so without denying the presence of chaos -so much cherished by surrealist thought.

In 1929, Fondane embarked on a long voyage to South America where he

had been invited by Victoria Ocampo, an Argentinian writer. There Fondane gave a few lectures on the topic of Surrealism and film. Most of Ulysse was composed on this voyage. The collection of poems Ulysse attests to the poet's search for adventure. Just like Ulysses, Fondane's spiritual discovery will be marked by the seriousness of existential thought; during his wandering adventures, he perceives Ithaca from a distance yet he decides not to return there "Car la trouvaille est, par elle-même, une limite"<sup>26</sup>. Fondane is no longer pursuing answers as was the case in his dramatic poem "Philoctète". Any answer would be a limitation and just like Ulysses he avoids returning to his previous ideology. While following the teachings of existential philosophy, he continues his quest as a poet and existential thinker, and this search is marked by a constant questioning of the mystery of life:

"Rameurs d'une vieille fiction,  
 (quand donc finira le périple?)  
 nous naviguons dans le multiple  
 pays de la malédiction.

Ô mère cruelle, Existence!  
 Quelle louve, pour ses petits,  
 eut plus d'ovaires dans la panse,  
 et moins de lait dedans ses pis?"<sup>27</sup>

Ulysse is a tribute to the memory of his native land. Just like Ulysses, while searching for new meaning, in a new world, Fondane has the need to

remember his life in Roumania:

“ville de petits juifs accrochés à l’air  
 les trottoirs étaient des rubans sales,  
 j’étouffais de bonheur, de dégoût,  
 ça sentait le pain frais et le hareng salé  
 l’amour sentait la bouse humide...

.....  
 j’ai chanté tout cela, mais je voulais partir...”<sup>28</sup>

In other poems he remembers his father who is at his side, always present within his own soul with eyes as beautiful as the corn of the Moldavian land. The image of the father represents the Divine:

“...et Jérusalem n’était-il que symbole et que fable  
 de ce havre qu’on cherche et qui est introuvable?  
 Mon père, c’est cela qui te rend misérable.  
 Tu penses à ton jeune garçon que tu as emmené au voyage,  
 qui est si gentil en marin, mais si bête pour son âge,

.....  
 il ne comprend rien à ce meeting de fantômes.”<sup>29</sup>

It is clear that this is a poem which addresses the question of his identity as a Jew. As a young boy growing up in Roumania, he had witnessed the emigration of the Jews who no longer wished to live under the miserable conditions of those times. Now, in France, he was experiencing the loss of the hope he had felt in Roumania: that of finding comfort and meaning as a Jewish emigrant. In

Ulysse, we sense the feeling of loss and exile, that of the emigrant and his sorrow.

“Emigrants, diamants de la terre, sel sauvage,  
je suis de votre race,  
j’emporte comme vous ma vie dans ma valise,  
je mange comme vous le pain de mon angoisse,  
je ne demande plus quel est le sens du monde...”<sup>30</sup>

Ulysse marks the beginning of the new poetics of Benjamin Fondane. On this voyage he feels the loss of his paternal father as well as that of a divine explanation of the world. The pain and suffering no longer fit in a “reasonable world” as he understood it in his Roumanian verse. And in fact he is going to remain on the threshold of the “question” as being the only means of comprehending existence. That is not to say that Fondane’s poetics will become that of an atheist for the existential development of his poems will sustain itself through the opened mind of the poet and philosopher who refuses to limit its essence to any answer. His verse will comprehend more and more questions always leading to other questions.

In conclusion, we would like to underline the fact that Shestov’s existential philosophy has transformed Fondane’s poetry in such a way that it enables us to better understand the suffering associated with past and present historic events as well as the nature of existence itself. The duty of the existential poet is to question the meaning of suffering, while following an inner-spiritual voyage

which only poems can express. "He agonized over each question, and he despised answers...His vision of the world appeared as a form of interrogation" 31 declares Emil Cioran. Through this continuous cycle of questioning, Fondane entered a unique realm of truth, that of the essence of the circle of life itself.

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### CH. III: SURREALISM AND FONDANE

Fondane integrated Surrealism in his own poetics: “OUVRONS DONC L'ERE DES SCENARII INTOURNABLES. Un peu de l'étonnante beauté du foetus s'y trouvera”<sup>1</sup>, exclaims the poet in the preface to Trois scenarii - cinépoèmes. Fondane was determined to express the unspoken, to attain the impossible, and make poetry the center of artistic expression in the same manner that a newborn is the center of life. Throughout his entire career as a writer, Fondane dealt with topics revolving or centering on Surrealism : his first publication in France, Trois scenarii - cinépoèmes (1928), his literary critique, Rimbaud le voyou (1933), his essay Faux traité d'esthétique (1938), and his collections of poems, Titanic (1937) and Ulysse (1944). Fondane also wrote the scripts to Rapt (1934) and Tararira (1936), movies which were influenced by Surrealism; they were produced in Argentina. A posthumous collection of essays on cinéma, Ecrits pour le cinéma, was published in France in 1984.

In the 1981 issue of “Sens” Michel Carassou affirms the resemblance between Fondane's poetics and that of Surrealism: “A la source du surréalisme, Fondane allait reconnaître un désespoir identique au sien...”<sup>2</sup>. In this chapter we will analyze Fondane's relationship with the surrealist thought in all of the publications listed above and we will conclude with the reasons for which he eventually opted to become a poet of existential thought.

We have already witnessed the daring Fundoianu in his Roumanian publications, the man and writer who refused to be bound by any one ideology

or country. Before his arrival in Paris, Fondane had been attracted to the dada movement whose leader and Roumanian colleague, Tristan Tzara, he knew personally; they were both in search for ways to make the impossible possible in a world which had become ruled by an ideal of false esthetics. Nevertheless, Fondane became aware of the limitations of the dada movement and its nihilistic character: << "Dada avait fait table rase, n'avait conçu que le néant, fondé sur la seule catégorie cartésienne du doute..."...la négation absolue ne pouvait être qu'une attitude transitoire>><sup>3</sup>. Dada represented the metaphysical despair within the consciousness of all writers. Yet, by underlining the impossibility of any creative process, dada fenced itself in its own ideology.

According to Benjamin Fondane, Surrealism continued the unfinished metaphysical journey of the dada movement by which it was inspired and it was able to flourish due to the already existing "table rase" of Tristan Tzara: "l'école surréaliste a tout fait pour étouffer, issue de Dada, la part de l'esprit Dada qu'elle charriait dans ses veines, qui était ce qu'elle avait de meilleur"<sup>4</sup>. Other literary movements developed simultaneously such as "Le Grand Jeu" and "Discontinuité" (which we already mentioned in Chapter II) - to which Fondane adhered in 1928 together with his friends, Arthur Adamov and Claude Sernet. They were all strongly influenced by Surrealism yet they did not wish to be assimilated by it: <<R.Gilbert-Lecomte...envisage de "succéder au surréalisme comme iceluy au dadaïsme" et même de "l'annexer">><sup>5</sup>. Nevertheless, inspired by Surrealism, they developed manifestos of their own operating on the concept of Destruction/ Construction. Fondane's adherence to "Discontinuité"

was brief and his contact with "Le Grand Jeu" was only through his many friends.

Fondane did not wish to become a surrealist writer, yet he was influenced by it. We shall now analyze the elements of Surrealism found in Trois scenarii - cinépoèmes. In its preface, 2X2, Fondane emphasizes the importance of cinematography as an art form and warns us against the danger of its commercialization: "C'est de notre faute si le cinéma est commercé par tous les marchands du monde. Pendant qu'ils allaient au cinéma de confiance et vulgairement s'y amusaient, nous lui avons bêtement fermé l'esprit, nous l'avons méprisé au nom de l'ART."<sup>6</sup> The striking aspect of this introduction is the fact that, according to Fondane, the "cinépoèmes" are only meant to exist on a surreal plan. "Noyés de littérature"<sup>7</sup>, they are never to be produced as film strips, and yet due to the intense cinematographic images they bring forth, they are not just mere poems. Fondane explains: "le véritable scénario étant par nature très malaise à lire, impossible à écrire"<sup>8</sup>. Why did he then write them? Man Ray's illustration for Trois scenarii - cinépoèmes provides an answer: it is a photograph which represents Fondane's portrait (his bust) in distorted images - standing and upside down. Fondane succeeded in making a surreal image of what surreality is all about: within the limits of the known, he was able to express the unknown. This pictural photograph complements Fondane's concluding statement: "une partie de moi-même que la poésie refoulait, pour pouvoir poser ses propres questions, angoissantes, vient de trouver dans le cinéma un haut parleur à toute épreuve. Que vaut-elle? mais que vaux-je?..."<sup>9</sup>. We continue :

"24 une main vulgaire sale immense approche un exquis genou de  
femme grandeur normale; la main grossit jusqu'à pouvoir con-  
tenir le genou dans le creux de la paume

25 mais dans le genou un oeil de femme

26 la main diminue se rétrécit se ramasse jusqu'à devenir

27 la main qui bouge d'un vagabond la tête sur les pierres du quai"<sup>10</sup>

In fact, these "scenarii" - the Roumanian word for playscript, are not impossible to reproduce as film strips. Yet one must allow these poems to exist on a surreal plane, as Fondane intended them to be -detached from any formal, preconceived notion of art expression. The "scenarii" preserve their freshness, unaltered by convention, and the unconscious continues to speak:

<<5 c'est la tête d'un jeune homme élégant une valise à la main

6 qui est peint sur une affiche-réclame pour la danse

7 sur un trottoir un ouvrier lit un journal

8 la tête du jeune homme se penche hors l'affiche

9 sur l'épaule de l'ouvrier pour lire: "La Liberté">><sup>11</sup> (Barre fixe)

Removed from reality, Fondane asserts his thirst for freedom and the surrealist mind of the poet is at work, expressing itself through automatic writing; the reader need not try to establish any sense to these verses:

"42 il se découvre: ses bras sont égaux

- 43 le docteur prend sa main droite détachable  
 44 l'examine au microscope  
 45 gros plan de la main droite qui a sept doigts  
 46 le médecin la met dans un bocal d'alcool  
 47 le jeune homme s'en va  
 48 une main écrit sur une étiquette: danger de mort" 12 (Mtasipoj)

The poet regards his poem as an objective presence elevating it above all other things while giving it a life of its own. Fondane escapes all traveled routes, he is a writer who escapes death itself. Trois scenarii - cinépoèmes live within the subconscious of all ages and they will continue to do so as long as the "scenarii" will remain "intournables".

Surrealism was mainly founded on the poetics of Rimbaud, and Rimbaud's poetics was an insatiable source of inspiration for both Fondane and Breton. Fondane makes the following statement: "L'influence de l'oeuvre de Rimbaud...avait toutefois agi sur Verlaine et, à travers celui-ci sur l'école symboliste. Cependant cette influence n'était encore que de peau; c'est avec l'insurrection de Dada et la doctrine surréaliste que Rimbaud rentra, sérieusement, en lice." 13. At first the surrealists were unable to detect the "voyant par excellence" ; according to Fondane, this is how Breton misinterprets (in 1921) the genius of the "voyant", and Rimbaud's crisis before his death: "Un homme comme Rimbaud en renonçant délibérément à poursuivre son oeuvre littéraire et en choisissant dans la deuxième partie de sa vie une forme d'activité qu'en apparence rien ne relie à son activité première n'arrive pas à la renier

complètement"<sup>14</sup>. Fondane demonstrates just how the last phase of Rimbaud's life, that which he calls the stage of the vagabond -"l'étape du voyou" is representative of a spirit which moved the poet throughout his entire life. Nevertheless, Fondane does not deny Rimbaud's suicidal gesture: his renunciation of poetry, and his decision to live the "normal" life of greed. Fondane states that there is something even more terrible than death itself when Rimbaud willingly surrenders to a life of despair: "La mort est une chose passagère, accidentelle et dont on meurt. Mais le désespoir est une chose terrible, infinie et éternelle, et dont on ne meurt pas (...) le désespoir est là, quoi qu'il fasse, et "soudain" le pousse à l'acte le plus inconsidéré de sa vie: la fuite, une fuite déraisonnable, loin des siens, loin des bonnes paroles, loin de la mort"<sup>15</sup>. According to Fondane, once Rimbaud became the "forçat intraitable", abandoning the poet to absolute despair, what was left of him, the "voyou", was able to survive only within the realm of the absurd. We will continue with an in depth analysis of Rimbaud le voyou in our next chapter.

Fondane applied the poetics of Surrealism to cinema, being among the first to introduce the idea of the "film pur" -the pure film. We can describe the "film pur" as the outcome of the industrial revolution in its raw or pure form: "l'adaptation immédiate aux organes nouveaux inventés par la mécanique et par l'économie"<sup>16</sup>. It is our belief that Fondane's "films purs" were similar to the "scenarii intournables" yet these movies were meant to exist; Fondane explains: "Le film pur...n'est pas, comme le cubisme fut réaction de peintre contre la peinture, une réaction du cinéaste contre le cinéma. Il n'est en révolte que

contre le reste, tout, sauf contre le cinéma..."<sup>17</sup>. The two movies produced by Fondane were "Rapt" and "Tararira" ; he comments on both movies in his essay Ecrits sur le cinéma where he explains the birth of the "films purs": "l'Europe avait grand besoin de remonter aux sources, de chercher les causes du mal, d'écarter d'elle les thèmes du malheur...; il nous ramena au point du départ; ;il créa volontairement, délibérément, une sorte d'amnésie, une machine à faire du vide, à alléger la mémoire"<sup>18</sup>.

In 1929, Fondane wrote the screen play for the movie "Rapt ou la séparation des races" an adaptation of La Séparation des races by C.F. Ramuz. And in 1934 the film was produced in Argentina with his friend's help, Victoria Ocampo - the noted feminist writer and political activist. Fondane's creative vision was so much ahead of his time that the early twentieth century viewer was just not ready for it. It is only recently that the movie "Rapt" has become available to the public after being misplaced in the French archives for many years. "Rapt" was shown at the Centre Georges Pompidou during the 1996 Swiss film festival. The film portrays a love story similar to that of "Romeo and Juliet". One original idea that Fondane adds to the story: instead of situating the story in Switzerland as it was meant by the author, he presents it in a no man's land: "... je voulais que l'action fut située non pas spécialement en Suisse, mais quelque part dans l'espace, pour qu'elle garda sa valeur humaine générale" <sup>19</sup>. This particular aspect, as well as others, were not welcomed by Kirsanof, the Argentinian producer; Fondane expressed his disappointment when the film was banned from the market: "Mais il serait souhaitable que nous ayons, un jour

prochain, pour le film à venir, une plus grande liberté d'action, de meilleurs moyens de travail, des circonstances moins hostiles..."<sup>20</sup>. Fondane wrote this script at a time when the rise of Nazism was evident all over the world; it appears that "Rapt" dealt with the notion of hostility among nations and how love among young people is affected by it. It is unfortunate that this film was never shown in 1934 when it could have added a critical insight to the world politics of his times.

In 1936, Fondane returned to Argentina where he was to write and produce the film "Tararira" -"un film absurde sur une chose absurde"<sup>21</sup> mentions Michel Carassou in the literary magazine "Sens". His friend, Victoria Ocampo, helped him realize this dream. Unfortunately, the film did not become a reality; it was rejected by its producer in the same manner as "Rapt" and for the same reasons: "Machinandiarena, mécontent du film, effaré, semble-t-il, par ses audaces, se refusa à le distribuer"<sup>22</sup>

It is true that both his theatrical - Fondane's theater company, "Insula", and cinematographical attempts were in a sense failures. This only proves Fondane's theory about the role of commercialization and how it can take over when an artist does not abide by its rules. The art Fondane produced in the form of the the pure film was not meant to be ; it was not sellable to the general public. Yet both movies survived as substitutes for the real life experience they represented in a surreal manner. Fondane's pure film was in fact a poetic experience which marked Argentina by its mere absence, and its continuous presence today.

Fondane's collections of poems, Ulysse and Titanic , are also marked by Surrealism . Ulysses' journey is not what it might appear: an adventure; it is a rather desperate, surreal search for the meaning of life. In her book, Benjamin Fondane ou le périple d'Ulysse , Monique Jutrin analyzes Fondane's journey as a poet and she notes its similarity to that of Ulysses: "cette errance réclame un lieu où puisse enfin se retrouver l'homme, - qu'il soit poète ou Juif" 23. This desperate search is marked by the absurd:

"Dans le sommeil on ne sait où,  
le soleil tourne dans un trou.  
Soleil cuis-moi..." 24

These verses remind us of Apollinaire's "soleil cou coupé" from his cubist poem "Zone"; one can almost imagine the universe as a square with the sun as its center, and the human being as its victim. The surrealist character of "Ulysse" is evident in the following verses:

"j'ai renoncé tu sais, j'ai accroché mon ombre,  
la mer peut désormais s'en aller  
toute seule." 25

The exiled poet, no longer in control, no longer desirous of answers, hangs up his shadow like a coat and abandons himself to life. Unreal yet present are his hidden desires:

"...Que ne puis-je me mettre au chaud sous mon sommeil,  
que ne peut-on ôter son visage du jour  
- et dormir sans figure!" 26

This poem is only one example of the many surrealist verses which compose Fondane's Ulysses. Surrealist images were also present in his earlier collection of poetry, Titanic:

"C'est un rêve effrayant et je m'y trouve encore.  
-Une chose mouvante et qu'on appelle Terre  
coule à pic, lentement, hors du regard de l'être..."<sup>27</sup>

This image is inseparable from Salvador Dali's painting, "The Persistence of Memory" (oil painting from 1931), where clocks melt away as if human beings were part of them, and the earth is no more than a desolate, forgotten corner of the universe.

The poet's mission is that of the artist in search of meaning; at times, when the promised land is unattainable, his verse is full of anger:

"pénélopes usées, juillettes avachies  
-aviez-vous eu pitié du voyageur (...)  
-vies sans importance!  
-parapluies oubliés!"<sup>28</sup>

Our hero is unkind to his Penelopes: the poet wishes to reach beyond the known. His most ardent wish does not consist in grasping the known but rather in trying to gain the depth of the unknown: "Nous savons tous qu'un voyage dans l'inconnu ne doit nous rapporter que du connu"<sup>29</sup>. Poetry was the absolute life experience Fondane never wished to end, never wished to imprison within a clear definition ; the poet's own life equaled that of his poetics. And the fear of death, that of complete death, terrifies the artist who longs for immortality:

“ Et j’avançais, craignant qu’on m’oubliait et je criais  
de peur, de faim, d’angoisse:  
moi aussi...moi aussi, je suis un dieu. Pitié!” 30

In a poem Fondane dedicates to his close friend and mentor, Léon Shestov, Fondane is in search of a new form of expression, finding words inadequate for his task:

“ Le monde est là peut-être, mais suis-je bien en lui?  
Je passe et il ne reste rien dans le miroir,  
pas même un trou  
et j’ai beau m’exercer sur les mots hors d’usage  
comme on redresse au marteau les clous qui ont déjà  
servi, tordus, et qu’on les enfonce à nouveau,  
il n’est pas de chanson donnée à tout le monde...” 31

The image he portrays is in a sense obsolete, lacking novelty ; yet the chant is present: sculpting his feelings is a poet whose image need not remain in mirrors for its echo is unique. Roger Gilbert-Lecomte was among Fondane’s many admirers, yet he criticised his style; he felt that it had to be improved and simplified: <<Tâchez un jour, demain, ou dans dix ans, de faire...un poème parfait (...) fait uniquement de vers comme: “Et pour semer aussi loin qu’impossible / Une nouvelle beauté panique” complètement débarrassés d’images descriptives...belles et curieuses mais du seul fait qu’elles ne sont pas absolument nécessaires, indignes des autres images 32>> . We know that Fondane maintained his ideas alive in his poems, yet we think that he followed

Shestov's example who was not interested in eloquence. For Shestov the message was more important than the wording. Here is what Shestov thought of the importance of style: "Aussi, je ne travaille jamais mon texte...Comme je ne me soucie pas de l'écriture, du style, je pensais que ce devait être bien médiocre"<sup>33</sup>. Whether Fondane was or was not concerned with his style of writing, many of his poems came straight from the wisdom of his soul; clearly stated and in free verse they meet with us on new grounds unbound by rhetoric:

<<C'est une voie qui crie dans le désert "où suis-je?"

Hier, c'était l'océan, la nausée,

et l'envie d'une terre solide dans la paume -

la terre!

Mais aujourd'hui le jour avance dans le brouillard..."<sup>34</sup>

In spite of the overwhelming presence of Surrealism in Fondane's writing, the poet's uniqueness is due mainly to the existential philosophical teaching he absorbs from Leon Shestov. Fondane will be among those who cry out against pain and suffering, and the poet will also try to awaken his readers from their deep, apathetic sleep:

<<je ne peux pas fermer les yeux,

je dois toujours crier jusqu'à la fin du monde:

"il ne faut pas dormir jusqu'à la fin du monde"

je ne suis qu'un témoin.>> <sup>35</sup>

It is evident that Fondane was not a surrealist poet: he states his decision to break away from the "false esthetics" of Surrealism in his essay, Faux traité

d'esthétique. In this essay, he accuses the surrealists of betraying their mission as poets; in Fondane's opinion, nothing rises above "poetry" and subjecting poetry to any political cause is a crime. Fondane feels that the poet needs absolute freedom from politics, esthetics, life itself, in order to express himself beyond the margins of time or space. Here is what he thinks of Surrealism: "Le surréalisme: malgré sa bonne foi, il n'a fait que du mal à la poésie" 36. Fondane states that Surrealism marked poetry with a guilty conscience by introducing it to the realm of speculative thought when it desperately needs to remain a sacred activity: <<"...la poésie s'efforcera d'être une connaissance, sacrifiera à la morale, à la politique, bref voudra être quelque chose." Ainsi la poésie entre dans le domaine du spéculatif perdant son état sacré.>>37. And yet André Breton claims that the main goal of Surrealism is that of freedom; this is what he states in "Position politique de l'art d'aujourd'hui": "la défense de la liberté n'est jamais une servitude..." 38. Breton finds it necessary to give Surrealism a concrete form; the word freedom has no value if not applicable to society and its people: "...nous vivons en conflit ouvert avec le monde immédiat qui nous entoure, monde ultra-sophistiqué, monde qui, sous quelque aspect qu'on l'interroge, s'avère, devant la pensée libre, sans alibi"39. In the end, Fondane felt constrained by Surrealism; without being a mystic, Fondane felt that the impossible was attainable as long as unbound by our understanding of what is real. In this respect, he feels close to the ideology of Benjamin Péret who states in "Le Déshonneur du poète" that poetry should be a liberating act: "le poète lutte contre toute oppression: celle de l'homme par l'homme d'abord et l'oppression

de sa pensée par les dogmes religieux, philosophiques ou sociaux” 40.

Fondane's poetics evolved from its initial concern with esthetics, which was predominant in his Roumanian verse, to this fundamental question: "Qu'est-ce donc pour nous que la poésie -cri, prière, acte magique? Qu'importe! Que celui pour lequel elle est un cri, crie! Qu'il prie, celui pour lequel elle est une prière! Et qu'il se fasse sorcier, voyant, ou prophète, celui qui y voit un acte magique! Mais avant tout que le poète ose!"<sup>41</sup>. Surrealist thought remains present in many of his publications throughout his creative life; yet in spite of the fact that it gave Fondane the basics of a poetics, later on in life he found Surrealism to be insufficient for his own aspirations as a writer; he then dared to go beyond a very strong popular movement in order to pursue his own poetics of existential thought. Fondane writes in 1938 that for him the concept of writing is a spiritual exercise which is not the mere result of thought; its chant exists beyond the concrete presence of its language: << Comment faire pour vivre avec sa pensée ne serait-ce qu'un "moment" avant qu'elle ne se soit faite langage?...Je n'ai pas de langage - et je chante...Je suis "celui qui n'est pas" - et je décide de la vie et de la mort de ce qui est>><sup>42</sup>. We believe that it is this spiritual need which led Fondane to establish an existential poetics. In Fondane's opinion, poetry was a way of gaining some understanding about life yet on a different plateau where men could not be bound by politics, or any other historic concept. And this spiritual poetics of existential thought was born through a painful process of questioning, a search for life unbound by answers;

unique within its own poetic sphere of thought.

NOTES:

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3. Michel Carassou, "Benjamin Fondane et la conscience honteuse du  
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4. Benjamin Fondane, "Signification de Dada,"  
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5. Viviane Couillard, "Aux Frontières du Surréalisme," Mélusine. 3(1982):164-  
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6. Fondane, Benjamin. "2 X 2." Trois scenarii cinépoèmes. 6.
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8. Ibid.
9. Ibid., 6-7.
10. Benjamin Fondane, "Paupières mures," Trois scenarii -cinépoèmes.
11. Benjamin Fondane, "Barre fixe," Trois scenarii -cinépoèmes.
12. Benjamin Fondane, "Mtasipoj," Trois scenarii -cinépoèmes.
13. Benjamin Fondane, "Notes biographiques," Rimbaud le voyou.  
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14. Rolland de Renéville, "Préface" Rimbaud le voyant.  
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16. Benjamin Fondane, "Présentation de Films Purs,"  
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19. Benjamin Fondane, "Rapt, film de Kirsanof, d'après un roman de Ramuz."  
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20. Benjamin Fondane, "Quand Kirsanof tournait la Séparation des races,"  
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21. Michel Carassou, "Benjamin Fondane 1898-1944," Sens. 127.
22. Benjamin Fondane, "Tararira (1936)," Ecrits sur le cinéma. 132.
23. Monique Jutrin, "Croissance de l'oeuvre poétique,"  
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24. Benjamin Fondane, "Ulysse," Le Mal des fantômes.  
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25. Benjamin Fondane, "Ulysse," Le Mal des fantômes. 70.
26. Ibid.
27. Benjamin Fondane, "Titanic," Le Mal des fantômes. 125.

28. Benjamin Fondane, "Ulysse," Le Mal des fantômes. 73.
29. Benjamin Fondane, "Ch. XXXII," Baudelaire et l'expérience du gouffre.  
(Paris: Pierre Seghers, 1947) 36l.
30. Benjamin Fondane, "Ulysse," Le Mal des fantômes. 66.
31. Ibid., 88.
32. Benjamin Fondane, Benjamin. "Lettre de Roger Gilbert-Lecomte à  
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33. Benjamin Fondane, "Entretiens avec Léon Chestov."  
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34. Benjamin Fondane, "Ulysse." Le Mal des fantômes.  
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35. Benjamin Fondane, "Ulysse," Le Mal des fantômes. 88.
36. Benjamin Fondane, "Ch. II," Faux traité d'esthétique. 51.
37. Ibid., 52
38. André Breton, "Position politique de l'art d'aujourd'hui."  
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39. Ibid., 252.
40. Jean-Louis Bédouin, "Le déshonneur des poètes," Benjamin Péret.  
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41. Benjamin Fondane, "Ch. V," Faux traité d'esthétique. 120.
42. Benjamin Fondane, "L'exercice spirituel,"  
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## CH.IV: RIMBAUD LE VOYOU

Benjamin Fondane was among the first authors to be fascinated with the life and works of Arthur Rimbaud. Such was the genius of the young poet that it disturbed the whole concept of poetry. Nevertheless, in spite of all the possible interpretations of his ravaging life, who can pretend having understood Rimbaud in all of his complexity? Rimbaud himself noted how difficult it is to know the truth about anything: "notre pâle raison nous cache l'infini..."<sup>1</sup>. Fondane's literary critique on Rimbaud remains valid today. Jean Cocteau first acknowledged it in a letter addressed to Fondane: "Il reste que votre livre est le seul possible..."<sup>2</sup>.

When Fondane published his book on Rimbaud in 1933, another important study was already in print: Rimbaud le voyant by Rolland de Renéville. It is certain that Fondane had been inspired by Renéville's work, yet it was only a source of inspiration. Renéville based his interpretation of Rimbaud's life on "la Lettre du Voyant"; written by the poet in 1871, and addressed to Paul Demeny, it testifies to Rimbaud's mysticism and the poetic alchemy which had inspired Surrealism; "le Grand Jeu, s'était aussi réclamé de l'expérience de Rimbaud et plus particulièrement de sa "Lettre du Voyant" <sup>3</sup> declares Michel Carassou, an expert on surrealist thought. Reneville explains that, at first, the surrealists were unable to recognize "le voyant par excellence", and they didn't give him any credit for his "esprit déréglé". Nevertheless, in 1925, Breton incorporates Rimbaud's theory on the undeniable presence of the visionary, and in "Lettre aux voyantes" here is how he addresses this idea: "Se peut-il que les

pérsécutions séculaires vous détournent à jamais de lancer à travers le monde, en dépit de ceux qui ne veulent pas l'entendre, la grande parole annonciatrice? (...) Nous avons vu les poètes aussi se dérober par dédain à la lutte et voici pourtant qu'ils se ressaisissent, au nom de cette parcelle de voyance, à peine différente de la vôtre, qu'ils ont" 4. Ultimately, Breton declares that "Rimbaud est surréaliste dans la pratique de la vie et ailleurs" 5.

This chapter will present Fondane's Rimbaud le voyou , a detailed analysis of Rimbaud's life stages - the revolutionay stage and the visionary stage ( that had already been presented by Renéville). Yet the special merit of this book is to have recognized and represented Rimbaud's genius through the vagabond stage, "l'étape du voyou"; it is "le voyou", the immoral poet and his deranged mind that have been the topic of so much controversy. Fondane's interpretation opposes that of Renéville's who had presented Rimbaud's quest as a search for an ideal of purity. Fondane notes that it was "le voyou" who determined Rimbaud's genius; and in spite of the fall that "le voyou" caused him , it is he who is "le voleur de feu", "la liberté libre", "le fils du Soleil" -able to attain the unknown.

Most critiques concentrate on the divergence of Rimbaud's creative mind. In Fondane's analysis, we find that the three stages in Rimbaud's life were not contradictory; they all dealt with the presentation of a desperate spirit pertaining to a domain Fondane claims to be that of the tragic. Rimbaud experiments with all possible excesses, and the crises he undergoes bring him to experience the abyss. Nevertheless, he attains the unknown with the assurance that he can be

saved from chaos ; this is what he declares: "qu'est-ce mon néant auprès de la stupeur qui vous attend?"<sup>6</sup>

In 1912 Paul Claudel writes his famous preface to Rimbaud's Oeuvres complètes; it is then that he notes the importance of the three stages in Rimbaud's life ( the revolutionary stage, the visionary stage, and the vagabond stage). Claudel declared that for him Rimbaud was a mystic, "un mystique à l'état sauvage"<sup>7</sup>. Fondane signals that, in fact, Claudel who was a Catholic writer, had interpreted everything from a religious point of view ; this is what Claudel thinks of Rimbaud's last and only confession: "Sa vie, un malentendu (...) jusqu'à ce qu'enfin, réduit, la jambe tranchée, sur ce lit d'hôpital à Marseille, il sache!"<sup>8</sup>. Fondane is not of the same opinion; he does not trust Isabelle Rimbaud's statement in regard to the poet's late conversion to Catholicism. First of all, it is difficult to have faith in Isabelle's declaration since she was unfamiliar with her brother's poetry at the time when she made her statement regarding Rimbaud's last days before his death. Fondane also notes that Paternie Berrichon -Rimbaud's brother-in-law, had deliberately made false statements in regard to Rimbaud: "...le mari d'Isabelle, Paternie Berrichon, ne s'est pas gêné de truquer les lettres de son beau-frère"<sup>9</sup>. Fondane thinks that Rimbaud's conversion was a desperate act; before dying, this is how the poet addresses his sister: "J'irai sous la terre...et toi, tu marcheras dans le soleil"<sup>10</sup>. This complaint is typical of the poet's state of mind and soul; Fondane emphasizes the fact that logic was not a part of the Rimbaud's way of life, a life that was mostly marked by excess. And who among us is capable of calmly confronting

death? Fear can take hold of anyone -even a poet who finds it best to live just once. Fondane's interpretation of Rimbaud's confession is this: a rebellious act against Ananke -what Freud sees as the refusal to submit oneself to cosmic reality. By converting to Catholicism, Rimbaud attempts to find freedom and this time in the act of submission itself. Yet Rimbaud becomes Catholic only by working at it, with an immense effort: "...il travaille (...) à se rendre catholique"<sup>11</sup>. In any case it is not an act of treason as Breton suggested it when he declared that "Rimbaud a voulu nous tromper"<sup>12</sup>. Breton also stated that Rimbaud was guilty of following in Claudel's footsteps: "il est coupable (...) de ne pas avoir rendu tout à fait impossible certaines interprétations déshonorantes de sa pensée, genre Claudel"<sup>13</sup>. The way in which Rimbaud's life ended is only one aspect of his life -it is not significant in the interpretation of his writings and his life.

Rimbaud's true nature is found in the rebellious adolescent, the poet and the vagabond who struggled with a world he wanted to change. Fondane does not claim to have found a formula capable of explaining the mystery which reveals the genius of this tormented poet. However, one thing is certain: the vagabond and author of "Une Saison en enfer" willingly accepts an absurd existence and attains the ideal of "le forçat intraitable"-the inflexible convict". When growing up in a stifling provincial town, Rimbaud was already admiring "le forçat intraitable": "Il avait plus de force qu'un saint, plus de bon sens qu'un voyageur -et lui, lui seul, pour témoin de sa gloire et de sa raison"<sup>14</sup>.

In order to better understand the vagabond stage in Rimbaud's life,

Fondane analyzes the genius of the young, adolescent poet. Everything was disappointing to the child and adolescent who was becoming aware of the fact that dishonesty reigns everywhere: in society, at church and in school as well as in his own typically bourgeois family. His mother was very strict with him instilling in the young child a strong wish for evasion and an appetite for travel. Once he succeeded in escaping his native provincial town, Rimbaud encountered Paul Verlaine whose influence was of major importance. It is Verlaine who first noted the young poet's exceptional talent, and who fully understood Rimbaud's rebellious nature. According to Renéville's study, Verlaine's poem on Rimbaud relates the spiritual adventure of the young poet : "comme un crime d'amour mystique"<sup>15</sup>. Here are a few verses from "Crimen Amoris":

"Or, le plus beau d'entre tous ces mauvais anges  
 Avait seize ans. Sous sa couronne de fleurs,  
 Les bras croisés sur les colliers et les franges,  
 Il rêve, l'oeil plein de flammes et de pleurs"<sup>16</sup>.

And according to Verlaine, this is how his angel speaks:

"O je serai celui-là qui sera Dieu!  
 Nous avons tous souffert, anges et hommes,  
 De ce conflit entre le Pire et le Mieux.  
 Humilions, misérables que nous sommes,  
 Tous nos élans dans le plus simple des vœux"<sup>17</sup>.

The young poet aims for the spirit of brotherhood in the hearts of all men, and his greatest desire is to have all men live equally. How disappointed he will be to

realize that his dreams were just illusions...His rage then takes hold of him, and he cries out like Job; yet, this Job does not receive an answer. Consequently, Rimbaud joins Sophocles and his fight against the unbearable fate of humanity, and he concludes in the same manner as Nietzsche did: "Horreur de ma bêtise!"<sup>18</sup>. Nevertheless, Fondane reminds us that the poet was desperately longing for God: "J'attends Dieu avec gourmandise"<sup>19</sup>; there is a sacred moment in his life when with much humility he declares: "Je suis de race inférieure de toute éternité!"<sup>20</sup>. Instead of surrendering to the established laws of life, the poet chose freedom and this freedom brought him much pain but also helped him attain the visionary stage of his life: "Je ne suis pas prisonnier de ma raison...Je veux la liberté dans le salut...J'ai dit Dieu!"<sup>21</sup>. By claiming to be what society called a brute, Rimbaud maintained himself within the sacredness of his dreams.

Rimbaud's soul did not rest for long in the womb of love; shocked by Verlaine's violence, Rimbaud left him feeling completely lost -no longer knowing what to think or what to believe. It is certain that women could not satisfy his ideal of love; Rimbaud's hatred for women had been a part of him since childhood:

"Le jeune homme, devant la laideur de ce monde  
Tressaille dans son coeur largement irrité,  
Et plein de la blessure éternelle et profonde,  
Se prend à désirer sa soeur de charité.

Mais, ô Femme, monceau d'entrailles, pitié douce,  
 Tu n'es jamais la Soeur de charité, jamais,  
 Ni regard noir, ni ventre où dort une ombre rousse,  
 Ni doigts légers, ni seins splendidement formés.

Aveugle irrévêillée aux immenses prunelles,  
 Tout notre embrassement n'est qu'une question:  
 C'est toi qui pends à nous, porteuse de mamelles,  
 Nous te berçons, charmante et grave Passion"<sup>22</sup>

Rimbaud felt that women were not his equal -they were the ones who needed his charity; consequently, the poet could not find through them the love and peace of mind he had hoped for. In the "Lettre du Voyant", Rimbaud relates his hope for the end of the oppression of women: "quand elle vivra pour elle et par elle (...) elle sera poète, elle aussi! La femme trouvera de l'inconnu!"<sup>23</sup>. Incapable of finding love, Rimbaud's longing became "dégout métaphysique"; this disgust, explains Fondane, does not make any exceptions: "ni la poésie, ni l'amour ; et voilà qu'il s'attaque à ce que les théologiens appellent la suprême perfection: l'existence elle-même" <sup>24</sup>.

Baudelaire was "le premier voyant, roi des poètes, un vrai"<sup>25</sup> and a constant source of inspiration for the young poet. Yet, according to Fondane, Rimbaud's poetics goes beyond that of Baudelaire's : while Baudelaire criticized the evil of existence without engaging himself in a fight against the order of the world, Rimbaud's goal was to write poems capable of changing the world.

Baudelaire considered the role of the poet to be superior, and he aspired to the sublime; however, unlike Rimbaud, he did not abandon himself to metaphysical despair. Baudelaire never aimed for the metaphysical state of suffering that Rimbaud brought upon himself. Rimbaud's renunciation of illusory dreams and the decision to stop writing resulted from the poet's disappointment with life. Rimbaud then reached the vagabond stage, and he destroyed the poet he once was -the poet who had failed to change the world. It is then that Rimbaud lived within the realm of the absurd. The anguish of "le Voyant", the poet who created the "Illuminations", was closely related to the prophetic mission he was able to attain:

"Enfants, certains ciels ont affiné mon optique: tous les caractères nuancèrent ma physionomie. Les Phénomènes s'émurent. -A présent, l'inflexion éternelle des moments et l'infini des mathématiques me chassent par ce monde où je subis tous les succès civils, respecté de l'enfance étrange et des affections énormes. -Je songe à une Guerre, de droit ou de force, de logique bien imprévue.

C'est aussi simple qu'une phrase musicale.<sup>26</sup>" (Guerre)

The theory of the "Voyant" became an important source of inspiration to the surrealist movement. Renéville remarks that, at a later time, André Breton - after having criticized Rimbaud's visionary theory, realized its significance and he incorporated it in his own poetics. Nevertheless, Jean Cassou explains that there are many ideological differences between the surrealist movement and "les

méthodes déréglées du Voyant”<sup>27</sup>. Rimbaud never ceased to belong to himself, and only to himself, while Surrealism engaged itself in questions of class struggle. Fondane was in a sense more like Rimbaud since he realized that poetry would be sacrificed if an alliance between poetics and politics existed.

Jules de Gaultier writes to Fondane in 1933 acknowledging Fondane’s interpretation: Rimbaud “s’est jeté dans l’action sans but qui a été pour lui la forme du désespoir et de la solitude. Il a été celui que vous avez vu, l’homme tragique”<sup>28</sup>. When Rimbaud sees that “la vraie vie est absente”, and that the prophetic mission of the visionary poet is unrealizable, he chooses to free himself from poetry, and thus from life itself. It is then that the most tragic aspect of his life - the vagabond stage, manifests itself; “Une Saison en enfer” illustrates the poet’s disillusionment:

“Je devins un opéra fabuleux: je vis que tous les êtres ont une fatalité de bonheur: l’action n’est pas la vie, mais une façon de gâcher quelque force, un énervement. La morale est la faiblesse de la cervelle.

(...)

Aucun des sophismes de la folie, -la folie qu’on enferme, - n’a été oublié par moi: je pourrais les redire tous, je tiens le système.

(...)

Je dus voyager, distraire les enchantements assemblés sur mon

cerveau. Sur la mer, que j'aimais comme si elle eut du me  
 laver d'une solitude, je voyais se lever la crois consolatrice.  
 J'avais été damné par l'arc-en-ciel. Le Bonheur était ma  
 fatalité, mon remords, mon ver: ma vie serait toujours trop  
 immense pour être dévouée à la force et à la beauté"29.(Delires II)

Rimbaud becomes the "Bateau ivre" and "infusé d'astres"<sup>30</sup> he drowns himself in the sea; Fondane notes that "le véritable Rimbaud ne peut être saisi qu'à ses moments de crise"<sup>31</sup>. The vagabond retains the ideology of the visionary poet but his outstanding characteristic is his rebellious nature. According to Fondane, the abandonment of poetry is a manifestation of the rebel-poet. There is also something of the absurd in this decision, an element of the tragic. "L'horreur qu'un être vivant peut avoir de l'être, horreur sans remède, incurable, voilà bien ce qui caractérise l'homme tragique, le destin de l'homme tragique!"<sup>32</sup> declares Fondane in Rimbaud le voyou. Rimbaud was also fulfilling his adolescent ideals of running away from life...; in his youth, he had dreamt of traveling to the Orient. The poet's excessive decision to give up his poetry and make a living in Africa was a desperate act, an act that was marked by tragedy. His ideals join Léon Shestov's philosophical principals; here is how Michel Carassou understands it: <<Pourquoi Rimbaud a-t-il échoué? A la lumière de la pensée de Chestov, Fondane pouvait désormais répondre: parce que Rimbaud était un voyou...A travers ce drame individuel, Fondane analyse une expérience comparable à celle que Chestov décrit comme "le domaine de la tragédie"...>><sup>33</sup>. In search of the mystery of life and death, Rimbaud searches

for truth within the absurd and he denies reason and the evidence it brings. Since our lives are always marked by the absurd, it is maybe within the realm of the absurd that one should search for an answer. And if reason ever triumphed over the absurd, it was at the end of Rimbaud's life when the poet accepted to convert to Catholicism. He then felt that death was unavoidable, and his confession was proof of the human weakness which we all experience when in need of assurances; this act of submission was not representative of the true faith of Rimbaud, "fils du Soleil".

Rimbaud le voyou was the most successful book that Fondane published during his lifetime. In a letter the philosopher Jean Wahl wrote to Fondane, he shows a lot of interest in it <sup>34</sup>, and the surrealist poet David Gascoyne notes that Fondane's book expressed who the real Rimbaud was: "exactement le Rimbaud que mon intuition m'assurait être le vrai"<sup>35</sup>. Jean Cassou writes in "Les Nouvelles littéraires" that Fondane's study contains "des pages d'une sombre et puissante splendeur"<sup>36</sup>, but that the metaphysical interpretation of Rimbaud's life is not necessarily the best interpretation: " Le Rimbaud de Fondane a sa nécessité et sa vérité. Il est bon de commencer par la métaphysique. Mais il est meilleur de conclure par la poésie"<sup>37</sup>. Our conclusion is that Fondane's interpretation was not metaphysical; it was based on Léon Shestov's philosophy of existential thought and it concluded with the absurdity of life when the poet is removed from his poetic experience.

NOTES:

1. André Roland de Renéville, "Mise au point," Rimbaud le voyant.  
(France: Editions Thot, Vanves, 1985) 27.
2. Jean Cocteau, Jungle. 9 (1986): 170.
3. Benjamin Fondane, "Fondane et Rimbaud," Rimbaud le voyou.  
(Paris: Editions Complexe, 1990) 9-10.
4. André Breton, "Lettre aux voyantes (1925)," Manifeste du surréalisme.  
(Paris: Jean-Jacques Pauvert, 1962) 236.
5. André Roland de Renéville, "Mise au point," Rimbaud le voyant. 24.
6. Benjamin Fondane, "Ch.XXVII," Rimbaud le voyou. 220.
7. Paul Claudel, Oeuvres d'Arthur Rimbaud. (Paris: Mercure de France, 1912.)11.
8. Benjamin Fondane, "Notes," Rimbaud le voyou. 250.
9. Benjamin Fondane, "Ch. XXV," Rimbaud le voyou. 206.
10. Benjamin Fondane, "Ch.XI," Rimbaud le voyou. 119.
11. Ibid.
12. André Breton, "Second manifeste," Manifestes du Surréalisme. 136.
13. Benjamin Fondane, "Ch.XVI," Rimbaud le voyou. 146.
14. André Roland de Reneville, "La Carriere prophétique." Rimbaud le voyant.  
109.
15. Ibid., 110.
16. Ibid., 111.
17. Benjamin Fondane, "Ch.XV," Rimbaud le voyou. 138.
18. Ibid.

19. Benjamin Fondane, "Ch.XII," Rimbaud le voyou. 138.
20. Ibid., 126.
21. Arthur Rimbaud, Oeuvres. (Paris: Editions Garnier Frères, 1960) 108.
22. André Roland de Renéville, "Lettre dite du voyant." Rimbaud le voyant. 196.
23. Benjamin Fondane, "Chapitres ne figurant pas dans l'édition originale."  
Rimbaud le voyou. 266.
24. André Roland de Renéville, "Lettre dite du voyant," Rimbaud le voyant. 198.
25. Arthur Rimbaud, "Illuminations," Oeuvres. 295.
26. Jean Cassou, Les Nouvelles littéraires. (1933): 2.
27. Benjamin Fondane, "Ch.IV," Rimbaud le voyou. 65.
28. Jules de Gaultier, Letter addressed to Fondane - manuscript found in the  
possession of Michel Carassou- Fondane's literary heir.
29. Arthur Rimbaud, "Une Saison en enfer," Oeuvres. 233.
30. Arthur Rimbaud, "Poésies," Oeuvres. 129.
31. Benjamin Fondane, "Ch.XIV," Rimbaud le voyou. 135.
32. Ibid., 175.
33. Benjamin Fondane, "Préface," Rimbaud le voyou. 15.
34. Jean Wahl, Letter addressed to Fondane -manuscript found in the  
possession of Michel Carassou.
35. David Gascoyne, Rencontres avec Benjamin Fondane.  
(Paris : Editions Arcane 17, 1984) 2.
36. Jean Cassou, Les Nouvelles littéraires. 2.
37. Ibid.

## CH. V: REFLECTIONS OF EXISTENTIAL THOUGHT

According to Kierkegaard, "genuine existence is never possible without reflection on existence"<sup>1</sup>. We have always concerned ourselves with the meaning of existence, we have tried to understand and define it, and we continue to do so in spite of the impossible, the mysterious, the unattainable that best describe our existence. Philosophers such as Plato and Descartes were in search of "the changeless and the universal"<sup>2</sup> yet other philosophers understood the very nature of existence and its changing, moveable quality. "When Aristotle says that the individual is the real, he could be looked upon as the progenitor of one of the traditions which culminate in the philosophy of existence..."<sup>3</sup> explains Jean Wahl in his study, Philosophies of Existence. In fact Schopenhauer also notes that "everything objective exists only indirectly, as mere representation of the subject, so that everything is always closely associated with self-consciousness"<sup>4</sup>. In modern times, the idea of the subjective character of all existence is attributed to Kierkegaard (among others) who explicitly underlines the importance of the self as the only possible translation of what life is. In this chapter, we will present Benjamin Fondane and Leon Shestov's concepts on existential thought. Fondane's personal subjective eye will then come into focus -his writings being an interpretation of the existent and a reflection of his times.

Existential thought in the twentieth century is best explained when we analyze some of the teachings of twentieth century philosophy. After Nietzsche and his interpretation of life, one may question existential thought: is it

disinterested in the relationship between man and the divine? According to Jean Wahl, "existence and transcendence are among the key concepts of the philosophies of existence"<sup>5</sup>. When one struggles to comprehend the pain of being alive, one often encounters the divine -not as the object but as a subject of the self. In Fondane's words: " il y a un croyant dans le philosophe et un philosophe dans le croyant"<sup>6</sup>.

"Freedom", says Sartre, "is the sole foundation of values...No other can nor has to follow the path that I follow. Akin to the Kafka character for whom opens a door which can open for no other, the existent knows that his problem is his alone, and his solution only his"<sup>7</sup>. Existentialism as defined by Sartre and Camus, and existential thought both confirm freedom as being a necessary human right; nevertheless, their concepts differ in many ways. For example, Jean Wahl explains that existentialism "has cut existence off from transcendence as Kierkegaard conceived it"<sup>8</sup>. It is then important to note that existential thought relates to transcendence while existentialism bases its understanding of life on reason alone and claims that transcendence is obsolete. In "Before the Law", Kafka's man from the country, just like Fondane, comes to the door of his own accord, thus choosing to pursue transcendence. Another way in which the two philosophies differ is their relationship to reason and the absurd. Camus who acknowledges the existence of the absurd in our lives, accepts it as a necessary evil with which we must live - his conclusion following the rules of logic. Contrary to Camus, Fondane rises above speculative thought: he believes in the absurd and in man's ability to question existence. And he abides by Rimbaud 's

statement: "Je ne suis pas prisonnier de ma raison...Je veux la liberté dans le salut..."<sup>9</sup>. Existential thought questions man's destiny as well as Pascal's living on the edge of the abyss". Since our "reasoning" fails to explain man's destiny, it is important to liberate oneself from established thought in order to free Sisyphus from his neverending trauma.

In Baudelaire et l'expérience du gouffre, Fondane explains the motivation which brought Kafka's man from the country in front of the doorkeeper's threshold: "...même si personne ne nous répond, nous ne pouvons pas cesser de questionner. ...C'est donc du centre et non du dehors de la vie, que l'esprit du "moi" pose ses questions, il est intimement lié à la vie..."<sup>10</sup>. Unlike Kafka's main character in "Before the Law", Fondane realizes that he need not obey the doorkeeper, that the door was placed there for him in order to trespass its threshold and he proceeds to do so while pursuing a philosophy of existential thought. He is thus able to transcend the door and his method is the metaphysical, existential scream: "Le cri est un essai de modifier le réel; il provoque le miracle"<sup>11</sup>, explains Fondane in Rimbaud le voyou. Here is the sound of Fondane's cry in Le mal des fantômes:

"J'avais crié vers Toi. Ai-je crié trop fort?  
 ou n'ai-je pas assez crié? avec assez  
 de foi? car le désastre tomba. Je le savais.  
 it était enfoui en moi. Je l'avais muri  
 et maintenant il se détachait en moi comme un fruit mur  
 le fruit réel d'une idée."<sup>12</sup>

Fondane acknowledges the abyss and allows "le cri" to exist in itself and by itself; he thus establishes the objective reality of despair and uses it as a tool for transgressing boundaries of established thought. Yet the poet makes a clear distinction between the pure existential cry, as that of Job, and the "cri racont  " which exists only as a memory of the experience. The latter is the cry which confronts the "intelligere de la pens  e speculative"<sup>13</sup> and even though it is only a memory, it leads him to a perpetual state of rebellion:

"Sa mis  re lui p  se, son impuissance aussi -  
 chagera-t-il jamais le monde avec son cri?  
 Il est un temps o   l'eau est froide, mais un temps o   elle bout,  
 le gaz irresign   distend les parois et   clate,  
 Il est un temps de mourir et un temps de ne pas mourir  
 de r  volte perp  tuelle -"<sup>14</sup>

His indignation is similar to that expressed by St. John Perse; Fondane quotes his verse using it as an epigraph for his collection of poems, "Ulysse":

"Et c'est l'heure,    Po  te,  
 de d  chirer ton nom,  
 ta naissance et ta race"<sup>15</sup>

Emil Cioran considered the destiny of all men to be that of exile:

"L'homme est un sinistr   du paradis. La musique, les larmes, l'extase sont le seul paradis que nous connaissons sur la terre..."<sup>16</sup> Benjamin Fondane knew that the era in which he lived was an era of decay in which societies were placing the individual below the object, below knowledge and where reason had

become a tool justifying the treatment of those considered inferior - those phantoms with absent souls. Nevertheless, the poet refused to be a ghost: "le poète lui-même a honte d'être un fantôme..." 17. The poetics of Benjamin Fondane was undoubtedly concerned with suffering and exile. This explains the fact that the absurd resides at the core of existential thought; it opposes the reasoning of speculative thought and that of the Nazi regime, and it creates a new poetics of tears and freedom. In Fondane's own words here are a few verses he writes in 1942, where his main concern was that of the Jewish people:

"Et pourtant, non!  
 je n'étais pas un homme comme vous.  
 Vous n'êtes pas nés sur les routes,  
 personne n'a jeté à l'égout vos petits  
 comme des chats encore sans yeux,  
 vous n'avez pas erré de cite en cite  
 traqués par les polices,  
 vous n'avez pas connu les désastres à l'aube,  
 les wagons de bestiaux  
 et le sanglot amer de l'humiliation..."18("Preface in Prose"L'Exode).

The development of existential philosophies in the 1940's was not coincidental; Jean Wahl states that "after the turmoil of the war and the Occupation"19 there was a need and "an urge to rally about a doctrine, and the newer the doctrine the better..."20. Fondane's friendship with the noted Russian

philosopher, Léon Shestov, determined the new paths he followed as an existential philosopher and poet. Shestov realized that Fondane was the only person who fully understood his views on existential thought. Shestov's philosophy stated that suffering was inseparable from a complete understanding of the nature of existence. In Fondane's words: "Je lui disais, à peu près, combien il était malaise de la suivre, car pour pénétrer sa pensée, pour y parvenir, il fallait, de son propre avis, avoir traversé quelque intime désastre..."<sup>21</sup>. It is certain that suffering increases our sensitivity towards humanitarian issues and generally such experiences lead us towards a search for the presence or lack of presence of the divine; for one to deliberately seek such experiences is, without a doubt, a spiritual quest.

Shestov acknowledged the blindness to all the suffering existing in the world and especially that unexplained by reason: <<...la douleur, celle même de l'univers entier, mise sur une balance, ne saurait faire contrepoids même à un seul grain de sable"<sup>22</sup>>>. Shestov and Fondane believed that once awakened, men will come to realize that although unable to overcome suffering and injustice, they would have to constantly fight for a more humane level of existence. At a time in history when the meaning of existence had lost its sacredness, existential thought underlined the agony of the sufferer while trying to experience life through a spiritual and metaphysical *modus vivendi* that surpassed the manifest limitations of purely noetic faculties.

Shestov encouraged Fondane to write philosophical essays and La Conscience malheureuse was the first collection of essays that he published in

1936. Fondane often felt a certain lack as a writer of philosophy since his background was literary. Yet Shestov thought that his lack was in fact a positive element: "Vous n'êtes pas venu à la philosophie par les voies habituelles, oui. Mais heureusement, car cela vous permet de poser des questions plus audacieuses..."<sup>23</sup> And among the fundamental questions that are presented in La Conscience malheureuse, is the question he formulates about knowledge. Fondane states that knowledge is an impediment to understanding life since it limits us to views which are generally explained through reason. Thus we no longer have the freedom to think independently from established facts. It is a teaching Fondane gained from Shestov who declares: "...l'homme parviendra peut-être finalement à se délivrer du savoir, à reconquerir la vraie liberté, la liberté de l'ignorance, qu'avait perdu le premier homme"<sup>24</sup>. Fondane believes that primitive societies were closer to an understanding of the mystery of life since they were free of the "knowledge" we acquired as civilized societies. They were aware of life variants, yet they were not bound by established facts of reason: "Pour le primitif, les choses sont bonnes ou mauvaises -jamais fausses; ils connaissent des êtres bien ou mal intentionnés -jamais des non-êtres! Ils connaissent le malheur -mais non la nécessité!"<sup>25</sup>. What Fondane understands by the term "necessity" is the need to abide by the knowledge we have in order to explain life through reasoning and facts. There is then no room left for the mysterious, the absurd, and the void that nevertheless impose their presence on life. We then tend to gain control of something we cannot understand in order to feel the comfort of an established order which gives us

the illusion of having overcome the void in us. Ultimately, it is obvious that we have gained little or no insight on existence as a whole, on the meaning of life and death, on transcendence. In Le lundi existentiel, Benjamin Fondane refers to the teachings of Lucien Levy-Bruhl and his understanding of primitive societies: "...l'expérience des primitifs ne débouche pas sur un Savoir mais sur une "révélation" 26. According to Fondane's essay, this revelation was of a mystical nature but not in the way which we define it; the myths which we inherited from primitive societies were in fact valid interpretations of life: "les mythes, pures fictions à nos yeux, soient aux leurs des histoires incontestablement vraies" 27. Fondane sees the connection between the spiritual world of primitive societies and the artistic world of the modern era. The passage is possible once the order of the established knowledge is abolished in favor of a more universal understanding of the essence of man: "Le courant esthétique passé de la réalité des primitifs dans la non-réalité des modernes, sans solution de continuité, sans brisure..."28. Fondane's observation is interesting to us because he sees the connection and yet he denies rational thought as being the bridge between the two worlds; what connects the past and the present is the human quality of creativity which sees no boundaries of time, and defines the true essence of man.

In La Conscience malheureuse, the Biblical question of the Fall is presented by Fondane as a Fall into knowledge. It was knowledge that brought about the unhappy consciousness of modern societies: <<Si l'humanité dédaignait l'intelligence et se cramponnait délibérément à l'erreur et à

l'absurdité, il n'y aurait guère de "malaise", de "crise" ou de "chaos" dans le monde>> 29. One manifestation of knowledge is that of Christian ideology. It was Shestov who first inspired Fondane on this topic. In a critique of Nietzsche's philosophy, Léon Shestov notes that man was condemned by Christianity to bear the marks of original sin as they were portrayed in the Bible. We were thus bound by an ideology which did not allow for freedom of thought ; as for Nietzsche's solution which resides in the necessity to accept our destiny as the only one possible, it is restrictive and narrowing. Fondane also criticizes Nietzsche for having considered knowledge as the supreme form of wealth that we have. Nietzsche's supremacy is established through knowledge as if it were able to equate our being with that of the divine:" Nietzsche était-il libre de refuser la vérité du serpent, après avoir mangé de l'arbre de la connaissance? était-il libre de rejeter sa supreme cruauté et de sacrifier non plus Dieu au néant, mais le néant à Dieu?"<sup>30</sup>. According to Benjamin Fondane, the Bible represented an established concept on life which was limiting since the majority of its interpretation was based on knowledge and reason: "La Bible ni les Evangiles n'échappent, malgré leur pureté, aux pollutions d'une raison présente jusque dans les plis les plus secrets des révélations"<sup>31</sup>.

There are, however, two biblical stories which fascinate both Shestov and Fondane: those of Abraham and Job. According to existential thought, Abraham becomes the knight to attain true faith; the absurdity of his act is explained only in terms of his connection with the divine which suspends the ethical as understood by the society condemning his acts. When Shestov opts for the

absurd, he is able to better understand these two biblical stories; he explains it in his book Athènes et Jérusalem: <<"Abraham avait foi en la puissance de l'Absurde". Tout calcul humain n'existait plus pour lui depuis longtemps...L'élan de la foi doit toujours avoir lieu en vertu de l'Absurde">><sup>32</sup>. In Les Révélations de la mort, Shestov reflects on the writings of Dostoyevsky as they relate to the "absurd": "Il rêva qu'il était parmi les hommes qui n'avaient pas encore goûté des fruits de l'arbre de la science du bien et du mal, qui ne connaissaient pas encore la honte, qui ne possédaient pas de science et ne savaient pas, ne voulaient pas juger"<sup>33</sup>. The mad man is the only one who dares not judge others, and who reflects upon the absurdity of existence; he reveals to us an understanding of life as it was before falling into the abyss of knowledge. And yet, before Dostoyevsky, he would have been ridiculed and labeled as evil.

In his essay, "Léon Chestov et la lutte contre les évidences", Fondane explains that which is limiting in our concept of existence: "Là où il y a preuve, il y a contrainte; et la pensée de l'existence est liberté"<sup>34</sup>. Rational thought or speculative thought is bound to the concreteness of all things, and therefore it cannot explain the essence of existence. When Abraham regains Issac we witness proof that he was innocent and that God is above the ethical as we understand it. Abraham's act appeared as unjust and absurd to men but not to God. Abraham was then absolved by true grace, and although we need not attain grace in the manner in which Abraham attained it, our capacity for suspending the established laws of the ethical needs to expand to a higher level of comprehension. It is only then that we will begin to appreciate the sorrow and

pain which existential thought relates to the absurd as an opening of the door to a deeper understanding of humanity. In Fondane's words, we are dealing with a new dimension of thought, a new world which comprehends faith on a different level, that of the tragic: <<"Il est un domaine de l'esprit humain où jamais encore on n'a pénétré en volontaire: les hommes n'y entrent qu'à leur corps défendant" C'est le domaine de la seconde dimension de la pensée - de la tragédie - ou encore de la foi>>35.

Fondane, as well as Shestov, both recognize that Job's merit lies in the element of rebellion. Job has the courage to express anger in front of an unjust God: "La signification de Job consiste précisément en ce qu'il ne décharge pas le pathétique (Leidenschaft) de la liberté par de fausses consolations" 36, explains Shestov. Job's anger has universal meaning for modern men of existential thought for it expresses the horror he feels when confronted with suffering - suffering brought by men upon other men, suffering which we have become accustomed to accept with no opposition. The cry for justice and understanding is addressed to humanity as a whole; it is the same cry as that of Pascal and his urge to wake us from a deep sleep of oblivion. <<Que ferait Job si on venait lui demandait "comment il faut vivre"? Il est justement en train de crier qu'il avait cru savoir comment il fallait vivre...>>37, asks Fondane; the poet is now engaged in a quest that will deeply affect his poetics for the presence of esthetics in life and in writing is superfluous when it allows suffering to prevail: "L'artiste 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.”<sup>38</sup>

Fondane freed himself from esthetics in order to explore the domain of the tragic. He considered that the tragic was the source of a multitude of questions on the essence of life, and he proceeded on a journey which led him away from a false treaty on esthetics and into an unexplored domain, the domain of the tragic -which usually men avoid at all cost. That is so not because we do not encounter pain in our lives and in massive doses at times, but because we rarely reflect upon its meaning and its presence in our lives. In Faux traité d'esthétique - a literary critique in which the poet presents the essence of his poetics, Fondane states that for a true poet, the act of writing is indispensable to his life: “la poésie est un besoin, et non une jouissance...”<sup>39</sup>. As a poet of existential thought, Fondane has the need to express himself within the domain of the tragic, yet he avoids any adherence to politics. He feels that poetry can only be true to itself when unaltered by political considerations. Fondane's poetics distinguishes itself from Surrealism in its need for complete independence: “quand, enfin, il se met a chanter avec, dans le regard, cette vision de misère humaine, et de cadavres et d'incendie, il a beau penser: pain, devoir, travail, lutte, humanité - sur le papier, voilà cette odeur de foin qui surgit, et d'étoiles, et de chevelures.”<sup>40</sup>. Consequently, the poet needs to sing his song whether he does or does not serve society, whether he remains a phantom of this world, or not. Viewing life unadorned by esthetics, let him sing his song :plain and simple in its nakedness of illusion, pain and hope.

### 1. Shestov and Fondane: Life beyond Morals

Shestov notes in Les Révélations de la mort, that the principle of morality relies upon a set of rules that men impose on others and that "les hommes doivent agir de telle façon que leurs actes manifestent leur parfaite soumission à la règle"<sup>41</sup>. In fact, men need the constraints they place upon themselves; they cannot bear the burden of free thinking because once engaged in thought, all they can do is suffer. Thus, it is the philosopher who must charge himself with this heavy responsibility; according to Plato -as Shestov's citation indicates, it is through deep thinking that men learn to die: "celui qui s'adonne entièrement à la philosophie, celui-là n'aspire rien d'autre qu'à se préparer à la mort, et à mourir..."<sup>42</sup>. Philosophy may be a way of accepting death according to Plato but not according to Shestov and Fondane. Man must have the right to cry out and fight against suffering and death just the way Job did; in addition, the poet need not accept death as an end to his being.

Fondane's existential philosophy regards human life as the most precious possession; the writer does not concern himself with life after death, or with religious dogma connected with after-life theories. Contrary to Fondane, Shestov perceived a double reality: that of life on Earth and that of life after death. This is how he states it in his own words: "Telle est, en effet, la révélation de la mort: là-bas, sur la terre, toute cela était important; ici, il faut autre chose (...) Fuyons vers notre chère patrie...c'est de là que nous sommes venus, c'est là aussi que se trouve notre Père"<sup>43</sup>. For Shestov death is mysterious yet not more mysterious or more real than life; it is unclear what the term "Père" means for

this philosopher of existential thought. In Le Pouvoir des clefs, Shestov finds himself in a conversation about the probability of being or not being ; here is the way in which he questions the divine: "est-il admissible que Dieu soudain préfère le néant à l'être et plonge par Sa parole toute -pouissante l'univers entier et Soi-même dans le néant" ?<sup>44</sup>. Shestov believes in the eternity of being: that of God and therefore that of humanity as well. The term "Père" refers to the origin of life itself since God and man are one as an expression of life, as the only possible reality of our existence .

"Le pouvoir de Dieu, et de l'homme confiant en Dieu, c'est de réaliser à chaque instant une plénitude, sans chercher à connaître, qui est le mal"<sup>45</sup>. In the introduction Yves Bonnefoy wrote to Shestov's study, Athènes et Jérusalem, he maintains that Shestov was a philosopher in search of God not as knowledge but rather as pure creation: "Dieu ne connaît pas le bien et le mal. Dieu ne connaît rien, Dieu crée tout"<sup>46</sup>. Shestov's teachings go beyond knowledge in order to reach the incomprehensible; and as for morality, nothing can ever be explained through it - to the contrary, all hope for plenitude, pure creation, or Paradise would vanish with it.

Fondane was a rebel whose understanding of life was more bitter than that of Shestov; the tragic sense he extracted from it tormented him throughout his entire life. Shestov was not a traditional believer, and yet he had confidence in God; all of his life he tried to attain a truth that seemed to be hidden to him by the nature of life itself. And yet he maintained the belief that one day he would obtain an answer; he thought that he would find this door by following the-path



mystique n'est pas de l'ignorance, mais un mode de savoir"48. Fondane considers himself a disciple of Shestov largely because, just like his master, he is in search of a non-answer that is not based on knowledge but rather on parting with knowledge: <<on ne peut pas dire de Dieu qu'il existe, car en disant "Dieu existe", on le perd immédiatement"49.

Ultimately, considering the teachings of Shestov and Fondane, we must ask ourselves one question: what is life beyond reason, knowledge, and morals? Without these tools, how can men fight against the obviousness of facts, how can men avoid death? Fondane questions the access to God obtainable through human suffering. Yet Shestov justifies this quest for the impossible, the unattainable: "ce n'est que lorsque l'homme veut l'impossible qu'il se tourne vers Dieu. Pour obtenir ce qui est possible, il s'adresse à ses semblables"50. After all, for those who can detach themselves from all knowledge, for those who can feel without thinking and who are capable of a spiritual existence, there is happiness within the creation of life itself. With each word, gesture, and thought, humans can design their own lives; we can thus create our own unique existence, and with each breath we can feel love and plenitude beyond morals. Should it be for just a few moments in life, the quest is nevertheless fulfilling.

## 2. Benjamin Fondane and Gaston Bachelard

In 1938 Fondane suffers a great loss, that of his mentor Léon Shestov. He is deeply moved by it, and unable to function for some time. The surrealist poet, David Gascoyne, mentions his encounter with Fondane at the time of Shestov's death: " Il m'a fait l'impression d'être complètement foudroyé par la perte de son grand ami et maître - une image de Fondane qui m'a fait effectivement, comme raconte Monsieur Cioran, poursuivi pendant des mois..."<sup>51</sup>. After Shestov's death, the essence of Fondane's writings continued to express the ideas of existential philosophies. Although Fondane appreciated many other contemporary writers, and wrote critical reviews, his needs were not determined by the influence of other authors: "Le monde intellectuel est un paysage ou personne n'a jamais converti personne et soi-même moins que tout autre"<sup>52</sup>. In his study, Benjamin Fondane : a poet in exile, William Kluback states that the essence of Fondane's work did change after Leon Shestov's death: "Without the presence of Shestov, Fondane seemed to move in other, if not contradictory, directions..."<sup>53</sup>. William Kluback's belief is that, after Shestov's death, the work of Benjamin Fondane followed the philosophy of Gaston Bachelard. It is difficult to imagine such a radical transformation in Fondane's inner world, yet it is true that Fondane read the works of Gaston Bachelard with much interest: "cette pensée est susceptible d'appréhender une réalité mouvante et riche...des rapports avec ce qu'on peut appeler l'être" <sup>54</sup>. Nevertheless, the article Fondane writes, "Bachelard apprivoise le rêve", is a review of Bachelard's philosophy and not a statement of acceptance and

adherence to his philosophical thoughts. In The New Scientific Spirit, Bachelard states: <<What does it mean to say that science can rectify metaphysics? As an example of what I have in mind, consider how "realism" changes, losing its naive immediacy, in its encounter with scientific skepticism. Similarly, "rationalism" need not be a closed system; a priori assumptions are subject to change...>>55. By allowing metaphysics to be a part of science, Bachelard opened the door to a new field of interdisciplinary study, and a new understanding of the world.

The philosophies of these two writers were very different; Fondane was not interested in limiting his creativity to any particular formula and especially one which had to be based on observations. Here is how he states his view on Bachelard's theories: "C'est qu'en effet, il n'acceptera pas le rêve, ni l'imagination, ni l'absurde avant de les avoir soumis à des lois" 56.

Nevertheless, William Kluback points out that Fondane showed great interest in the idea of open rationalism conceived by Bachelard: <<It is this "pedagogy of ambiguity" that softens the oppositions between reason and imagination, between truth and illusion>> 57. And we find Bachelard's comments on Fondane's works as testimony to the conversation that took place between the two thinkers; in L'Air et les songes, Bachelard praises Fondane for understanding the concept of the object as a source of inspiration and transgression into another form of the realm of imagination: <<Si l'on pouvait multiplier les expériences de transformations d'images, on comprendrait combien est profonde la remarque de Benjamin Fondane: "D'abord, l'objet n'est pas réel, mais un bon conducteur du réel">>58. Our conclusion is that, in spite

of the fact that he had great admiration for Bachelard's writings, Fondane remained true to his own poetics of existential thought without any other major influence than that of Léon Shestov. Emil Cioran, who was a close friend of Benjamin Fondane, believed that in the last years of his life, Fondane was leaning towards a poetics which was mystical in nature: "Ce qu'il aurait pu embrasser, s'il avait continué à vivre, c'est le mysticisme. C'est vers cela que Fondane allait. Mais il a vécu des moments historiques trop tourmentés, horribles dans un certain sens. Il est donc arrivé à une vision tragique de la vie par l'histoire même..."<sup>59</sup>.

### 3. Other Poets of Existential Thought

Benjamin Fondane's existential poetics was a unique, personal way of interpreting life at a crucial moment in history. Yet many other poets belonging to various poetic movements -ranging from symbolism to surrealism, expressed ideas similar to those of existential thought. To name just a few: St.-Pol-Roux, Max Jacob, and Robert Desnos, all of whom were victims of the Holocaust. In his poem, "Ephémères", the symbolist poet St.-Pol-Roux, designates the historic "hour" of his writings: "l'heure est à l'égoïsme à moins qu'elle ne soit à la révolte"<sup>60</sup>. The sentiment is similar to that expressed by Fondane who also questioned the validity of art at a crucial point in history; In St.-Pol-Roux's words:

<<-"A quoi bon offrir ces statuettes et ces vases à l'Humanité qui

répond d'un crachat et détourne les yeux? Le chef-d'oeuvre lui importe si peu désormais. Le temps n'est plus à la Beauté. Réjouissons-nous donc un instant de cette céramique entre le songe et la réalité, puis qu'elle se brise dans l'oubli.">>61

The cubist poet Max Jacob, wrote a moving poem, "Jugement dernier" with the subtitle, "Meditation"; needless to say, this poem leads us to profound existential reflections. The threat of the last judgement was no longer from above but rather that of men upon other men -it was that of the Nazi regime:

<< Par vos aïeux, et vous, le ciel est offensé.

Fuyez comme Caïn avec votre famille

.....

Fuyez par les décombres, les rideaux de fer

et sous la pluie de feu; de bûchers en bûchers

fuyez, mourant de faim, blessés par la mitraille:

"Seigneur, dira Caïn, ou voulez-vous que j'aïlle?">>62

Benjamin Fondane portrays similar images of destruction and war; and both poets question the existence of man in a world where force reigns:

"Tous ces cheveux tombés et ces cils et ces ongles

laissés derrière nous, veux-tu qu'on s'en souviennne,

La nuit est là. Le monde meurt,

et la forêt est pleine de craquements nouveaux."63

In a poem Fondane writes "d'après Walt Whitman"-following the style of the American poet, Fondane expresses his dismay and questions the survival of the

human soul in a world where force has become a solution:

“Est-il si simple que ça de noyer, de couler  
des âmes?  
N'est-il victoire que de la  
force brutale?” 64

The surrealist verse of Robert Desnos conveys similar messages; the intensity of his verse accrues as he enumerates and sums up the image of our world brought into despair:

“L'infini profond douleur désir poésie amour révéla-  
tion miracle révolution amour l'infini profond  
m'enveloppe de ténébres bavardes.  
Les infinis éternels se brisent en tessons ô chevelure!  
C'était ce sera une nuit des nuits sans lune ni perle  
Sans même de bouteille brisées” 65

The juxtaposition of the ephemeral with the profound gives the reader the impression of a finale where all will end regardless of its importance. And how could these poets not have this feeling when the Nazi regime had become so obsessed with power that it could no longer decipher the meaning of life... Fondane's verse appealed to the consciousness of those who were still part of the human race:

“Mais vous savez pourtant que vous-même et nous-  
mêmes sommes de même race,  
que je n'ai pas demandé à partir et je pars,

traqué d'un bout à l'autre de l'univers épars..."<sup>66</sup>

Benjamin Fondane was gassed at Birkenau, two weeks before the camp's liberation, Max Jacob died in 1944 at Drancy, Robert Desnos in a labor camp at Floha, and Saint Pol-Roux in a hospital at Brest (in 1940); he had been badly beaten by a Nazi soldier.

The next generation of writers continued the legacy of the victims of the Holocaust. The Italian poet Primo Levi, and the East European poets Paul Celan and Tadeusz Borowski, are just three of them. All three committed suicide not being able to survive the memories they wrote about; in the words of Primo Levi (from the poem "Réveille):

"In the brutal nights we used to dream  
Dense violent dreams,  
Dreamed with soul and body:  
To return; to eat; to tell the story."<sup>67</sup>

For these writers existence became an unreal experience no one ever thought could be produced by the human mind and soul. Yves Bonnefoy describes this unpredictable element of life in "L'improbable": "L'existence y devient - comme l'acte de la présence dans la "perspective" du concept -une réalité impensable que beaucoup de peintres méconnaîtront"<sup>68</sup>. Yet the poets we are citing here wrote precisely for this purpose: they did not wish for us to ever forget the probability of existence becoming the sort of nightmare it was during the Nazi regime. In a poem entitled, "The Sun of Auschwitz", Tadeusz Borowski remembers:

“we stood looking into the distance and felt  
 the far away green of the meadows and the clouds’  
 seagreen within us, as if the world  
 existed only through us and nothing changed  
 as long as we were there...” 69

And Paul Celan remembers with much anger:

“Anger  
 as black as a hook,  
 overtakes me.

.....

And death looks on with a casual eye.”70

These verses are Job’s voices and cries to which we must awaken, and although we have not yet fallen into oblivion, time has a way of erasing such memories. In Paul Celan’s words:

“The SILICIFIED SAYING in the fist,  
 you forget that you forget,

.....

through the earth  
 cleft to the crest  
 the pauses come riding,  
 there, by  
 the sacrifice-bush,  
 where memory catches fire,

the One Breath  
seizes you."71

This one breath is that of the memory of the existence of others, others who could have been with us, others who could have sung with us only if Job's cry would have been heard. And the hope we have today is that the philosophy of existential thought will be taken seriously for what it is :the vivid reminder of the importance of all living souls in a world which belongs to all humanity.

Our understanding of existential thought comprehends man as he questions himself or herself thus calling "into question", explains Jean Wahl, "the entire universe which is bound to him" 72. Benjamin Fondane, and Leon Shestov, gave their personal interpretation to the tragic times of their existence. They questioned the meaning of theology, the existence of the soul, and the survival of humanity. When Fondane's scream joined that of Job's, he acknowledged a *Historic* era of absolute despair. Yet there was hope in Fondane's cry for he believed in the Biblical message of Job and Abraham. He believed that, when heard, man will survive, and will maintain his presence in this universe. Fondane's existential verse is present with us today, and it contains the song of our suffering, our desire for life, and most of all our belief in the transcendency of all tragic moments.

NOTES:

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4. Arthur Schopenhauer, "III :The Foundation of Ethics,"  
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5. Jean Wahl, "Part I," Philosophies of Existence. 19.
6. Benjamin Fondane, "Introduction," La conscience malheureuse.  
(Paris: Editions Denoël et Steele, 1936) 10.
7. Jean Wahl, "Part II," Philosophies of Existence . 60.
8. Jean Wahl, "Part I," Philosophies of Existence. 25.
9. Benjamin Fondane, "Ch.VII," Rimbaud le voyou.  
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10. Benjamin Fondane, "XXVIII," Baudelaire et l'expérience du gouffre.  
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11. Benjamin Fondane, "Ch.VII," Rimbaud le voyou. 94.
12. Benjamin Fondane, "Au temps du poème - Poèmes épars,"  
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13. Benjamin Fondane, "Léon Chestov et la lutte contre les évidences,"  
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14. Benjamin Fondane, "L'Exode Super Flumina Babylonis,"  
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15. Benjamin Fondane, "Ulysse," Le mal des fantômes . 19.
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17. Benjamin Fondane, "VI," Faux traité d'esthétique.  
(Paris: Editions Denoël, 1938) 106.
18. Benjamin Fondane, "L'Exode - Super Flumina Babylonis,"  
Le Mal des fantômes. 262.
19. Jean Wahl, "Comprehensive View," Philosophies of existence . 91-92.
20. Ibid.
21. Benjamin Fondane, "Entretiens avec Léon Chestov,"  
Rencontres avec Léon Chestov . 42-43
22. Leon Chestov, "A Propos de la philosophie de l'histoire,"  
Sur la balance de Job . (France: Flammarion, 1971) 309.
23. Benjamin Fondane, "Entretiens avec Léon Chestov,"  
Rencontres avec Léon Chestov . 101.
24. Leon Chestov, "Dans le taureau de Phalaris," Athènes et Jérusalem .  
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25. Benjamin Fondane, "La Conscience malheureuse,"  
La Conscience malheureuse. (Paris: Editions Denoël et Steele, 1936) 33.
26. Benjamin Fondane, "La Philosophie vivante," Le lundi existentiel.  
(Monaco: Editions du Rocher, 1990) 92.
27. Ibid., 89.
28. Benjamin Fondane, "IV," Faux traité d'esthétique. 79.
29. Benjamin Fondane, "La Conscience malheureuse,"  
La Conscience malheureuse. 3.

30. Benjamin Fondane, "Nietzsche et la supreme cruauté,"  
La Conscience malheureuse . 66.
31. Benjamin Fondane, "La Conscience malheureuse,"  
La Conscience malheureuse. 9.
32. Léon Chestov, "Dans le taureau de Phalaris," Athènes et Jérusalem. 171.
33. Léon Chestov, "Les Révélations de la mort," Sur la balance de Job. 93.
34. Benjamin Fondane, "Léon Chestov et la lutte contre les évidences,"  
Rencontres avec Léon Chestov. 234.
35. Benjamin Fondane, "Léon Chestov et la lutte contre les évidences,"  
Rencontres avec Benjamin Fondane . 250.
36. Leon Chestov, "Dans le taureau de Phalaris," Athènes et Jérusalem . 184.
37. Benjamin Fondane, "Léon Chestov et la lutte contre les évidences,"  
Rencontres avec Léon Chestov . 247.
38. Benjamin Fondane, "XXXI," Baudelaire et l'expérience du gouffre .  
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39. Benjamin Fondane, "VI," Faux traité d'esthétique. 108.
40. Benjamin Fondane, "Léon Chestov et la lutte contre les évidences,"  
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41. Léon Chestov, "Les Révélations de la mort," Sur la balance de Job. 48.
42. Ibid., 98.
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## CH.VI: MEETING WITH EMIL CIORAN

More than fifty years ago, Benjamin Fondane's life ended in Auschwitz. Fondane's existential image of the Wandering Jew and that of the prophet announcing the apocalypse of the Second World War remains present in today's literary conscience. He never ceased to question suffering and that which makes it reoccur in our lives: "crier est supérieur à toute prière... La prière ne vient qu'après le cri, et la poésie ne vient qu'après la prière" 1. Existential thought is concerned with the definition of life -the way it is now, and the different ways in which it could be perceived.

In "Poésie et prémonition", Monique Jutrin mentions Fondane's optimism regarding the end of the Nazi occupation: "Fondane prédisait la fin du nazisme avec une clairvoyance qui laissait ses amis stupéfaits. Malheureusement, il ne lui fut pas donné de vivre ce grand jour" 2. In March of 1944, Fondane and his sister Line were denounced, arrested by the Gestapo, and transported to a concentration camp in Drancy. Fondane's closest friends, Cioran, Lupasco, Paulhan ( as well as many other Roumanian friends who were then established in Paris), were able to obtain his liberation. Yet, they could not obtain Line's papers. Fondane who was very much attached to his sister Line, refused to abandon her and remained at Drancy. His wife, Geneviève, never recovered from her husband's loss; she died in 1953 of a medically unknown cause.

Emil Cioran has spoken to many interviewers about Fondane with the intention of maintaining Fondane's memory alive and well publicized. And in

January of 1992, I was fortunate enough to obtain an interview with Emil Cioran. This was my chance to become more intimately involved with Fondane, and Emil Cioran was very glad to make another contribution in honor of his close friend. The two friends had frequent discussions on Léon Shestov' s philosophical thoughts; <<...on devine ce qui a pu séduire Cioran dans la pensée de Chestov qui, selon Fondane...ne veut pas "comprendre l'être mais parvenir à l'être">><sup>3</sup>, explains Bruno de Cessole in his article, "De l'admiration aux anathèmes". In Exercices d'admiration, the chapter entitled "6, rue Rollin" is a personal account dedicated to Benjamin Fondane: "J'allais le voir souvent (je l'ai connu pendant l'Occupation), toujours avec l'idée de ne rester qu'une heure chez lui et j'y passais l'après-midi...il adorait parler, et je n'avais pas le courage et encore moins le désir d'interrompre un monologue qui me laissait épuisé et ravi"<sup>4</sup>. Cioran was interested in Fondane's ideas, but he was also interested in Fondane, the human being. In La Tentation d'exister, within a broader context analyzing man and his destiny, Cioran comments on the drama of being a Jew: "Etre homme est un drame; être juif en est un autre. Aussi le Juif a-t-il le privilège de vivre deux fois notre condition." <sup>5</sup>.

In our interview Cioran often talks about the torment Fondane felt as a writer engaged in the tragic of life. And in Exercices d'admiration, Cioran states that Fondane was fascinated by the "tragic" : " sans une certaine fascination de la tragédie, on ne saurait expliquer son refus de toute précaution, dont la plus élémentaire était celle de changer de domicile" <sup>6</sup>. Meeting with Cioran on one rainy, cold afternoon, transformed and enlightened me about myself as a writer

and human being, and gave me much to reflect about Benjamin Fondane's real personality. Cioran's only request was that I remain faithful to what he stated in our interview. I kept my promise as best as I could.

A.L.-B.: Most people would have opted for life, yet Fondane was deeply attached to his sister Line whom he refused to leave. How can we interpret his refusal to be liberated? After all, he was abandoning his wife to despair...

E.M. Cioran: Fondane was a superior, noble man. He was above the ordinary. He refused to abandon Line, and to accept his liberation. Before this, he had a false image of the whole situation. Maybe he thought that he could eventually escape, and save Line. Even though he was a tormented individual, before his arrest, Fondane was full of illusions concerning the political situation of those times. He used to tell me: "I no longer exist...no one knows me, I can't possibly be in danger, my books, no one reads them anymore..." That was not true, and I often encouraged him to hide, and to stop wandering around freely on the streets of Paris. He used to live on a small street, rue Rollin, which was out of the way -that gave him the impression of being well protected. Yet Fondane seldom stayed home ; he used to take walks everywhere.

His friends wanted to hide him and, for a little while, he stayed with a Roumanian friend who had a large apartment -a friend who was on good terms with the Germans. Victoria Ocampo, who admired Fondane, wanted to bring him to South America. Yet her efforts were in vain. And then his wife prayed for him

to go into hiding, but without any results...

In a sense, Fondane had accepted death. He was a noble man living in a sinister era. Thinking of him is thinking of a noble person, giving us a feeling similar to that of exclusion. Yet this is what Fondane was: not a distinguished man but a noble man...in a more profound way. One would say that he was neither a believer nor a non-believer, but both. This is what is extraordinary about him. He was detached from religion but, at the same time, he was a religious spirit - in the sense that for him being religious was a way of surpassing this world.

A.L.-B.: In La Conscience malheureuse, Fondane states the following: "Il y a un croyant dans le philosophe et un philosophe dans le croyant" (There is a believer in the philosopher and a philosopher in the believer)<sup>7</sup>. What do you think of Fondane as a philosopher?

E.M.Cioran: He was more than a philosopher: more profound, more sensitive. You understand, he was a philosopher, but deep down inside, he was beyond philosophy. He had his faith but at the same time, he was conscious of the fact that he had surpassed most all other beliefs, yet without feeling any pride. He had surpassed our average miseries: as a man he was superior to all other men. This is why, when one talked to him, even for a short while, one had the feeling of attaining something important. And this without any pretensions, without any preaching. Fondane had become superior to all other men -in his

own career, and this, without gestures, without demonstrations, without exhibiting any pride, since he was incapable of insolence. He was a rare man due to this extraordinary noble quality of his... In any case, the writer he admired most of all was Leon Shestov whom he adored.

A.L.-B.: In an interview with Michael Jacob (in 1989), you have spoken of philosophy and its insufficiencies, and you have mentioned the fact that Shestov refused to adhere to any philosophical dogma; Shestov was a thinker who had surpassed philosophy.

E.M.Cioran: This is what Fondane admired in Shestov: a philosophy which presented itself as the contrary of the official schools of philosophy. It was a world which was not to be figured out but a world which had to be surpassed. It was a presence, something that was unforgettable; Shestov was quite the opposite of the philosopher as we perceive him.

Fondane was a modest man, but he was superior to others; really, if there are noble people in this world... oh well, he belongs to this category of men who surpass themselves.

A.L.-B.: Fondane probably felt very lonely as he reached such a superior level of thinking; he was probably aware of the fact that very few people were at his side.

E.M.Cioran: Nevertheless, this is when one can observe Fondane's religious side. Normally, he should have felt proud of himself. Not at all, he knew that he had surpassed others, yet precisely without feeling any pride. In fact, people who are very talented are unfortunately vain, they are conscious of their genius, not him -he had in a sense exceeded the human condition. By establishing this detachment, he had really understood and nothing could truly fascinate him anymore. And I believe that it is for this reason that he did not take any precautions. Each time I saw him on the street like this, dressed up as any other person (without his star), what could I do?

A.L.-B.: So, you knew him during the Occupation, but when exactly?

E.M.Cioran: It was during the war, during the three or four years of the Occupation.

A.L.-B.: Did you meet him at his friends' house?

E.M.Cioran: Of course, we had common friends. He was then well-known. There was a Roumanian philosopher, Lupasco who appreciated him very much. In fact, everyone knew that he was somebody...

A.L.-B.: And had you read his books at the time when you were meeting with him?

E.M.Cioran: No, but I was also an admirer of Léon Shestov. In fact, he made me love Shestov even more.

A.L.-B.: I suppose that Fondane was not at all a practical person; it was impossible for him to imagine the pettiness of others and therefore he did not go into hiding.

E.M.Cioran: He was a detached man...

A.L.-B.: Detached from reality?

E.M.Cioran: No, not detached from reality, but detached from normal, petty things. Fondane had something special, he did not resemble others. He did not have the typical reactions we normally have. The others, without a doubt, would have hidden, right?

A.L.-B.: His wife was not able to stop him from going out, couldn't she...

E.M.Cioran: Fondane and his wife were really very different. She was from a very good family, very cultured; nevertheless, they were basically very different. One would say that she was a little afraid; she would tell him to be careful...In fact his wife also had a noble personality, but at the same time, they did not have much in common. Fondane appreciated her because she was a.

remarkable woman but he was special. And then Geneviève loved him so...

A.L.-B.: Since Fondane was a spiritually tormented person, maybe he needed someone who was different, calmer. If Genevieve had also been intensely concerned and tormented with and by existence, it would have been difficult for them to live together.

E.M.Cioran: They were indeed a peculiar family. Yet he had a lot of influence on other people. For example on people from South America.

A.L.-B.: I have the impression that Fondane was a very passionate man. He had the gift of convincing others through his own passionate self, didn't he?

E.M.Cioran: All the people who knew him felt a special presence...It is hard to explain it sometimes, but there was something about him that impressed other people; more so because he lived among people who were very vain, and yet, he was quite the opposite. Fondane had a proud but noble heart; his pride was metaphysical in nature.

A.L.-B.: Mr. Cioran, did you always know that philosophy would give sense to your life?

E.M.Cioran: Yes, but not right away. My ideal in life was not to have to work for

a living. I wanted to live like this, as a student. I came to Paris in order to write a thesis, but I did not aspire to a profession. It was not always easy but I put up with humiliation and poverty.

A.L.-B.: This gave you the freedom to write.

E.M.Cioran: Yes, that is what I consider freedom: no need to work, no profession. This is why I left Roumania. I did my best to remain free, and I succeeded in surviving without a profession.

A.L.-B.: But writing is a noble profession...

E.M.Cioran: However, one cannot earn a living with what one writes as a writer, especially when one is young...You understand, I managed like this...especially since one has to write a lot of books that sell, and be popular. I did not want to have an audience.

A.L.-B.: In this manner you were able to spend your time with what was most important to you, while so many people waste all their lives in positions of a more or less menial nature.

E.M.Cioran: That is the catastrophe. And then, you know marriage, it's complicated because once you are engaged in domestic matters, you

understand...

A.L.-B.: You have obligations...

E.M.Cioran: Moreover in Fondane's case, it was not him who earned a living, it was his wife. And his wife was a positive person...she never reproached him with anything.

A.L.-B.: Did Fondane read your books when you were friends?

E.M.Cioran: Yes, indeed, of course he did. He was very nice with me. We had common interests, we liked the same philosophers.

A.L.-B.: Was Shestov well-known in Roumania?

E.M.Cioran: He had admirers, but not that many.

A.L.-B.: As Shestov's disciple, do you think that Fondane followed the teachings of his master who stated that in order to be a philosopher, and follow the path of truth, "il fallait, de son propre avis, avoir traversé quelque intime désastre?" (it was necessary, by one's own accord, to have experienced personal tragedy?)<sup>8</sup> . I am not referring to the end of his life, but during his lifetime, was he obsessed with suffering, was it something he searched for?

E.M.Cioran: Yes, he was not a happy man in the way the rest of the world understands happiness. There was anxiety in his life, and torment. To speak of misfortune is too much, but he was an anxious man. In any case, one cannot speak of happiness when referring to his life; and yet he was too wise to be unhappy.

A.L.-B.: He was not searching for tranquility but rather for the opposite...

E.M.Cioran: No, not the contrary to that but he was sensitive to misfortune. He was not at all a happy man. One cannot speak of an image of happiness, especially since one could detect in Fondane an anxiety that was almost physical. I believe that even the idea of happiness would have displeased him. Fondane was definitely an anxious man. He was much too lucid and full of anguish.

A.L.-B.: Did he wish to aim at the impossible?

E.M.Cioran: The impossible, that's too much to say but how can I explain it: on a philosophical plane, happiness had no meaning for him. He felt anguish almost constantly...; he was tormented in the sense that he was aware of suffering. I never heard him speak of happiness.

A.L.-B.: Doesn't Fondane refer to the primitive man as the only one who had

experienced true happiness while the era of the tree of knowledge made us lose our Paradise?

E.M.Cioran: Yes, you know that even the idea of happiness became remote.

A.L.-B.: What impressed me mostly in Fondane's writings, is the idea that men, even after experiencing the Fall, could request (from God) that Paradise be returned to them.

E.M.Cioran: It is an extreme request, unrealizable. It is hoping for too much. Fondane wanted a sort of wisdom and sometimes he appeared as a sage. I believe that he was hiding some kind of affliction. Deep down inside, he was controlled by his own torment, he was troubled...

A.L.-B.: By an unhappy conscience...

E.M.Cioran: One cannot imagine Fondane and the concept of happiness, it does not make any sense. Fondane and happiness, that is absurd. Therefore, it was a matter of the tragic within him, but it did not have much to do with unhappiness.

A.L.-B.: You mention in the chapter you wrote on Fondane -in your book Exercices d'admiration , that "Chercher était pour lui plus qu'une nécessité ou

une hantise, chercher sans désespérer était une fatalité..." ( Fondane's quest was for him more than a necessity or an obsession, searching without stopping was his destiny...)9. Fondane states it himself in Baudelaire ou l'expérience du gouffre when he mentions that: "la trouvaille est par elle-même une limite "finding is by its own nature a limitation"10. Since Fondane was not in search of answers, what was the aim of his philosophy aside from posing the questions well? Was there no other path for him than that of metaphysics or mysticism?

E.M.Cioran: He could have embraced mysticism if he had been able to continue living. Fondane was then leading himself towards mysticism. Yet he lived during an era of historic torment, horrible moments in a sense. He then concluded with a tragical vision of life because of history itself; aside from that, he was a very sensitive person, especially when life had to do with pain. Nevertheless, he gave the impression of having surmounted all that.

A.L.-B.: Was philosophy a way of easing his soul?

E.M.Cioran: Yes, a certain kind of philosophy, as a very important stage of thinking. I believe that his thinking was more profound than philosophy itself.

A.L.-B.: In which sense?

E.M.Cioran: His thinking went beyond the anguish experienced by philosophers; their content is "ouvermé" (opened to a closure). He was a tormented spirit but with a certain wisdom. Fondane conquered despair, but for him despair was a temptation; he was devoured by it an entire life. Nevertheless, he mastered the temptation to commit suicide, a temptation he could have succumbed to several times in his life.

A.L.-B.: I believe that every profound soul passes by this stage of temptation.

E.M.Cioran: Yes, in my opinion, someone who has never been tempted by suicide, is an animal. Yet, this depends on intensity, and tension. It is in this way that man distinguishes himself from animals. I believe that the temptation to commit suicide remains likely to surface all throughout one's lifetime. In general, it only manifests itself during the early part of one's life, especially during one's youth. It's the temptation young people fall into when they cannot find an answer to the major questions regarding life. However, all depends on the intensity of the feeling.

A.L.-B.: In Exercices d'admiration, you have stated that Fondane was incessantly "en lutte contre la tyrannie et la nullité des évidences, avide de ses contradictions et comme effrayé d'aboutir..." (fighting against the tyranny and nullity of obvious facts, thirsting for their contradictions and almost afraid of reaching an answer...)11 What was your understanding of "effrayé d'aboutir"?

E.M.Cioran: You know that when one succeeds, one no longer has any problems. One then has the answer just like this, like a dessert. Afraid of reaching an answer since finding a solution is like removing from life its tragic element.

A.L.-B.: Can we then say that what gave meaning to Fondane's life was the element of the tragic?

E.M.Cioran: Yes, but there is the danger of believing that one could reach an answer. Fondane resisted this temptation and he agonized over questions. He detested any answer. For him, what mattered was the question; it was important for him to escape the answer and not to say "I have found a solution". The vision of his world appeared in the form of a question. Therefore the profound passion of a true philosopher is to question himself. We know that from that moment on, through the process of questioning, we can believe we have found something.

A.L.-B.: Yet Nietzsche and Kierkegaard both have a theory, a unique way of thinking.

E.M.Cioran: They were more positive, they did not have any tragic visions. Naturally there were affinities between Fondane and these philosophers. Yet Fondane was more profound and more sensitive.

A.L.-B.: Then it was not a matter of intellectual games.

E.M.Cioran: That is also true for Nietzsche; nevertheless, it is also a matter of degree. They all have points in common, and even on the morbid side. Yet they are not thinkers who declare that they have found an answer. That is what is essential. They are tormented minds, men who have not found anything but who keep asking questions, and who question themselves about suffering. They do have extraordinary points in common.

A.L.-B.: In your book, Exercices d'admiration, you declare that : "Nous sommes tous, Eliade en tête, des ci-devant croyants, nous sommes tous des esprits religieux sans religion" (We are all, Eliade first of all, former believers, we are all religious minds without a religion)<sup>12</sup>. Can we say that Fondane, due to his special sensitivity, was in a sense a believer?

E.M.Cioran: Yes, he was a believer without a religion.

A.L.-B.: He would have liked to believe in God, but it seemed to him that God had abandoned us...

E.M.Cioran: Yes, that's it. He did not resolve this problem...he did not like certainties. Philosophers such as Nietzsche and Kierkegaard, had this point in common.

A.L.-B.: We could question whether God exists just because we believe in his existence and ultimately whether God is just a need we have as humans.

E.M.Cioran: True believers are a little bit skeptical, they experience this sort of agony that all religious minds have known. It is a troubled certainty; there is no certainty except for that of fanatics. The true religious spirit must know uncertainty.

A.L.-B.: Pascal's revelation, did it not become a certainty?

E.M.Cioran: Yes, but when one is close to Pascal, one also feels his anguish...do you understand? His anguish is stronger than his positive experience. One feels that he was a very unhappy man, even desperate at times, and that is why Pascal still impresses us today - his anguish never really disappeared. Even people who have answers experience torment. It is the same story with people in monasteries; one should not think that happiness can be found there. They are all tormented people. There is something profound within them, yet they cannot experience the meaning of happiness as ordinary people do.

A.L.-B.: Consequently, the quest of God is a quest that we pursue a whole lifetime. It would be much too simple to say that God's existence is a sure thing. What matters is to continue the spiritual quest.

E.M.Cioran: Faith takes hold of monks, but true monks have a tormented soul. They have found an answer but they are still human beings and they live in anguish; not completely, yet they experience moments of anguish, just like this...All depends on the intensity. I used to have friends who were monks and they were not at all sure.

A.L.-B.: In following Shestov's teachings, Fondane disapproved of all logic and since he followed other paths than those of reason, where did he think that such a philosophy could lead him? Was there anything other than despair in Fondane's quest?

E.M.Cioran: It is the path leading to faith that is most interesting. Fondane was a tormented spirit who sometimes felt he had an answer, but who was not able to find one. The torment is more important than the result. He was in search of religion yet what is beautiful is the quest itself, the anguish, and not the triumph.

A.L.-B.: What sense did existence have for Benjamin Fondane? Or did existence really have any sense for him?

E.M.Cioran: One cannot say yes or no because for him, what was important was the torment itself. There is no answer, there is only the quest for an answer. You understand, for him, it was the torment that constituted the sense to his existence.

A.L.-B.: In an interview you had with Michel Jacob in 1989, you stated that Shestov is the only philosopher whose teachings are useful to you when confronting life's tragedies.

E.M.Cioran: Yes, that's because Shestov is the only thinker who sides with you. A profound relationship can then develop, one you cannot have with any other philosopher. Yes, he was a profound thinker.

A.L.-B.: What is your opinion regarding Fondane's philosophy? Could his philosophy also be useful to us?

E.M.Cioran: Insofar as one is a tormented individual. Psychological drama is very important; when you are engaged in a conversation with Fondane, even when you disagree with him, you belong to these minds born to live in agony. Therefore, you can communicate your troubles to Fondane when you have experienced the same crises as he has. Being a partner in his torment is already pretty good, isn't it? Being able to be so intimate with someone who was a tragic figure, that is extraordinarily important. You are not a disciple, but you belong to the same family of ideas. That is very important, and you may have the impression that you have found something. It does not happen very often in life.

A.L.-B.: Nietzsche has a passion for the superior man, yet not all men can appreciate the desire for the superhuman figure...

E.M.Cioran: That is the vain side of Nietzsche, isn't it? Nietzsche had a large number of disciples because he incarnated the positive side of man. In any case, he is helpful. He can then have a positive influence. It is a risky theory, yet introduced by an exceptional individual.

A.L.-B.: Man can then feel capable of doing everything without needing God.

E.M.Cioran: Nietzsche places man in God's role. Nevertheless, faith exists, even for Nietzsche, inevitably...If he had not had this religious background, he would not have been able to influence so many people. He makes man and God face each other. That's pretty good. And he gives man superiority. So this sort of thinking replaces religion. This is the positive aspect, yet there is also a morbid side to it.

A.L.-B.: I prefer Kierkegaard for myself; I feel closer to his philosophy.

E.M. Cioran: The style is what is different in Kierkegaard's writings.

A. L.-B.: In the preface of the Conscience malheureuse, Fondane states that philosophy is "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 possibilités mêmes de vivre" (the act by which the existent settles its own existence, the act itself of the living, searching within himself and outside of

himself, with or against evidence, the possibilities of life)<sup>13</sup>. What do you think of this manner of conceiving philosophy? Can the inadequacies of philosophy be overcome this way?

E.M.Cioran: It is one way. You know, philosophy is not a religion, philosophy does not have answers. It indicates various paths, gives us suggestions...it is just a way of stating: here are some possible answers. Nevertheless there are no certainties.

A.L.-B.: Fondane was a philosopher of existential thought. Of course one cannot relate his philosophy to the existentialism of Camus and Sartre; his philosophy related to the Bible and to life's mysteries.

E.M.Cioran: Fondane was better than them, he was more sincere. Sartre and Camus were very good, but they did not seem convincing enough. They did not display a profound sensitivity. There was something that was too Parisian in their writings. Their philosophies were very different and that's the essential thing that has to be mentioned.

A.L.-B.: Can one say that the Slavic spirit is more moving than that of the French?

E.M.Cioran: Yes, but this is a more complicated matter. There is something

else...They were brilliant spirits, but very Parisian.

A.L.-B.: In your interview with Michael Jacob (on the Swiss radio) you spoke of Russian writers, like Dostoyevsky, who go all the way.

E.M.Cioran: In this case, we deal with great minds, very profound. Their masterpieces are unforgettable, they mark us for a lifetime. While with the great French existential writers, there is a brilliant side to them, yet they were just intellectuals who lacked a certain profundity.

A.L.-B.: In the preface of his book, La Conscience malheureuse, Fondane says :  
"Mieux vaut sauver l'existence, dussions-nous pour cela briser en morceaux, apres l'avoir surmontee cette connaissance..." (Once we can surmount knowledge, it is better to save existence, even if we have to destroy ourselves for it...)14. Nevertheless, I ask myself how can one surmount this?

E.M.Cioran: The idea of being able to surmount knowledge is already pretty good. What matters is having this idea in the first place. It's an interesting aspect of Fondane's philosophy.

A.L.-B.: I am always wondering: should we return to the instincts of primitive men or should we become engaged in the mysteries of the Bible? Can we rid ourselves of the concept of "evidence" -detested by both Shestov and Fondane,

since we now have grasped this concept?

E.M.Cioran: There is no answer for this. It's a personal adventure. Each one of us is marked, destined for our own path. It depends only on us, and still...If one has no calling, it's no use...For such a person being a philosopher means nothing at all. We must follow our own path, and that is essential; the rest does not count...

A.L.-B.: In the same preface I mentioned above, in La Conscience malheureuse, Fondane explains why men are haunted by an "unhappy conscience": <<Si l'humanité dédaignait l'intelligence et se cramponnait délibérément à l'erreur et à l'absurdité, il n'y aurait guère de "malaise", de "crise" ou de "chaos" dans le monde...L'homme serait peut-être une bête, aux dires de l'intelligence, mais, ce qui est certain, c'est qu'il n'aurait pas affaire à une "conscience malheureuse.>> (<<If humanity scorned intelligence and deliberately clung to error and the absurd, there would be no "uneasiness", no "crises" or "chaos" in the world... Man would then perhaps be an animal, according by the standards of intelligence, but, what is certain, is that he would not be disturbed by an "unhappy conscience".>>)15

As we have already been able to observe, all men do not experience the burden of an "unhappy conscience". It is rather the sensitive souls who suffers, and not necessarily intelligent men, isn't that so?

E.M.Cioran: Yes, except that men who are sensitive do not lack intelligence.

A.L.-B.: And yet there are intelligent human beings who are not sensitive, don't you think so?

E.M.Cioran: Yes, but this is what one calls destiny; one does not know who the privileged ones will be.

A.L.-B.: Fondane states that if we could accept the element of the absurd in our lives, we would no longer encounter any crises, we would no longer suffer. Yet, how can it be possible to accept this element of the absurd in our lives? All throughout life, man is incapable of understanding the reason for his existence, and whether life makes any sense at all.

E.M.Cioran: Yes, yet this is what life is all about...

A.L.-B.: Nevertheless, by being a philosopher, you have found an equilibrium in your life.

E.M.Cioran: No, I was not searching for equilibrium in my life. It happened just like this...I was not even looking for a solution. We all have our own way of exteriorizing our inner being. One also writes in order to rid oneself of one's thoughts; it's an obsession...One cannot completely rid oneself of one's thoughts, but one can do so in part...that is the positive side of writing. One cannot

resolve one's problems, yet it's a way of soothing oneself. There is no solution, therefore one must remain more or less skeptical.

NOTES:

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2. Monique Jutrin, "Poesie et premonition," L'arbre à paroles. n.71 (1992): 7-15.
3. Bruno de Cessole, "De l'admiration aux anathemes," Magazine littéraire. 327  
(1994):59-61.
4. Emil Cioran, "Benjamin Fondane 6, rue Rollin," Exercices d'admiration.  
(Paris: Gallimard, 1977) 153.
5. Emil Cioran, "Un peuple de solitaires," La Tentation d'exister.  
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6. Emil Cioran, "Benjamin Fondane 6, rue Rollin," Exercices d'admiration. 155.
7. Benjamin Fondane, "La Conscience malheureuse,"  
La Conscience malheureuse. (Paris: Editions Denoel et Steele, 1936) 10.
8. Benjamin Fondane, "Entretiens avec Léon Chestov,"  
Rencontres avec Léon Chestov. (Paris: Editions Plasma, 1982) 43.
9. Emil Cioran, "Benjamin Fondane 6, rue Rollin," Exercices d'admiration.  
(Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1986) 156-157.
10. Benjamin Fondane, "XXXIII," Baudelaire et l'expérience du gouffre.  
(Paris: Pierre Seghers, 1947) 360.

11. Emil Cioran, "Benjamin Fondane 6, rue Rollin," Exercices d'admiration. 157.

12. Emil Cioran, "Mircea Eliade," Exercices d'admiration. 131.

13. Benjamin Fondane, "Préface pour aujourd'hui,"

La Conscience malheureuse. X-XI.

14. Benjamin Fondane, "Post-Scriptum," La Conscience malheureuse. XXIII.

15. Benjamin Fondane, "La Conscience malheureuse,"

La Conscience malheureuse. 3-4.

## CH. VII: INTERVIEW WITH DAVID GASCOYNE

A.L-B.: In your book, Rencontres avec Benjamin Fondane, you indicate how much you were touched by Fondane's interpretation of Rimbaud and of his poetry. What is it that impressed you mostly in Fondane's study on Rimbaud?

D.G.: From all the books I had consulted on Rimbaud at the time (found at the British Library and at the British Museum), Fondane's was the most dramatic, the most clear...

A.L-B.: In which way did he understand Rimbaud better than the other critics?

D.G.: He renders Rimbaud's life and works together , and since it is difficult to separate the life from the works of Rimbaud , it is actually better than other interpretations. It also comprises a picture of the whole Western civilization.

A.L-B.: Rimbaud's readers had thought that the poet could never part from poetry, and they were shocked to see Rimbaud turn away from poetry.

D.G.: The French are quite different from the British: "poetry" does not adequately translate "poésie" ; since Baudelaire, and Mallarmé we are dealing with something rather more than literature. Fondane brings this point out very strongly in his book.

A.L-B.: Yves Bonnefoy mentions that the reason Rimbaud gives up on poetry is because poetry no longer resolves any of his frustrations, and poetry at that point becomes disappointing to him.

D.G.: Yes, in the book Rimbaud par lui-même, Yves Bonnefoy mentions this point. And as far as Fondane's interpretation is concerned, I think it is one of the best. One other important reading on Rimbaud is Alain Borer's book, Rimbaud se disant négociant.

A.L-B.: According to Fondane, Rimbaud is responding to life in negative terms as he is creating his verse. Do you agree with this point of view?

D.G.: I find it difficult to give a summary of what I feel Rimbaud's life and works have been. Fondane was responding to Rolland de Renéville's Rimbaud le voyant. If anything, I found Fondane's interpretation more radical, and a certain philosophical skepticism about the claim that the adventure of poetry was final.

A.L-B.: Fondane also played an important role in your relationship with the surrealist movement which you had previously thought to be "une bombe qui pouvait faire craquer ce monde plat et médiocre" (a bomb which could make this flat and mediocre world crack)<sup>1</sup>. Fondane helped you see the shallowness of its claimed profundity. You also became aware of its shady politics. Was it mainly Fondane's influence that made you understand the problems of the surrealist

movement?

D.G.: I don't quite remember Fondane's expression as he criticised Breton and Surrealism, but I don't believe that he said they were shallow. My inner fundamental objection to Surrealism is that the surrealists were a generation who rejected every kind of spirituality (of the soul and of the spirit); they were very anxious to affirm that automatic thinking was not interested in spiritualism. Nothing beyond transcendentalism interested them ; it was purely an anti-capitalist, intellectual movement. At one time, I used to say that it was an anti-religious position, and so pertinent to the French for the French "esprit" means mind and also spirit.

A.L-B.: Fondane wrote to you and responded to your questions regarding Surrealism. Here is your statement from that letter:<<il m'a répondu que vraisemblablement, nous ne devons jamais espérer trouver la vérité par nos propres moyens mais que parfois elle s'empare de nous. "Dieu sait"- a-t-il écrit si en nous engageant sur le chemin du Surrealisme vous en étiez moins>> (his answer was that probably we must never hope to find truth on our own but that sometimes truth gets hold of us. "God knows" -he wrote, if while engaged on the path of Surrealism, you gain less than otherwise )2. So, for him Surrealism is not the way one can attain truth.

D.G.: There is a caution against any particular movement or system of ideas;

he questions the concept of "reality"; for him reality or truth is a mystery. Reality is quite different from what most people think it is; in Hamlet , Shakespeare says that there are more things in heaven and Earth than in philosophy.

A.L-B.: When Fondane says that "la vérité s'empare de vous", your response is that in fact you have been searching for the truth. So then it is better to think that you might come close to grasping reality but you should not give yourself the illusion that you can actually possess it.

D.G.: Yes, I have been in search of it all my life...

A.L-B.: In your Journal you declare that after becoming suspicious of the politics of Surrealism, you decided to no longer adhere to this movement.

D.G.: I specified somewhere here how it happened, on page 392: "I had become not so much disillusioned with Surrealism as begun to wish to explore other territories than the sub- or unconscious, the oneiric and the aleatory" 3.

A.L-B.: Was Fondane the one who convinced you to stop believing in Surrealism?

D.G.: Reading Fondane pushed me in the direction I had already chosen.

A.L-B.: Did he influence you as a writer?

D.G.: Not directly, no, but I have always been attracted to characters like himself; sometimes I think of him as a “clenched fist”. He was a writer who was excited about his ideas. I could never imagine him as a professor who discusses things impassionately.

A.L-B.: People say he was a very warm, dynamic person whose energy was an inspiration to all.

D.G.: His ideas were part of his life; he was living his ideas. He talked about them with much enthusiasm; they meant something to him all the time.

A.L-B.: You mention in Rencontres avec Benjamin Fondane how special you felt in his presence. Did you consider yourself to be a friend of Fondane?

D.G.: I was 21 years old when I met him; he was 27. I had great admiration for him.

A.L-B.: How would you describe your relationship with Fondane?

D.G.: It had meant something special to me. I never thought of myself as pertaining to Shestov’s circle but he encouraged me to read his works while I

was struggling to understand Western philosophy. I felt that Fondane knew a great deal more than I did; seeing him was like going to lessons.

A.L-B.: In 1937, you wrote Fondane a letter which stated: "j'ai compris qu'il ne s'agit pas d'autre chose pour moi que de me livrer entièrement...au désespoir" (I understood that what I had to do was to surrender my life entirely to ...despair)<sup>4</sup>.

D.G.: Yes, this thought was a bit romantic...

A.L-B.: Do you still believe that despair is a way of understanding the meaning of life?

D.G.: I grew out of this belief as I experienced more of life but in my essay on Shestov, I mention that the spirit-as I understood it, was rejecting all illusions and false ideas. But I am against complete negativism. There is an expression that Pascal uses which translates as "morose delectation". People are publicly disappointed with the idea of reality which does not include God or anything of that sort. I believe that man is always spirit and if that does not happen he can become destructive.

A.L-B.: Atheists can be very happy human beings.

D.G.: They call themselves humanists.

A.L-B.: Yes, but not all humanists are atheists.

D.G.: There is an illusion there. To me, man and God are one; man and God were one: the source of being. And religion is turning back to this source. After the disaster which man called "la chute"-the Fall, this pure being (that is man and God together) no longer existed. Religion is thus binding back to the pure being.

A.L-B.: How about the Jews who do not believe in the Fall?

D.G.: Shestov's criticism of Martin Buber was that he did not believe in the original sin. That is his great weakness. I admire Buber a lot , and I have read all his books (I and Thou), and I went to many of his lectures.

A.L-B.: Do you feel that not living with the idea of the original sin is a better way of interpreting the Bible?

D.G.: Yes, it seems to make more sense to me. Yet Shestov's theory on knowledge could be viewed as complimentary to Martin Buber's thoughts.

A.L-B.: How about the meaning of Reality?; one only defines it in objective terms.

D.G.: Yes, the idea of complete objectivity is an illusion. The observer's subjectivity always comes into play when registering an experience. So, thinking people realize that pure objectivity is only an illusion.

A.L-B.: Science is of course not the way to attain the answers that the human soul is searching for.

D.G.: Shestov mentions one of Chekhov's tales where a pupil runs to his master for advice and the only answer he can obtain from the world renowned wise professor is "I don't know". Trying to face ignorance and death is a complicated matter; Heidegger for example rejects death. I agree with Fondane's rejection of him but I admire Heidegger's refusal to give up. The refusal to face one's death is what Heidegger calls inauthenticity.

A.L-B.: When one accepts the subjectivity of the soul one can also accept death since the person is then no longer attached to his or her physical being.

D.G.: I personally do not reject the idea of reincarnation; all my life I have been aware of something else that is going on simultaneously like in T. S. Eliot's poetry ("The Four Quartets"). He expresses this simultaneous existence on another dimension which is beyond time. I think that once something happens, once someone has come into being, it remains there, it's there.

A.L-B.: Fear of death is mostly fear of change, fear of the unknown.

D.G.: Fear of death for most people takes the form of nothingness, of not being anything anymore and there is no possibility of remembrance. That makes life the fundamental thing that people find difficult to be followed by death. Yet the life of the spirit is really a continuous search for meaning, I think. One is in the world for some reason.

A.L-B.: Returning to our topic and Surrealism, what was your relationship with André Breton?

D.G.: Last August there was an exhibition at the Beaubourg dedicated to Breton. I didn't actually go to see the exhibit but I have the catalog, and a book entitled Je vois, j'imagine - which focuses on his non-literary works; it was published recently by Gallimard. I wrote an article "Le Magique" on Breton and I enjoyed meeting his widow (his third wife) Elisa.

A.L-B.: In which way was Breton misunderstood by Fondane and other writers who had negative experiences when meeting with Breton?

D.G.: It is true that he did quarrel with all his friends, but he had to because he was heading a movement. On the other hand, being dictatorial was also part of his personality. I would see him at the head of this long table at the "Cafe de la

Place Blanche” and many people would come to see him. Sometimes there were minor confrontations. On rare occasions, when I met him in private, he was quite different.

A.L-B.: How can one interpret Fondane's dislike for Breton?

D.G.: When you, as a writer, have a point to make, and you want to make an impression on people so that they take interest in a particular point, you are inclined to exaggerate and put things in strong terms in order to make it sink in.

A.L-B.: How is it that the surrealists remained indifferent to Fondane's attack?

D.G.: 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...

A.L-B.: How do you explain the difference between their ideologies?

D.G.: As I have mentioned before, the Surrealists rejected the idea of the spirit. Fondane and Shestov were fighting not to go back to the old thinking of religion but to create a new belief. Shestov based his thinking on Husserl's philosophy.

A.L-B.: Shestov's article, "La lutte contre les évidences" attests to the fact that

the necessities of life had to be ignored in order to attain a deeper understanding of life.

D.G.: The surrealists were materialists but they did not strike directly against Existentialists. Surreality is the term that they used; that meant that they acknowledged reality plus the unconscious mind. Fondane was striving to acknowledge surreality plus a spiritual reality.

A.L-B.: The spirit played an important role for Shestov and Fondane.

D.G.: Yes, and then there is the idea of the supermaterialism. Reincarnation means that you do not reject the physical pleasure of being. It is within the physical person that the spirit exists.

A.L-B.: In the preface you wrote to Le Mal des fantômes, you describe Fondane whose appearance as a poet was enthusiastic yet when you refer to him as a philosopher, you mention "une apparence de sang-froid" (a cold, calm appearance)<sup>5</sup>. It is hard to imagine Fondane as strictly intellectual - one is mostly drawn to him by his sensitivity and nervous energy...

D.G.: He was capable of a kind of scientific objectivity but he did not think of it as the main thing in formulating his ideas. I also wrote about Shestov and mentioned that he was an anti-rational thinker. Shestov mentioned to his

students that Fondane was the one and only person who understood him better than anybody else. The basis of this kind of phenomenology is expressed by Husserl in his books: Phenomenology and the Crisis of Philosophy, and Ideas.

A.L-B.: How would you describe Fondane's relationship with Shestov?

D.G.: I understand it as the most important thing in Fondane's life. Cioran mentioned in his book Exercices d'admiration my experience when one day I met Fondane on Boulevard St.Michel and all he said to me as he passed me by is "Chestov est mort..." (Shestov is dead); it was something beyond words, it was impossible for me to respond to this, so I just shook his hand, he shook mine; he went his way and I went mine.

A.L-B.: If Fondane had not met Shestov, would he have found philosophy to be a way of expression?

D.G.: Yes, I believe so...yet I have my own doubts about philosophy. I am not sure that philosophy is a good thing for someone who writes poetry. In my collected poems, there is an article "Apologia" which is a critique of Pascal, and this article refers to this problem.

A.L-B.: Philosophy had a positive effect on Fondane; it helped him go beyond the bucolic stage of his Roumanian poetry.

D.G.: I am not familiar with Fondane's early poetry. Pierre-Jean Jouve's poetry is comparable to that of Fondane. He was writing his Tombeau de Baudelaire at the time when Fondane was engaged in writing Baudelaire et l'expérience du gouffre. Jouve was a very difficult man ;I think that men of such indisputable genius are very often selfish, touchy, and difficult. Claude Sernet and Voronca were Roumanian writers of Jewish origin who were close to Fondane as well as the Roumanian sculptor Constantin Brâncuși.

A.L-B.: Both Shestov and Fondane were Existentialists whose deep biblical roots were essential to them; did their philosophies differ in some way?

D.G.: You said biblical, and I have to interject; most English writers or intellectuals of my generation are familiar with both the Old and the New Testament because of the traditional upbringing that was imposed on them. For modern, contemporary writers like Fondane and Shestov, we can only speak of the resonances of the Bible.

A.L-B.: Young intellectuals like myself who were raised in Eastern Europe were not exposed to the teachings of the Bible. Nevertheless, there was an intense interest in the Old and New Testament. And one needs to be familiar with the stories of Job and Abraham in order to understand certain basic ideas presented by both Fondane and Shestov.

D.G.: Jung is a modern thinker who took an interest in the Bible and then we have Blake's illustrations to the "Book of Job".

A.L-B.: In which way did Fondane break away from Shestov? His philosophy was a bit different, wasn't it?

D.G.: Yes, but Fondane relied on Shestov's criticism. He presented his books as a continuation of Shestov's philosophy as he states it in Le Faux traité d'esthétique.

A.L-B.: Both Fondane and Shestov were admirers of Kierkegaard.

D.G.: I think it may have been Shestov's visit to Germany to meet Husserl; it was Husserl who was Heidegger's master. When Shestov met Husserl, they got along surprisingly well and they also talked about Kierkegaard.

A.L-B.: Searching for the meaning of faith was evident in both Shestov's and Fondane's life. It is not clear to me whether their motivation was of a religious nature or whether they were mainly concerned with comprehending life and its origins.

D.G.: If we were to refer to the meaning of the word "religio", its philological definition is "to bind back". And when we refer to original sin we are referring to

the idea of breaking away from the source of being. The word "sin" means "separation" -which is a result of breaking away.

A.L-B.: Within these established terms we can then say that both Shestov and Fondane were religious writers.

D.G.: Yes, both of them were concerned with spirituality.

A.L-B.: In Fondane's collection of poems, Titanic, we can feel, by reading some of the verses, the poet's frustration as he is trying to reach God:

"C'est un rêve effrayant et je m'y trouve encore  
 Une chose mouvante et qu'on appelle Terre  
 Coule à pic, lentement, hors du regard de l'être...

.....  
 les hommes sont debout, ils ont peur de s'étendre  
 congrès de fantômes debout,  
 ils crient: Qui veut bien m'acheter?  
 Tant pour ma liberté, tant pour ma conscience,  
 tant pour mon corps, ce n'est pas cher,

.....Dieu est en solde..."

(It is a frightful dream and I am still there

A moving thing we call Earth  
 Is sinking slowly, away from us...

.....  
 People are standing, afraid of stretching out  
 a meeting of phantoms standing,  
 crying: who wants to buy me?  
 For my freedom, my consciousness, my body  
 It's not expensive,

.....  
 .....God is for sale...)6.

D.G.: I relate this to Nietzsche's famous declaration: "God is dead!" A modern thinker following Western philosophy has to go through this state.

A.L-B.: After experiencing this state of anguish, Fondane nevertheless incorporates God in his ideas about existence.

D.G.: Other poets have been interested in similar topics; like the eighteenth century poet John Keats who says that we all have the opportunity of becoming a spirit (a soul) and yet this opportunity can be wasted. Materialism is a way of wasting the human soul, when one becomes occupied and obsessed with it. It is also true that man does not live by bread alone; and there is a clear dissatisfaction with the communist system of life, and the lack of freedom one

has.

A.L-B.: How do you feel about the following statement (that relates to Fondane and Shestov) : man's concern with his own soul usually occurs after being struck by tragedy.

D.G.: In my opinion, tragedy can also mean the waste that modern culture is faced with. I would like to recommend this magazine entitled "Resurgence" which is mainly concerned with religious and ecological matters.

A.L-B.: The sartrian Existentialist declares that to man everything is possible, and the shestovian Existentialist says that "à Dieu tout est possible" (for God all is possible)<sup>7</sup>. So then the shestovian Existential thinkers are still hoping for God's return even though we are now experiencing abandonment. 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.

D.G.: The theme of the Garden of Eden and the Fall of man, the nostalgia of the origins is the fundamental theme of European literature.

A.L-B.: Blaise Pascal mentions that we would not be aware of the concept of the Garden of Eden without the remembrance of the experience itself.

D.G.: The Fisher King from Medieval literature has the same significance. Regaining the Garden of Eden is a bit different but it relates to the same Western European concerns. The Garden of Eden is just a symbol for the pure state of being.

A.L-B.: Fondane refers to man's thirst of knowledge and the difficulty in letting go of that knowledge once it has been acquired.

D.G.: One example is consumerism which developed together with the industrial society. The question is how can we stop man's thirst for production and consumption? How can we get out of mass production? The only solution lies in man's capacity of being a spirit and leading the kind of life that would nourish that spirit.

A.L-B.: Progress seems to lead society to its own destruction.

D.G.: Perhaps, destruction has to be accepted as necessary. Ecological problems can be studied in relation to problems of spirituality.

A.L-B.: Although Fondane's deep cultural roots and concern for Jewish problems mark all of his writings, some Christian thoughts are considered by him.

D.G.: Yes, I came across that in Le Lundi existentiel where he quotes from the Bible in Latin that Jesus is teaching that the Sabbath was made for man and not man for the Sabbath. To me Jesus was an anti-religious thinker, he was for the anti-establishment; he was against making idols, and dogmas.

A.L-B.: Shestov debated similar religious questions regardless of their Jewish or Christian origin.

D.G.: I never thought of Shestov as being consciously a Jewish thinker. I think that he grew out of it when he was young.

A.L-B.: Could you explain the following verses from the poem you have dedicated to Fondane?:

“..... But the  
 Inspired and the unchained and the endowed of  
 desperate grace  
 Shall break through the last gate, by violence  
 take  
 God’s kingdom, and attain the certain State.”<sup>8</sup>

What is the “certain State”?

D.G.: It is an early kind of certainty which exists beyond the exceptions of uncertainty. In the New Testament there is a rather mysterious statement about

the kingdom of Heaven. I am not quite sure that Fondane would have accepted this idea.

A.L-B.: The way I interpret these verses is the expression of anger that Fondane felt as he disputed God's absence.

D.G.: Yes, that is right. To me Fondane was a poet with a "clenched fist"; when I say "clenched" I mean "crispe". There is a poem of Rene Char called "A une sérénité crispée".

A.L-B.: Shestov's philosophy was in favor of pain and despair for the one who wished to understand the true meaning of life "car pour pénétrer sa pensée, pour y parvenir, il fallait, de son propre avis, avoir traversé quelque intime désastre..." ( because in order to penetrate his philosophical thoughts, in order to succeed, it was necessary, in one's own opinion, to have experienced personal tragedy...)9. (Rencontres avec Léon Chestov).

D.G.: At the beginning of his acquaintance with Shestov he asked: how can I follow a teacher who believes in this?

A.L-B. Fondane questions the indifference of those who are not concerned with the essence of life; the following verses (from Ulysse) are meant to awaken man from his sleep:

"L'homme est peut-être roi de ce monde, mais moi  
 mais vous, toutes ces ombres usées par la colère,  
 la pitié et l'envie de n'être nulle part,  
 Qu'y cherchons-nous? Vous ai-je inventées ? Mon regard est las  
 Que font les hommes? Sont-ils absents d'eux-mêmes?  
 (Man maybe is king of this world, but I  
 and you, all these shadows worn out by anger,  
 the pity and envy of being nowhere,  
 What are we looking for? Have I invented you? My gaze is weary  
 What are men doing? Are they absent from themselves?)<sup>10</sup>

Fondane pursues the same thoughts in his collection of poems, "Titanic":

"qu'est-ce qu'un homme après tout?  
 Quelqu'un qui a peur et qui crâne (...)  
 qui aime ses dieux et les mange  
 et dont le coeur durcit un morceau de pain...  
 ...Peut-être dort-il ou rêve-t-il?  
 Comment saisir ce qui se quitte?"  
 (what is a man after all?  
 Someone who is afraid and who swanks (...)  
 who loves his gods and then devours them  
 his heart petrifying a piece of bread...  
 ...Could he be asleep or dreaming?  
 How can we seize what we must part with?) <sup>11</sup>

In a way this is a very violent statement.

D.G.: Yes, but it also makes you think of the eucharist.

A.L-B.: I never thought of it that way - in a way it relates to Pascal.

D.G.: Yes, Fondane was very familiar with Pascal and he lived at 6 rue Rollin- it is there that Pascal died. Two of the most curious, ferocious French books are Pascal's Pensées and Rimbaud's Saison en enfer. I was always very committed to these two books which are very important to me. There is that very mysterious testimony that Pascal sewed into his clothes.

A.L-B.: In spite of this revelation, Pascal was tormented all his life; the presence of the "gouffre" was constantly at his side.

D.G.: It is impossible to disconnect this idea from Pascal's theory on the infinite spaces of the universe. And the idea of man being alone in the universe.

A.L-B.: This relates to your verses in the poem "Night thoughts".

D.G.: There is another poem I wrote which the Surrealists disapproved of because I said that the price of revolution in poetry is not worth the risk. It is a poem about crucifixion: Christ is in agony until the end of the world and we must

not sleep during that time. This is a quotation from Pascal that I use in my poem.

A.L-B.: Most people who have to make a living are in the unfortunate situation of never having the time for such deep thinking. Cioran said that the goal in his life was never to have to work (for a living) so that he would not have to waste his life.

D.G.: In connection with Kierkegaard, the terrifying side of Christianity is the establishment which is so impersonal.

A.L-B.: Fondane's prophetic vision belongs to all post-biblical times and it is very much present with us today. You indicate this thought in your preface to Le Mal des fantômes: "Les poètes, les vraies, savent jusqu'à la moelle de l'os qu'il reste toujours caché derrière la fureur et le chaos de la désintégration sociale et économique... Quelque Chose d'Autre, et c'est parce qu'il a pressenti cela... que la poésie de Fondane reste d'une actualité si vivante." (The poets, the true ones, know deep down inside that there is always Something Else hidden behind the fury and chaos of social and economic disintegration.... and because Fondane sensed this his poetry is very much alive today)12. You agree to that?

D.G.: Yes, definitely. When I wrote this I had no idea of what had happened to Fondane. It was later on that I persuaded my publisher to place it under the heading of "In Memoriam".

A.L-B.: Being a poet, a creator is a tremendous gift and a way of relief; have you considered writing poetry again?

D.G.: Yes, but to me poetry does not come with ease.

A.L-B.: Your ambition as a young writer was expressed by Shestov's words: "création hors du néant" (creation outside of chaos). It is through the act of creation that one can temporarily forget his condition:

"la délectable angoisse  
de gaspiller l'éternité  
pour une longue et pleine minute de néant."  
(the delectable anguish  
of wasting eternity  
for a long and plentiful minute of nothingness)13.

Not for one line of verse does Benjamin Fondane forget pain and despair, neither the chaos and futility of man's existence. If anything, the process of writing concentrates all of the anguish he felt as a man, a writer, and Jewish emigrant. So for him creation existed within chaos; can one still think that he felt relief by the process of writing? It seems that he was accepting the absurdity of chaos rather than trying to escape it.

D.G.: Yes, one can observe these thoughts in his last book, Baudelaire et l'expérience du gouffre; it is really negative and pessimistic.

A.L-B.: Was it maybe due to the politics of his time?

D.G.: Yes, of course. I also feel that his vision of Baudelaire was very much like that of Jouve although the two writers were not aware of it. Jouve writes in these approximate words that : "la qualité suprême du grand poète réside dans le courage. Baudelaire est un exemple magnifique de courage car il en faut pour s'abîmer comme il l'a fait devant Dieu et sa profondeur" (the supreme quality of great poets resides in their courage. Baudelaire is a magnificent example because one must have courage in order to destroy oneself as he did when he faced God and his profoundness).

A.L-B.: When you were a young writer you felt that creation was a way of escaping chaos. But it seems to me that Fondane concentrated on experiencing chaos rather than wishing to escape it.

D.G.: Fondane was more conscious of it than most writers. Jouve also struggled in his poetry to express the feeling of chaos.

A.L-B.: In the preface that he wrote to La Conscience malheureuse, he mentions how man could be freed from anguish if only he were to accept chaos, and the state of absurdity life imposes on him. Have you ever analyzed La Conscience malheureuse as you intended to do when you wrote to him in August of 1937?

D.G.: I never actually succeeded in doing that. It is a book that always had an effect on me. I think that if you have an uncommon point of view, you have to overemphasize your ideas. After many years of reflection on that book, I think that he overstated certain positions in La Conscience malheureuse. It is his account of the history of philosophy; it's a survey of various philosophers. He was very interested in Bergson's philosophical position; "tout se passe comme ceci" (all happens like this) is a phrase that I always associate to Bergson's philosophy. In a way, Bergson's philosophy is similar to William James' pragmatism and the American philosophers' position in the 1920's.

David Gascoyne never did elaborate on Bergson's philosophical ideas and Fondane's statement "tout se passe comme ceci" ; we also did not have sufficient time to discuss the American philosophers' position in the 1920's. However, this interview made me realize that my work on Benjamin Fondane could never come to any conclusions without, at the same time, leading me into deeper reflection. When in 1937, Benjamin Fondane responds to a letter from David Gascoyne, he also sends him a copy of La Conscience malheureuse, and warns him against the danger of viewing life and despair in a romantic way; Fondane states that one has to be spiritually armed "pour lutter comme diable pour se préserver une bonne raison de vivre" (in order to fight like a devil and preserve a good reason for living)<sup>14</sup>. In La Conscience malheureuse, Fondane presents a chapter on "Bergson, Freud, et les dieux" in which he analyzes

Freud's conviction "l'humanité n'a que faire du Dieu mort"(humanity has no need for a God who is dead)<sup>15</sup>, versus Bergson's belief "...si Dieu n'existait pas il eut fallut l'inventer" (...if God did not exist it would have been necessary to invent him)<sup>16</sup>. Fondane concludes that it is human beings who decide on the possible or the impossible and that we do that before the actual life experience : "Mais ce n'est pas d'aujourd'hui seulement que l'homme de science, ou de pensée, décide, avant toute expérience, de ce qui est possible ou impossible..." (Yet, since long ago, scientists, or philosophers have always decided, before any actual life experience, what the possible or impossible would be)<sup>17</sup>. So, Gascoyne's statement "tout se passe comme ci" refers to the idea that all experiences happen because we, as human beings, have the desire to make them happen; we wish to believe in our Gods or wish to eliminate them in favor of our own glory. Fondane's reflection is unique in the realization that man's potential can reach the impossible and make it possible.

"...Il serait impossible d'exagérer la valeur de l'enrichissement, et non seulement intellectuel, que cette fréquentation m'a apporté (...It would be impossible to exaggerate the value of the enrichment - and not only on an intellectual plane, that these encounters brought me)"<sup>18</sup>, declares Gascoyne in his book, Rencontres avec Benjamin Fondane. Although in the 1930's Gascoyne was in touch with many other writers and poets of his time, he seemed to favor Fondane's philosophical and poetic interpretations; after reading Fondane's book, Rimbaud le voyou, Gascoyne felt that it was the only interpretation he could accept "sans réserves" (without any reservation) . A surrealist poet

himself, Gascoyne understood the reasons for which Surrealism was not the one and only path to follow. In fact, he showed great interest in poetry and philosophy of Existential thought: " Under the influence of Benjamin Fondane, with whom I had many conversations in Paris after our first meeting in 1937, I was gradually grasping and developing some understanding of what Fondane and his master Leon Chestov designated Existential Philosophy"<sup>19</sup>. Gascoyne's attempt to include metaphysics in his poetry became evident in his publication, The Sun at Midnight. After the post-war years, Gascoyne felt that his experience as a surrealist poet was similar to that of Cecil Collins who " had far too much of a personal religious mysticism to make a good surrealist"<sup>20</sup>. And as we remember from the interview presented above, Gascoyne's personal interest in what he named the spiritual was stronger than his interest in the surrealist movement to which he once adhered.

Among the many common points which bind Fondane and Gascoyne, we have their deep regard for the individual as a separate and sacred entity. In his Collected Journals 1936-42 Gascoyne explains having feelings of "instinctive revolt" against statements which define the uniqueness of the self only as "mere subjectivity" . He felt that the need to adhere to a group was just as important as the need for subjectivity: <<I could not repress for long my instinctive revolt against what I saw as a cavalier dismissal as "mere" of the sine qua non of personality, of respect for the individual as a person as much as a unit, and of spirit opposed to conditioned reflexes>><sup>21</sup>. As men engage in their own personal experience and interpretation of existence, there is the need to

participate and contribute to a society one cares about, or the need for social or political change. Yet one's own spiritual experience can only be lived through the subjective interpretation of the self and only when given the freedom to remain true to one's own being. Fondane was very much aware of the problems caused by the surrealist movement and the loss of freedom the poet had to succumb to when his individual voice was not given its place: <<...quelles sont les évidences apportées par les poètes? ...Ils ont vu que le singulier est plus important que le "général", le contingent plus vrai que l'immuable et l'éternel, l'inintelligible plus profond, plus riche que l'intelligible...>> (...what is the evidence brought to us by poets? ...They have seen that the particular is more important than the "general", the contingent more real than the immovable and the eternal, the unintelligible more profound and richer than the intelligible...>><sup>22</sup>. And as proof for all this, Fondane names the poets and philosophers of Antiquity who are still very much alive today: "Alors que les systèmes politiques, économiques, théistes, se sont effondrés...les évidences d'Homère, de Sophocle, d'Eschyle, toutes les affirmations des poètes répondent en nous à quelque chose de vivant, à un trouble du coeur auquel nous reconnaissons la vie" (While many political, economical and theological systems have collapsed...the evidence brought by Homer, Sophocles, Aeschylus, and all the affirmations of poets make us respond -even today, to something that is alive, to a turmoil of the heart in which we recognize the beat of life)<sup>23</sup>.

Gascoyne's spiritual interpretation of existential philosophy brings us closer to a more thorough understanding of existential thought: "truly Existential

Philosophy which aims, not at making as complete and rational a discursive exposition as possible of the purely conceptual problems of existence, but at launching individuals into a more fully conscious and authentic real existence of their own..."<sup>24</sup>. Ultimately, man may then find, after a whole lifetime of searching, what can be understood as true wisdom. Meeting with Gascoyne elucidated many of my concerns and brought me to the realization that Fondane's choices aimed not towards the tragic -as many scholars believe it, but towards wisdom. We will conclude with Bernard Chouraqui's comment (from his book Le Scandal juif) on the greatness of Benjamin Fondane: "Sa grandeur est qu'il fût innocent de sa propre mort: somme de choisir entre la vie et le poème, entre Dieu et le monde, il choisit la vie contre le poème, il choisit Dieu contre le monde"<sup>25</sup>.

#### NOTES:

1. David Gascoyne, Rencontres avec Benjamin Fondane.  
(Paris: Arcane 17, 1984) 6.
2. Ibid., 11.
3. David Gascoyne, "Afterward," Collected Journals 1936-42.  
(London: Skoob Books Publishing, 1991) 392.
4. David Gascoyne, Rencontres avec Benjamin Fondane. 9.
5. Benjamin Fondane, "La poésie de Benjamin Fondane," Le mal des fantômes.  
(Paris: Editions Plasma, 1980) 14.

6. Benjamin Fondane, "Titanic," Le Mal des fantômes .  
(Paris: Paris Méditerranée, 1996) 193.
7. Benjamin Fondane, "Le Lundi existentiel et le dimanche de l'histoire,"  
Le Lundi existentiel. (Paris: Editions du Rocher, 1990) 44.
8. David Gascoyne, "I.M. Benjamin Fondane," Collected Poems 1988.  
(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988) 99.
9. Benjamin Fondane, "Entretiens avec Léon Chestov,"  
Rencontres avec Léon Chestov. (Paris: Editions Plasma, 1982) 43.
10. Benjamin Fondane, "Ulysse," Le Mal des fantômes.  
(Paris: Paris Méditerranée, 1996) 97.
11. Benjamin Fondane, "Titanic," Le Mal des fantômes. 195.
12. Benjamin Fondane, "La poésie de Benjamin Fondane,"  
Le Mal des fantômes. (Paris: Editions Plasma, 1980.) 10.
13. Benjamin Fondane. "Titanic," Le Mal des fantômes.  
(Paris: Paris Méditerranée, 1996) 194.
14. David Gascoyne. Rencontres avec Benjamin Fondane. 12
15. Benjamin Fondane. "Bergson, Freud et les Dieux,"  
La Conscience malheureuse. (Paris: Editions Denoel et Steele, 1936) 140.
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid., 141.
18. David Gascoyne, Rencontres avec Benjamin Fondane. 18.
19. David Gascoyne, "Afterword," Collected Journals 1936-42. 381.

20. David Gascoyne, "Afterword," Collected Journals 1936-42. 394.
21. Ibid., 392.
22. Benjamin Fondane, "III," Faux traité d'esthétique.  
(Paris: Editions Denoel, 1938) 60.
23. Ibid., 58.
24. David Gascoyne, "Léon Chestov," Journal 1936-1937.  
(London: The Enitharmon Press, 1980) 136.
25. Bernard Chouraqui, "Fondane, l'anti-poète,"  
Le Scandale juif ou la subversion de la mort.  
(Paris: Editions de la différence, 1991) 346.

## CH.VIII: CONCLUSION

Conclusive statements are final and stifling when they do not allow for open-ended questions; "la trouvaille est par elle-meme une limite"<sup>1</sup> explains Fondane in Baudelaire et l'experience du gouffre . While elucidating some of the elements Fondane presented in his works, we will also avoid definite statements.

As Fondane's admirers and followers, we subscribe to the same feelings Baudelaire had in regard to the masterpieces of Theophile Gautier: "I do not know of a more embarrassing feeling than that of admiration. Due to the difficulty of expression, the feeling of admiration resembles that of love"<sup>2</sup>. Nevertheless the young writer did not live long enough to become a more established writer and he worked frantically toward the completion of his many poetry collections, literary critiques, philosophical essays, and dramatic plays. In fact we know that during the Nazi occupation Fondane was writing constantly with the fear of being caught and the desire to complete all that he had to before it was too late.

The different theories on the philosophies of existence which developed in the 1940's were a natural phenomenon due to the extreme political conditions of the times. "One might ...describe the evolution of the philosophies of existence as going from a purely religious thought with Kierkegaard to a non-religious and at times anti-religious thought with Sartre"<sup>3</sup> explained Jean Wahl in Philosophies of Existence. We agree with Jean Wahl's statement that the basic question all existential thinkers face is "...what does it mean to exist?"<sup>4</sup>.

Being subjective and spiritual in nature, Fondane's theories were close to those of Kierkegaard. Yet he often made non-religious and anti-religious statements having in mind that the institution was meaningless to him. He saw the Fall of man into the disgrace of sin as the ultimate misunderstanding reasoned from the knowledge religion gave us. In that respect he followed Pascal's "pensée" who declared that religion was the instrument of reason by which the masses were assured to gain happiness: "L' Ecclésiaste montre que l'homme sans Dieu est dans l'ignorance de tout et dans un malheur inévitable...Or il veut être heureux et assuré de quelque vérité" 5. In fact, explains Pascal, true faith can only be found through inner grace: "C'est le coeur qui sent Dieu et non la raison...Voilà ce que c'est que la foi. Dieu sensible au coeur, non à la raison"6. Fondane's quest was of a spiritual nature and optimistic enough to believe that following in Job's footsteps, his cry would be heard by all: <<le cri n'était pas la une façon d'abandonner la lutte, mais une methode de lutte; ils eussent pressenti dans ces cris "une force active qui, telle les trompettes de Jericho, doit faire tomber les murailles de la forteresse>> 7. Very often "le cri" is brought to our attention by the "concrete" words or expressions that make their way in many of Fondane's poems: "la solitude se déboutonne", "les amoureuses pleines de dents", "un grand soleil réel qui me baisait la bouche", "le coeur est plein de terre à en craquer". This type of wording is a constant reminder that objective elements of life are present here to fulfill the role of existential poetics.

As a disciple of Léon Shestov, Fondane closely followed the teachings of his mentor. One most important lesson came from Shestov's

Le Pouvoir des clefs; there he describes life as a labyrinth where men need to chose their own path. Yet, no matter what path we chose, we cannot find a solution to the mystery of life as it presents itself to all men: in Shestov's words: "L'essence même du mystère ne nous impose-t-elle pas le renoncement à toute solution?"<sup>8</sup> This is why Fondane decided to base his philosophy on questions; for Shestov and Fondane, all potential answers would be illusive. As for the differences (of opinion) between the two writers, Fondane was very careful not to reveal many of them. Very often one needs to read between the lines: with Shestov, "la pensée existentielle commence, en effet, là où finit la pensée rationnelle ..." <sup>9</sup>. Unlike Shestov, Fondane was not content with the acknowledgement alone- he felt that the role of this new philosopher was not just to teach but also to react against the so-called established truths : "Le philosophe n'est plus un homme qui sachant enseigne...mais un homme qui lutte contre les vérités éternelles..."<sup>10</sup> It is in this manner that the existential poetics of our poet brought hope to us ; his vision was to establish a more personal, freer world, unbound by its prejudicial past.

The existential poetics of Benjamin Fondane was a poetics of hope; as Yves Bonnefoy states in L'Improbable, the difficulty of modern poetry is that of reinventing hope: "Dans l'espace secret de notre approche de l'être, je ne crois pas que ce soit de poésie vraie que ne cherche aujourd'hui, et ne veuille chercher jusqu'au dernier souffle à fonder un nouvel espoir"<sup>11</sup>. Benjamin Fondane was a poet who dedicated his poetry to life. In his study, Au Seuil de l'Inde, Fondane favors the contemplative nature of Oriental philosophies while

criticizing Western philosophies for being engaged in the pursuit of ideologies centered around power and conquest: "...une philosophie mixte, lâche, ou tantôt la vie est jugée au nom de la philosophie et tantôt la philosophie au nom de la vie. C'est ce qui permet à nos maitres de présenter les Européens comme des affirmateurs parce qu'ils ont mis en oeuvre une énorme technique de puissance et de conquête..."<sup>12</sup> Yet Fondane did not have the luxury of contemplating life; he fought for causes which dealt against power and conquest. Fondane fought with his pen, and his daring thoughts. In the end, he left us numerous poems that aspired for a better world, a world where one could be hopeful and proud of one's origins -no matter where they had come from.

The presence of Benjamin Fondane's poetry and philosophical essays among us today is evidence of his success as a writer. As the twentieth century comes to a close, his works are gaining increasing attention in Europe, Canada, and here in the United States. Fondane's poetics of existential thought draws a path we can pursue even today when the well-being of our planet is in question. One need not think too hard to notice the lack of respect one has today for vital elements which assure existence, such as the quality of the air we breathe, the water we drink, the animals and forests, and quality of foods -often disregarded in favor of economic gain. Also, as the world becomes smaller and more accessible, and the immediate neighborhood more diverse, it is essential that the spiritual bond of brotherhood rise above "l'esprit de l'échelle"-the spirit of the ladder (by which Fondane meant that certain men find themselves superior to

others). It is only with great respect for humanity, for life and the existent that we will be able to avoid the repeat of previous historic atrocities. Have we spent twenty centuries in vain? Didn't history teach us anything? Are we so disconnected from the past as to continue repeating the same mistakes over and over again? Are we so egotistical in nature as to disregard the relationship between the self in our ancestors and the self in our great -grandchildren? Must we place more hope in space travel than in our own human resources? Need we still have tolerance for poverty, famine, and political injustices? An existentialist's reply might be too idealistic yet absolutely necessary for the preservation of life on Earth, on a planet which still allows for light, warmth, plenitude, and hope:

“Je me suis accroché aux bateaux: pourquoi s'éloignaient-ils?

La terre elle a du bon, elle ne bouge,

ca sonne si plein sous nos pieds,

source de certitude!

J'ai demandé à la lumière: pourquoi changer de place,

faite de deux moitiés,

couchée au rebord des étoiles?

Le foin, il a du bon le foin,

l'eau de vie n'est pas mauvaise,

il y a des filles dans les foins,

leur ventre sonne de désir.

J'ai demandé au monde: pourquoi, monde,

tournes-tu sur toi-même

le coeur dans la nausée?  
 Appelles-tu l'écartèlement éternel,  
 les visages d'éternité?"<sup>13</sup>  
 "Le Poète et son ombre" Titanic.

NOTES:

1. Benjamin Fondane, "Ch.XXXIII," Baudelaire et l'expérience du gouffre.  
 (Paris: Pierre Seghers, 1947) 360.
2. Charles Baudelaire, "Critique littéraire: Théophile Gautier,"  
Oeuvres complètes. (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1961) 23.
3. Jean Wahl, "Ch.IV," Philosophies of Existence.  
 (New York: Schocken Books, 1969) 24.
4. Jean Wahl, "Ch.VIII," Philosophies of Existence. 108.
5. Blaise Pascal, "Pensee," Oeuvres complètes.  
 (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1963) 508.
6. Ibid., 552.
7. Benjamin Fondane, "Entretiens avec Léon Chestov,"  
Rencontres avec Léon Chestov. 248.
8. Yves Bonnefoy, "L'Acte et le lieu de la poésie," L'Improbable.  
 (Paris: Gallimard, 1980) 122.

9. Léon Chestov, "Deuxième partie," Le Pouvoir des clefs.  
(Paris: Editions de la Pleiade, 1928) 155.
10. Benjamin Fondane, "Léon Chestov et la lutte contre les évidences,"  
Rencontres avec Léon Chestov. 246.
11. Ibid., 247.
12. Benjamin Fondane, Au Seuil de l'Inde. (Paris: Fata Morgana, 1994) 40.
13. Benjamin Fondane, "Titanic," Le Mal des fantômes. 236.

APPENDIX: A SHORT BIOGRAPHY OF BENJAMIN FONDANE

In recreating the persona of Benjamin Fondane, one inevitably relies on the testimony of his friends and living relatives. There is much that one can say in order to recreate his psychological makeup. Nevertheless, what we think vital to a more thorough comprehension of this writer are the statements he made himself on various issues of personal importance to him. We hope to be able to recompose the image of Benjamin Fondane giving priority to his own voice; we will then better understand the various stages of his life. And the question is what role did his persona have in his writings of existential thought.

In Exercices d'admiration, Emil Cioran describes Fondane as a writer whose physiological traits were very much in tune with his soul: "Jamais auparavant je n'avais vu un tel accord entre le paraître et le dire, entre la physionomie et la parole"<sup>1</sup>. Fondane's intense physical appearance matched his psychological composure: he was interested in the tragic due to the extreme antisemitic situation of his times; yet, Cioran agrees to the fact that he was very much of a sage, a thinker who had the insight to recognize the truth behind political and literary movements: "Je garde le souvenir très précis d'une de mes premières visites pendant laquelle, après avoir dénombré les tares vertigineuses de Hitler, il m'avait décrit en visionnaire l'effondrement de l'Allemagne, et avec de tels détails que j'ai cru sur le coup assister à un délire."<sup>2</sup>. Fondane's visionary talent was decisive in the choice of his poetics: he recognized Surrealism to be in tune with a political belief that would later on stifle the

creativity of artists living under communism; he refers to Surrealism as being “le commerce au miracle”<sup>3</sup>. Existential thought allowed him to question the meaning of our existence, and to focus on the countless doors that one can open not for the sake of finding an answer but for the privilege of gaining insight into the metaphysics of life; in fact Cioran states that he was furious against those who felt they had an answer: “Indulgent d’habitude, il cessait de l’être à l’égard de ceux qui pensaient avoir trouvé...”<sup>4</sup>.

In the pursuit for success, Fondane devoted a lifetime to serious reading and writing; for him leaving Roumania meant that he could live among the best writers of the twentieth century, that he could have a chance at becoming a well-known international author. In one of Fondane’s articles, the author presents himself as a double in an interview with himself: “au fond, vous savez, je ne suis qu’un grand auteur inconnu (...)”<sup>5</sup> and later on he states: “Monsieur...je me demande sérieusement si je ne gagne pas à être inconnu (...) car être connu, c’est déjà avoir un visage, c’est avoir une fausse attitude, c’est déjà déraisonner face au public”<sup>6</sup>. In fact, although Fondane’s main preoccupation was to become a prolific writer, the path of existential thought brought him to a spiritual search for deeper meaning. He was a very modest, noble human being, explains Cioran. And how else could we understand the life choices he made, his attachment to his sister Line whom he would not abandon in Drancy, and his attachment to his wife whom he would not leave behind when in 1943 he had a chance to move to Argentina... Being with the ones he loved was more dear to him than life itself. Fondane writes from Drancy before being deported to

Auschwitz: "C'est pour demain, et c'est pour de bon. Sois ferme, mon petit (...) C'est dur, tres dur, mais d'autres que nous ont supporté davantage. Le film d'horreur que j'ai vu ici"<sup>7</sup>.

Shestov's influence was of major importance to Fondane's intellectual growth. Although Fondane appreciated Shestov's writings from his early start in Roumania, it was at the time of their personal exchange of thoughts that Fondane's work was transformed. The idea of having a disciple never quite appealed to Shestov, yet when in conversation with the young Roumanian writer, the philosophical existential thoughts they shared were inspirational to both of them. This is how Fondane explains it in Rencontres avec Léon Chestov: "...pendant quelque quinze ans il fut mon maître -malgré lui -, je fus son élève, - sans le savoir - et qu'ainsi une substance passa de lui à moi"<sup>8</sup>. In "Ulysse", Fondane dedicates a poem to Léon Shestov in which it appears that the philosopher was appreciated for his sincerity as he was in tune with suffering, in tune with the misery caused by those who had little regard for life and humanitarian issues:

"A quoi bon tout cela?

Que savions-nous si le matin était réel

le grand matin des hommes,

.....

à quoi bon tant de navigateurs, de périples,

de continents nouveaux, de paradis perdus,

de panoplies, de consciences,

où traînent leur ennui les princes de l'exil  
 parmi des souvenirs de cors et de tueries?

Assez, assez mon insomnie!"<sup>9</sup>

According to Fondane, it was crucial for Shestov to awaken the world and make it aware of suffering. This is how Shestov's theories relate to those of Blaise Pascal. The seventeenth century philosopher was also concerned with life's traumas and suffering; his wish was to awaken men and redirect them on the path to a more holy life: <<...l'essentiel de la philosophie de Pascal ... "ne cherchons pas l'assurance et la fermeté" dans notre monde ensorcelé. Nous ne devons pas être tranquilles, nous ne devons pas dormir...>> <sup>10</sup>. There is another Pascal - Shestov - Fondane connection: Shestov quotes Pascal's philosophy, stating that one can gain insight on a different path than that of reason: << Pascal recourt aux "vérités" qu'il a puisées dans la Bible pour abattre, avec leur aide, la raison et ses exigences>><sup>11</sup>. One of Fondane's main ideas, that of reason and knowledge as an impossible element in gaining truth - a truth relating to the element of existence itself, is well expressed in Le lundi existentiel: " ...la philosophie existentielle ne commence pas avant mais seulement à partir de l'instant où tout enseignement finit, ou le Savoir ne répond plus à nos questions..."<sup>12</sup>. Consequently we may assume that Fondane was following Shestov's teachings when he made certain decisions about his own life. We know for example that his decision about not going into hiding during the Nazi occupation was irrational, and it is not because of the lack of knowledge he had; aware of the danger, Fondane was not going to lose his

dignity as a human being, and his freedom as a Jew. Thus he continued to write poetry under the name of Isaac Laquedem crying out against the injustices of persecution in France.

Ultimately, Fondane's choice was that of a path dedicated not just to writing for art's sake; his goal was to dedicate his writings to life. And this is how he develops a poetical existential philosophy which concentrates on a metaphysical attainment of fulfillment going beyond our division of life into good and evil. Fondane's understanding of life related to a spiritual path which led him to question God himself; yet, at the same time, what he questioned was our understanding of God. For him a higher spiritual level of life would develop only when society had the courage to cry out loud against suffering and injustice. And here again we clearly see how Shestov inspired Fondane's writings ; he declares that <<Ce n'est pas le "désir" ni l'"amour", mais le besoin de Dieu qui est au centre de la pensée chestovienne...>><sup>13</sup>.

Shestov not only approved of Fondane's writings and criticism, but he recognized in them the personal voice of the young poet: "...vous avez un don extraordinaire d'exposer clairement les idées les plus difficiles et que ça prouve que vous les faites vôtres"<sup>14</sup>. As a disciple of Leon Shestov, Fondane had much to learn which he then transposed onto his own poetic works. The poet also centered his life's decisions around these existential philosophical thoughts; the noted philosopher Jean Wahl comments on this with much admiration: "il s'agit désormais de vivre sa recherche, hors les catégories de la pensée, hors le bien

et le mal, hors les preuves, je suis si évidemment avec vous..."<sup>15</sup>. Existential thought thus presided over his own personal choices regarding life as the most precious gift one has, regarding humanitarian issues as an absolute necessity for the survival of this world, regarding freedom as the most precious right the artist needs to maintain. "Ma demeure est hors du camp"<sup>16</sup>, says he once imprisoned in Drancy for he then recognized that his ideas were to survive and give meaning to the next generation of writers.

Biographical Data:

November 14, 1898: Benjamin Fondane born Benjamin Weschler in the city of Iași - Roumania; he had an older sister Line, and a younger sister Rodica. Their parents: Isaac Weschler -a businessman, and Adela Schwartzfeld who introduced her children to well known authors such as Goethe, and Eminescu.

1917: Isaac Weschler dies due to illness.

Benjamin Fundoianu (literary last name taken after the region of Fundoaia which had once belonged to his family) writes many of the poems that will be published later on in his collection of Roumanian poetry entitled Privești (in 1930).

1917-1919 He completes his high-school education in Iași where he also continues with law school. Of major influence to his literary formation are his encounters and friendship with Ion Minulescu - credited with having introduced French symbolism in Roumania, and Ion Vinea -a precursor of the Dada movement.

1918: His first book is published: Tăgăduința lui Petru (Peter's Denial)- a dramatic play written in the symbolist manner.

1919: At the end of the First World War, Fundoianu moves to Bucharest. At first he makes a living as a journalist and literary critic for avant-garde journals such as "Rampa", "Sburătorul", "Flacăra", and "Mântuirea".

1922: Together with Line, and her husband Armand Pascal, Fundoianu forms his own avant-garde theatrical company, "Insula" (Island); he then writes two plays: "Balthazar's Feast" and "Philoctetes".

The publication of his book, Imagini și cărți din Franța is a testimony to his desire to broaden his literary experience by joining the French literary milieu.

1923: Fundoianu moves to France; the need for closer ties with the French intellectual sphere and the rising anti-semitic movement in Roumania were his primary motives.

The French had then already experienced the Dada movement and Surrealism was about to be born.

1923-1927: Four years of silence follow Fundoianu's move to France.

Nevertheless, he maintains his literary ties with Roumania where he publishes many articles in "Unu" and "Integral", and "Contimporanul".

1924: At the home of Jules de Gaultier, Fundoianu meets Léon Shestov

(philosopher of Existential thought) who will become his mentor and best friend.

- 1926: Léon Shestov, appreciative of Fondane's comments on his book, (La Philosophie de la tragédie) becomes a close friend of Benjamin Fondane; Fondane begins to incorporate existential thought in his literary views. Fondane meets Victoria Ocampo, an Argentinian writer, at the home of Léon Shestov.
- 1928: Fundoianu, now Benjamin Fondane, publishes his first poem in French: "Le Regard de l'absent" in the literary journal "Discontinuité"; he then has ties with "Le Grand Jeu" -the literary circle of Roger-Gilbert Lecomte and René Daumal. A collection of surrealist poetry, Trois scenarii-cinépoèmes - on the topic of cinematographic art, is published.
- 1929: Trip to Argentina (invited by his friend Victoria Ocampo) where he presents surrealist films. He publishes an article on Constantin Brancusi in "Cahiers de l'Etoile"
- 1930: Publication of Privelisti in Bucharest, Roumania.  
He begins working for "Paramount" studios (in Paris).
- 1931: Benjamin Fondane marries Geneviève Tissier; their official witnesses are

Léon Shestov and Constantin Brâncuși. Fondane had met Genevieve while working at "Abeille" -an insurance company.

1932: Fondane begins to write for the "Cahiers du Sud" on a regular basis.

1933: Publication of Ulysse -his first collection of poetry in French, and Rimbaud le voyou -a literary critique.

Fondane writes the screenplay for the film "Rapt" -an adaptation of a novel written by C.F.Ramuz (presented in Switzerland).

1935-36: Fondane meets the British surrealist poet David Gascoyne.

1936: Second trip to Argentina again at the intervention of his close friend, Victoria Ocampo. Fondane directs the film "Tararira" but with little success due to its avant-garde content.

1937: Publication of his collection of poems, "Titanic" in the "Cahiers du Journal des poètes".

An article entitled "Kierkegaard et la philosophie existentielle" is published in "Revue de Philosophie".

1938: Léon Shestov dies.

Benjamin Fondane becomes a French citizen.

Faux traité d'esthétique is published: a critical essay on surrealism and poetics. "Léon Chestov et la lutte contre les évidences" is published in "Revue philosophique de la France et de l'Etranger".

1940: Fondane fights in the war, is made a prisoner, and then escapes. Once again imprisoned, he is released due to his poor health.

Proud of their Jewish origins, Fondane and his sister Line refuse to declare themselves as Jews for they did not believe they had to wear the Jewish star.

1940-44: Le mal des fantômes is published in the "Cahiers du Sud" and under the pseudonym Isaac Laquedem the essay entitled "L'Honneur des poètes". Fondane writes a lot: Baudelaire et l'expérience du gouffre - to be published posthumously, and many revisions of "Ulysse" and "Titanic".

Meetings with Emil Cioran often at Fondane's residence, 6 rue Rollin. A plan is worked out for him in order to escape to Argentina but Fondane refuses to leave his family behind (his sister Line and his wife).

1944: Fondane and his sister Line are arrested, and deported to Drancy (March). His wife with help from Cioran, Lupasco, and Paulhan, obtains Fondane's liberation but he refuses to part with his sister Line.

Deported to Auschwitz (May) where he was to be gassed in October - two weeks before the camp's liberation.

Publication of Le Lundi existentiel et le dimanche de l'histoire - a presentation of existential thought based on the teachings of Léon Shestov.

1947: Publication of Baudelaire ou l'expérience du gouffre.

1953: Death of Geneviève Fondane (due to illness) after joining in 1946 the Order of the Sisters of Notre Dame de Sion.

#### NOTES:

1. Emil Cioran, "Benjamin Fondane 6, rue Rollin," Exercices d'admiration.  
(Paris: Gallimard, 1986) 153.
2. Ibid., 155.
3. Benjamin Fondane, "Lettre de Fondane à Claude Sernet,"  
Le Voyageur n'a pas fini de voyager.  
(Paris: Paris-Mediterranee, 1996) 55.
4. Emil Cioran, "Benjamin Fondane 6, rue Rollin," Exercices d'admiration. 156.
5. Benjamin Fondane, "Interview avec moi-même,"  
Le Voyageur n'a pas fini de voyager. 28.
6. Ibid., 29.

7. Benjamin Fondane, "Lettres de Drancy,"  
Le Voyageur n'a pas fini de voyager. 192.
8. Benjamin Fondane, "Sur les rives de l'Ilissus,"  
Rencontres avec Léon Chestov. (Paris: Plasma, 1982) 17.
9. Benjamin Fondane, "Ulysse," Le Mal des fantômes.  
(Paris: Paris-Méditerranée, 1996) 155-156.
10. Leon Shestov, "La nuit de Gethsemani," Sur la balance de Job.  
(Paris: Flammarion, 1971) 312.
11. Ibid., 309.
12. Benjamin Fondane, "Le Lundi existentiel et le dimanche de l'histoire,"  
Le Lundi existentiel. (Paris: Editions du Rocher, 1990) 63.
13. Benjamin Fondane, "Sur les rives de l'Ilissus."  
Rencontres avec Léon Chestov. 34.
14. Benjamin Fondane, "Entretiens avec Léon Chestov,"  
Rencontres avec Léon Chestov. 163.
15. Benjamin Fondane, "Lettre de Jean Wahl à Fondane,"  
Le voyageur n'a pas fini de voyager. 121.
16. Benjamin Fondane, "Ma demeure est hors du camp,"  
Le voyageur n'a pas fini de voyager. 165.

## PART TWO: TRANSLATIONS FROM BENJAMIN FONDANE'S WRITINGS

## I. JULES DE GAULTIER IN THE ARTS\*

Whether Jules de Gaultier was or was not influenced by Flaubert when he created his metaphysical system, lately defined as "a philosophy of relationships", is something that we can establish later. What Jules de Gaultier found in the psychological mechanism of Madame Bovary was an incredible intuition of a phenomenon, which he later implemented in the general social and spiritual world, and then resolved through pure metaphysics. According to psychological interpretations, the ability to conceive yourself as other than you are, that is in a linear fashion -with its risk or gain, is a phenomenon which leads people towards the element of ridicule, failure, or glory; one example is the romantic person of Madame Bovary. Gaultier named his system of thought "Bovarysme" but according to him, this phenomenon (in Flaubert's masterpieces) was not a simple coincidence as in Cervantes, Racine's Le Cid, or La Rochefoucauld's writings where we only find fragmented and isolated ideas. All of Flaubert's masterpieces are based on the vision of "Bovarysme", a basic plan on which he embroidered his world like a goblet. Then we have the "Bovarysme" of the stupidity of science portrayed by Monsieur Homais (one of Flaubert's characters), the "Bovarysme" of education portrayed in the Sentimental Education, the "Bovarysme" of religions, and that of metaphysics in "The Temptation of St. Anthony". This vision of error one has about oneself, projecting

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<sup>1</sup> \*Note: literary essay translated from Roumanian.

a false image in the mirror of knowledge, is called illusion - an image which is also found in Salammbô's protagonist, a real person who tries to possess illusion and is then burdened by it. Jules de Gaultier ingeniously discovered what the historic soul of Hamilcar's daughter consists of. She is raised by the priest Sahabarim in the sacred world of the veil...She ignores the whole world of passions dormant in her body.

Salammbô detests Matho yet she goes to see him; she should have realized that she loved him except that from the depth of her education what emerges is a false image and that image deceives her. When she is possessed by Matho in the tent, her consciousness breaks down for a moment. Finding her sacred snake dead, Salammbô cannot have any more surprises: "She turned it over a few times, with the tip of her sandal, and the slave was permeated by her insensitivity". Back at her parents' home, Salammbô falls again in the trap of her own deceiving ideas -on a mythological plane. In the end, when Matho will be tortured, her fainting and her death on the tombstones prove that, when the real light- that of the consciousness of her true self overcomes her, it is too late.

This erroneous self image will again be found in the Temptation of St. Anthony. Here we have the whole spectrum of human error: all beliefs, all faiths, all religions, all that was invented by our mind in order for human error to be seen in another light, always different due to the bitter impossibility of seeing oneself, pure and simple as one is. "And by the only fact of fantastic representation, stripped of any commentary, the philosophical spectator develops the impression of a scene of immense dementia; from this

metaphysical and transcendental dementia, men, thrown in the world of extraordinary relationships, try very hard to attain an absolute, projected into the void by their own hysteria of desire.”\*

What Jules de Gaultier mainly extracts from the principal of Error (which is his foundation, his absolute before any creation), from the way of the world and then from the goal of philosophy, is the idea of beginning and of finality in a world of inconsistent and unpredictable relations and he places this idea above all others.

If indeed religion and faith are born from extreme self error, then it is natural that those things which collapse first will be the concepts of beginning and finality. And with that will disappear all religions, the whole world of ethics, and that which Gaultier names “the idols of the sky of logic”: truth, equality, and freedom.

Once destroyed, the world (of old ideas) is hardly alive among stones and weeds -yet, is it still possible to create a new world?

Schopenhauer says in The World as Will and Representation: “only one representation has been used; since it was taken to be the only possible interpretation, it may appear that existence no longer has any significance and that everything is in vain.”

Well, since the old interpretation collapsed, it is not the only one: here is a new interpretation. Along with ethics, let us dispose of the sensitivity of ethics.

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<sup>2</sup> Note: Fondane’s quote does not include any reference.

Let us replace it with a spectacular one. If indeed the world does not have a goal, existence any end or sense, and creating new idols -from religion to science, is only a turmoil born from human sensitivity, then we still have something which can only be seen when one stops pursuing the concepts of ethics in order to substitute it for the contemplation of the drama of life itself.

Here is Jules de Gaultier's conclusion based on the works of Flaubert: the satisfaction of no longer figuring among the actors of our phenomenal drama is replaced by the happy and gratuitous position of the spectator, removed from it all. Between illusion and contemplation, the world of ethics and esthetics, Jules de Gaultier opts for an inexorable antagonism. On one side the "vital instinct" (to which we can apply Nietzsche's idea - the lack of truth as a condition of life) and on the other hand, the "instinct to know". We have these two extremes: to want and to know. Gaultier finds these instincts in two people: Plato and Kant, and in the history of the Jews and Hindus.

In the beginning, was it not error that was the only creative force? Is it not the one and only significance and guarantee of life? Here is then the definite result: religions are good, idols are good, in a logical or sentimental way, any motor creating activity is good. Let us gladly contemplate the fact that error is still challenging all forces, fighting when inactive, shaking all that is inert, and when in pain, it is forever creating intrigue out of spite, and this intrigue follows each deed for the victory and maintenance of the drama of life.

Flaubert's theories -will say Gaultier -assume a surpassing of a moral understanding of life. However, Gaultier would be profoundly unhappy if error no

longer existed among men and if, along with the disappearance of morality, the drama of existence would also end. Let us await the show of our world's theater which is to be portrayed on the wall of our existence. Let us prolong the drama in order to prolong the show.

The metaphysics of an artist! Flaubert was able to escape unwounded from the catastrophe of romanticism, the bankruptcy of morality and, that of the exact sciences due to his sensibility which allowed him the satisfaction of viewing the drama of life itself. A contemporary of Flaubert, Baudelaire captured the same sort of depth in the entrails of metaphysics:

"L'homme ivre d'un rêve qui passe,  
 Porte toujours le châtimeur,  
 D'avoir voulu changer de place."

Starting from the principle of illusion, Jules de Gaultier's method of literary criticism was, he thought, very simple: "Under this perspective of Error, the entire history of literature could be recomposed; its history could gain an order, a clarity, a generality, which no other system of classification was yet able to bring forth until now. Contrary to other methods, this method is neither accidental, nor fortuitous or based on exterior considerations ; this method dominated through its psychological character, all fields of facts and circumstances of the expression (whatever it may be) of the literary effort having the causative object from within."

I have purposely cited the proposition of this critical theory of Jules de Gaultier because it does not otherwise enter in the possible forms of the genre.

Gaultier's idea, with no chance to succeed in the world of literary criticism, is nevertheless the foundation of a superior form of metaphysics. However, one should not believe that this method takes its inspiration from Flaubert's concept. The "Bovarysme" of Gaultier is like Kant's theory of knowledge in which all consequences once abandoned, are again rediscovered. It is a theory of complete knowledge. Nietzsche for a moment had this same idea (quickly discarded) when he maintained that the world can only be justified as a phenomenon of esthetics. He was then writing The Origin of Tragedy and he was just a spectator. Later on, Nietzsche placed his supreme will to power in the center of a world which was esthetically justified. And philosophy became for him a creator of values -this is the whole difference between the two instincts: the vital one and that of knowledge.

The metaphysics of the drama of life thus germinated, grew, and organized itself in France, finding there the mind capable to endure and exhaust an unuseful attitude, an attitude devoted to a geometry with lack of interest which had become of no use.

Was this idea first found in Nietzsche? Was it again found in Flaubert? This simple idea became prolific in the abundant intelligence of Gaultier; it developed into an attitude, and then it transformed itself into a system. For Jules de Gaultier, the system has more to say than the value itself; it is a representative one.

We encounter in Gaultier, as one does at a crossroad, Gassendi the epicurian and Montaigne the skeptic; Voltaire and Helvetius are holding hands,

Bayle's concepts are to be continued in Stendhal's works as well as Rivarol's in Renan's writings. Nowhere, in any past history, can the ideological paysage recount, as it does in France, so many artists concerned with knowledge. The French represent today (according to the vital instinct- German or Russian) the instinct of knowledge, in the same way the Jews represented ancient Hellenism. This is the whole tradition of France, dilettante and epicurean, refusing to recognize itself in Bergson's ingenious system and yet gladly recognizing itself in Gaultier's metaphysics.

Jules de Gaultier opposes Bergson and his metaphysics of artistic clarity; instead he favors a metaphysics which, in an excess of vitality, willingly confuses object and subject, existence and knowledge. Even if Bergson's system is vaster and more personal, Jules de Gaultier can smile. One understands and demonstrates the mechanism of illusion when the subject itself can only be recognized due to its own type of errors, and then we can smile even when the child in front of you is able to build the most ingenious sand castles on the beach.

The ability of conceiving yourself other than you are - in it lies Gaultier's smile because "Bovarysme" intervenes each time one is confronted with the subject in its appearance as an object - and that is always. This mechanism of illusion, of which the subject is a victim, encompasses all forces, all activity, the entire world of ethics -a pretext for life's trap, in order to always create a show. "The will to power" thus becomes, in the representation of this phenomenon, the surest way to construct a world in front of this show, and this idea can be

translated as the will to create and maintain the metaphysical farce of existence.

This disdain for the common reader is the supreme act of the juggling of intelligence ;Gautier declares that his ideas have surpassed a moral grating. A vision, this time a simple one, that of an artist, came in its youth to play on the planks of the stage of life, instead of the melodrama which has passed away. From now on the world will be a world of lines and curves.

Translated from Roumanian from

Cărți și imagini din Franța (1922)

## II. POEMS TRANSLATED FROM ROUMANIAN

## "THE POET'S DESTINY"

To sing a lifetime, in search of his ideal,  
If in the midst of life by waves of misery should he be  
Shaken, may he find comfort in his song!  
And his verse should never praise the ephemeral  
Majestically with notes that make you tremble  
To sing of beauty and the future  
When peace and brotherhood will triumph,  
His verse awakening the wish to have another life  
Sweeter, more beautiful, mysterious, and grand,  
To sing about the beauty and the strength of youth!  
Within the vastness of your life, poet, this is your destiny!

Iași, 1913 (from Poezii Vol.II p.115)

“WHITE FLOWERS SLEEPING”

White flowers on trees sleeping, as many women do,  
I look for them only in passing.  
Like Diogenes, forehead in my hands to them I shout:  
Should all trees have such splendid fruits!

When I die if ever, I will no longer see them under the willow tree,  
and in the night to follow flickering with wolves  
a passing stranger unaware might step on me  
just when the body earth again will be.

Don't be surprised to hear that I shall die like others,  
life's pleasures and all these years are in vain.  
And also do not wonder why I am not complaining:  
Today I'm still so young, I'm just eighteen.

1916 (from Privelisti p.199)

## "HERTZA"

-IV-

Old folk from the old house came out.  
to the gate covered with ivy,  
and in their eyes they had the smile of a pond in a quiet plain  
Do you still remember? Do you still remember?  
The orchard, throwing stones to green and ripened apricots.  
Quince, behind windows, those with unwrinkled skin,  
telling each other words with piano keys embracing.  
The sofa soft like a pear, hey tom-cat,  
it felt so good in the old Moldavian armchair,  
with wooden leaves torn from the luster year by year.  
Not hiding well the albums with a clamp  
youth made of iron! It's gone near the lamp  
and full the mirror is with wrinkles on its face.  
Neverending the time since today disappeared  
Faded and weak as convalescence is .  
Every night you're waiting for the same carriage  
which unloads the same Jews - they are returning.  
In the house, we know of the boats departing for New York  
and the shores where the ocean has unloaded our limbs.  
Behind blinds a lantern is still signaling with fear  
and that is all. You're going to the fence

two young ones knock at the old door. You come out  
and in your eyes you have a frozen smile, quiet  
from a pond in a quiet plain; it's autumn. Do you still remember?

1922 (from Privelišti, p.27)

### III. SUR LES RIVES DE L'ILLISUS

(Après la mort de Léon Chestov)

Ce n'est pas dans cette sorte de préface que je me propose de dire en quoi consistait, pour Léon Chestov, le plus important; mais on aura compris, je l'espère, que ce que je tente de raconter ici c'est la raison pour laquelle je suis venu à lui, la raison aussi pour laquelle je ne ferai rien qui puisse concilier sa pensée avec le monde, avec l'histoire, voire avec l'histoire de la philosophie. S'il ne dépendait que de moi que, d'un léger coup de pouce donné à ses textes, il pût entrer de pied ferme dans la gloire des siècles et figurer dans le retable d'honneur de la philosophie au lieu de demeurer, comme par le passé, un suspect, une voix clamant dans le désert, duise-je être persuadé que mon abstention le condamne à l'oubli éternel, et que jamais, jamais, lecteur ne s'ouvrira à ses livres, je ne donnerais pas ce coup de pouce! Je ne ferais même pas l'éloge de sa vertu, de sa bonté, du sacrifice de lui-même à sa mission, de sa vie pure et claustrée; ce serait le faire servir au renforcement des valeurs qu'il a le plus combattues. Il aimait par-dessus tout l'audace; il en avait manqué peut-être dans sa vie? C'est dans son oeuvre qu'il l'a mise. Aussi m'en tiendrai-je à son oeuvre seule quoiqu'il m'en coûtât de le faire. Est-ce seulement par fidélité? honnêteté? scrupule? vénération? Non pas! S'il avait été dur, méchant, orgueilleux, puéril, fantasque - comme l'était peut-être Dostoïevski - aurais-je dû l'en blâmer? l'en excuser? S'il n'y avait eu que grâce en son génie, et point de mérite, aurais-je dû lui en savoir moins de gré que si, par contre, l'effort l'eût emporté sur le don?

### III. ON THE BANKS OF ILISSOS

(Following the death of Lev Shestov)

It is not in this kind of preface that one can analyze Lev Shestov and what was most important to him ; but I hope one can understand that what I am trying to recount here is the reason for which I came to see him, the reason for which I will not do anything to reconcile his ideas with those of the world, and those of history - the history of philosophy. If it only depended on me, or on my changing his texts a little, he would have made a glorious entrance in history figuring among the retabled, honored philosophers instead of remaining, as he has been in the past, a suspect, or a shouting voice in the desert; yet, even though I could be persuaded that my abstinence condemns him to eternal silence, and that there will never be a reader interested in his books, I shall not make those changes to his writings! I will not even praise his virtue, his goodness, his sacrifice to his mission, or his pure, confined life; it would be a way of making him reinforce those values that he fought the most. Boldness is what he liked most of all; could it be that maybe he lacked boldness in his own life? If so, he placed it in his works. In any case, I shall only refer to his works; it is not only by fidelity, honesty, scruples, or veneration that I will do so. Should he have been harsh, mean, proud, puerile, whimsical, as Dostoyevsky maybe has been - would I have blamed him? excused him? If his genius only consisted of grace, and no merit, would I have liked him less than if, on the contrary, his effort would have been greater than his gift?

According to the old philosopher, Montaigne, what does a decent man

De quoi un honnête homme parlerait-il avec le plus de plaisir, si ce n'est de lui-même? dit quelque part, aux ternes près, le vieux Montaigne. Cela est assez finement remarqué. Il faut ajouter que, pour le lecteur aussi, il n'est plaisir plus grand que lorsque son auteur consent à parler de soi. Cela n'est vrai, néanmoins, que du lecteur d'ouvrages littéraires. Il n'est rien qui, par contre, répugne davantage au lecteur-philosophe! Tout comme Mallarmé refusait de jeter un sou par la fenêtre, dans la rue d'où parvenait jusqu'à lui la mélodie d'un orgue de Barbarie, de peur de s'apercevoir que l'instrument ne chantait pas seul, le philosophe déteste les confidences: cela l'obligerait à convenir que ce n'est pas le Nous lui-même qui parle à travers le porte-voix du livre, mais un homme, un homme en chair et en os, dont la présence, les manières et peut-être le ton seraient susceptibles de lui rappeler trop brutalement l'indignité de l'instrument. Je consens à l'avance à ne pas choquer ce lecteur; je bornerai au strict minimum mes confidences; mais je ne puis m'en passer; autrement, bien des choses paraîtraient inexplicables. Il me faudra bien parler non seulement de Chestov - mais aussi de moi - afin de faire comprendre comment, pendant quelque quinze ans il fut mon maître - malgré lui -, je fus son élève - sans le savoir - et qu'ainsi une substance passa de lui à moi, qui n'était pas le moins du monde un enseignement, quoique ce fut plus et mieux que cela. Il est de fait qu'aux temps anciens, tout comme aujourd'hui, si on se sentait la vocation pour telle ou telle étude, on s'informait du maître le plus illustre, le plus proche et le moins onéreux, on allait à lui dans l'intention d'y puiser le meilleur enseignement, voire même un métier productif - et ce sont les affinités électives

enjoy to speak of most of all, if not himself? This he remarked with much subtlety . One must also add that there is no greater pleasure than that of the reader who listens to his favorite author when that author consents to talk about himself. Nevertheless, that is only true for the reader of literary works; there is nothing more appalling for the philosophical reader! The philosopher detests confidences just like Mallarme who refused to throw any money out the window, when he heard the melody of a barrel organ because of fearing to discover that the instrument was not playing on its own. This type of confidence would oblige the philosopher to accept that there is no collective voice speaking through the book; the voice of one man would then have to be acknowledged, a real man whose presence, manners or maybe suspect tone would be susceptible and would awaken the philosopher to the very brutal fact that the voice comes from an indignant human instrument. I accept in advance not to shock the reader; I will limit my confidences to the minimum ; but I cannot eliminate them ; otherwise, many things would seem incomprehensible. I will need to speak not only about Shestov, but also about myself - in order for the reader to understand why during fifteen years , in spite of himself, he has been my master . I have been his student without knowing it, and in this manner a substance was passed down to me without being a form of teaching, although it was far more and far better than that. It is true that in ancient times, just like today, if one felt a calling for a certain profession, one would search for the most renowned master, the closest and the least expensive, and one would go to him in order to draw from him the best possible teaching ; this happened even when it was a matter of

qui décidaient, par la suite, lesquels de ces rapports de professeurs à élève se mueraient en rapports de maître à disciple.

Ce ne fut pas notre cas. Chestov n'était professeur que malgré lui; il n'aimait pas enseigner et, à l'Institut Slave de Paris, tout comme Kiev en 1919, en régime bolchevik - il ne professa qu'à contre-cœur : il fallait bien gagner sa vie! Quant à moi, j'avais vingt-six ans quand je le rencontrai; il en avait cinquante-sept; mes études étaient terminées, ma vocation fixée; je n'avais jamais songé à la philosophie. Un jour que je le questionnais sur ses débuts, Chestov me raconta qu'il avait fait des études de droit, n'avait jamais suivi un cours de philosophie et que, après même la publication de ses premiers ouvrages, on le tenait pour un critique littéraire; lui-même se tenait pour tel.

Quant, vers le printemps de l'année 1924, je rencontrai Chestov à Paris, dans le salon de Jules de Gaultier, quelles ne furent pas ma surprise et ma joie de faire connaissance d'un écrivain dont, un an auparavant, les Révélation de la mort m'avaient profondément bouleversé (j'avais écrit cinq ou six articles à propos de cet ouvrage) mais que - habitude d'esprit assez mallarméenne - je n'avais jamais songé à situer dans le temps et l'espace, jamais conçu comme existant quelque part. Quand il m'eut posé les questions d'usage, je dus certainement lui faire, mot pour mot, la réponse qu'il me fit plusieurs années plus tard: j'avais fait des études de droit, je n'avais jamais suivi un cours de philosophie, on me croyait - et je me croyais - poète et essayiste. Je m'intéressais sans doute, et passionnément, aux idées; son livre m'avait profondément excité, j'en avais parlé à mes lecteurs. Quand à la philosophie

learning a trade. It was the elective affinities that afterwards decided whether the master to student rapport would become a master and disciple relationship. This was not our case. Shestov was a master despite himself; he did not like to teach and, when he taught at the "Slavic Institute of Paris" or in Kiev (in 1919 - during the Bolshevist regime) he only did it half heartedly: he needed to earn a living! As for myself, I was twenty six years old when I met him; he was fifty seven; my studies completed, my vocation fixed; I had never thought of philosophy. One day when I questioned Shestov about his beginnings, Shestov told me that he had studied law, and had never taken any courses in philosophy and that, even after his first publications, he was considered to be a literary critic; he even believed that himself.

When, in the Spring of 1924, I met Shestov in Paris, in Jules de Gaultier's salon, I was very much surprised and I felt great joy in meeting the writer whose book, Les Révélations de la mort (The Revelations of Death) had impressed me in a profound and distressing way just the previous year (I had written five or six articles on his book). Having a mind and spirit similar to that of Mallarmé, I never even thought of Shestov as a person existing in time and space, a person living somewhere. When Shestov asked me the usual questions one asks at first, I must have given him, word by word, the same answer he was to give me a few years later: I had studied law, I had never studied philosophy, and people thought that I was (what in fact I considered myself to be) -a poet and an essayist. I was passionately, and without a doubt, interested in ideas; his book had been very thrilling to me, and I had conveyed that to my readers. As far as

proprement dite (et j'entendais par là quelque chose de compliqué, d'ennuyeux et d'inhumain) je n'y avais touché que fort peu, si ce n'est à Schopenhauer, à Nietzsche et à Jules de Gaultier, qui avaient fourni à ma fiévreuse adolescence l'idée enivrante d'une justification esthétique de l'univers, et -déjà! - une première nostalgie d'un au-delà du bien et du mal. De cette ivresse, à l'époque où je rencontrai Chestov, je m'étais délivré tout seul. Mon passage à travers l'idéalisme fut bref. Je commençais déjà à balbutier les vraies paroles du monde, je m'étais aperçu, en somme, selon la remarque de Heine, que je n'avais pas la moelle d'un dieu. L'expérience à laquelle me conviait Bergson: m'installer au centre de la durée, croire à l'infailibilité des données immédiates du moi, ne me séduisit guère; je ne voyais pas où elle prétendait mener; et menait-elle quelque part? Je passai par une époque de crise, qui fut longue.

Chestov me permit d'aller le voir assez rarement au début et, en général, les jours de réunion, d'invités. Il me montrait de la sympathie, s'intéressait à mes occupations, à mes travaux. Nous ne causions guère philosophie, les essais qu'il avait tentés n'avaient pas été brillants. Deux ans plus tard, en 1926, lorsque parut la traduction française de sa Philosophie de la tragédie 1, il eut la bonté de m'en adresser un exemplaire. Je lui écrivis une lettre de remerciements 2. Je lui disais en toute simplicité que son livre m'avait bouleversé - comme ses précédents ouvrages, par ailleurs - mais qu'il avait aussi éveillé en moi un

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1 La Philosophie de la tragédie. Dostoïevski et Nietzsche, Paris:Ed. de la Pléiade, 1926.  
2. Letter from January 1927. See annex 1.

the strict definition of philosophy is concerned, I then understood it to be something complicated, boring or inhuman; I had only read a little, yet Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and Jules de Gaultier had already given me and my feverish adolescence the intoxicating idea of an esthetic justification of the universe, and already! - my first nostalgia of something beyond good and evil. At the time when I met Shestov, I had, on my own, liberated myself from this sort of intoxication. My passage through idealism was brief. I was already beginning to mutter the real words of the world, and I had in fact discovered, according to Heine's remark, that I did not have the composure of a god. Also, the experience to which I was invited by Bergson: that is to situate myself in the center of duration, to believe in the unfailling results given by the self, were not at all appealing to me; I could not see where it pretended to lead me; and did it lead anywhere? I was experiencing a crisis which was to last quite a long time.

In the beginning, Shestov only allowed me to visit him occasionally, generally at parties or gatherings. He liked me and he showed interest in my occupations, my work. We never discussed philosophy; the essays he was engaged in writing at the time were not satisfying to him. Two years later, in 1926, when the French translation of his book, La Philosophie de la tragédie <sup>1</sup> was published, he was kind enough to give me a copy. I wrote him and thanked him for it. <sup>2</sup> I simply told him that his book had deeply shaken me - just like his other writings - but that it had also caused me to be distressed. I took the liberty

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1. La Philosophie de la tragédie. Dostoievski et Nietzsche. Paris: Ed. de la Pléiade, 1926.

2. Letter from January 1927. See annex 1.

trouble que je prenais la liberté de lui communiquer: "Si la tragédie, le malheur, étaient la condition de la recherche de la vérité - et telle était sa thèse - qui donc jamais allais le suivre de propos délibéré? Qui oserait se souhaiter à soi-même la tragédie, et fut-ce pour les beaux yeux de la vérité? Jamais, terminais-je, vous ne pourrez avoir de disciple." En me rappelant le contenu de cette lettre, que je résume tant bien que mal, mais dont je conserve la ligne, je m'aperçois que je n'avais encore compris qu'à moitié; j'espère même n'avoir pas écrit: "les beaux yeux de la vérité". Quoi qu'il en soit, quelques jours plus tard, je fus invité chez Chestov. Il y avait du monde. Chestov me fit un accueil dont le souvenir ne m'a pas quitté. Il lut à haute voix ma lettre à quelques -uns de ses amis qui se trouvaient là et me dit: <<J'ai tellement pris l'habitude qu'on me parle de mon "talent" d'écrivain, de mes "dons" de critique, de la justesse ou de l'arbitraire de mon interprétation de tel ou tel, que votre lettre m'a véritablement surpris. Vous ne vous êtes pas intéressé à mon "style", ni à mon flair psychologique, mais à la question elle-même. C'est remarquable!>>.

Ce fut à partir de ce moment que Chestov commença plus particulièrement à me porter intérêt. Je ne saurais dire vers quelle époque il décida de me permettre de l'aller visiter seul et que commencèrent nos entretiens, espacés d'abord, puis de plus en plus fréquents, et dont la boule de neige ne fut interrompue que par sa mort. Pas avant 26, mais bien avant 29. Toutefois, cela n'alla pas tout seul: j'avais beau comprendre la "question" elle-même, je n'étais pas moins d'une ignorance à toute épreuve quant à sa matière et à son histoire. Bien que pour Chestov il n'y eut rien au monde que la "question

to communicate this to him in writing: <<If tragedy, and misfortune, were the condition for the searching of truth - and that is what his hypothesis was - who would then deliberately follow such a path? Who would then wish tragedy upon himself, even if it were for the sake of discovering "the beautiful eyes of truth". You will never ever have any disciples, I concluded>>. As I am now recalling the content of this letter, I am summing it as best as it can be expected, and although I am retaining the essentials, I now realize that I had only partially understood his philosophy; I even wish that I had not mentioned this phrase: "the beautiful eyes of the truth". Whatever it may be, I was invited to Shestov's house a few days later. Many people were there. Shestov welcomed me in a way that I shall never forget. He read my letter out loud in front of his friends and then said: "I am so used to hearing about my talent as a writer, about my gift for being a good critic, about the accuracy or arbitrariness of my interpretation, that your letter was a real surprise to me. Instead of showing interest in my style or psychological flair, you showed interest in the question itself. That is remarkable! "

From that moment on, Shestov began to show a special interest in me. I could not say exactly at which point in time he decided to invite me alone, or when our personal conversations began, at first spaced out, and then more and more frequent, yet this snowball of conversations never ceased until interrupted by his death. Not before 1926, but well before 1929. Nevertheless, all did not become clear right away: even though I understood the "question" well, I showed much ignorance concerning its substance and history. Even though

même”, qu’il souffrit toujours de ce qu’elle demeurat incomprise ( je me souviens par contre de la joie qu’il éprouva lorsque Husserl, en un entretien qu’ils eurent vers 1929, montra qu’il en saisissait toute l’importance), il ne voulait guère d’une compréhension de sentiment, d’intuition, qui négligeât - par ignorance - les obstacles quasi insurmontables que cette question, pour être acceptée, avait préalablement à vaincre. Cette question, centre de sa pensée, il la répétait inlassablement, bien que chaque fois revêtue d’une autre illustration: voilà deux faits qui, en tant que faits, et empiriques, n’ont aucun droit au prédicat de la vérité nécessaire et éternelle: ce chien enragé a été tué, Socrate a été empoisonné. Pourtant, la raison veut que ce soient là deux vérités, et encore deux vérités de même espèce; elle exige que je n’y voie aucune différence; je dois les accepter, c’est tout. Mais j’ai beau faire, Socrate est bien autre chose que ce chien enragé; je veux bien, à la rigueur, tenir pour une vérité apodictique ce fait: ce chien enragé a été tué; mais je ne saurais jamais admettre que la même raison qui a créé une loi pour la conservation de la matière ait non seulement abandonné Socrate, mais encore décidé qu’il était impossible à qui que ce fut - à Dieu même - de détruire cette vérité de si basse extraction, une vérité de pur constat, historique: “Socrate a été empoisonné”, et de faire que ce qui a été n’ait pas été.

Excerpt from “Sur les rives de l’Illisus”

in Rencontres avec Léon Chestov

what mattered most of all for Shestov was the "question itself", and he suffered at the thought of it being misunderstood (I remember how glad he was when during one of his encounters with Husserl -in 1929, the latter acknowledged the importance of this question) he was not interested in being understood only on an emotional or intuitive level thus neglecting - due to ignorance- the obstacles nearly insurmountable that this question had to first conquer in order to be accepted . Even though each time it was presented differently, Shestov would tirelessly repeat this question which was the center of his thought: there are two facts which, as far as facts are concerned, as far as empirical facts are concerned, they have no right to the title of necessary and eternal truths ; one is that a mad dog was killed, the other that Socrates was poisoned. However, reason wants us to see these two truths as similar truths stating that there is no difference at all between them ; I must accept these facts , and that is all. But I have trouble doing so, Socrates is a total different issue than this mad dog; it is possible to accept this fact as an apodictic truth: this mad dog was killed; but I would never admit that the same type of reasoning which created a law for the conservation of matter has not only abandoned Socrates, and also decided that it was impossible for everyone - even God- to destroy this truth of low extraction, a truth of pure constant, and of historic value: "Socrates was poisoned", thus establishing that in fact what happened did not.

Excerpt from "Sur les rives de l'Illyrie"

in Rencontres avec Léon Chestov

## IV. TROIS SCENARII - CINEPOEMES

## 2 X 2

Si plein de prestiges qu'il soit, le cinéma ne me semble guère promis à un avenir de perfection, je veux dire à un état prochain de fixation, de déchéance. Car ce qui le plus s'oppose au cinéma, qui ne demanderait pas mieux que de s'asseoir, c'est bien l'objectif ou l'appareil qui lui donne naissance, l'objectif qui ne cesse de tirer de ses limbes, de sa précieuse matière grise, pensante, troublante, ce langage de plus en plus précis, plus aigu, dont le moins qu'on puisse dire c'est qu'il n'est point lui, menacé de stagnation. L'objectif a, certes, tout à attendre des ingénieurs, tout à craindre des cinéastes. Il déteste bien plus que nous tous le cinéma - septième art. Il rougit d'être employé à des fins si basses, d'être le dépotoir de la "littérature" mauvaise ou bonne, d'être considéré dans ses résultats truqués plus que dans son essence et de fournir un travail de représentation lorsqu'il est là, tout prêt, pour la création pure. L'objectif contre le cinéma - voilà le drame d'après-demain.

Mais le cinéma est né fonction d'une chose dont il ne peut être détaché, qui l'arme d'une puissance terrible et le situe et c'est l'ennui, l'immense Ennui qui ronge le vieux foie des sociétés contemporaines. Plus jeune que ses deux grands précurseurs, le journal et le music-hall, le cinéma eut la chance de naître juste au moment catastrophique où l'homme a commencé de s'apercevoir que tout était à jamais perdu. Ce n'était guère, par conséquent, le moment d'être libre. Les foules modernes voulaient du pain et du cinéma; un stupéfiant - pourquoi pas? L'ennui, d'exquis vice individuel passa fonction sociale, l'ennui -

## IV. THREE SCENARII -CINEMA POEMS

## 2 X 2

As prestigious as cinema is, its future does not seem to announce perfection, I mean by that a condition of fixation and decay. What mostly opposes cinema (and which would gladly rest aside), is really an objective apparatus which gives birth to it; this objective apparatus incessantly draws from its own limbs, from its own precious gray matter - thinking, disturbing, and becoming a cinematographic language, sharper and more precise, of which the least one could say is that it is not menaced by stagnation. This objectivity has certainly everything to gain from engineers, and from cineasts, everything to fear; it detests cinema - the seventh art, more than any of us. It blushes at the thought of being used for such a low purpose, of being "literature's" dumping ground, bad or good, its special effects being respected more than its own essence, and for providing representation work when it is there, all ready for pure creation. Objectivity against cinema - that is tomorrow's drama.

Nevertheless cinema is born due to a function which it cannot be separated from, and which arms it with a terrible strength thus giving it a place; it is ennui, the immense Ennui that devours the insides of contemporary societies. Younger than its two great precursors, the magazine and the music-hall, cinema had the chance of being born right at the catastrophic moment when man began to realize that all was forever lost. Consequently, it was not in the least the right moment for being free. The modern crowds wanted bread and movies; a narcotic - why not? The ennui...of exquisite individual vice went beyond social function,

cette unique forme de bonheur particulière aux sociétés capitalistes gouvernées par une morale de perfectibilité infinie par le progrès mécanique.

Mais la rançon de ce progrès est-ce toi, forme d'exaltation inconnue jusqu'à nos jours, exaltation de toutes les forces destructives de l'homme, tournées contre lui-même, d'un besoin de se fuir qui en est la conséquence, et de cette impuissance à le faire - qui est comme son corollaire? ALLONS DONC AU CINEMA puisque voici le seul art qui n'a jamais été classique, et par art classique, j'entends bien un sens intime du réel qui accepte en échange d'une garantie de durée qui le flatte, de subir le dressage par la raison, ses appareils orthopédiques, ses corsets de plâtre, ses masques à gaz et qui répond pleinement aux exigences de l'homme le plus méprisable, le plus misérable que je connaisse, je veux dire, de l'homme classique (1). Car, qui préférerait à son ennui, Dieu sait combien mortel, combien vorace, tous les plaisirs réunis d'un homme satisfait de quelque époque que ce soit. C'est une des rares choses qui soient encore à l'honneur de l'homme que son refus de vouloir oublier, mourir à une forme de son expérience, la plus douloureuse, le tronc devrait-il lui fournir

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<sup>1</sup> Ce qui est vraiment nouveau dans notre vision du monde c'est que la chose la plus invraisemblable puisse être accompagnée de réalité, nous apparaitre comme vraie; ma soeur, dans un rêve, voit venir à la maison un petit hydrocéphale qu'elle connaît pour le voir tous les jours au quartier latin et bien qu'elle sache que c'est le petit hydrocéphale, elle pense en le voyant: "Qu'est-ce que Mallarmé vient chercher ici?"

D'autre part au jugement porté plus haut je ne connais guère de sortie de secours. Qu'un esprit qui s'est employé à servir une cause puisse être amené à servir une autre, je ne le croirai jamais; chaque esprit plaide éternellement une seule et même cause: la sienne; qu'il y ait donné ses entrailles suffit à peine à nos exigences.

C'est pourquoi je m'inscris en faux contre certain manifeste d'hommes de théâtre qui se sont proposé de se servir de Hugo, de Shakespeare, malgré eux, comme bon leur semblera. L'esprit serait-il réversible? Peut-être n'est-ce pas très malin de croire que les gens sont morts parce qu'on les tue. Et si le poison leur tombait des mains? si les épouvantails étaient fées?

ennui - this unique form of happiness characteristic of capitalistic societies governed by morals of infinite perfectibility due to mechanical progress.

Could the ransom of this progress be you, until now an unknown form of exaltation, an exaltation of all the destructive forces of man, directed against himself, and consequently the need to escape oneself and the incapacity of doing it - which is like its corollary? LET US THEN GO TO THE CINEMA since here is the only art which has never been classical, and by classical art what I really understand is an intimate sense of reality accepting to undergo training by reason in exchange for a flattering time warranty, its orthopedic apparatus, its plaster corsets, its gaz masks fully respond to the requirements of the most despicable man, the most miserable that I know, I mean, that of the classical man. (1) For, who would not prefer all the pleasure of satisfied men put together, from any era, rather than his ennui, God knows how deadly, how voracious. One rare thing still exists to men's honor: the refusal to forget, the wish to die as a form of experience, the most painful kind, and then, in return, he should obtain an open-sesame. I certainly want a part of Rothschild's fortune, but not to be Rothchild, not to live his life!

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1. What really is new in our vision of the world is that the most incredible thing could be accompanied by reality and have the appearance of truth; my sister, in a dream, sees a little hydrocephalous whom she knows because of seeing him every day in the latin district and even though she knows that he is the little hydrocephalous, seeing him, she thinks: "What is Mallarmé doing here?"

On the other side, according to my highest judgement, I do not know of any possible emergency exit. I will not believe that a mind which served one cause can be brought to serve another; each mind eternally pleads one and the same cause: its own; that it may have given its guts away hardly matters to our requirements.

That is why I do not subscribe to certain manifests in the theater which propose using Hugo, Shakespeare, in spite of them, just so that they may reach their own goals. Could the mind be reversible? Maybe it is not so smart to believe that people are dead because one has killed them. And if the poison were to fall out of their hands? and the scarecrows were fairies?

en échange le sésame ouvre-toi. Je veux bien de la fortune de Rothschild, mais pas de la vie de sa personne, pas être Rothschild! (Et peut-être l'ennui de Rothschild est-il dix, cent fois plus grand que le nôtre, peut-être est-il proportionnel à sa richesse).

ALLONS DONC AU CINEMA puisque malgré sa bonne volonté de ramper au plus bas, l'a.b.c. de sa technique est encore capable de fortifier de mystère la réalité, la plus vite soit-elle. Appareil à lyrisme, par excellence! Quel rôle ont joué dans l'histoire de l'homme les lettres a.b.c. et ça dépend-il vraiment du nombre de fois dont ces lettres sont entrées dans une combinaison de mots pour que notre destin en sente la bonne ou la maligne influence? La superstition ne serait-elle que la poésie des pauvres? Le cinéma est vraiment appelé à créer des superstitions nouvelles, il rend l'inanime poignant, charrie la réalité énorme de son gros plan, accouche de l'arbitraire: il introduit la notion de la quantité lyrique, le point de vue du discontinu, le jeu du simultané; il étaye ses jugements de l'homme sur la dimension-durée. Nulle réalité ne saurait lui dérober sa figure - sommes-nous encore à tes vérités, Physique? La sur-impression permet à deux corps d'occuper au même instant le même point de l'espace; mais elle affirme contre Bergson, passionnément, que deux sensations peuvent être égales. C'est pour avoir impressionné une plaque photographique, que le Radium, il me semble, tenta la découverte et fut appelé à vivre; le cinéma est à l'affût de tous les rayons X; du nouveau, je vous dis qu'il y a du nouveau dans le monde; il est le premier, à l'appréhender.

La bascule nous donne la mesure de notre poids apparent; le cinéma, la

(And maybe Rothchild's ennui is ten times, one hundred times larger than ours, maybe it is commensurable with his riches.)

LET US THEN GO TO THE CINEMA because in spite of its good will to remain obscure, the a.b.c. of its technique is yet capable of fortifying reality with mystery, even the most vile kind of reality. A lyrical apparatus par excellence! What a role the letters a.b.c. have played in men's history, and does it really depend on the number of times these letters engage in word combinations so that our destiny we may feel a positive or negative influence? Could it be that superstition is only the poetics of the poor? Cinema is really called upon to create new superstitions, it renders the inanimate agonizing, it sweeps away our enormous reality from its main plan, and gives birth to the arbitrary; it thus introduces the notion of lyrical quantity, the notion of discontinuity, and the interplay of the simultaneous; for its judgement of men, cinema relies on the concept of dimension-duration. No reality could possibly take away its countenance - can we still grasp its truth, the Physical one? Double exposure allows for two bodies to occupy the same point in space at the same time; but contrary to Bergson, it passionately affirms that two sensations can be equal. It seems to me that Radium was called to life by the over-exposure of a photographic plate; cinema is waiting for the encounter of all possible X rays; something new, I am telling you there is something brand new in the world; and cinema is the first to get hold of it.

The scale gives us our apparent weight; the cinema, the capacity of our real movement. Seized by its rhythms, by being objects of a camera and by

capacité de notre mouvement réel. Happé par ses rythmes, nous cessons d'avoir un visage, d'être objets de photo, d'exprimer le provisoire; à partir d'un certain nombre d'images par seconde, le monde extérieur cesse d'être pensé tel quel, s'évanouit; il y va désormais de tout autre chose. Le cinéma se joue de nos préjugés, de l'image qu'après tout, nous voulons conserver de nous-mêmes. Il bouscule tout cela, mais dédaigne ce qui n'est pas cela. Il s'amuse follement à nous modifier, à nous raturer sur le vif, à nous faire mousser, à s'en donner spectacle. C'est nous qui sommes l'objet de sa convoitise, qui faisons ses délices; c'est nous qui sommes son unique proie, le cinéma purement abstrait (absolu) n'étant destiné qu'à jouer un rôle critique: faire l'analyse des éléments purs en présence, marquer une rupture nette avec les arts d'imitation, donner une chiquenaude à l'esprit au cerveau dormant; s'en aller, comme s'en fut le cubisme. Tel relief abstrait d'ARP gagne infiniment à s'appeler "bouteille-nombriil", telle danse de blancheurs pures de Man-Ray, de partir d'une boîte de cols. Nous ne pouvons nous intéresser qu'à l'homme et à ce qui le détruit. A la cime de l'esprit, à son plus grand degré d'absolu, n'importe lequel de nos actes, pris au hasard, ne sera toujours, en dernière analyse, qu'une évaluation morale du monde. L'inhumain c'est bien la chevelure de l'humain, le vide semé exprès avec une peau d'orange, l'angoisse sans figure. L'affirmation du jeune Nietzsche que le monde ne saurait se justifier qu'esthétiquement, je ne l'ai aimée qu'aussi longtemps que j'acceptai d'en être dupe; qu'il l'eût cassee, plus tard, je n'en voulais tenir compte; comme lui, je faisais passer pour de l'héroïsme, une première lacheté. Craignait-il donc tant que cela de connaître la "vérité" sur la

expressing the temporary, we no longer have a visage; starting with a certain number of images per second, the outside world ceases to be thought about as it is, and disappears; and from there on so does everything else. Cinema plays on our prejudices, on the image which, after all, we wish to conserve of ourselves. It knocks all of that, but despises what is not just that. It has a fantastic time by modifying us, by altering us in real life situations, by making us mad, by creating a show. We are the object of its desire, producing its delight; we are its only prey, the purely abstract (absolute) cinema being destined only to the role of the critic: analyzing the pure elements in our presence, marking a definite rupture with the imitative arts, giving the dormant soul an mind a flip; and then going away, just like cubism. Such an abstract relief of the ARP gains infinitely by calling itself the "navel-bottle", such as Man-Ray's dance of pure whiteness, parting from a box of collars. We can only be interested in man and in what destroys him. No matter how outstanding, how high it is placed in the absolute, an action - no matter which one, will ultimately always be a moral evaluation of the world. The inhumane is only a part of the humane, the emptiness having been spread purposely with an orange peel, the anguish without a face. I have liked young Nietzsche's affirmation, that the world could only justify itself esthetically, only as long as I accepted to be deceived by this affirmation; I did not want to take into consideration that he demolished it later; just like him, I wanted to consider this first cowardice as my first heroic act. Was he then so afraid of knowing the "truth" on Greek tragedy?

Consequently, we have no doubt that cinema allows men to see ahead of

tragédie grecque?

Que le cinéma permette par conséquent à l'homme de regarder plus avant dans les choses, n'en doutons pas. Mais le Dieu-Cinéma ne saura surprendre ma religion pas plus que tout autre idole. Il ne saurait donner beaucoup plus que la poésie, et dieu sait si la poésie, tant et si furieusement aimée, est capable d'ouvrir sans couteau une seule huître, de tirer le signal d'alarme au moment du danger panique. Le cinéma pas plus que la poésie ne saura nous faire désobéir à quoi que ce soit, il nous entraînera fatalement à toutes les habitudes acquises, à la perte de temps destiné à agir (à quelle fin?) il acceptera de servir, lui, l'art immoral entre tous, l'hypocrisie des moeurs les plus stupides, les plus américaines. Mais il aura servi -les ficelles de toutes choses s'étant usées - à nous réunir devant un malentendu, aussi nouveau que possible, à multiplier les chances de ce qu'on appelle "vivre".

Ce n'est pas par conséquent pour corriger le cinéma, le rendre meilleur (qu'il ne devienne pas un art; c'est tout ce que nous exigeons de lui) que nous proposons à notre tour ce mortier nouveau destiné à ruiner dans les esprits une certaine forme de cinéma, à mettre au monde une certaine autre. Nous y apportons nos scrupules, notre inquiétude, nos dégoûts et notre énergie sans emploi dans le siècle. Au moment de la désintoxication par l'écriture - puisque cela est inévitable - nous demandons humblement à ces mêmes moyens, dont l'enigme nous épuise sans s'épuiser elle-même, de vouloir bien prononcer d'autres mots, les nôtres. C'est de notre faute si le cinéma est commercé par tous les marchands du monde. Il a été donné aux plus simples d'être toujours

times. Nevertheless, the God/Cinema will not be able to become my religion any more than any other idol. It would not be able to produce more than poetry, and God knows if poetry, even though loved tremendously, can open a single clam without a knife in order to trigger the alarm at the moment of panic-stricken anything; it will fatally drag us into all of our acquired habits, and the time destined for action (with which goal?) will again be lost in favor of the most immortal art of all, the hypocrisy of the most stupid of morals, the most American. However, it will have served - all other possibilities having been exhausted - to unite us in front of a misunderstanding, no matter how new, to multiply the chances of what we call "living".

Therefore, it is not in order to correct and improve cinema (we only insist for it not to become another art form) that we suggest this new role destined to abolish a fixed form of cinema from our mind, and to give birth to a certain other. We bring to it our scruples, our anguish, our distastes and our energy which has no other use in this century. At the moment of detoxification through writing - since it is inevitable we humbly ask of these very same means (so enigmatic that they exhaust us without exhausting themselves), to willingly pronounce other words, our own. We are the only ones to blame when cinema is a commercial item sold by all the merchants of the world; the simplest of minds was always the first. While they were confidently going to the cinema, amusing themselves vulgarly, we were foolishly limiting its potential, despising it in the name of ART. However, it would suffice to approve it, and modify it suddenly while modifying ourselves. In a similar manner, we would modify the art of the blacksmith or that

les premiers. Pendant qu'ils allaient au cinéma de confiance et vulgairement s'y amusaient, nous lui avons bêtement fermé l'esprit, nous l'avons méprisé au nom de l'ART. Pourtant, il suffisait d'y aller pour, du coup, le modifier et nous modifier. Nous modifierons aussi bien l'art du maréchal-ferrant ou la chimie organique. A présent, plusieurs bons esprits veulent tenter l'aventure. Leurs moyens sont plus que de fortune. Je ne gage pas sur leur réussite. Dans le doute je m'abstiendrais de faire imprimer ces scénarios.

**OUVRONS DONC L'ERE DES SCENARII INTOURNABLES.** Un peu de l'étonnante beauté des foetus s'y trouvera. Disons tout de suite que ces scenarii écrits pour être lus, seront à courte échéance noyés de "littérature" (voyez les traces de ce vitriol dans mes trois ciné-poèmes) le véritable scénario étant par nature très malaise à lire, impossible à écrire (1). Mais alors pourquoi m'attacher délibérément à ce néant? à quelle fin? C'est qu'une partie de moi-même que la poésie refouillait, pour pouvoir poser ses propres questions, angoissantes, vient de trouver dans le cinéma un haut parleur à toute épreuve. Que vaut-elle? mais que vaux-je? On n'écrit plus guère que pour se donner une contenance; on publie rien que pour poser des récepteurs, jeter son doute dans le plus possible d'hommes, sans espoir d'en trouver du reste (2). Ecrire: une sorte de faux point d'appui pour gens à qui la timidité a fait perdre leur centre de gravité, comme

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1. Imagine-t-on le scénario écrit d'Emak Bakia, d'Entr'acte ou à l'autre extrême, celui du Charlot Noctambule par exemple de beaucoup le film le plus pur de Chaplin?

2. Je compte beaucoup sur cette promesse tombée un jour de la table de Francis Picabia: "nous sommes à la merci de toutes les télégraphies sans fil du monde".

of organic chemistry. At this very moment, several good people wish to attempt the adventure. Their means are not based just on fortune. But I am not betting on their success. Being that I am in doubt, I would abstain from printing these scenarios.

LET US BEGIN AN ERA OF IMPOSSIBLE SHOOTINGS. A bit of the astonishing beauty of a fetus will then be found within it. Let us say right from the start that these scenarios, written in order to be read, will shortly be drawn in "literature" (one can see the traces of this vitriol in my three cinema poems) a veritable scenario being by nature very difficult to read, impossible to write. (1) Then why become deliberately attached to this void? for what purpose? Is it because a part of me, being held back by poetry, has just found in cinema an ultimate test-proved loud speaker because of the need to ask questions, agonizing questions. What is its real worth? what is mine? One no longer writes in order to distribute receptors, and throw his own doubts among as many of us as possible, with no hope of ever finding a response. (2) Writing: a kind of fake support for those so timid that they have lost their center of gravity, just like whistling in the middle of the livingroom, talking with your hands in your pocket, and asking preposterous questions a la Rousseau. One can also find within writing the equivalent of delicious absurdity - in which men discover the vanity of "the spirit of the ladder".

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1. Can one imagine for example the scenario written by Emak Bakia, "About intermission of the other extreme", and the one written by Charlot Noctambule, by far the purest Chaplin film?

2. I rely heavily on this promise which fell from Francis Picabia's table: "we are at the mercy of all the wireless telegraphs in the world".

siffloter dans un salon, parler les mains dans les poches, poser des questions saugrenues à la Rousseau. Y chercher aussi l'équivalent de la délicieuse absurdité - dont l'homme tire vanité après coup - de ce que l'on appelle "l'esprit de l'escalier".

## V. POEMS TRANSLATED FROM FRENCH

## "ULYSSE"

Le monde est fini, le voyage  
commence.

Y a-t-il encore un soleil quelque part?

Nous avons peur de la vie,  
nous avons peur de la mort,  
de toutes ces vieilles chansons  
de nourrice.

Nous portons avec nous  
le poids d'une race d'ancêtres  
qui ont trop aimé cette terre  
pour ne pas la haïr.

Nous sommes issues de la pierre  
lourde et sauvage,  
nous fûmes des rocs, des racines,  
jamais oiseaux, jamais nuages -  
feuilles des cimes -

Les dieux ah! sont morts.  
Nous cherchons  
des hommes. Des hommes  
qui n'aient pas peur d'achever  
ce qui reste des dieux.

from Le mal des fantômes (p.126)

**"ULYSSES"**

"The world has ended, the voyage  
has just begun,  
Is there still a sun somewhere?

We fear life,  
we fear death,  
all these old songs  
from our childhood.

We carry within us  
the weight of our ancestors' race  
who loved this earth too much  
unable to hate it.

We have been born from stone  
heavy and wild,  
we were rocks, and roots,  
never birds, nor clouds-  
leaves fallen from peaks-

Our gods ah! are dead,  
We are looking  
for people. Men  
who would not fear to complete  
the work of Gods.”

from Le mal des fantômes (p.126)

a Line

"Marseille, tu changes les cales du bateau  
d'émigrants qui montaient sous l'oeil de la police,  
ils sentaient la fatigue, l'ail,  
ils étaient loqueteux et bredouilles.

-Où allez-vous mes frères?

Maquignons, rebouteux, marchands de vins, forains,  
fripiers, diamantaires,  
votre sang fouette mon sang, votre paupière me soulève,  
vous chevauchiez la nuit des temps  
vous êtes ma soif permanente  
je vous ai vus quittant les poches des provinces  
trainant quelques vertèbres molles sous vos chemises  
les pogroms de l'Ukraine vous ont chassés des villes  
vous n'aviez que votre vie dans les valises  
maigres et vifs comme bois roulés par les torrents,  
pourquoi aller toujours de la fin vers les commencements,  
pourquoi lisez-vous donc votre livre à rebours,  
vous n'arrivez jamais et vous partez toujours  
quel âcre paradis  
roule dans votre bile,  
où courez-vous, assis

sur le pont, immobiles,  
ressemeleurs de mots, bijoutiers d'accidents,  
dites-moi d'où vient ce fleuve d'énergie?  
Dans vos mains je lisais une ligne de vie  
longue et cent fois brisée.

Où donc t'avions-nous amarré  
canot de secours, synagogue?  
Partout dans le vent, la marée  
monte, sanglot de Décalogue!

Pauvres vifs

Que de fois projetés sur les murs par vos longues bougies de suif  
vos ombres ont prié sur les fruits de la terre,  
ont nagé lourdement dans l'eau de la prière  
et appelé dans leurs coeurs racornis, la jeune,  
la frêle bergère, l'épouse,  
la fiancée promise et noire du Cantique  
des Cantiques  
J'ai voyagé avec vous dans le train, mon père est là  
(qu'il est beau dans ses yeux le maïs de la terre moldave)."

from "Ulysse", Le mal des fantômes (p.109)

to Line

Marseille, you were loading the wedges of the boat  
with emigrants climbing in while policemen watched,  
they smelled like fatigue, like garlic,  
in rags they were and empty-handed,

-Where are you going brothers?

Horse dealers, bonesetters, wine merchants, boothkeepers,  
second-hand clothes dealers, diamond dealers,  
your blood is my blood, your eyelid stirs me,  
you were riding in the darkness of time  
you are my everlasting thirst,  
I saw you leaving the province  
dragging a few soft bones under your shirts  
the Ukrainian pogroms had chased you from the cities  
in your suitcases your lives are all you had  
skinny and quick like the wood rolling in the torrent,  
why must you always go from the end to the beginning,  
then why must you read your book backwards,  
always departing your destination you never reach  
what pungent paradise  
rolls in your head  
seated, where are you running,

stagnant, on the bridge,  
resolers of words, jewelers of accidents,  
tell me where does your river of energy come from?  
In your hands I was reading your life-line  
long and one hundred times broken.

Where have we moored you  
lifeboat, synagogue?  
Everywhere in the wind, the tide  
is rising, the sobbing of a Decalogue!

Poor live ones  
So many times projected on the walls by your long candles of  
tallow  
your shadows have prayed on the fruits of the earth  
they swam heavily in the waters of prayer  
and called in their hardened hearts, the young  
the frail shepherdess, the wife,  
the promised and dark fiancée of the Song  
of Songs.

With you I traveled in the train, my father is there  
(in his eyes how beautiful the corn of the Moldavian land)."

from "Ulysse" Le mal des fantômes. (p.109)

## "AU TEMPS DU POEME -POEMES EPARS"

C'est toute la douleur du monde  
qui est venue s'asseoir à ma table  
-et pouvais-je lui dire : Non?

Je m'étais fais si petit,  
une petite chenille, et j'ai éteint la lampe  
-mais pouvais-je savoir qu'elle mûrissait dedans  
et pouvais-je m'empêcher qu'elle sortît un jour,  
une chanson entre ses ailes?

J'ai dit à la douleur du monde  
qui s'est couchée sous mon ventre:  
N'ai-je pas assez de la mienne?

Vois: j'ai ma propre soif!  
On ne peut pas toujours demeurer une chenille  
la terre m'est rugueuse au ventre  
elle me fait mal votre terre  
je suis né pour voler...

D'un bond je lui tournai le dos -  
mais elle était déjà dans mon songe.

Est-ce mon sang qu'elle voulait?

J'ai dit à la douleur du monde:

-C'est une ruse, une sale ruse.

Voilà que tu chantes en t'en allant...

-Mais à ma place, dites, l'auriez-vous oubliée?

(1944)

Le Mal des fantômes (p.357)

"THE TIME OF THE POEM - FRAGMENTS"

All the sorrow of this world  
came to sit at my table  
-could I have said: No?

I had made myself so small,  
a little caterpillar, and I turned off the light  
could I have known sorrow was blooming within me  
could I have kept her from coming out one day,  
a song between her wings?

I spoke to the sorrow of this world  
lying down under me:  
Haven't I enough of my own?

See: I have my own thirst!  
One cannot always be a caterpillar  
the earth hurts my body  
your earth hurts me  
I was born to fly...

I sprung up and left her -  
but even then she was in my dream.

Was it my blood she wanted?

I spoke to the sorrow of this world

-It's a trick, a dirty trick.

There you are singing you leave...

-Yet in my place, tell me, would you have forgotten her?

(1944)

Le Mal des fantômes (p.357)

"La tête sur la roue  
j'avance face contre terre  
lié par ce solide mouvement  
qui ne se peut briser qu'il ne me jette -  
Je roule dans le cadre fermé  
avec la solitude à droite et le grand pont  
rouillé à gauche. Vaches. Des vaches ont été  
semées dans le pré. Des meubles immobiles,  
Une rivière coule au rebord de la toile  
et nous fermons un noeud si ferme et si ténu  
qu'il suffit de la moindre velléité obscure  
de ciller, de la moindre poussière dans l'iris  
pour que le paysage s'allonge sur le dos  
et couvre d'une goutte de sang imprévisible  
la signature à peine séchée dans un coin."

Le Mal des fantômes (p.379)

"Head on the wheel  
against the earth I move forward  
connected by this solid movement  
which cannot break without casting me off-  
I roll enclosed in the frame  
with solitude to my right and the huge rusted bridge  
on my left. Cows. Cows had been  
sowed in the fields. Static furniture -  
A river flows on the edge of the canvas  
and we form a knot so solid and so tight  
that any vague obscure desire  
makes us blink, any insignificant speck of dust  
allows the landscape to stretch out on its back  
and cover with drops of unforeseeable blood  
the signature still wet in the corner."

Le Mal des fantômes (p.379)

“Ces choses n’avaient ni commencement ni fin  
cela ne finissait pas d’être  
pas un trou, pas la moindre fissure  
pas un visage lézardé!  
les hommes se tenaient coude à coude, serrés,  
comme pour empêcher qu’on y passe  
pas une absence entre deux vagues  
pas un ravin entre deux mots  
pas un passage entre deux seins  
lourds, gras,  
et pourtant au travers de la muraille lisse  
quelque chose suintait  
l’écho ranci d’une fête étrange,  
une sueur de musique,  
les gouttes d’un sang frais qui caillait aussitôt  
sur la peau morte du monde.”

Le Mal des fantômes (p. 377)

“These things had no beginning and no end  
there was no end to being  
not one hole, not even the tiniest crack  
no furrowed face!  
elbow to elbow men were standing tight together  
as if blocking the passage  
no absence among waves  
no ravine between two words  
no passage between two breasts  
heavy, fat,  
and yet through the smooth wall  
something oozed  
the rancid echo of a strange celebration,  
the sweat of music,  
drops of fresh blood already clotted  
on the dead skin of the world.”

Le Mal des fantômes (p.377)

## LE MAL DES FANTOMES: "Le mal des fantômes"

## XV

Nulle musique ne saurait guérir  
ce qui n'a pas été par la musique  
blessé. Et nulle Paix, réconcilier

(en quelque soif donnée) le Lamentable  
avec lui-même. Nulle eternite  
verser l'oubli du temps à l'incurable.

-Prier? mais OU? Le Temps est écroulé!  
La voix titube aux pierres, dans le vide...  
Prier? mais QUI? Les pierres ont roulé...

Pourtant ILS nous ont dit: "Prenez les harpes!  
(c'était au bord des fleuves). Jouez donc  
esclaves! Sonne, ô vin des vieilles grappes!"

Mais nous: "Quelle musique peut guérir  
le coeur captif, le mal de ce fantôme  
las de toujours renâitre, pour périr?"

C'était au bord des fleuves. (Nous y sommes.) p.180

## PHANTOMS IN PAIN : "Phantoms in pain"

## XV

No music could heal  
that which has not been by music  
wounded. And no Peace, reconcile

(in a granted desire) the Lamentable  
with itself. No eternity could spill  
time's oblivion into the incurable.

-To pray? but WHERE? Time has crumbled!  
The voice stumbles on stones, in the abyss...  
To pray? but TO WHOM? The stones have rolled away...

Nevertheless THEY have told us: "Pick up the harps!  
(it was on the edge of rivers). Play then  
slaves! Ring out oh wine!"

Yet for us: "What sort of music could heal  
the captive heart, the pain of this phantom  
weary of always being reborn, in order to perish?"

It was on the edge of rivers. (We are there.) p.180

## LE MAL DES FANTOMES: "Ulysse"

C'est une voix qui crie dans le désert "où suis-je?"

Hier, c'était l'océan, la nausée,

et l'envie d'une terre solide dans la paume -

la terre!

Mais aujourd'hui le jour avance dans le brouillard

haletant. Sur le pont, des marins de brouillard

s'enchevêtrent. On ne sait où le bateau commence

où il finit. Un pas de plus c'est le chaos.

La sirène gémit, hurle,

elle crie dans le désert "je suis là, je suis là"

et l'écho lui répond "je suis là, je suis là!"

Attention à ma vie. Elle est fragile. Oh! comme

elle est fragile. Et pourtant si pleine de sa soif.

Je me penche sur mon passé - rien; sur mon avenir - rien.

Je te cherche, où es-tu? une femme de brouillard entre autres.

Que de fantômes, pour vivre, ai-je trahi? Je ne sais.

Leur sang coule. Où sont les vivants? Du brouillard.

On voudrait s'accrocher à quelque épave, corde,

canot, désir, noyé, chevelure, espoir...

Mais le bateau avance haletant, il a peur,

il a peur de la vie, il a peur de lui-même,

il ne sait d'où il vient, il ne sait où il va

c'est une voix qui crie...

L'entends-tu comme elle crie  
dans le désert?

Le Mal des fantômes (p.145)

**PHANTOMS IN PAIN: "Ulysses"**

It's a voice crying in the desert: "where am I?"

Yesterday, it was the ocean, the nausea,  
and the desire for a solid earth in my palm -  
the earth!

Today the day advances in the fog  
gasping. On the bridge, seamen of the fog  
run into each other. One no longer knows where the boat starts  
where it ends. Another step and it's chaos.

The siren moans, screams,  
it is crying in the desert "Here I am, here I am"  
and the echo answers "Here I am, here I am!"

Be careful with my life. It is fragile. Oh! how  
fragile it is. And yet so full of desire.

I look into my past -nothing; into my future -nothing.

I look for you, where are you? a woman of fog among others.

So many phantoms, have I betrayed in order to live? I know not.

Their blood flows. Where are those living? More fog.

One would like to hang on to some wreckage, some cord,  
boat, desire, some drowned person, mane, hope...

Yet the boat advances while gasping, it is afraid,  
afraid of life, afraid of itself,

not knowing its origin, its destination

it's a voice crying...

Do you hear how it cries

in the desert?

Le mal des fantômes (p.145)

## LE MAL DES FANTOMES: "Titanic"

"Le Poète et son ombre"

## VIII

J'étais attaché à ces riens,  
mais plus encore à moi-même.  
A peine a-t-on franchi le seuil  
qu'on tourne autour de quelque chose  
comme un soleil désemparé...  
Qu'on ouvre la porte seulement  
le monde se jette dedans -  
combien résisteront les digues?  
Qu'on ouvre l'oeil, voici le cirque  
où dansent les chevaux savants.  
La vie déborde l'écran!  
J'ai beau m'accrocher aux fauteuils,  
la faim qui monte des entrailles  
s'apaisera-t-elle jamais?  
Il fait si chaud, si bon en moi,  
j'ai effacé toutes les traces,  
c'est comme un feu de bois tranquille,  
des ombres passent à travers  
le bois craque, les ombres craquent...

Je vais m'allonger sur le dos  
moitié ici, moitié ailleurs,  
les jambes posées sur le vide,  
les bras ballants, les yeux ouverts  
de l'autre côté de la nuit...

Le mal des fantômes (p.247)

## PHANTOMS IN PAIN: "Titanic"

"The poet and his shadow"

## VIII

I was attached to these nothings,  
and to myself even more.  
We have just reached the threshold  
and we begin to spin around something  
like a lost sun...  
Let the door open  
people will rush in -  
how many will be stronger than the dikes?  
Open your eyes, here is the circus  
where the performing horses dance.  
Life overflows the screen!  
No matter how I grip on to these armchairs  
hunger rises from within  
will it ever be appeased?  
I feel so warm, so good inside,  
I have erased all traces,  
It's like a tranquil fire,  
shadows slipping away  
the wood crackles, the shadows crackle...

I am going to stretch out on my back  
half here, half elsewhere,  
legs placed on the void,  
arms dangling, eyes opened  
on the other side of the night...

Le mal des fantômes (p.247)

## LE MAL DES FANTOMES: "L'exode -Super flumina Babylonis"

## "La voix dans le désert"

C'est dans ce point précis d'absence  
que les oiseaux coulaient à pic dans l'oeil du vide  
ailes et sang -  
ils tournoyaient avant de couler dans le vide,  
dans le jour devenu plus grand qu'auparavant.

C'est dans ce point précis:  
Tout finissait, les routes et les besoins humains,  
je tenais une nuit nouvelle dans mes mains,  
un phare cependant balayait mon visage,  
le poumon s'essoufflait  
parmi les voix j'ai vu des canots qui partaient  
vers un pays sans paupières  
-ce n'était pas le temps mais un autre espace,  
la lumière était si lourde ou l'on marchait,  
elle coulait de nos poches comme un sang noirci.

-C'est dans ce point  
que j'ai douté enfin de ma lucidité  
en me voyant moi-même, mais détaché de moi.  
Ce n'était pas la peur mais une autre joie,

ce n'était pas le bonheur mais une autre amertume,  
et je criais, honteux de m'entendre crier:

C'est dense!

Cette vie est-elle donc plus épaisse que l'autre?

Ce désespoir est-il plus sage que l'espoir?

C'est dans un monde sans rémission que j'avance,  
c'est dans un monde sans retour que je m'enfonce,  
c'est dans

un monde évanoui qui cherche sa matière,  
et c'est un monde sans commencements ni fins,  
un monde flamboyant dont la voix rauque crie:

C'EST!

Le Mal des fantômes (p.316)

## PHANTOMS IN PAIN: "Exodus - Super Flumina Babylonis"

"A voice in the desert"

It is in this precise moment of absence  
birds sinking in the eye of chaos  
wings and blood -  
birds swirling before slipping into emptiness  
in a day becoming bigger than before.

It is at this precise point:  
All was ending, roads and human needs,  
I was holding a new night in my hand,  
a headlight however was blinding me,  
my lungs out of breath  
among voices I saw fishing boats leaving  
towards a land with no eyelids  
-it was not time but another space,  
light was so heavy where we were walking,  
leaking from our pockets like darkened blood.

-At that time

I finally doubted my consciousness  
while looking at myself, yet detached from myself.  
It was not fear but another kind of joy,

It was not gladness but another kind of bitterness,  
and I was screaming, ashamed of hearing myself:  
It's dense!

So this life is denser than the other?  
Is this despair wiser than hope?  
I am advancing in a world with no remission,  
plunging in a world with no return,  
inside  
an unconscious world searching for its substance,  
and it's a world with no beginning and no end,  
a burning world whose harsh voice cries:

SO IT IS!

Le Mal des fantômes (p.316)

## VI. RIMBAUD LE VOYOU

de Benjamin Fondane

VIII

<<Donc tu te dégages  
Des humains suffrages,  
Des communs élans!... >>  
Rimbaud

Mais déjà vous protestez contre le terme de "voyou" que j'emploie ici à dessein, et me voici forcé de recourir au dictionnaire pour vérifier la valeur de ce mot:

VOYOU, n.m. Individu de moeurs crapuleuses qui vit ordinairement dans la rue.

Le Larousse est net sur ce point.

Je sais que rien ne vous empêche de reprendre la vie et l'oeuvre point par point, mais en vérité, pourriez-vous, la conscience tranquille, affirmer que Rimbaud vécut jamais autrement que dans la rue? Rappelez-vous seulement ses fugues, ses voyages à pied de Charleville à Paris, à Bruxelles, son instabilité évidente (qu'un médecin qualifia de paranoïa ambulatoire) qui lui fit parcourir toute l'Europe et l'Asie, qui lui fit tracer de nouvelles voies au commerce en Abyssinie, et, même pendant sa maladie, ses petites voyages atroces de Marseille à Paris, puis à Roche, puis de nouveau à Marseille. Dans sa vie morale, il n'est pas moins instable; c'est un marchandeur, un vagabond! "Individu aux moeurs crapuleuses", voilà qui vous choque davantage. Ce n'est pas que chez vous, en famille, ou dans le secret de vous-même, vous pensiez différemment. Mais il vous est difficile de concevoir qu'à la table de travail, le doigt

## VI. RIMBAUD LE VOYOU

by Benjamin Fondane

## VIII

<<So you remove yourself  
from all human approval,  
from all common passions!...>>

Rimbaud

I feel compelled to demonstrate the value of the word vagabond since I am using it here with a certain purpose, and I do not wish it to be misunderstood; first let us verify its dictionary meaning:

VAGABOND, m.n. Individual of corrupt morals ordinarily living in the streets.

The Larousse dictionary is quite clear about this point.

I know that you can understand and revise Rimbaud's life and poetry in every detail, but could you affirm, with a clear conscience, that Rimbaud lived elsewhere than in the street? If you could only recall his escapades, his trips on foot from Charleville to Paris, to Brussels, his evident instability (labeled by a doctor as ambulatory paranoia) which led him to voyages throughout Europe and Asia, and new commercial routes he traced in Abyssinia; even during his sickness, he traveled from Marseille to Paris, then to Roche, then again to Marseille. His moral life was also unstable; he was a haggler, a vagabond " ; an "Individual of corrupt morals". At home, with your family, or deep down inside, you find this to be even more shocking. And it is difficult for you to conceive that while an author must enhance and embellish Rimbaud's image, most of all, he

contre la tempe, un auteur qui écrit sur Rimbaud et le doit, par conséquent relever, embellir, tienne à tout prix -et en dépit de toute convenance - à conserver de lui une image exacte.

Peut-être ai-je tort d'insister si souvent sur les "laideurs" de Rimbaud; vous ne demandez pas mieux que de les oublier. Mais précisément, il m'importe qu'on ne les oublie pas! A quoi bon l'investir de qualités morales qu'il n'eût jamais, en faisant tantôt un saint, tantôt un voyant? Je vous rappelle également qu'à ses propres yeux la théorie du voyant, loin d'être un acte "beau" selon la morale ordinaire, est l'acte du voyou par excellence, l'acte par lequel on fait main basse aussi bien sur le passé que sur l'avenir. Rimbaud d'ailleurs en eut pleinement conscience. Au moment même de l'invention de cette théorie, loin de se donner le beau rôle, loin de prendre la position hiératique du Voyant, n'écrit-il pas: "Je m'encrapule de plus en plus..."? Le mot qu'il emploie pour se désigner et désigner son activité est, comme par hasard, le mot du Larousse.

Mais ne serait-il pas un voyou dans le sens propre du mot qu'il le serait sur le plan spirituel, car n'est-ce pas une définition de voyou: "L'Esprit est autorité, il veut que je sois en Occident. Il faudrait le faire taire pour conclure comme je voulais?" Sans doute cette phrase ne vous dit rien qui vaille; on est habitué aux mots obscurs des gens de lettres réputés obscurs. Mais Rimbaud se charge lui-même de nous avertir des prolongements que ces mots supposent, des dangers qu'implicitement ils contiennent: "J'envoyais au diable les palmes des martyrs, les rayons d'art, l'orgueil des inventeurs, l'ardeur des pillards; je retournais à l'Orient et à la sagesse première et éternelle. Il paraît que c'est un

needs to conserve -and at all cost, an exact picture of the poet as he is writing at his desk and reflecting on Rimbaud.

Insisting on the "ugliness" of Rimbaud may be wrong; you would certainly prefer to forget it. Yet, for me, it is most important not to ignore it! Why should we attribute to him moral qualities that he never had, making him either a saint or a seer? I wish to also remind you that, according to Rimbaud, the theory of the visionary poet, is far from being an act pertaining to "beauty"- as labeled by acceptable ethical behavior. The theory of the visionary poet results from the actions of the vagabond par excellence, actions which determine the past as well as the present; in fact Rimbaud was fully aware of this. When he invented the theory of the visionary poet, it was not with the purpose of assuming the "good" role; far from taking the hieratic position of the Seer, does he not write: "I am sinking in more and more vileness..."? The term he is using to describe himself and his activities happens to be a Larousse term.

It is possible to see Rimbaud as a vagabond in the spiritual rather than the literal sense; this is how the vagabond defines spirit: "Spirit is authority, it decides that I should be in the Occident. Would it be better to silence the authority of the Spirit in order to make my own decisions?" It is without a doubt that nothing special is marked by this sentence; we are used to obscure words from obscure renowned writers. Yet Rimbaud takes it upon himself to warn us of the consequences of these terms and their dangerous implications: "I was cursing the martyrs' palms, the art shelves, the inventors' vanity, the looters' fervor; I was returning to the Orient and its initial, eternal wisdom. It appears to

rêve de paresse grossière”.

Voyou, ne vous disais-je pas qu'il répond de point en point au signalement du voyou? Envoyer au diable les martyrs (et non seulement les bourreaux), les rayons d'art (et non seulement les sermons et la littérature), l'orgueil des inventeurs (des inventeurs, nos dieux!), l'ardeur des pillards (les martyrs et les pillards, dans le même sac) et retourner à une sagesse première qu'on situe en Orient, mais qui, sans doute, n'est qu'un rêve de paresse grossière, car il n'y a pas de sagesse qui se soit passée jusqu'à présent, ne serait-ce que "des palmes des martyres" , n'est pas vivre dans la rue? Dès qu'il y a une Maison elle est esprit, elle est autorité, elle est bâtie en Occident, elle a ses martyrs, ses inventeurs, ses rayons d'art, ses pillards. Vivre dans la rue! tel est le sort de Rimbaud, sort auquel il n'essaye guère d'échapper, car alors même qu'il veut quitter l'Occident, c'est peut-être pour échapper à son autorité, mais point pour s'épargner ses inconvénients: "Pourtant, ajoute-t-il dans le même texte, je ne songeais guère au plaisir d'échapper aux souffrances modernes."

Que l'esprit soit autorité, voilà ce dont Rimbaud ne doute guère, voilà ce dont il souffre, et de ce que l'esprit veuille absolument que nous soyons en Occident. Non seulement la religion, toute religion, le veut, mais aussi et surtout les philosophes, les théologiens, les athées, les hommes de science, les théosophes, etc. La révolution elle-même ne veut rien d'autre. De cet état de choses, Goethe se chargera de donner la définition: "Les chefs-d'oeuvre supérieurs ont été enfantés par l'homme et sont, en même temps, les plus hauts

be a dream of base idleness”.

Rimbaud, the vagabond -doesn't the poet fit this description in every aspect of it? You can curse everything: the executioners, but also the martyrs, the sermons and literature, but also the art shelves, the inventors' vanity (the inventors, our gods!), the looters' fervor (the martyrs and the looters in the same bag) and then return to the initial wisdom situated in the Orient. Nevertheless, this wisdom is, without a doubt, only a dream of base idleness. Since there is no lasting wisdom other than the wisdom found in the “palms of martyrs”, couldn't we then say that wisdom can be found on the streets? As soon as an institution is found, it becomes spirit, authority, it is built in the West, it has its martyrs, its inventors, its art shelves, its thieves. Living in the streets! such is Rimbaud's destiny, a destiny he does not avoid; when he leaves the West it is maybe because he wishes to escape its authority, but certainly not because he wants to spare himself the inconvenience of being there. Here is Rimbaud's comment -from the same text: “However, I was certainly not trying to escape modern suffering.”

Rimbaud never doubts that spirit could be authority and he suffers on this account; he also suffers from the fact that it is an absolute necessity for the spirit to be situated in the West. Religion, all of religion wishes to be situated in the West -and most of all philosophers, theologians, atheists, scientists, theosophists, etc. Even the revolution itself has the same wish. Goethe will be the one to explain this situation: “Superior works of art were invented by men and, at the same time, they are the highest products of Nature; they were

produits de la Nature; ils ont été créés d'après les lois vraies et naturelles; plus rien ici n'est arbitraire, plus rien n'est imaginaire; là est la Nécessité, là est Dieu." Vous voyez bien, l'esprit en Occident est toujours Nécessité, toujours l'Ananké d'Aristote est Dieu, et ceci même pour un des rares hommes tant soit peu affranchis de la tutelle du lieu commun.

D'autre part, en Occident, Dieu ne précède jamais l'Esprit qui est autorisé; il le suit. Et alors même qu'on le remplace (car on le remplace presque toujours par quelque chose), ce par quoi on le remplace est presque immédiatement investi de tous les attributs du Dieu ancien. Même chez les gens aux yeux desquels Dieu ne saurait être qu'un "porc", il y a toujours une niche secrète où loger une puissance nouvelle, qu'on appelle par simplicité l'Esprit, et même l'Esprit des Ténèbres et, puisque nous vivons dans le règne des mots, ce Dieu étant aussi légitime que l'autre, nous serions prêts à le prendre en considération, non sans d'abord poser une question préalable: quels sont les attributs du Dieu nouveau qui le distinguent de l'autre, puisque, à tout prendre, ce n'est pas d'une substitution de personne qu'il s'agit, mais d'une transmutation de valeurs?

Mais voilà, quoi qu'on fasse, le nouveau Dieu sent lui aussi son lieu de naissance; il est de son Occident; il commande, il ordonne, il prescrit, il enjoint; il veut qu'on lui obéisse: il tyrannise par l'intermédiaire de gens qui se croient plus qualifiés que d'autres pour parler en son nom; il a aussi ses peches contre l'esprit que toute l'eau de la mer ne pourrait laver; il a ses sanctions et ses récompenses. Ce Dieu, tout comme l'autre, est parfait et absolu; lui aussi, il

created by true natural law; nothing here is arbitrary anymore, the imaginary no longer exists; that is Necessity, that is God." It is obvious that the spirit in the West is always equivalent to Necessity, and Aristotle's Ananke is always God; this is true even for Rimbaud -one of those rare human beings untouched by the authority of common men.

In the West, God never precedes Spirit -our highest authority; God follows Spirit. Even when we replace God with something else (and we always replace God by some other term), we immediately adorn this new God with the attributes of the old God. Even the people for whom God could never be anything but a "pig", have a secret alcove, a home for this new power -a power that we simply call Spirit (even when referring to the Spirit of Darkness). Since we live in a kingdom of words, this God is just as legitimate as the other and we would be willing to respect it but not without first asking this question: what are the attributes of the new God which distinguish him from the old one? ; we must take into consideration the fact that this is not a matter of substituting one term by another, but a question of transmutation of values.

Whatever we do, this new God knows that he belongs to the West and he commands, gives orders, prescribes, charges us with various tasks; he wants us to obey: he tyrannizes through the intermediary of people who believe themselves to be more qualified than others. This God has his sanctions and his rewards yet he also sins against Spirit and all the waters of the sea could not wash away his sins. Yet, just like the other, he is perfect and absolute; he is authority and he obeys necessity. And this is the "Spirit" which is given to us as

obéit à la nécessité; lui aussi, il est autorisé. Et c'est cet "Esprit" qu'on nous sert comme étant le Dieu de Rimbaud? C'est cet "Esprit" qui est "Autorité", qui veut que "nous soyons de l'Occident", qui serait l'Esprit de Rimbaud? De cet Esprit comme de l'autre, Rimbaud ne nous dira-t-il pas: "Il faut le faire taire pour conclure comme je voulais"?

Non, pour Rimbaud, il ne s'agit pas d'un Esprit de cette sorte, fût-il le plus authentiquement hégélien et eût-il la dialectique de son côté: il s'agit au contraire, d'un rêve de paresse grossière, d'un rêve seulement, pendant que nous plongeons, en bras de chemise, dans le fin fond des "souffrances modernes".

Rimbaud's God? Is this "Spirit" -which is "Authority", and wants us "to belong to the West", considered to be Rimbaud's Spirit? Isn't it true that Rimbaud would define this Spirit as well as the other one as : "The Spirit which must be silenced in order to be able to conclude as one wishes to conclude"?

No, this kind of Spirit does not exist for Rimbaud -even if it is the most authentic Hegelian Spirit and even if dialectics is on its side. For Rimbaud it is mostly a question of dreaming -a dream of base idleness, only a dream, while we plunge, naked, in the fine far end of "modern suffering".

## VII. LA CONSCIENCE MALHEUREUSE

de Benjamin Fondane

Nietzsche et la "suprême cruauté"

"Voici le temps des ASSASSINS."

J.A.Rimbaud

Voici un malade qui professait la santé, un pauvre hère qui enseignait le sur-homme, un individu extrêmement délicat et nerveux qui écrivait: "Soyez durs!", un nordique qui prêchait le midi, un athée continuellement aux prises avec Dieu, un impuissant qui n'avait de louanges que pour la puissance, un faible qui n'admettait que les forts, un solitaire qui ne prônait que la société, un fou qui allait jusqu'à penser que seul l'homme normal avait droit à la vérité.

Défaut de sincérité? Oh! que non. Ignorance de soi-même? Moins encore. Peur de la vérité? Peu d'hommes ont eu autant de courage. Erreur, partant, sut toute la ligne? Nietzsche savait plus de la vérité que la plupart des hommes - et je ne parle pas des philosophes. Lorsque Chesterton parle de la "faiblesse intellectuelle" de Nietzsche, il témoigne par là de sa profonde incompréhension d'un des plus grands événements intellectuels du XIX siècle.

Mais quelle est donc la vérité de Nietzsche? Si l'on garde les yeux ouverts et que l'on essaie de capter ses vérités, les unes après les autres, que retiendrons-nous de ces milliers d'affirmations, de négations, de contradictions, également insolents et péremptoires, qui nous plongent dans un chaos et une perplexité sans issue? Comment déciderions-nous si sa vérité est l'amor fati: la résignation au destin, à la pierre, à la lourdeur - ou si, par contre, sa vérité est

## VII. THE DISTRESSED CONSCIOUSNESS

by Benjamin Fondane

Nietzsche and the "Supreme Cruelty"

<<These are times for "Assassins">>

J.A. Rimbaud

Here is a sick man who professed good health, a miserable wretch who professed superiority in human beings, an individual extremely delicate and nervous who used to write: "Be strong!", a man from the North who advocated in favor of the South, an atheist in continual struggle with God, a powerless man who only praised strength, a feeble man who only approved of the strong, a solitary man who only advocated life within a society, a mad man who went as far as to believe that only the average individual was entitled to possess the truth.

Lack of sincerity? Oh, no! Ignorance of the self? Not in the least. Fear of truth? Few men had so much courage. Error at the root of his whole philosophy? Nietzsche knew more about truth than most men - and I am not referring to philosophers. When Chesterton mentions Nietzsche and his "feeble intellect", he is revealing his own profound misunderstanding of one of the most significant happenings of the XIXth century.

Of what then does Nietzsche's truth consist? If we were to keep our eyes open and try to capture these truths, one after the other, what would we retain from the thousands of assertions, negations, contradictions, equally arrogant and absolute, which immerse us in a dead-end state of chaos and perplexity? How could we decide whether his truth is the "amor fati": resignation to destiny,

dans cette irrésignation totale qui le pousse à exalter notre volonté de puissance, la morale des maîtres et les valeurs qui surgissent dans l'au-delà du bien et du mal? Une absence de vérité étale surgit devant nous, en nous; et pas plus que nous ne savons quelle est la femme aimée par Don Juan, nous ne savons quelle est la vérité choisie par Nietzsche. Don Juan aime l'amour et non la femme; Nietzsche aime la vérité et non les vérités; cette énorme conscience intellectuelle (pas moindre que celle d'un Pascal, qu'il "aimait presque" justement à cause de cela), a beau le rejeter à droite ou à gauche, dans les bras de telle ou telle idée, doctrine ou système - aucune ne saurait le retenir; et pas plus que Don Juan ne s'arrêtera à une femme, Nietzsche ne saurait épouser une idée. Tous les deux iront de femme en femme, d'idée en idée, jusqu'au rendez-vous fixé par le convive de pierre, jusqu'au rendez-vous de la mort. La vérité de l'un comme de l'autre n'est pas dans la rencontre; elle est dans la poursuite; que l'on dénombre les figures de cire - femmes ou idées - qu'ils ont semées sur leur route, ne saurait guère nous avancer. Rien de plus déconcertant que ces vitrines où Nietzsche a rejeté ses déchets. Pensez-y: parmi tous les hommes, il y en a un seul qu'il déteste profondément - je veux dire l'homme du type religieux. Et, paradoxe: c'est cet homme-là qu'il révère le plus. Il déteste l'absence de courage, le mensonge, la facilité - et il avoue trouver ces défauts dans l'homme qu'il voudrait le plus aimer, le savant. Le philosophe lui semble fournir la figure de l'homme supérieur - et il n'a de raillerie que pour le philosophe. Il admire le guerrier et néanmoins à la seule vue de ses bottes, son âme délicate saigne; et il hait le militaire allemand - le meilleur guerrier du

to the stone, to the unbearable weight - or, on the contrary, whether his truth consists of an absolute resistance which drives him to exalt our will for power, the moral sense of our masters, and values which go beyond the boundaries of good and evil? An absence of constant truth appears before us, within us; and just as we do not know who is the woman loved by Don Juan, we are not aware of which truth has been chosen by Nietzsche. Don Juan is in love with the concept of love and not with women; Nietzsche loves the concept of truth but not existing truths; whatever this enormous intellectual consciousness (no less significant than that of Pascal, whom he "almost loved" just because of that) does to him, driving him to this or that idea, doctrine or system - no idea could restrain him; and just as Don Juan will not be satisfied with one woman, Nietzsche will not embrace one idea forever. Both will drift from woman to woman, from one idea to another, until the rendez-vous fixed by death - our stone guest. Don Juan's truth as well as Nietzsche's, lies not in the encounter; it is contained in the continual pursuit of truth; should we enumerate the wax images - women or ideas - that they have planted along their way, we would not advance at all. Nothing is more disconcerting than these showcases where Nietzsche has thrown away his rubbish. Think about it: among all men, there is one that he really detests - I mean the religious man. And paradoxically: it is the very same type of man that he reveres the most. He detests the absence of courage, the lies, self indulgence - and he admits that the scientist, the man whom he would like to esteem most highly, has these faults. The philosopher embodies for him the image of the superhuman being - but he only has mocking

monde. Il hait, disais-je, la facilité, la paresse, l'esprit, et il s'en va tout droit les aimer chez les Français, les Voltaire, les Montaigne, etc. Il devrait aimer Renan pour sa haine du christianisme et son amour de la science - et il fait des efforts désespérés pour ne pas le trouver "hideux", selon le mot de Claudel. Il s'aime énormément - et il n'a de cesse qu'il ne se soit évanoui, au point de fabriquer un sur-homme, qui ne lui ressemble en rien. Il hait le Christ, il aime Dyonisos - et c'est le Christ que passionnément il voudrait être et non point Dyonisos. Comme il aime les grecs! - et il ne pourrait causer avec un grec plus de cinq minutes. Quelle conversation irritante lui eussent procurée un Epicure, un sophiste! Par contre, il ferait ses délices d'une conversation avec un Calvin, un Luther, un Pascal - et peut-être les ferait-il fusiller l'instant d'après.

Mais que nous fermions les yeux et que nous regardions de notre oeil intérieur ce visage tendu vers la folie - et qui y aboutit - toutes ces vérités fragmentaires, morcelées, apparentes, s'évanouissent en un instant: c'est pourquoi chaque ligne de Nietzsche est pleine à craquer, pleine de sang, de vérité, pleine de Nietzsche. Que nous importe, à présent, que les vérités les plus contradictoires l'aient passionné tour à tour et, pour ainsi dire, simultanément; que les hommes les plus divers aient exercé un attrait infini sur lui!...Absurdité? Pourquoi pas? Mais qui nous oblige de lire Nietzsche? Plutôt ne pas le lire, que de le lire à rebours, comme on l'a presque toujours lu. J'aurais éperdûment aimé cet homme - et tout en lui, son messianisme, ses prétentions, son orgueil, sa cruauté, sa façon de parler femmes, m'eût déplu, évervé, agacé. Les vérités, non, il ne les possédait pas: voilà ce que nous disent nos yeux ouverts. Mais,

remarks for him. He admires the warrior and yet at the mere sight of his boots, his delicate heart starts bleeding; and he hates the German military man - the best warrior in the world. He hates, as I have already said, the easy way out, laziness, the spirit, and yet he admires these very same attributes characteristic of the French, of men such as Voltaire, Montaigne, etc. He should appreciate Renan for his hatred of Christianity and his love of science - but he desperately tries not to find him "hideous", according to Claudel's definition. He loves himself tremendously - and yet he would rather inflict pain on himself than cease trying to create a superhuman being who does not resemble him in the least. He hates Christ, and he loves Dionysos - but it is Christ whom he would like to be and not Dionysos. How he loves the Greeks! - and yet he could not converse with one for more than five minutes. How annoying would have been his conversation with an Epicurian, or a sophist! On the contrary, he would delight in a conversation with one such as Calvin, Luther, Pascal - or maybe one moment later he would have them shot.

Nevertheless, should we close our eyes and look from within at this face leaning towards madness -and later consumed by it, all of these seemingly obvious, fragmented pieces of truth disappear in a moment: that is why each line written by Nietzsche is on the verge of collapse, full of blood, of truth, full of Nietzsche. What matters now that he has had a passion for the most contradictory truths one by one and, so to speak simultaneously; that he has been extremely attracted by the most diverse men! Absurdity? Why not? But who obliges us to read Nietzsche? It is better not to read him, his messianism, his

nous avons fermé les yeux et tout change soudainement; de nouvelles évidences nous assaillent; et nous comprenons, plus que nous ne voyons, que s'il ne possédait pas la vérité, c'est la vérité qui le possédait, lui. Elle se moquait de lui, le trompait, le cocufiait, le plongeait dans les pires ténèbres, sans doute; mais ne cessait d'être avec lui, de l'accompagner et jusque dans l'erreur et la folie. Un bouc émissaire de la vérité? Peut-être!<sup>1</sup>

On est habitué à voir Nietzsche employé à toutes les sauces - et nous avons avoué franchement que ses textes répondent à tout, justifient tout, couvrent tout. Mais ce sont là textes magiques et qui nous brûlent les doigts. Nous sentons, pour peu que nous ayons un peu d'honnêteté, que nous faisons de ces textes un usage interdit, défendu, éhonté, que la pensée de Nietzsche difficilement s'accommode de l'échelle humaine. - Comment? Nietzsche ne fut-il pas, de tous les humanistes, le plus grand? N'avait-il pas voué toutes ses forces à l'homme? - Assurément! Mais à quel homme, y avez-vous jamais pensé? A peine parle-t-il de l'homme qu'il le trouve nauséabond: petit, lâche, servile, brutal, grossier, inepte! Petit et brutal le guerrier, inepte et grossier le savant; le saint et le génie même lui font mal aux entrailles. Non, il n'aime l'homme qu'en tant que trame, que matière première, de son sur-homme. Par là, il côtoie l'éthique qui, elle aussi, n'aime l'homme qu'absolument transformé par le devoir; et il rejoint le religieux qui n'aime l'homme que transformé par la foi. Lorsque

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<sup>1</sup> "Et qui sait si jusqu'ici dans toutes les grandes occasions, il n'en a pas toujours été de même: la foule adorait un dieu - et ce dieu n'était qu'un pauvre animal de sacrifice." Nietzsche, sur le psychologue: Par delà le bien et le mal.

pretensions, his pride, his cruelty, but I would have disliked his annoying and irritating way of talking about women. Truth he did not possess: that is what our opened eyes confirm. But, after having closed our eyes, suddenly everything changes; we are attacked by new facts; and our understanding goes beyond the obvious, we can comprehend that even though he did not possess truth, truth had its grasp on him. Without a doubt, truth was mocking him, making him look like a fool, truth was cheating on him, undoubtedly plunging him in the worst of darkness; nevertheless it did not cease to be at his side, accompanying him all the way into error and madness. A spokesman for the truth? Perhaps! 1

We are accustomed to seeing Nietzsche's theory used in all sorts of arguments -and we have admitted very frankly that his writings have an answer for everything, justifying everything and covering all aspects. But these texts are magical and they practically burn our fingers. If we were to be a little bit more honest, we would realize that we are using these texts for a forbidden purpose which is shameless, and that Nietzsche's thought adapts only with difficulty to the human scale. - How can that be? Wasn't all of his strength dedicated to men? - Most certainly!...But to what sort of men, have you every thought about it?The moment he begins to speak of men, right away he finds them sickening: petty, cowardly, slavish, brutal, crude, inept! The warrior - petty and brutal, the scientist - inept and crude; even the saint and the man of genius make him sick.

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1. "And who knows if, for all great occasions up to now, he was not always the same man: the crowd loved a god - and this god was only a poor, sacrificial animal." Nietzsche commenting on psychologists in Beyond Good and Evil.

Nietzsche fait l'apologie de quelque chose, il ne faut pas s'y tromper; il aime son guerrier, son saint, son génie, et il ne faut guère être sorcier pour deviner que pour Nietzsche, ces hommes n'ont jamais existé, qu'ils n'ont toujours été qu'un souhait de sa pensée. Car, pour Nietzsche, malgré son humain trop humain, l'humain n'est pas intéressant; l'homme a manqué son but de toute éternité; il ne commence qu'à présent à en prendre conscience. Et le but de l'humain, c'est d'abolir l'humain, afin de se substituer au divin; le but de l'homme c'est d'abolir l'homme, afin de devenir un dieu.

C'est de là que viennent les contradictions, les hésitations, les louvoiements de Nietzsche; car il cherchait le dieu dans l'homme - et ne l'y trouvait pas. Partout, sous toutes les latitudes, à toutes les époques de l'histoire, l'homme a témoigné de son impuissance à être un dieu - et cette impuissance met Nietzsche en rage. Il s'acharne à tout détruire, à tout démolir, à tout nettoyer - pour faire place à l'homme qui vient, à l'homme qui aura brisé ses chaînes, qui aura recouvré sa nature originelle. Si néanmoins il fait quelque confiance à l'homme, c'est pour l'unique raison que cet homme a accompli une seule action terrible et tragique: celle d'avoir tué Dieu.

Ce cri poussé par Nietzsche et qui fait résonner la voûte des âges, ce cri: "Dieu est mort", c'est là qu'il nous fait chercher la clef de sa philosophie, de sa vie, de ses contradictions, de son impuissance, de sa folie. Ce cri donne à son oeuvre une signification que nous chercherions vainement ailleurs. Tout ce que Nietzsche déteste ou aime, tout ce qu'il veut ou ne veut pas, tourne autour de son cri: "Dieu est mort!" Le fait que Dieu soit mort, cela ne change-t-il pas toutes

No, he is only fond of the man who provides the framework, the raw material for his superhuman being. In this manner, he follows the same path as that of ethics, which is fond of only those men transformed by duty; and thus he joins those religious people who only love men transformed by faith. One should not be misled when Nietzsche praises something; he loves his warrior, his saint, his man of genius, and there is really no need to be a wizard in order to guess that for Nietzsche, these men never existed, that they were never anything but wishful thinking. Because, for Nietzsche, in spite of his "human, all too human" theory, the human element is not interesting; man has missed the ultimate goal within all eternity; only now does he begin to become aware of it. And the goal of all humans is to abolish the human element in order to take the place of the divine; the goal of mankind is to abolish mankind, so that it may become God.

From this stem all of Nietzsche's contradictions, hesitations, evasions; since he was searching for God within man - and he was not able to find him. Everywhere, in no matter what geographical latitudes or times in history, man witnessed his own powerlessness when wishing to be God - and it is this lack of power which enrages Nietzsche. He is desperately trying to destroy, demolish, and erase everything - in order to make room for the future man, the man who will have then broken his chains, and who will have then regained his original nature. Nevertheless, if he shows some confidence in men, it is only because men have accomplished one single terrible and tragic action: that of having killed God.

Nietzsche's cry echos throughout time; it is within this cry: "God is dead",

nos évaluations? toutes nos valeurs? "Si Dieu n'existe pas, alors tout est permis" - disait le vieux Karamazoff. Seul Nietzsche a compris la portée terrible de cette pensée de Dostoïewski. Si Dieu n'existe pas, que valent donc nos morales, nos métaphysiques, notre connaissance, nos actions? Il faudra tout remettre en question; et peut-être faudra-t-il supprimer les morales, les métaphysiques, les connaissances, les actions! Et il faudra tenir compte principalement de ce fait inouï, insolite, étrange, que c'est l'homme qui a tué Dieu. Cependant "cet événement prodigieux est encore sur la route où il chemine - il n'est pas encore parvenu aux oreilles des hommes. L'éclair et la foudre ont besoin de temps, même après qu'elles sont accomplies, afin d'être vues et entendues. Cette action est encore plus loin d'eux que l'étoile la plus éloignée - et pourtant ils l'ont accomplie<sup>1</sup>".

Cet étrange mystère n'a jamais cessé de hanter Nietzsche: l'homme avait tué Dieu et néanmoins il continuait de vivre comme par le passé, comme si, Dieu tué, tout n'était pas enfin permis! Sans doute, Nietzsche ne songeait guère, comme le vieux Karamazoff, qu'il fallait enfin profiter de cette permission pour se souler, violer, et jouir de la vie. Pour lui, la permission apparaissait comme infiniment plus terrible; l'homme avait enfin la permission de devenir Dieu lui-même, et il ne s'était pas aperçu de cela, il vivait comme si cela n'était pas un événement considérable, un événement décisif! Sans doute, il ne savait que trop que l'homme était devenu dieu de par la toute-puissance de sa raison. Mais

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1. Nietzsche: Le Gai savoir.

that we must search for the key of his philosophy, his life, his contradictions, lack of power and madness. This cry gives a meaning to his writings impossible to find elsewhere. All that Nietzsche hates or loves, all that he wants or does not want, revolves around his cry: "God is dead!". The fact that God may be dead, doesn't that change all of our assessments, all our values? The old man Karamazov once said: "If God were non-existent, then everything would be allowed". Nietzsche was the only one to understand the terrible significance of this thought expressed by Dostoyevsky. If God did not exist, then what would our morals, metaphysical theories, knowledge and actions be worth? Everything would have to be reevaluated; and maybe it would be necessary to eliminate our morals, metaphysical theories, accumulated knowledge and actions! And it would be necessary above all to take into account this extraordinary, unusual, strange fact, that it is mankind who killed God. Nevertheless "this incredible happening is still on its way - the news has not yet reached human ears. Even after they have been accomplished, actions take time in order to be noticed just as lightning, thunder and the light given by stars need time to reach us. This incredible deed is even further away from men than the most distant star - and yet it is mankind who accomplished it".<sup>1</sup>

This strange mystery never ceased to haunt Nietzsche: Man has killed God and yet he continued to live as in the past, as if, with God being dead, everything was still not allowed! Without a doubt, Nietzsche was not at all

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1. Nietzsche in The Gay Science.

il haïssait cette morale et cette métaphysique et cette raison - ces singeries mesquines de la divinité: Il haïssait Socrate, Platon, les juifs et les stoïciens - et combien davantage les chrétiens - qui enseignaient le Devoir, l'impératif catégorique, les lois, la nécessité, la raison, qui enchaînaient l'homme à nouveau, au moment même où il eût dû devenir libre et pareil aux dieux. Que l'homme ait tué Dieu - qu'il ait commis cette chose effroyable, insolite, sans précédent, pour rester quand même enchaîné à quelque chose, à quelque chose de plus stupide, de plus inepte, de plus capricieux que les dieux - cela Nietzsche n'arrivait pas à le comprendre: "Dieu est mort ...et nous l'avons tué. Comment nous consoler, nous les meurtriers des meurtriers! Ce que le monde possédait jusqu'aujourd'hui de plus saint, de plus puissant, a saigné sous nos couteaux; qui nous lavera de ce sang?... La grandeur de cette action n'est-elle pas trop grande pour nous? Ne sommes-nous pas tenus de devenir nous-mêmes des dieux afin d'en paraître dignes?"

Que l'homme n'ait pas compris "la grandeur de cette action", qu'il n'ait pas tenu à devenir lui-même un dieu, qu'il ait accompli une action démesurée, disproportionnée à ses propres forces - et qu'il n'en sache rien - cela épouvantait Nietzsche. Car il sentait, il devinait, il savait, qu'avoir tué Dieu n'était pas une action fortuite de l'homme; ce moment se situait comme un point sur une longue ligne que l'homme a dû et devra encore parcourir, une trajectoire de sacrifice dont il ne peut ni ne veut se distraire: "Ne doit-on pas enfin sacrifier tout ce qui est consolant et saint, tout ce qui guérit, toute espérance, toute foi dans une harmonie dissimulée, toute foi dans la béatitude et la justice à venir?"

contemplating, like the old man Karamazov, the thought that one should finally profit from this by drinking, raping, and generally getting a kick out of life. For Nietzsche, this liberty seemed infinitely more terrible; man finally had the right to become God himself, and he had not become aware of it, he continued to live as if this were not a significant event, a deciding factor! Undoubtedly, he was very much aware that man had granted himself an "autonomous" moral code, and an "autonomous" metaphysical code; he knew very well that man had become God by the great strength of his power to reason. But he hated this moral code, this metaphysics and this reasoning - these petty foolish games of divinity! He hated Socrates, Plato, the Jews and the stoics - and even more those Christians who preached Duty - the categorical imperative, laws, necessity, reason, all of which once more enchained men at the very moment when they ought to have been freed and God-like. Nietzsche just could not understand that man, after having killed God, after having committed this horrifying, unusual and unprecedented crime, nevertheless chose to remain chained to something, something more stupid, more useless, more capricious than the gods - Nietzsche just could not understand that: "God is dead... and we have killed him. How could we, murderers of murderers, how could we console ourselves! The most saintly, powerful possession of the world bled under our knives; who will wash the blood from our hands?...The immensity of this crime, is it not too great for us to bear? Doesn't this act oblige us to become gods in order to appear worthy of it?."

That man may not have understood "the magnitude of this action", that he, himself, may not have wanted to become God, that he may have

Ne doit-on pas sacrifier Dieu lui-même et, cruel envers soi, adorer la pierre, l'ineptie, la lourdeur, le destin, le néant? Sacrifier Dieu pour le néant, ce mystère paradoxal de la suprême cruauté a été réservé à cette génération, nous en savons tous quelque chose."

Non, il nous faut confesser la vérité: jusqu'à Nietzsche et même après lui, nous n'en savions rien; nous avons tué Dieu, et nous ne le savions pas ; nous avons sacrifié Dieu au néant - et nous l'ignorions; nous étions loin de savoir que la raison, notre raison, qui réclamait ce sacrifice, ne voulait que le pur néant. A vrai dire, nous n'avions même pas vu qu'il s'agissait d'un sacrifice; nous n'avions même pas remarqué que nous agissions en vertu d'un mystère, et que ce mystère était non celui de la béatitude immédiate, mais celui de la "suprême cruauté". Nous avons tué Dieu à la légère, tout simplement, sur la seule foi du serpent qui nous avait promis que nous serions "pareils aux dieux". Nous avons mangé du fruit de l'arbre du Savoir et lorsque nous nous vîmes nus, personne ne s'est trouvé pour crier au voleur, à la piperie, au contrat violé; personne ne s'est aperçu que, le fruit mangé, nous n'étions pas devenus des dieux. Encore moins avons-nous vu que celui qui a mangé une fois mangera, que celui qui est tombé tombera, que le cycle était ouvert où, de cruauté en cruauté, de sacrifice en sacrifice, de gouffre en gouffre, nous tuerions Dieu, non pas pour devenir des dieux, mais pour adorer la pierre, l'ineptie, le destin et la lourdeur. Qu'il faille arriver à "l'ineptie" - au mystère de la suprême cruauté - cela, le serpent nous l'avait caché; les philosophes qui relèvent du serpent nous l'avaient caché également; et si Nietzsche est enfin venu nous le dire, comment ferions-nous

accomplished an enormous action, not measuring up to his won strengths - and that he may not even be aware of it - all of this was appalling to Nietzsche. Since he sensed, guessed, and knew, that this crime had not been accidental; this moment was the point of departure for man venturing on a long journey, that he had to and would have to pursue again and again, a path of sacrifice which he could not longer abandon nor did he wish to: "Don't we finally have to sacrifice all that is comforting and saintly, all that cures, all hope, all faith in a concealed harmony, all faith in the bliss and justice to come? Must we not sacrifice God himself and, being cruel to ourselves, adore the stone, the nonsense, the weight of our destiny, nothingness? We all know something about the fact that by sacrificing God in favor of nothingness, this paradoxical mystery of the supreme cruelty was destined to our generation."

No, we must confess the truth: until the time of Nietzsche and even succeeding him, we knew nothing of this; we had killed God but we had not realized it; we had sacrificed God to nothingness without knowing it; we were far from understanding that reason, our reason, which was demanding this sacrifice, was only our wish for pure nothingness. Frankly speaking, we had not even realized that a sacrifice was involved; we had not even noticed that we were acting by virtue of a mystery, and that this mystery was not that of immediate bliss, but that of "supreme cruelty". We had thoughtlessly killed God, simply by following the law of the serpent who had promised us that we would be "equal to the gods". We have eaten the fruit from the tree of knowledge and when we saw our nakedness, no one was able to cry out for help, to denounce the thief, the

encore pour le confondre avec le serpent, alors que, de toute évidence, il ne faisait que répéter les paroles du dieu de la Genèse: "Tu ne mangeras pas de cet arbre car tu connaîtras la mort"? Vous connaîtrez la mort, l'ineptie, la lourdeur, le destin, entendez-vous? et vous ne serez jamais pareils aux dieux!

Si Kierkegaard pensait être un contemporain du Christ, j'ose affirmer que Nietzsche était un contemporain d'Adam. Tout comme Adam, il avait cru aux paroles subtiles du serpent. Tout comme Adam, il a préféré les paroles du reptile (qui promettait que nous serions pareils aux dieux) aux paroles de Dieu, qui nous avait prévenus que nous le sacrifierions au néant. Tout comme Adam, Nietzsche a cru pouvoir devenir pareil aux dieux; tout comme lui, Nietzsche s'est vu tout nu; mais il a compris mieux qu'Adam que le serpent l'avait trompé, qu'il n'avait que la "suprême cruauté" dans l'arbre de la connaissance. Aussi, à l'encontre d'Adam, qui s'était résigné à sa défaite, Nietzsche - déçu mais non brisé - pensa qu'il fallait préserver dans l'erreur. Il fallait sacrifier Dieu à l'ineptie - et il l'avait sacrifié. Ce "mystère de la suprême cruauté", il avait pris sur lui de l'accomplir. Car il avait perdu en route les connaissances premières; à présent il confondait Dieu avec le serpent, et reprochait à Dieu les seuls méfaits du serpent: "Débarassez-nous d'un pareil dieu. Plutôt rester sans dieu, plutôt faire le destin avec son propre poing, plutôt être fou, plutôt être dieu soi-même."

Ainsi chantait Nietzsche, le démoniaque. Ainsi chantait le seul homme qui avait connu que le serpent nous avait trompés, et qui savait que nous n'étions pas devenus pareils aux dieux, mais pareils aux fous et aux bêtes. Mais toute la question est là: Nietzsche était-il libre de refuser la vérité du serpent, après avoir

cheating and the broken contract; no one realized that after having eaten the forbidden fruit, we had not become gods. Even worse we have seen that the one who once ate would eat again, that the one who fell would fall again, that the cycle had been opened to more and more cruelty, more and more sacrifice, and that we would kill God, not in order to replace him, but to adore the stone, the nonsense, the weight of our destiny. The serpent had hidden from us the fact that we were to be touched by "ineptitude" - and reach the mystery of supreme cruelty; the philosophers, who were under the influence of the serpent, also kept the truth away from us; and if Nietzsche had finally come to reveal the truth to us, how could we again confuse him with the serpent, since evidently, he was only repeating the words of God from Genesis: "You shall not eat from this tree because you will then know death"? You shall know death, ineptitude, the weight of destiny, do you hear? and you will never equal the gods!

Although Kierkegaard thought himself to be a contemporary of Christ, I dare say that Nietzsche was a contemporary of Adam. Just like Adam, he believed in the serpent's subtle words. Just like Adam he preferred the reptile's words (who was promising that we would be equal to the gods) to those of God, who had warned us that we would sacrifice him to the abyss. Just like Adam, Nietzsche realized his nakedness; but he understood better than Adam that the serpent had deceived him, that the tree of knowledge only consisted of supreme cruelty. Also, contrary to Adam, who had resigned himself to having failed, Nietzsche - disappointed but not crushed - thought that it was best to persevere in error. It was necessary to sacrifice God to ineptitude - and he did sacrifice

mangé de l'arbre de la connaissance? était-il libre de revenir de son plein gré, de sa propre décision, au non-savoir essentiel? était-il libre de rejeter sa suprême cruauté et de sacrifier non plus Dieu au néant, mais le néant à Dieu? "Sans doute - disait son pape à Zarathoustra - avec toute cette incrédulité, tu es plus pieux que tu ne crois. Sans doute est-ce quelque dieu qui t'a converti à ton athéisme." Et à voir Nietzsche se débattre, crier, hurler, devenir fou d'avoir dû tuer Dieu - POUR RIEN - il nous est impossible de ne pas penser avec effroi que ce fut sans doute quelque étrange démiurge - le serpent du Savoir par exemple - qui l'avait converti à son athéisme.

him. He had taken it upon himself to accomplish this "mystery of the supreme cruelty". Since he had lost along the way our primary teachings, he was now confusing God and serpent, and he was reproaching God the wrongdoings of the serpent: "Let us get rid of this sort of God. Better to remain godless, to become masters of our own destiny, better to be crazy, to become God ourselves."

This is the way the diabolic Nietzsche was chanting. So chanted the only man who realized that the serpent had deceived us, and who knew that we had not become equal to the gods, but similar to the insane and to the animals. However the main question is this: did Nietzsche have the freedom to reject the serpent's truth, after having eaten from the tree of knowledge? Was he able, of his own free will, to turn back and favor a most essential thing, that is our lack of knowledge? Did he have the freedom to reject supreme cruelty and rather than sacrifice God to nothingness, sacrifice nothingness to God? "Without a doubt - his pope was saying to Zarathustra - with all your lack of belief, you are more devout than you think you are. It is undoubtedly some god who converted you to atheism." And as we see Nietzsche struggle, shout, yell, and become insane because of having killed God - FOR NOTHING - it is impossible for us not to consider with terror the possibility that, without a doubt, it was some strange demiurge - for example the serpent of Knowledge - who had converted him to atheism.

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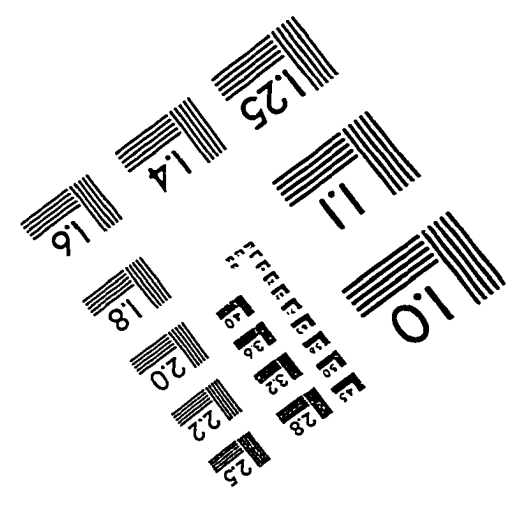
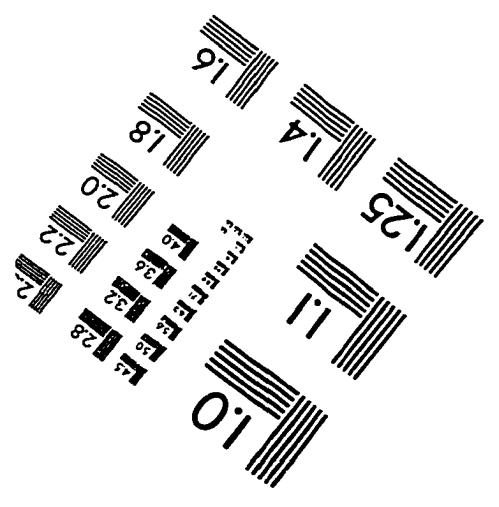
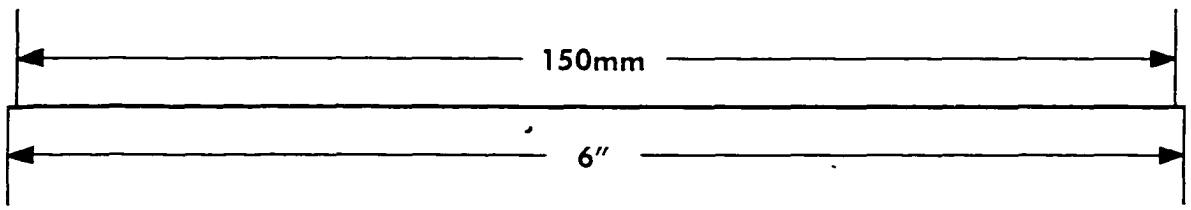
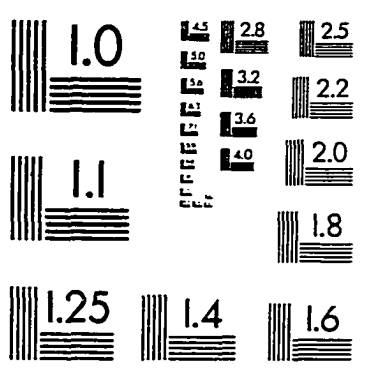
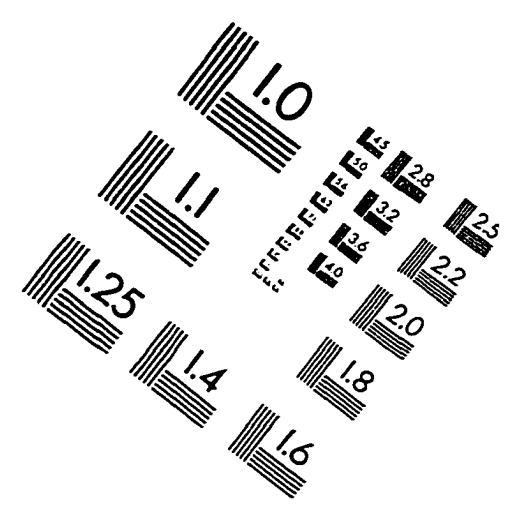
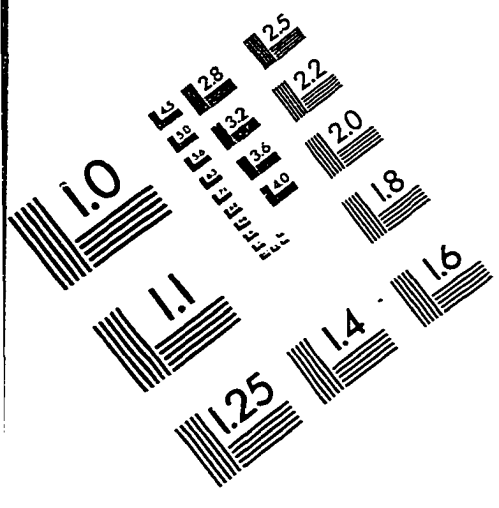
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