

MICHEL CARASSOU

Michel Carassou, specialist in avant-garde literature, editor of René Crevel and B. Fondane's works. He published editions and studies dedicated to the Romanian-born French poet, Surréalisme, textes et débats (Surrealism. Texts and Debates) and, in collaboration with Henri Béhar, Dada, histoire d'une subversion (Dada, A Story of Subversion).

FROM DADA TO EXISTENTIALISM

In Romania, at least in his Bucharest period, Benjamin Fondane undoubtedly belonged to the avant-garde, an avant-garde that was characterized by eclecticism, by being open to all initiatives seeking to break with the past. Once he settled in Paris, he remained close to his Romanian friends; he continued to contribute, and generously, too, to the Romanian magazines that were the engines of modern thought; but, most of all, he played an essential role, that of a "guide," and made many writers and artists in Romania, whom he considered representative for the new orientations of creation, play that role as well. In France, Fondane was not instantly revealed as an avant-garde writer. First, because he did not belong to any group or movement, with one exception, that of the evanescent *Discontinuité* movement, set up in 1928 by Arthur Adamov and Claude Sernet to mark their opposition to the way surrealism was going.¹ On the other hand, it happened that way owing to the fact that his major, mature works – critical essays, philosophical texts, poems – come from a source that is different from modernity.

But despite all this, Fondane was never absent from the great debates that troubled the world of the avant-garde; he followed with great interest the birth and development of surrealism; he defended those films that were works of art or essays; he supported *Alfred Jarry* Theater and encouraged Antonin Artaud to go to the very end in his endeavor²; he sided with the *Grand Jeu* group against the surrealists; he vehemently expressed his point of view in the "Aragon matter," and, later, again, during the *Convention of the writers for the defense of culture* in 1935. He was interested in all fields of creation, in their new forms, be they painting, sculpture, architecture: the

proof is in his eulogizing writings on Chagall, Brancusi, Le Corbusier. He got involved in music, too, as he authored, with E.L.T. Mesens, Albert Richard and André Souris a manifesto on modern music³.

When we look at the entire range of his involvement in the avant-garde, we still feel Fondane always played second violin. A lucid observer, but one who was also often passionate, Fondane did not hesitate to make a commitment to defend an artist or a group, whose direction went along his own persuasion, but he never emerged as a leader of any movement.

In his literary work, what undoubtedly belongs to the avant-garde remained marginal. These are the texts published under the title of *ciné-poèmes*, in *Documents Internationaux de L'Esprit Nouveau*, 1928, and, according to the scanty information we have, *Tararira*, the movie shot in Argentina in 1936, and whose producer was so outraged that he refused to release it.

But is the heart of Fondane's work really outside the avant-garde? Before answering this question we should wonder about the meaning of the phrase avant-garde to him, and, most of all, about the meaning it carried in the late 20s and in the 30s. In France, the avant-garde area was occupied at the time by surrealism, and that movement, as we shall see, did not meet Fondane's aspirations at all. And he looked in other directions to find a space for his preferences. This is how he became sympathetic to other approaches, which he encouraged or defended, those of Artaud or the *Grand Jeu*, for instance, but these were realms he was never entirely part of.

So what did the avant-garde mean to Fondane? Not much, of course, if it was limited to a search for form, to fashionable phenomena, if it was not connected to the hunt for a human truth. An innovating movement was only interesting to him if it was part of the epoch, translating its essence, in the research of the most lucid people of that epoch, if it represented a spiritual peak.

So, Fondane was able to understand the scope of the Dada movement, the most radical and the most subversive, because it was directed both to art and morality: "Let's say right this instant that Dada is cubism on the moral plane, on the plane of action, acknowledging it is anarchist, aware of its catastrophic tendencies and assuming full responsibility. Dada is to cubism what the Terror was to the *Etats Généraux*, what the October Revolution was to the revolution of Kerensky⁴."

Like his most lucid contemporaries, Fondane placed the origin of the Dada movement in the collapse of the values following World War I: "In fact, in 1918, when the war was almost over, the earth was lying down, its belly open for surgery, for shells to be extracted, art was on the minds of young people who were impatient, sarcastic, desperate, alienated from their own countries, whom the old, collapsed world, smoking at their feet, was finally revealing all its tricks to, young people that the future held no promise for, nothing, except the reiteration of a grotesque farce⁵."

For him, as for the Dadaists, the war brought about an awareness of the lie represented by artistic creation. While the war was raging, as he was writing the poems included in *Landscapes*, he still deceived himself with the idea of an “aesthetic justification of the Universe,” he still believed poetry alone could succeed where metaphysics and morality had failed, that poetry was the only “way to get knowledge,” “the only *raison d’être* for a being.” Then, owing to the destructive mechanics of the war, too, he woke up from this “idealistic sleep,” rejected aesthetics and stopped trusting language: “I ate the forbidden fruit and I immediately knew that I was naked, that Beauty was as doubtful as Truth, Good, Civilization. Words got rid of me; in the night, I began to cry out without words⁶.” Then he went through a deep crisis: for four years after settling in Paris, he was unable to write poetry.

What else did he have against language, against words, if not the fact that they were the vehicle of reason, this capacity that could have no other end than to strangle the spirit, to annihilate the freedom of man? Fondane totally endorsed Dada in its suit brought against reason, and, like Dada, he preferred the absurd, the idiotic, which were in his view more appropriate to express the irreducible character of individual experience.

Therefore, it is no surprise that Fondane was enthusiastic about the silent movie. Totally liberated from the language of words, and, therefore, from rational discourse and its limits, motion pictures appeared to him as a more authentic form of expression than poetry. In Fondane’s view, they offered an opportunity to build another conception of the human, a type of experience that would no longer be contradictory to thought. And when Fondane returned to poetry, or, rather, when poetry came back to him, “alone, without knocking on the door, like a spring,” his first book published in French was a collection of *ciné-poèmes*, directly influenced by the cinema. In the foreword, the author provides this justification: [I wrote these texts] “Because a part of me, that part of me which is avoided by poetry, has to ask its own anxious questions, and it found there, in the motion picture, a voice capable of expressing me⁷.”

Still, Dada had ceded the “lease contract” to surrealism. Fondane felt regret for Dada and the “ethics of merry suicide,” but he admitted an absolute negation could only be a transitory attitude. Once they finished demolishing everything that had to be destroyed, they had to move on to reconstruction. And this is what André Breton and his group did. In the beginning, Fondane accepted the *raison d’être* of surrealism: “a category had to be created to allow for the existence of a nebula, a heavenly body to justify the existence of the telescope. This continent that was searched for proved to be the dream⁸.”

Could Fondane have identified with an approach he acknowledged had “pure intentions, a spirit of innovation and research,” and which he considered “the most advanced in Europe after the war”? (World War I, of course). He had dreamed of being able to rebuild, he had begun to write poetry again, but, despite these attempts, he had not reached certitude: “(...) I understand

poetry was something else – What? – I didn't get that very well – Even now I'm not sure – Something that changes reality? No – Something that changes me? – Me? Who else? And, in fact, who am I?"¹⁰

Staying out, but relentlessly watching every move of surrealism, Fondane could not help criticizing what appeared to him to be deviations from the line drawn at the birth of the movement. His first reservations basically have to do with the political commitment of surrealism, to its relations with the communist party. Very early, Fondane had perceived the limits of the Soviet revolution: "What does this revolution propose to us and how could it – if we eliminate the destruction of the bourgeois – be of interest to our jubilation and to the redemption of the spirit through freedom? What exactly do we have the right to hope for? With or without the church, we know the proletarians will stop at a few adamant necessities: duty, law, the human sacrifice, old moral values which will go against the miraculous (...)"¹¹ The abolition of the bourgeois material life style was necessary, but it could not have the liberation of the spirit as a corollary, because the crisis of the spirit was not just limited to a crisis of the bourgeois spirit. Siding with communism, or at least with what the Stalinists were making out of communism at the time, surrealism ran the risk of having to abandon its conception of an autonomous spirit in its relations with society. This time by way of politics, the rational could make a powerful comeback and impose its own law to the poet.

The gap widened between surrealism and Fondane¹². In a speech made in 1929, he already announced: "Dada is dead, surrealism is dying."¹³ And in *Signification du Dada*, an undated text but which is most probably of the same epoch, Fondane went further in his assertion: "the surrealistic school, emerged from Dada, did everything in its power to suppress the part of the Dadaist spirit it had in its veins, and which was the best part of it."¹⁴ Fondane knew that André Breton's group was enjoying an increasingly large audience, but, to him, the first intuition, the founding utopia, had been betrayed and surrealism had not kept its promise to be "the most advanced movement after the war." In other words, surrealism had ceased to be an avant-garde.

Fondane continued, of course, to be interested in surrealism, but for different reasons, namely because that school seemed to represent in his view "à l'état chimique," that is experimentally, the level of the theoretical thought of the time in art. In *Faux Traité d'esthétique*, the critique of surrealism is fully manifest. Fondane criticized Breton's school for their will to save poetry, ascribing to it the "mental document" status, therefore assimilating it to a form of knowledge. Which would make it a tributary to speculative thought. He meant reason was the one that decided to mobilize the de-reasonable, the one that deliberately challenged the unconscious and which thus attempted to reach a "clear and distinct" occult territory. Fondane goes further in his reasoning, maintaining that for the first time "we are faced, together with the surrealists, with a violation of the poetic right by the poets themselves." By provoking the break with the so-called existential *non-savoir*, they were accountable for the "guilty conscience of the poet." So, their goals had not

been reached: "the provoked occult broke down, the directed inspiration collapsed, the deliberate irresponsibility became responsible, the solemn, proven disaster became explosion for show, something that will never really explode."¹⁵

Dada was dead, the surrealists paid "tribute to dialectics," motion pictures were now speaking, or "chatting," rather. Really, is there nothing left of these avant-garde manifestations? Yes, says Fondane, "a new reality was born, operative and efficient, at the end of a confrontation that only seemed to be destructive: it is what we call "the modern spirit." And, Fondane goes on to say, "the modern spirit has no right to represent the modern reality, except if we consider the forms of this spirit by relating them to a stable quality, for instance: their power of fertility, of propulsion, of a vital stimulus, or, on the contrary, their reductionistic capacity, to impoverish and decalcify."¹⁶

And was this "modern spirit," with its "power of fertility, of propulsion, of a vital stimulus," the one that would animate the entire work of Benjamin Fondane? He understood the impact of the avant-garde movements – cubism, Dada and early surrealism – "which have made it mandatory for the European civilization to produce in an accelerated movement the acts for the necessary suicide, to finally make room for something else." The way was open now, but the risk still remained that the old, tried routes would be found. And this was in fact the case of many, perhaps because they did not know anything of Fondane's warnings.

Something else (*autre chose*) meant to him a poetry of existence, which he conceived as "thought facing the ultimate reality," a poetry to allow each person to make his own singular voice heard, outside any and all control of speculative thinking. Poetry for which Fondane created an adjusted form of his personal lyricism, the long poem with free verses, a form used for his great poetic creations: *Ulysse*, *Titanique*, *L'Exode*.

"Something else" also meant to Fondane a philosophy of the existence which he developed along the line drawn by Dostoevsky, Kierkegaard and his teacher, Leon Chestov; it was, in a prolongation of the suit brought against reason by Dada, a philosophy where the standpoint of the singular man, rather than that of knowledge, namely reason, was privileged, a philosophy carrying the hope that perhaps there was a door in the wall of western thought, which could allow for an apprehension of the Being.

This philosophy of existence current, whose main spokesman was Fondane himself in the late 30s, was partly hidden after the war by the other current, of Heidegger and Sartre. Fondane measured the limits of this existentialist current in the critical appreciation he made in the early 40s¹⁷. According to him, this current of thought also paid "tribute to dialectics," refusing to place the being at the heart of its approach, because knowledge, reason were its priority. Fondane saw even further, into the future of that philosophy: it was destined to lead to "the death of man."

From Dada to existentialism, Benjamin Fondane came, therefore, a long way, in the thought of his time. A lucid and stern witness, he often accom-

panied that thought and anticipated it, running the risk of not being heard by his contemporaries. Always in search of something else that would satisfy his irreducible need for freedom and, at the same time, working forcefully and with talent in many fields of creation, he was able to endure in places where avant-gardes have not always been successful in staying, namely on the highest peak of the spirit.

Translated
by Monica VOICULESCU

NOTES

1. This group expressed their views in the only issue of *Discontinuité*, in 1928.
2. Cf. the letter written by Benjamin Fondane to Antonin Artaud (March 1930), in Benjamin Fondane, *Le voyageur n'a pas fini de voyager*, Paris/Toulouse Paris, Méditerranée/L'Ether vague, 1996, pp. 60-66.
3. "Avis", in *Le voyageur... op. cit.*, p. 141.
4. "Présentation de films purs," a speech made in Buenos Aires in July 1929, in Benjamin Fondane, *Ecrits pour le cinéma*, Paris, Plasma, 1984, p. 63.
5. "Signification du Dada," in *Le voyageur... op. cit.*, pp. 32-33.
6. "Mots sauvages," a foreword to *Landscapes*, in *Le Mal des fantômes* preceded by *Paysages*, Paris/Toulouse, Paris-Méditerranée/L'Ether vague, 1996, p. 21.
7. *Trois Scénarios-Ciné-Poèmes*, Brussels, Documents Internationaux de L'Esprit Nouveau, 1928, reprinted in *Ecrits pour le cinéma*, op. cit., p. 20.
8. "Louis Aragon ou le Paysan de Paris," *Integral*, no. 10, January, 1927.
9. "Les surréalistes et la révolution," *Integral*, no. 12 April 1927.
10. "Mots sauvages" in *Le Mal des fantômes*, op. cit., p. 22.
11. "Les surréalistes et la révolution," art. cit.
12. Cf. our study "Benjamin Fondane et la conscience honteuse du surréalisme," *Mélusine*, no. III, 1982, pp. 181-190.
13. "Présentation de films purs," in *Ecrits pour le cinéma*, op. cit., p. 63.
14. In *Le voyageur... op. cit.*, p. 32.
15. *Faux Traité d'esthétique* (1938), Paris, Paris-Méditerranée, 1998, pp. 69 and 71..
16. "Présentation de films purs," in *Ecrits pour le cinéma*, op. cit., p. 63.
17. Cf. *Le Lundi existentiel*, Monaco, Editions du Rocher, 1989.