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OUTSIDE THE BOX:
BENJAMINE FONDANE'S
AMBIGUOUS IDENTITY:
THOUGHTS ON *TOŻSAMOŚĆ
NIEJEDNOZNACZNA:
HISTORYCZNE,
FILOZOFICZNE I LITERACKIE
KONTEKSTY TWÓRCZOŚCI
B. FUNDOIANU/BENJAMINE'A
FONDANE'A (1898–1944)*
BY OLGA BARTOSIEWICZ

ABSTRACT

The following review article discusses the first Polish monograph devoted to the figure of Benjamin Fundoianu/Fondane, by Olga Bartosiewicz. It summarises the main arguments of the study, which constitutes a thorough overview of the poet's life and work. It also praises the author for her ability to create a convincing portrayal of a modernist in a state of turmoil, engaged in an identity quest, or in a flight from himself and his origins, at a very unfortunate time in history.

KEYWORDS: Fundoianu/Fondane monograph, Polish translation, Olga Bartosiewicz

The plaque on the Paris house occupied by Benjamin Fondane before he was deported to Auschwitz bears a much-quoted excerpt from one of his late poems:

I, too, had had a face,
Marked by rage, by pity and joy,
Quite simply, a human face! (Fundoianu 2006: 153).¹

These lines, now translated into Polish for the first time, close the monograph by Olga Bartosiewicz, a lecturer in Romance literature at the Jagiellonian University. Her book introduces the Polish audience to the figure of Benjamin Fundoianu/Fondane, born Beniamin Wechsler, a Romanian and French poet, critic and existentialist philosopher,

¹ The same lines are also displayed at Israel's Holocaust memorial Yad Vashem.

who perished tragically young in the Shoah. Bartosiewicz explores the writer's identity dilemmas, offering an overview of his life and his multifarious oeuvre. Anyone with an interest in avant-garde studies should get acquainted with this unique personality, non-canonical and hovering on the margins of European modernism, and yet extremely fascinating, thanks to his capacity for reinvention and a penchant for thinking outside the box.

The first chapter discusses the early phase of the poet's development in the context of rapidly transforming Modern Romania, newly freed from the influence of the Ottoman Empire and therefore still in the process of shaping its sovereign identity. Bartosiewicz draws attention to the challenges faced by people of Semitic extraction during a period of intensifying nationalism in all public domains. A native to Iași, Moldavia, Wechsler/Fundoianu grew up in a middle-class family, assimilated into the Romanian society but with strong connections to the secular, intellectual Jewish community. His early poems from the collection *Privești (Landscapes)* evoke the vanishing world of the *shtetl* and capture the beauty of the Bukovina region, though breaking with the tradition of contemplative pastoral poetry. Suffused with the atmosphere of transience, these texts mourn the passing of a more eclectic era. Their creation coincided with the bloodshed of World War I, hence the presence of a catastrophic tinge, which, as Bartosiewicz argues, would linger in Fundoianu/Fondane's work ever since. The second part of the chapter, particularly informative from the perspective of the Polish reader, delineates the socio-historical trends in interwar Romania, and discusses Fondane's position of a "Judeo-Gentile,"² caught between the loyalty to his Jewish roots and aspirations to join mainstream culture which, to complicate matters further, was neither fully defined nor philo-Semitic. Bartosiewicz elucidates the nuances of the Romanian debate on imitation, commenting on how the country hitherto anchored in the east, was remodeling itself as a satellite of France. Though largely a Francophone and Francophile himself, Fundoianu objected to the project of Romania's self-colonization, attempting, in a schizoid fashion, to remain faithful to the various facets of his identity. Soon, his interest in avant-garde experimentation would tempt him away from his fatherland. Much like Joyce, Fundoianu had to try to "fly by the nets" of "nationality, language and religion" (Joyce 2003: 220). In the words of the critic Adela Beiu, it was a time when "Romanian artists confronted aporia continuous with those of their more famous Irish colleagues, who had to circumvent the ploys of nationalism and colonialism in order to find an authentic and legitimate voice" (Beiu 2014: 973).

The next stage of Fundoianu's literary career began in 1923, after he moved to Paris and gallicised his pseudonym, changing it to Fondane. In Chapter Two of her study, Bartosiewicz describes his engagement with Dadaism and Surrealism, albeit not uncritical, as avant-garde aesthetics only partly suited his needs. He liked its antirational disposition and cosmopolitanism, but was put off by its superficiality and inadequate consideration of the existential dimension of human condition. The exploration of the latter attracted Fondane as he became a disciple of Lev Shestov, to whom he exhibited almost a filial devotion. Under Shestov's influence, he "began to understand that the goal of creativity was not in aesthetics or decoration; rather, its task was to use experience to

² Bartosiewicz borrows this term from Edgar Morin.

penetrate living reality” (Vorozhikhina 2017). Assuming the primacy of existence over knowledge and cognition, and intent on restoring the metaphysical dimension of life, Fondane developed his concept of poetry as *expérience*, which Bartosiewicz explores in great depth through an analysis of his essays on Rimbaud and Baudelaire. This part of the book is impressively argued, showing the author's interpretative strengths and breadth of perspective. Drawing on her theoretical and philosophical expertise, Bartosiewicz emphasises Fondane's adversarial stance and locates him within the paradigm of *antimodernité*. The questioning attitude and the refusal to be streamlined into a specific school of thought places Fondane among the modernism's contrarians, constantly readjusting their optics and discovering irremovable paradoxes underpinning human mental constructs.

The same chapter explores Fondane's preoccupation with cinema, “the only art form which was never classical,” (Fundoianu 1984: 16) as he pointed out in one of his essays. He saw it as a pioneering medium, and one which promised a more democratic relation between the creator and the audience. His publication of *Trois scénarii – ciné poèmes*³ (*Three scripts. Cinépoems*) in 1928 was an attempt to reinvigorate poetry through the use of cinematographic techniques. Bartosiewicz draws attention to the fact that even though these experimental texts invoke surrealist aesthetics, mainly through their loose structure, irreverence and anarchic humour, they are inevitably tinged with existential anxiety. She also sees similarities between cinépoems and silent film, which, unburdened by the rationality of discourse, allows for a glimpse of the subconscious. In his writings, Fondane praised silent cinema for its intimacy and imaginative potential in expressing that which is hidden, non-verbal; this capacity was important for his *film pur* theory, which he presented in the opening issue of the periodical *Integral*, and later during his lecture tour in Argentina in 1929. The advent of ‘the talkies’ disappointed Fondane, as such films were no longer universal (they needed a translation), and, more importantly, they were subject to ideological manipulation – the addition of sound and music usually brought associations with a specific national culture. Bartosiewicz mentions the artist's experience as assistant director and script editor at Paramount Pictures company in Paris, proceeding to a broader discussion of the economic and ideological forces weighing upon film producers. Fondane dismissed film as a carrier of ideas, because it implied resorting to reason, which he mistrusted. Bartosiewicz uses a brilliant quote from “Rimbaud le voyou” (“Rimbaud the Hoodlum”) to illustrate Fondane's scepticism:

We turn right: an Idea! We turn left: an Idea! Hegelian, anti-Hegelian, monarchical, reactionary, socialist, revolutionary, the idea of Order, Disorder, Authority, Hierarchy, Force, Freedom, Equality, Happiness, a Christian idea, a pagan one, an idea always and everywhere! (...) I do not know an idea without at least a hundred thousand murders weighing on its conscience (Fundoianu 2010: 139–140, my translation).

In view of this declaration, it comes as no surprise that Fondane could not accept the increased politicisation of the surrealist circles; gradually, their paths diverged also on methodological grounds, as he clashed with Breton over the use of mechanical writing and reliance on dreams, as well as over the interpretation of Rimbaud's “Lettre du Voyant”. Bartosiewicz sheds light on these arguments, emphasising Fondane's separateness and

³ The original edition of these poems contained two photographs by Man Ray.

readiness to swim against the tide. “My dwelling is outside the camp” – a line from an epigraph to an early poem, “Le psaume du lépreux” (“Psalm of the Leper”), somehow not mentioned in the study, appears to be a fitting sum-up of Fondane’s self-positioning within the avant-garde.

The third chapter of *Tożsamość niejednoznaczna* focuses on Fondane’s existential poetry. These works—“Ulysses”, “The Sorrows of Ghosts” (which Bartosiewicz aptly translates into Polish as “Phantom Pains”), “Titanic”, “Exodus”—are treated as a culmination of the poet’s intellectual efforts. Intensifying anti-Semitism and the looming spectre of the Holocaust forced Fondane to reflect anew on his own Jewish identity. At this stage, he probably knew his destiny was tragic: an individual’s experience was dissolving in the collective fate. The lyrical “I” of the poems faces the prospect with humility: considered unclean like a leper (a motif which recurs in “Les Mal de Phantomes”), he must bear exclusion and alienation, resigned to the wretchedness of his plight. Themes of exile and migration present in these late creations allude to the predicament of the Jewish diaspora, but equally, the construction of identity is conceptualized as an existential voyage.

Last but not least, Bartosiewicz moves on to discuss Fondane’s “Baudelaire et l’expérience du gouffre” (“Baudelaire and the Experience of the Abyss”), his final and unfinished work, published posthumously. It contains an apocalyptic vision of modernity in which “ennui is the source of sudden changes, war without motive, murderous revolutions” (Fundoianu 1947: 331). In the spirit of Shestov, Fondane uses the concept of the abyss to illustrate the state of disillusionment, a collapse of idealism, resulting from some traumatic experience which evades rational explanation. Bartosiewicz spares no effort to explain the metaphors and philosophical implications of this extremely challenging text, once again proving her interpretative skill and erudition.

Summing up, *Tożsamość niejednoznaczna* is a fine accomplishment, tracing Fundoianu/Fondane’s artistic trajectory, from his first Romanian-language poems and essays, to his mature, French-language work. The book goes beyond the framework of the monograph understood in a traditional fashion, often treating the literary creations as pretexts to discuss key phenomena of early 20th century culture, as well as to reflect on the paradoxical involvement of Jewish intellectuals in modernity. Moreover, by including a translation section at the end of the monograph, Bartosiewicz makes a valuable contribution to the recognition of Fundoianu/Fondane in Poland.

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