



University
of Glasgow

Rubens, Andrew (2012) *Subversions of history: 'The Writer Before the Revolution' and 'Man Before History' by Benjamin Fondane: a critical edition with translations, accompanying essay and notes on the translations.* MPhil(R) thesis.

<http://theses.gla.ac.uk/3291/>

Copyright and moral rights for this thesis are retained by the author

A copy can be downloaded for personal non-commercial research or study

This thesis cannot be reproduced or quoted extensively from without first obtaining permission in writing from the Author

The content must not be changed in any way or sold commercially in any format or medium without the formal permission of the Author

When referring to this work, full bibliographic details including the author, title, awarding institution and date of the thesis must be given

i

**Subversions of History: *The Writer Before the
Revolution and Man Before History*
by Benjamin Fondane**

**A critical edition with translations,
accompanying essay and notes on the
translations**

Andrew Geoffrey Paul Rubens

In two volumes

For the Degree of Master of Philosophy

University of Glasgow

French (School of Modern Languages and Cultures)

October 2011

Volume One

Abstract

The development of Benjamin Fondane's positions in the most salient political and philosophical debates in Europe of his time was central to his entire oeuvre, and helped him to cultivate his profound engagement with the freedom of the mind and spirit and with the relationship of the individual to history. Two of his essays stand out for their articulation of this positioning and its implications for his wider body of work: *L'Écrivain devant la révolution* and *L'Homme devant l'histoire, ou le bruit et la fureur*. The former was composed in 1935 for probably the largest politicised gathering of writers ever to take place in history, the anti-fascist 'Congrès pour la défense de la culture' in Paris. The latter was written four years later, with Europe on the brink of war, for a debate on Nazism and history published in the journal *Cahiers du Sud*. They provide an illuminating insight into the thought of their times. Together, they also offer the possibility of connecting with the penetrating ideas of an author whose oeuvre has been too often overlooked, especially in the English-speaking world. The translations are presented here in a critical edition, which includes an accompanying essay, notes on the translations and extensive translator's footnotes. As Elza Adamowicz said recently in the Times Literary Supplement, "as a thinker and poet... Fondane deserves to be better known"; this work is intended as a step towards rectifying the situation. The accompanying essay introduces and contextualises each essay in turn, before opening out into an analysis of Fondane's confrontation with philosophies of history, with the tensions between the individual's search for meaning and the dynamics of society, and with absurdity and alienation, as well as examining his positive response to them. The genesis of Fondane's thought, the interaction of his texts with those of his contemporaries, and possible connections with more recent thinkers are all explored along the way.

Table of Contents

Volume One

Acknowledgements	iii
1 Introduction	1
2 Revolution.....	4
The Writer and History	4
The Writer and Thought	7
Benjamin Fondane and the Revolution	10
3 History.....	16
The Force of History	16
Thinking the Nightmare of History	19
The Individual and History	23
4 The Frivolity of the Artist and Benjamin Fondane's Subversions of History ...	27
5 Conclusion: The truth of the writer: 1939 and onwards.....	39
Bibliography	42

Volume Two

Note on the translations	47
The Writer Before the Revolution.....	50
Man Before History or, the Sound and the Fury.....	74
Appendix I: Research Note	84
Notes	85

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my supervisor, Olivier Salazar-Ferrer, who introduced me to Fondane, for his support. I am immensely grateful to Graham Riach and Lilian Rose for their assistance with the translations. I would also like to thank Fraser Goodall to the same degree for invaluable help on several critical points, as well as proofreading. Thanks are due to Chad Helms, Pierre Masson and Ian Campbell for their help in regards to Fénelon, Gide and Carlyle respectively. I also need to thank Michel Carrassou for access to the 1935 manuscript. Ward Blanton, John Campbell, Alain Paire, Victoria Reid and Jim Simpson all provided scholarly support at points. Thanks too to Laura Corrigan for aiding the translation process at close quarters, and to Kate Headland and Jane and Des Rubens for their support and encouragement. Finally, I am grateful to the Arts and Humanities Research Council for funding my research.

Men of all the quarters of the globe, who have perished over the ages, you have not lived solely to manure the earth with your ashes, so that at the end of time your posterity should be made happy by European culture.

(Johann Gottfried Herder cited in Williams 1976, p.80)

Ne méprisez pas vos libertés, défendez-les opiniâtrement, tout en les déclarant insuffisantes et en luttant pour les développer.

(Salvemini cited in Klein & Teroni 2005, p.374)

Le monde est un spectacle qui comporte une infinité d'acteurs – et pas le moindre spectateur.

Benjamin Fondane (cited in Salazar-Ferrer 2007, p.56)

1 Introduction

The first films to be made in Russia after the establishment of the Soviet Union provoked a certain amount of interest in Europe. And not simply the curiosity of those in the youthful field of film criticism: artists and writers of all kinds, on the one hand, and many of those who hoped that the USSR would bring a new dawn for humanity, on the other (of course, many belonged to both categories) were eager to see if revolution was present in art as well as politics and economics. The value of cinema as a modern art form and as a propaganda tool had been immediately recognised by the new state, and many of the principles of socialist realism were enforced in the medium from the start. But despite the early critical success of *Battleship Potemkin*, the harnessing of the camera to the cause proved problematic. Many artistic avant-garde groups who were pinning their aspirations for a synthesis of art and life on the new Russia were disappointed, although the need for belief in a new world led to much ignoring of contradictions.

One modernist film-maker and critic, though far from being a political reactionary, took a more critical stance. Benjamin Fondane, a Romanian-born French citizen, who was also a poet, essayist, photographer and philosopher, upheld a fierce independence in all of his creative and critical writing. In 1933, responding to the question “le cinéma soviétique est-il réellement un art révolutionnaire?” in the journal *Documents* 33, he wrote

On obtient bien des choses sous la menace du knout, de la délation et de la Tchéka; mais pas l'œuvre d'art; l'obéissance est une chose excellente; mais pas dans les choses de l'esprit. (Fondane 1996b, p.8)

His criticism of the authoritarian regime is significant in itself for its frankness and prescience. But his article also went on to critique the confusion of his peers in France as they tried to merge art and politics. The connection between the artist and society has probably nowhere been more probingly explored than among the avant-gardes in Europe in the 1920s and 1930s. For Fondane, the development of his own positions in these debates was central to his entire oeuvre, and helped him to cultivate his profound engagement with the freedom of the mind and spirit and with the relationship of the individual to history.

Two of his essays stand out for their articulation of this positioning and its implications for his wider body of work: *L'Écrivain devant la révolution* and *L'Homme devant l'histoire, ou le bruit et la fureur*. The former was composed in 1935 at great speed during what was probably the largest politicised gathering of writers ever to take place in history, the anti-fascist ‘Congrès pour la défense de la culture’. The latter was written four

years later, with Europe on the brink of war, for a debate on Nazism and history published in the journal *Cahiers du Sud*. They provide an illuminating insight into the thought of their times. Together, they also offer the possibility of connecting with the penetrating ideas of an author whose œuvre has been too often overlooked, especially in the English-speaking world. With research into Fondane by Francophone scholars flourishing, the staging of a major exhibition in Paris last year and recent translations into German, Italian and Spanish, the time seems propitious for English versions of his works. As Elza Adamowicz said recently in the *Times Literary Supplement*, “as a thinker and poet... he deserves to be better known” (2005, p.11); this work is intended as a step towards rectifying the situation.

The translations are presented here in a critical edition, which includes an accompanying essay, notes on the translations and extensive translator’s footnotes. The first two chapters serve to introduce and contextualise each essay in turn. Not only is there a need to introduce Fondane’s thought, but also its grounding in the atmosphere of French intellectual activity at the time and the struggle with the meaning of culture, “one of the two or three most complicated words” (Williams 1976, p.76). Many of the ‘household’ intellectual names of the period are far less well known today; although the Congrès has been remembered in France, despite its marginalisation in cultural memory elsewhere, even there the prevalent narrative has suffered from historical distortions, which Wolfgang Klein and Sandra Teroni have recently done much to correct.

The concluding section of each of the first two chapters develops the contextualisation into a textual focus, while chapter three provides a critical analysis of Fondane’s essays. They reflect his extensive reading, referencing 19th-century *décadents*, Western philosophers of every era, English and Russian writers, Freud, Marx and Nietzsche, all underpinned by his single greatest influence, the ‘irrationalism’ of his friend and teacher Lev Shestov. He was also very much a part of avant-garde circles in Paris and their reactions to the First War. After identifying with Dada’s attack on the liberal narrative of progress, he was attracted to Shestov’s existential challenges to philosophy as a way out of its nihilism. By the 1930s, there was also with the rise of fascism to contend with. The question of a response incorporated a wider search for values as well as a reaction to the immediate threat.

The most eminent figure in that search, André Gide, is to a degree emblematic of its difficulties, and of the added confusion engendered by the promotion of communism. In a political speech in 1933, he acknowledged the similarities between Soviet and Nazi repression, but, with humanist faith in “cette marche vers la libération”, excused the communist ends. His speech also betrays the difficulty in finding an effective response to

fascism, hoping that “de plus compétents que moi vont vous dire” (1950, p.24). Against both the rigid doctrines of communism and the nightmare of fascism, Fondane opposes his metaphysical revolt: the freedom of art and the freedom of the individual. In some ways, his essays parallel earlier anarchistic ideas like those of Oscar Wilde (“it is clear, then, that no Authoritarian Socialism will do” [1905, p.15]) or Emma Goldman (“what’s the point in having a revolution if you can’t dance?” [cited in Shulman 1991]).

Fondane’s philosophy, however, goes in further directions. He is committed to the importance of the subversive “frivolité” of the artist, which “contienne un instant de l’éternel ou la plus désespérée des croyances en l’homme” (Fondane 1997, p.90). *L’Homme devant l’histoire* is also a kind of meditation on catastrophe, in which a rapport with Walter Benjamin’s work can be read, as well as existential consideration of despair. Possible links can also be seen with more recent philosophers “who want to call into question such traditional dichotomies as ‘reason/unreason’” (Baugh 2003, p.49). Fondane’s idea that “la culture n’est pas, elle devient” (1997, p.97) certainly brings Gilles Deleuze to mind. This dissertation explores the ways in which, for Fondane,

Le rôle de la culture...est de délimiter la frontière du social de la frontière de l’individuel...d’amener l’événement à sa plus haute expression éthique, métaphysique ou religieuse. (1997, p.101)

Fondane’s confrontation with philosophies of history, with the tensions between the individual’s search for meaning and the dynamics of society, and with absurdity and alienation are all examined, along with his positive response to them. This reading begins through an introduction to his texts and their contexts.

2 Revolution

The Writer and History

Quelques écrivains, devant les périls qui, dans un certain nombre de pays, menacent la culture, prennent l'initiative de réunir un congrès pour envisager et discuter les moyens de la défendre. Ils se proposent de préciser les conditions de la création littéraire et les rapports de l'écrivain avec ceux auxquels ils s'adressent.

Convocation of the Congrès international des écrivains pour la défense de la culture (Klein & Teroni 2005, p.66)

The Congrès international des écrivains pour la défense de la culture, which took place from 21st to 25th June 1935 at la Mutualité, Paris, has been described as “un sommet indépassé depuis lors dans l'histoire intellectuelle, si l'on considère le prestige des participants et le rôle politique accordé aux intellectuels” (Ory & Sirinelli 2004, p.100). 230 delegates from 38 countries from the USA to India came together in concern and defiance as fascism spread in Europe. They included Louis Aragon, Bertolt Brecht, E.M. Forster, André Gide, Aldous Huxley, André Malraux, Heinrich Mann, Robert Musil, Romain Rolland and Tristan Tzara; writers from Alain to John Dos Passos to Virginia Woolf gave declarations of support (Klein & Teroni 2005, p.13).

The interest of the USSR and its proponents was attested by the heavyweight presence of Ilya Ehrenbourg and Boris Pasternak, but the roll-call demonstrates that practically the whole spectrum of anti-fascist thought was represented. Yet one unique voice had to wait until the end of the century to be heard. Benjamin Fondane's *L'Ecrivain devant la révolution*, written during the conference itself but not given the chance to be read out, takes a highly particular approach to the subjects which dominated the debates. Before focussing on its uncompromising critique, it is useful to understand something of the period which led up to its composition.

The Threat to 'Culture'

In the France of summer 1935 it would have been difficult to engage in any kind of intellectual or political activity without considering the serious progress of events across Europe. While information from Russia was vague, the consolidation of Stalinism had already spread much dissent among sympathisers of the USSR; one result was the 'hardlining' of the Parti Communiste Français (Kritzman et al. 2007, p.19). Yet disagreement between progressives was overshadowed by the ascension of the Nazis in 1933. In January 1935, Saarland was reintegrated into Germany and in March Hitler announced rearmament. Like Spain, France was being rocked by political polarization. The far-right anti-parliamentary riots of February 1934 had led to the rapprochement of socialists, liberals and other objectors – including communists, as confronting fascism became the Comintern's priority – which would culminate in the election of a Popular Front government in 1936. This government would sit on the fence as its counterpart in Spain cried out for help at the onset of civil war. But in 1935 there seemed to be a genuinely coherent international anti-fascist movement of citizens, politicians and 'public figures' – intellectuals and artists in particular.

By the 1930s, Paris had become a unique centre of artistic and intellectual action, attracting writers, artists and musicians from across Europe, the USA and beyond. Not only was the sheer number of émigrés, avant-gardistes, creators and thinkers and the volume of their collective output impressive, the attention they provoked and the significance attributed to their interventions created an unusually wide context for the dissemination of their ideas. 1935 especially has sometimes been considered the year the Left Bank "came in to its own" (Lottman 1998, p.7). With political and intellectual life seemingly inextricable, there were huge audiences for public lectures (Gide 1950, p.63). Much discourse was strongly humanistic and pan-European in outlook; the eminence of the word was certainly taken seriously (see for example Tonnet-Lacroix 1993, pp.136 – 142). These values are typified in the intervention of André Gide and André Malraux in the aftermath of the Reichstag fire, leaving a courteous letter for Goebbels on behalf of the 'Comité Dimitrov' ("constitué dans divers pays...ne represent[ant] ainsi ni une nation, ni un parti politique") lobbying for the framed Dimitrov's release (Gide 1950, p.42).

Antifascisms

Political groups made unambiguous attempts to manipulate the charged atmosphere of public debate. Despite the ostensibly mixed composition of groups like the Association des Ecrivains et Artistes Révolutionnaires and the Amsterdam-Pleyel anti-war movement, the communists were instrumental in their organisation, often alienating possible sympathisers with their authoritarian approach. However, although it has been common to view the Congrès pour la Défense de la Culture as merely a communist showpiece (e.g. Lottman 1998), in their introduction to the collected papers of the Congrès, Sandra Teroni and Wolfgang Klein convincingly argue that it represented an almost uniquely open space for dialogue in the context of interwar anti-fascism, due to the Comintern abandonment of the strict agenda of “classe contre classe”...pour un ‘Front unique antifasciste’” which had facilitated the plurality of the Comité de Vigilance des Intellectuels Antifascistes, instrumental in the formation of the Popular Front (Klein & Teroni 2005, p.17). But despite the relative openness and shared ground in the Congrès, the tensions caused by the differences between Stalinists and those who took a more critical view of the USSR could not be suppressed, regardless of the (official) communist attempts to do so during the Congrès and to play them down afterwards in the *Commune* report.

Much of the reportage was indeed partisan, certainly in communist organs like *Commune*, *Humanité* and *Monde*, but they and other receptive publications like *Europe*, the *Nouvelle Revue Française* and *Les Nouvelles Littéraires* ensured widespread and detailed coverage, carried over internationally by the likes of *New Statesman and Nation*, *Partisan Review*, *Frankfurter Zeitung* and of course *Pravda*. They were part of an unprecedented post-Grande Guerre production of journals “à la fois politiques et littéraires” across the political spectrum, from *Je suis partout* to *Marianne* to *Monde* (Tonnet-Lacroix 1993, p.19). The importance of the many left-wing or left-leaning revues for the dissemination of the Congrès proceedings cannot be understated, and is in a large part responsible for the continuing resonance of the event within French thought today.

The most spectacular talking point of the Congrès indicates the difficulty of sustaining a united and effective anti-fascist front. The Trotskyist Surrealists were prevented from speaking after André Breton assaulted Ilya Ehrenbourg in the street and the Soviets threatened to pull out. Vítězslav Nezval’s text was refused and the stress of trying to reconcile communists and surrealism helped push René Crevel to suicide the day before the Congrès; the speech he had prepared was the last thing he ever wrote. The repression caused some controversy, although Breton’s speech was read out by Paul Eluard and he attended the event. For the Surrealists, though, the Congrès failed whichever way you

looked at it, denying them freedom of speech due to communist pressure but also making compromises with the bourgeoisie (Klein & Teroni 2005, p.397; Lottman 1998, p.94). As Nicole Racine puts it:

La rupture définitive de Breton avec le P.C.F. et la IIIe Internationale date...du Congrès pour la Défense de la Culture. A partir de cette date, Breton critiqua violemment la révolution de l'U.R.S.S. et la dégénérescence du socialisme sous Staline. (Racine 1966, p.33)

There were other eruptions which emphasise that this was not a unique case of dissent against the orthodoxy which certain parties were seeking to establish. The efforts of Magdeleine Paz and others to highlight the plight of Soviet dissident Victor Serge were prominent. One of his supporters, Gaetano Salvemini, caused a minor uproar, labelling Russia an “État totalitaire” (Klein & Teroni 2005, p.375). Yet these flare-ups also serve to illuminate the political significance given to art and literature by all the participants, even if their definition of the ‘culture’ they were supposed to be defending was often vague. In order to appreciate the nature of the intellectual reaction to the rise of fascism and its inextricability from the debate over communism, it is worth looking at the development of the wider intellectual climate in France in the inter-war years.

The Writer and Thought

Despite the eclectic mix of influences present in the capital, from symbolism to psychoanalysis, one concern had dominated French thought in the 1920s and 1930s: ‘engagement’. 1927 had seen anti-colonialism become mainstream with the publication of Gide’s *Voyage au Congo*, but it also saw the appearance of Julien Benda’s notable *La Trahison des clercs*, bringing into focus the central concerns which were to dominate cultured debate in the coming years: should writers and artists commit themselves to politics, and if so, in which ways and for which reasons? The framework for discussion developed rapidly, from anti-colonialism to anti-militarism to anti-fascism.

Engagement

For many, from Charles Maurras at the centre of Action Française to PCF partisans like Louis Aragon or Paul Nizan, Benda's question introduced a division of roles where there was none. Benda himself, whose original answer could be roughly summarised as 'no' (despite his involvement in the Dreyfus affair), eventually became a fellow traveller. Faced with the rise of fascism, this often seemed a logical step for the large crowd to the left of Maurras. Publications like Nizan's *Les Chiens de garde* (1932) and, in May 1935, Malraux's *Le Temps du mépris* set the tone, Malraux's stance matched by other illustrious characters like Gide and Rolland.

Providing a focal point and a forum for anti-fascists of all colours, studded with prestigious speakers, the Congrès drew a wide audience. As Gide's companion Maria Van Rysselberghe put it, "to hold a crowd of 2500 to 3000 persons for five evenings in a row, without counting the afternoons, to listen to speeches being read...is rather extraordinary". Though many of the propagandistic communist speeches were "tedious and inappropriate to the occasion", including that of a weighty figure like Barbusse ("intolerably bad" [Lottman 1998, p.86]), this did not prevent some fierce debate and an awareness of high political stakes, in the tradition of public discourse developed in France throughout the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century. With France seemingly the international bastion of antifascist organisation, and following on from assemblies like the Pleyel anti-war conference and the Soviet Writers' Congress of 1934, which Aragon, Malraux and Nizan attended, the Congrès can even be seen as an apotheosis of this tradition (Ory & Sirinelli 2004, p.100).

And while the central message of the Congrès, if anything, was that politics is a mass affair, the presence of learned German refugees like Ernst Bloch and Bertolt Brecht is an unqualified reminder of the importance of discourse as a foundation for resistance (for a persuasive argument on the effectiveness of the Nazi policy of persecuting intellectuals, leftists and trade unionists in greatly reducing the potential for internal revolt see Glover 2001). While words alone may not be enough to fight fascism, such pre-war activity may have helped prepare Malraux and others for organising with the Résistance.

Creative Revolution

Yet the tensions underlying the united front against fascism which came to the fore during the Congrès were present from the start. Pacifism versus armed resistance would continue to cause divisions right up until the outbreak of war, but in 1935, even if the idea

of a Nazi-Soviet pact was unthinkable, the contradictions caused by the abundance of perspectives on communism were clear. Perhaps most relevant for contextualising Fondane's *discours non prononcé* is his own disenchantment with Surrealism, made explicit in *Les surrealistes et la révolution*, his polemical 1927 response to Breton's "Légitime défense" from *La révolution surréaliste*. Accusing Breton of sophistry in his attempts to reconcile individual liberty and communism, he played devil's advocate – though with absolute sincerity – stating "jamais peut-être ne retrouvera [le poète] cette liberté absolue qu'il eut en république bourgeoise" (Fondane 1999, p.50). Not for the last time, Fondane's critical scrutiny sought out conclusions that others would only arrive at years later, here prefiguring Breton's definitive break with formal communism at the Congrès (and, perhaps, his post-war movement towards anarchism as he continued to struggle with this contradiction).

If the discord of the Surrealists emphasises the charged political background of the Congrès, their presence also reminds us of another crucial context for Fondane's text: the significance of the artistic revolts of the 1920s and 1930s. A nonconformist among nonconformists, Fondane personally engaged with Dada, Surrealism, le Grand Jeu, the absurd (he wrote in the only edition of Arthur Adamov's journal *Discontinuité*) and Antonin Artaud's theatre without becoming strictly affiliated to any of them, an avant-gardist without belonging to *an* avant-garde, seeking rather "une expression philosophique pour sa révolte" (Salazar-Ferrer 2004, p.46). If Fondane's "prise de distance" from the Congrès was "spirituelle" (Klein & Teroni 2005, p.568), it followed his highly personal development in the preceding years where "la révolte du dadaïsme, avec sa puissance destructrice et sa passion de l'absurde, fusionn[a] avec la révolte chestovienne" (Salazar-Ferrer 2004, p.59).

Fondane was sceptical of the humanism espoused by Gide and of the merits of playing to a crowd, twin aspects of the Congrès which he explicitly attacks in his text. He felt that many of the responses to fascism and much of the faith in the USSR lacked a sufficiently critical approach. His own unusual slant was the product of a philosophical development, not without its own internal tensions, which took in Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Dostoevsky, Baudelaire, Rimbaud and, most emphatically, the spiritual, existential irrationalism of the Russian philosopher Lev Shestov, his mentor. While Nietzsche was certainly in vogue in France at the time and it had been Gide himself who had done so much to disseminate Dostoevsky, few thinkers took such direct inspiration or drew such radical conclusions from them as Fondane. Combined with Dada's rejection of the tradition of Western cultural values in its reaction to World War One - the 'shipwreck' of post-Enlightenment humanism - Fondane's readings led him to the affirmation of an

absolute spiritual and creative individual freedom which informed both his essays and his poetry.

In the context of 1935, the critical distance afforded by his position is a foil for the platitudes of unquestioning ‘Hegelian’ Marxists, a rebuke to intellectuals allowing their critical instincts to be dimmed through political optimism and a prescient refusal of any simple Manichean understanding of the problem of fascism. Although Victor Serge himself was irritated by the philosophical affirmation of Fondane’s poetry which lead “ni à une volonté ni à un geste” (Salazar-Ferrer 2004, p.168), the same spirit found in *L’Ecrivain devant la révolution* shows, if nothing else, that the question of ‘engagement’ is never a simple one.

The spectre of the ‘War to end all wars’ haunted convictions in the diplomatic approach embodied in Gide and Malraux’s polite lobbying of Goebbels for Dimitrov. Further, some of the “celebrity” contributions at the Mutualité supported Gide’s own doubts about the negative effects of political commitment for creativity. Yet Pascal Ory and Jean-François Sirinelli remind us that Malraux’s *L’Espoir* and Picasso’s *Guernica* count among the masterpieces of the following years:

...ils subvertissent les termes convenus de la tragédie et de l’épopée au moyen de formes renouvelées...ils confirment l’intellectuel dans la conviction qu’un engagement tranché dans l’action est loin d’être incompatible avec la poursuite d’une œuvre. (Ory & Sirinelli 2004, p.113)

While artistic and political revolution may not be incompatible, the former can surely not be dogmatically subservient to the latter. In June 1935, the philosophical foundations of ‘engagement’ may have seemed to be progressing towards just such a singularity. Fondane’s text would have been uncomfortable for those making an idol of the USSR, but it constituted an uncommon and valuable contribution to the most pressing debate of its time.

Benjamin Fondane and the Revolution

It is a measure of the intense interest provoked by the debates of the Congrès that Fondane, as witness, audience participant and critic, wrote twenty pages of his own while

attending the speeches and on June 26th sent them to the internationally renowned *Cahiers du Sud*, which focussed on poetry and philosophy. This is underlined by the fact that Jean Ballard, the editor, already had a full complement of reports from other contributors, replying “je regrette que vous ne m’avez pas parlé plus tôt, mais tout de même 20 pages, c’est impossible” (Fondane 1998, p.75). One of these contributors, Pierre Minet, demonstrated that there certainly were those who engaged sincerely with the Congrès themes while refusing to ignore its contradictions:

...rien de ce que je viens de dire ne m’empêche d’adhérer pleinement à la cause antifasciste...ce n’est pas travailler contre cette cause, que de m’exprimer librement sur elle. (Minet 1935)

If Minet succinctly captured the “reception immediate du Congrès” as “une nouvelle illustration du Front Populaire” (Klein & Teroni 2005, p.569), his remarks also confronted attempts to establish orthodoxy as well as unity and demonstrated the need for critical distance in assessing the rise of fascism.

Fondane’s response

By 1935, the existential direction of Fondane’s thinking was becoming explicit. The following year would see the publication of the anti-Hegelian *La Conscience malheureuse*. Martin Stanton sees this project as one of several contemporary warnings (including those of Jean Hyppolite, Emmanuel Mounier, Jean-Paul Sartre and Jean Wahl) against the idea that Fascism would simply be resolved by the progress of history. He also argues that both Fondane, with his film-making, and Sartre, in his early novels, “hoped to introduce critical dimensions in the fields they felt the fascists had colonised” (Alexander & Graham 2002, pp.259–260). If Fondane’s existential thought differed irreconcilably from that of Sartre, with its theological directions, Christian Delacampagne’s conclusion that the latter’s philosophy led him to an exemplary criticality can surely also apply for the former (Kritzman et al. 2007, p.655).

It is a lack of such acuity from his peers that Fondane castigates in *L’Ecrivain devant la révolution*. In his view, the “pénurie intellectuelle de ce congrès” is defied only by Gide, Malraux, Tristan Tzara, Paul Éluard and a few others (Fondane 1997, p.60). Perhaps most importantly, he takes the speakers to task for their failure to positively define the ‘culture’ they are supposed to be defending and their vagueness and mutual contradiction in using the term. Considering the definition given in Jean Guéhenno’s

speech to be that of “la plupart des orateurs et celle du marxisme en particulier”, he attacks the reduction of artistic creation and enjoyment to a mere ‘reflection’ of the economic system, while pointing out that other speakers such as Jean Cassou have defined revolution as “l’acte de liberté dans la culture”, i.e. precisely the opposite (1997, p. 91).

Further, Fondane was frustrated by the way he felt that Gide, Malraux, Heinrich Mann and Waldo Frank toned down their speeches so as not to provoke any hostile audience reaction. In the crowd’s jeering of the liberal Benda, and even stronger disapprobation of Salvemini, Fondane, agreeing with Nietzsche, saw a transferral of Christianity’s mass religious sensibility to Marxism: complete faith in an abstract, pre-determined outcome, accompanied by a rejection of all scrutiny. Faced with the antipathy of his audience, Salvemini had the courage to state:

L’intellectuel doit lutter contre toute injustice sociale à côté des classes exploitées qui luttent pour conquérir l’égalité économique, mais il ne doit reconnaître à aucune doctrine le monopole légal de la vérité.

(Klein & Teroni 2005, p.375)

Perhaps this as close as the Congrès came to producing what Fondane terms “la vérité d’un écrivain qui soit en même temps un homme” (Fondane 1997, p.56).

Marxism and the artist

For Fondane, the Congrès completely bypassed its stated intention of addressing both the intrinsic role of the writer and her or his relation to society. The serious debate over ‘engagement’ was diminished and tensions emerged as an unreflective Marxist view of the artist’s political subordination was pushed forwards by the majority. Yet Fondane’s response to the doctrine of the communists was not a reactionary retreat into art for art’s sake. In fact, his discours engages frequently and seriously with the writings of Marx, as many of the other speeches failed to do.

In 1929, Fondane construed the “esprit moderne” embodied by Dada and Surrealism as

un *agent provocateur*, obligeant la civilisation européenne de produire à l’accélération les actes de suicide nécessaires, pour faire place enfin à *autre chose* (Fondane 2007; Béhar & Carassou 2005, p.204).

Yet if he exulted in the avant-gardiste desire to be out with the old and in with the new, he was also unequivocal that “cet « autre chose »... je ne saurais vous dire ce que c'est...[c]'est cependant le point central” (Fondane 2007, p.73). And as his Congrès text makes clear, revolt has a metaphysical dimension for him as much as a social one. He criticises Marxists for pinning down this “autre chose” to a fixed point, closing down the openness and creative potential of any revolutionary movement and for passing over the non-material aspects of human existence and interaction.

Fondane’s objections are principally aimed at the transformation of Marx’s ideas into dogma (“ce n’était pas le pape”[Fondane 1997, p.112]) and the prevention of critical responses which could lead to necessary adaptations and further innovation (for example, the refusal of the Soviet authorities to consider the ramifications of psychoanalysis). He also sets out to provide just such a critical response, addressing the lacunae left by the Congrès speeches. He critiques the idealism (in the philosophical sense) which grounds Marxism, dismissing Benda’s distinction between a monolithic version of ‘Western’ thought grounded in Cartesian dualism and a conception of communism as the attempt to unite physical and metaphysical (an idea he also sees (mis)handled in Paul Nizan’s speech). Further, he points out that in practice communists have in fact proposed “le choix de l’un de ces termes à l’exclusion de l’autre” (Fondane 1997, p.111), betraying their own principles of dialectical synthesis. He underlines his own assertion that the workings of economics must be matched with a consideration of the workings of the human mind and spirit by making the obvious point that dialectical materialism failed to predict the birth of fascism.

The power of words

The polemics of Fondane’s Congrès text are marked by the same profundity of thought as his earlier ‘political’ writing: “Ils témoignent d’une clairvoyance peu commune devant les évènements de l’époque” (Jutrin et al. 1996, p.1). He had raised his concerns over the Soviet characterisation of (and anxieties about) the role of art the year before in an article in *Cahiers du Sud* on the Soviet Writer’s Congress, predicted the coming consequences of the international clash of *Weltanschauungen* in *Le Cahier Bleu* in 1933, and, in December 1934, made a direct call for political resistance to Fascism at a conference for Romanian students (Salazar-Ferrer 2007, p.106).

However, it is in relation to the Surrealists and their ideas of a revolutionary current with an impetus at once artistic and political that his relative views were most sharply focussed. If the speech Breton prepared for the Congrès speech effectively confirmed

Surrealism's break with the Soviet regime and its sympathisers, Fondane felt that Louis Aragon's movement in the opposite direction laid bare the dismal result of putting the creative revolution in the service of the social one. He had made his feelings clear in 1932, when Aragon was imprisoned for his incendiary propaganda poem *Front Rouge*. Breton's campaign to have the poet released – despite his own dislike of Aragon's approach – by claiming the innocuousness of poetic licence was met by Fondane's letter attacking his mitigation of Surrealist claims for the real power of words (Fondane 1999, p.71). In any case, by the time of the Congrès, Breton was *persona non grata* for the 'mainstream' communists and Aragon was denouncing Surrealism. In his Congrès text, Fondane reproaches Aragon for the calumny of the anti-Surrealist rant in his speech. However, it is clear that whatever Surrealist methods and values Fondane still seeks to affirm, he sees the muddled interaction with politics by the most revolutionary of artistic movements as a disaster.

Yet, in *l'Écrivain devant la révolution* he also shows support for Marxism's underlying principles of social equality, both for their intrinsic validity and because a stable, materially satisfied society would allow the writer to concentrate more fully on her or his metaphysical tasks. His reservations concentrate on the faith in idealist dialectics and the way these have led Marxism's proponents to obtuse, myopic and oppressive positions: "l'incompréhension manifeste – et je l'espère bien passagère – des problèmes vitaux de l'écrivain...il importe donc, et cela dans l'intérêt même de la lutte socialiste, qu'une discussion large, courageuse, sincère, angoissante, soit ouverte" (Fondane 1997, pp.60–61).

The breadth of this discussion must cover the artistic, spiritual, psychological and metaphysical terms which, for Fondane, are always to the fore. As well as his earlier political writing, his text followed on from various articles he had published in *Cahiers du Sud* which were grounded in the philosophy of Shestov and its existential approach to the limits of reason. As *L'Écrivain devant la révolution* affirms, he sees the poem as an act of revolt in itself and on its own terms:

non pas le privilège aristocratique d'un art séparé du monde social ou contemplatif, mais par une action sur lui d'une autre nature que politique, sociale ou économique. (Salazar-Ferrer 2007, p.111)

I intend to discuss the nature of this action by the "poète frivole" (Fondane 1997, p.81) in Chapter 3. Later words of Fondane's crystallise the point that the poet-philosopher's Shestovian meditations are not a retreat – least of all a 'bourgeois' one – from the realities

of life, but rather lead him to a profound engagement – if not ‘engagement’ – with all of its aspects: “le monde est un spectacle qui comporte une infinité d’acteurs – et pas le moindre spectateur” (Fondane 1943).

Revolution and antifascism

In 1935, the question of revolution seemed inseparable from the antifascist cause: if fascism represented the degeneration of civilisation, ideas of a ‘good’ society and the part writers should play were a necessary consideration for its opponents. At the Mutualité, the communist presence clouded this discussion with a ‘for us or against us’ line and displayed complacency in portraying fascism as a blip to be ironed out by the progress of history, seeing the symbolic and physical forces of the USSR’s communism as the only remedy. Worse, perhaps, was the tendency to act as though the role of intellectuals was self-evident and consensus natural. In response, Benjamin Fondane, on his own terms, provides a singular, perspicacious analysis of the function of the writer, fascism and the case for revolutions.

Four years later, after the Moscow trials and Gide’s *Retour de l’U.R.S.S.*, life in Europe was bleak and the question of where things had gone so wrong seemed urgent. Fondane responded with fierce lyricism in an iconoclastic essay in *Cahiers du Sud* which is at once startling in its prescience and evocative of the hopelessness of its period. It leaves the modern reader with both a poignant historical document and a provocative and disturbing inquisition which, like his 1935 Congrès text, retains its freshness and wider relevance. The essay’s title was *L’Homme devant l’histoire, ou le bruit et la fureur*.

3 History

The Force of History

1939

If European worldviews in 1935 were still deeply affected by the horrors of the First World War and preoccupied by the dramatic rise of fascism, there was yet room for optimism, found both in the commitment to pacifism – embodied by the likes of Alain, Jean Giono or Bertrand Russell – and the hope inspired by various socialist movements, from the Popular Front to the USSR. In spring 1939, there was little brightness anywhere. The inexorable descent into war was in plain view and utopia must have seemed very far away. The nightmare of history was as vivid and close as the imagination could allow: the intervening period included the disarray caused by the Moscow Trials (brought to French readers' attention by, among others, Victor Serge in the review *Spartacus* [Serge 1972]); the implosion of the French Popular Front; Hitler's sabre-rattling towards Poland, showing that appeasement had failed; and Franco's victory in Spain at the start of April 1939, following on from the shock of Guernica.

With the strength of the far right in France, anti-Semitism had grown since 1935, typified in the hatred which was physically and verbally targeted at Popular Front Prime Minister Léon Blum (Lottman 1998, pp.80–81). The refugees pouring into France from Germany would hardly have felt that they had reached an assured safe haven. In 1939, Marseille was already attracting Jews who were feeling the pressure. Over the next couple of years, into and even after the *drôle de guerre*, it became a stepping stone for all kinds of people targeted for repression in Europe. Many illustrious names, including Walter Benjamin and André Breton, were among them (Guiraud 1998).

Fondane Before History

Benjamin Fondane himself intimated a desire to make his way to Marseille at this time, although it is not clear what his intentions were. His relationship with *Cahiers du Sud* meant he already had friends in Marseille; Jean Ballard organised a subscription among various writers to pay for his naturalisation in 1938 (Salazar-Ferrer 2004, p.65). Writing to Ballard in early May 1939, he asked if the editor could obtain railway passes for himself and his wife, Geneviève, saying “J’ai toujours été très maladroit pour les choses pratiques et ne sais pas à qui m’adresser.” Whether this tentative endeavour was an attempt to flee

the coming danger or not, the tickets turned out to be too expensive (Fondane 1998, p.154). Although Fondane had the fewest of illusions concerning the precariousness of life in France, he may have felt a modicum of protection in his new nationality.

Fondane was given an international perspective by an adventure to Argentina from April to October 1936. Through his links with Victoria Ocampo, who had first invited him there in 1929, he went to make the avant-garde film *Tararira*, now lost. In a letter to Geneviève which reads poignantly today, he spoke of the possibility of an “avenir argentin”, away from the storm clouds in Europe. However, in the midst of the *Década Infame*, Argentina was hardly inoculated against anti-Semitism, and some scholars have even suggested that *Tararira's* Franco-sympathising producers ended up sabotaging the film, which was never distributed (Salazar-Ferrer 2004, pp.136 & 141).

Intellectual disarray

Back in Paris, Fondane wrote and published frenetically, though affected by the death of his mentor, Shestov, in 1938. Around him, intellectual circles were thrown into confusion. Writers bore witness to, and struggled to analyse, the jolts of politics, going through reversals and retractions as they sought solid ground in the turmoil. Sometimes, texts became historical events in themselves, the most famous example being Gide's *Retour de l'URSS* in 1936, just over a year after his Congrès declaration that “L'URSS nous offre actuellement un spectacle sans précédent, d'une importance immense, inespérée, et j'ose ajoutée: exemplaire” (Klein & Teroni 2005, p.186).

Specific points of rupture like the France-Soviet pact, described by *L'Humanité* as “un coup de tonnerre” (Klein & Teroni 2005, p.398), had already allowed ideological differences on the left to surface, not least at the 1935 Congrès, but the publication of Gide's text, with the added context of the Moscow Trials, sent new shockwaves through France. The liberal democracies may have confirmed their ineffectuality in light of the *Anschluss*, the Munich accords and the abandonment of the Spanish Republic, but if many intellectuals had seen potential for concrete alternatives in communism, these now seemed far less credible. And with Europe in crisis, conservatives increasingly saw fascism as the lesser of two evils. Further, as Éliane Tonnet-Lacroix says of the “tentation fasciste”,

La conscience d'une crise fait naître par réaction un besoin de stabilité, d'ordre, voire de renaissance...on aspire donc à la restauration des valeurs traditionnelles. (Tonnet-Lacroix 1993, p.93)

For many right-wing Catholics like Charles Maurras, a Franco-style combination of fascism and Catholicism was a natural development.

Grand Narratives

The anxiety around cultural, moral and ethical values was shared by a wide spectrum of French Christian thinkers. Whether they were politically aligned with Maurras or not, many, from the polemical George Bernanos to Fondane's intellectual sparring partner Jacques Maritain, responded to the tumult of the times by concluding that Western civilisation had degenerated because such values had vanished, or at least had lost their connection with the spirituality which should supposedly underpin them. Here, 'totalising' solutions were often put forward (although not so much in the case of the mystically-oriented Maritain): the restoration of the monarchy desired by *Action Française* or the call by Bernanos, who eventually decided that Maurras was "trop peu profondément chrétien", for the "restauration de l'« ordre chrétien »" (Tonnet-Lacroix 1993, p.94).

If Christians, Marxists, fascists and just about everyone else could all agree that civilisation was in a mess, the number of voices warning against the idea that any system could provide a straightforward, complete and effective solution had risen since Salvemini had been booed at the Mutualité. Gide's 1936 confession that his view that "c'est dans une société communiste que chaque individu...peut le plus parfaitement s'épanouir" (Klein & Teroni 2005, p.182) had been shattered, at least in relation to the Soviet Union, was accompanied by a new trend among certain writers in putting defence of individual liberties foremost and attacking totalitarianism (a word which began to be used in the modern, negative sense around this time, for example in Franz Borkenau's 1938 book *The Communist International*).

Existential Crisis

If the prominence of the 'engagement' debate had "donné le sentiment de l'Histoire" (Tonnet-Lacroix 1993, p.50), disillusionment and pessimism in the second half of the 1930s were complemented by consideration of the existential position of the individual and a sense of the absurd, indirectly revisiting and developing Dada's mix of nihilism and vitality. As the clash of 'grand narratives' reached an apogee, for those who did not subscribe wholeheartedly to an explicit social ideology, trust in the positive and natural progress of history seemed to be more misplaced than ever. Instead, many attested to alienation and the devaluation of human life. 1938 saw the publication of Artaud's *Le Théâtre et son double*, Sartre's *La Nausée* and the French translation of Kafka's *The*

Castle.

Fondane was as aware as anyone of the grimness of the near future and the difficulty of finding meaningful and stable responses. The combination of his own ideas about the absurdity of existence and his opening onto spiritual dimensions of philosophy gave him a singular perspective on the immediate pre-war period and its ramifications. *L'Homme devant l'histoire* was produced in the darkest of times. Even so, a letter to the *Cahiers du Sud* shortly after its submission movingly attests to its author's need to continue affirming the life of the individual:

je fais comme si tout allait très bien et comme si on était assuré que rien ne sera dérangé de nos projets...sinon on ne pourrait pas vivre...les événements ne l'ont pas usé, au contraire ; il tient l'actualité beaucoup trop. Je suis persuadé qu'il aura un certain retentissement. (Fondane 1998, p.153)

For the reader today, overwhelmed with historical hindsight, Fondane's essay does indeed resonate profoundly. Before engaging with it, it will help to look closer at the changing intellectual climate and the developments in Fondane's own thought between summer 1935 and spring 1939, starting with the fallout from the Paris Congrès.

Thinking the Nightmare of History

Fondane and Thought 1935 – 1939

In the immediate aftermath of the 1935 Congrès, as the liberal press commented on the curious spectacle of seeing Communism presented “comme une nouvelle esthétique”, independent participants like E.M. Forster expressed their doubts as to whether the international writers' association formed there would be a real force for antifascism or merely a communist tool. Julien Benda's comments, however, were typical of non-Party progressives, and are telling: “beaucoup de coeur, beaucoup de foi”, in short, good intentions – exactly what Fondane finds insufficient. Ironically, possibly the only “travailleur d'esprit” helped directly by the Congrès was Victor Serge, who was eventually freed following pleas by both Gide and Romain Rolland (Klein & Teroni 2005, pp.568–570).

Few witnesses shared Fondane's view that art was not of much direct use in fighting fascism, but Nikolai Berdiaev scathingly took the Congrès' liberalism apart:

Tous les français sont humanistes...cela leur cause parfois des problèmes pour comprendre le communisme qui est une synthèse de Marx non pas avec Montaigne, mais avec Ivan le Terrible. (Klein & Teroni 2005, p.108)

Whatever ideas French intellectuals had about its role, the USSR's *realpolitik* meant not only that did Moscow not organise and control the Congrès, but also “s’est même ensuite essayé à détruire les effets de l’engagement des activistes” (Klein & Teroni 2005, p.581).

Despite efforts from Barbusse and others, internal politics and the turn to ‘socialism in one country’ meant there was little interest in sustaining a heterodox international cultural operation. The new association may have maintained intellectual independence, but without Soviet finances its activities were curtailed. However, although attempts to start a publishing house and hold a Mexican Congrès – not a choice to please the Comintern – did not go far, the efforts of 1935 paved the way for solidarity with Spain. A more limited second Congrès was actually held there in 1937, individuals like Aragon, Malraux and Tzara took a direct militant role and, perhaps most significantly, a Comité pour la défense de la culture espagnole was set up and actively supported Spanish writers and artists.

The disaffection of the Surrealists spurred them on to new activity, including their written response to the Congrès in August 1935, *Du temps que les surréalistes avaient raison*, followed by an international exhibition in Paris in 1938 and Breton’s collaboration with Trotsky in formulating a manifesto *Pour un art révolutionnaire indépendant* the same year. If this last was an attempt to continue developing ‘engagement’ in an increasingly complicated world, the 1935 text betrayed a kind of humanism underlying Breton’s own iconoclasm, leading Nezval to resign in disgust at his call for a diplomatic solution in regards to Hitler (Klein & Teroni 2005, p.567).

Other writers also responded strongly to the pre-war developments. As well as Malraux’s *L’Espoir*, two works from 1938 stand out for their lucidity and influence: Bernanos’s Spanish testimony, *Les Grands Cimetières sous la lune*, castigating injustice and tyranny on all sides, and Jean Grenier’s *Essai sur l’esprit de l’orthodoxie*, a penetrating analysis of the inner dilemmas of French intellectuals in their relationship with Communism. As well as making a great general impact on publication, these works are highly significant for *L’Homme devant l’histoire*, as Grenier wrote one of several companion essays for *Cahiers du Sud* and Bernanos was a direct inspiration for other contributors.

Cahiers du Sud was the only inter-war journal ‘de province’ to approach the status of Parisian publications like the *Nouvelle Revue Française*. Created in 1914 (as *Fortunio*)

by Marcel Pagnol and its tireless editor, Jean Ballard, it published many great names of European literature and philosophy of the first half of the 20th Century, from most of the Surrealists to Marguerite Yourcenar to Sartre to Walter Benjamin. Benjamin was one of many intellectuals who found refuge at the *Cahiers* in Marseille during the occupation (Paire 1993). And though Fondane was based in Paris, Ballard's journal was absolutely central to his development, publishing much of his work and connecting him to its vibrant network of contributors.

First published by Ballard in 1932 with an article on Heidegger, between winter 1935 and spring 1939 Fondane published articles on Kierkegaard, Dostoevsky, Nietzsche, fellow *Cahiers* writer Raymond Queneau, Gaston Bachelard and Vladimir Jankélévitch. He also published two major works at this time: *La Conscience Malheureuse* (1936), a collection of articles developing his existential thinking going back to 1929, and *Faux Traité d'esthétique, Essai sur la crise de réalité* (1938), in part a reclamation of the independence of poetry from ethical, aesthetic or political impositions (Salazar-Ferrer 2004, p.154). In addition, he published essays and poetry extensively in other periodicals. As he took up the mantle of Shestov's existential thought, it is a mark of his development as a philosopher in his own right, and the recognition of this development by others, that his articles began to appear in the likes of the *Revue philosophique de la France et de l'étranger*.

With Faked Cards

Fondane's credentials were well established, then, when the *Cahiers du Sud* commissioned a written 'debate' on the crisis of Western Civilisation to appear in the May 1939 edition: he was duly asked to provide the concluding essay. The collection of articles was provoked by a lecture given in Marseille by Ernst Erich Noth, in which he proclaimed the decisive moment of the threat to life and freedom was upon the world. Noth was a German refugee, representative of many intellectuals who had fled the Nazi regime. Exiled since 1933, he worked hard to promote German culture while the Nazis burned books and 'entartete Kunst' (Paire 1993, pp.224–225).

Jean Tortel wrote a report on Noth's lecture for the *Cahiers*, admiring Noth's "cri d'espérance" but finding no comfort in his call for spiritual regeneration (Paire 1993, p.251). In response, Jacques Bénét wrote a short essay entitled *Avec des cartes truquées*. Ballard then asked Gaëtan Picon, André Chastel, Jean Grenier, Pierre Missac and Roger Secretain to each respond directly to Bénét's text, with Fondane to provide a résumé and conclusion. Bénét, a Catholic and great admirer of Bernanos, wrote an angry and rather

scolding tract equating the moral and social decline with a spiritual one, taking a patriotic and somewhat conservative tone. Though he castigates Fascism and anti-Semitism abroad and at home, he displays nationalistic sentiments and echoes some of Bernanos's earlier suspicion of Jews (Bénet 1939, p.409).

Though the respondents were from varied backgrounds, they were mostly unenthusiastic. Picon, a militant anti-fascist and socialist, would go on to become directeur général des Arts et Lettres (in 1959, at the behest of André Malraux) and a director of *Mercure de France*. Unsurprisingly, he rubbished Bénet's equation of religion with morality. André Chastel, a (later celebrated) art historian, was similarly unimpressed with his prescription. Jean Grenier, prominent by 1939 because of his philosophical work as well as his famous essay, and mentor of Camus, was secretly a highly spiritual thinker, interested in Taoist principles of non-action and their relation to Christian mysticism (quietly Quietist, in fact). His brief contribution is somewhat critical, but also the most opaque. Pierre Missac, a friend of Benjamin who strenuously propagated the German's work after his death in 1940, wholeheartedly attacked Bénet's proposition and his lack of criticality. Roger Secretain, self-taught journalist and literary critic, who would play a highly involved role in the Résistance and became a social-democratic politician after the war, wrote a long and probing response which drew strongly and approvingly on Fondane's work.

However, Fondane himself refused the concluding role he had been asked to fulfil with his first emphatic sentence:

Les Cahiers du Sud me demandent de « conclure » cette enquête dont ils ont pris l'initiative ; je préférerais, pour ma part, être celui qui pose des questions.
(Fondane 1939, p.452)

Instead, he provided an intensely personal tour de force, acutely aware of and responsive to historical developments and the shifts and transformations they had provoked in the currents of contemporary thought, but also a powerful, polemical and at times poetic expression of his maturing philosophical convictions. The next section will look at its relationship with the essays in the debate and other texts and, of course, the nature of Fondane's questions.

The Individual and History

...Je n'ai jamais eu autant de mal à pondre quelque chose...il y avait là l'étoffe d'un gros livre...j'allais déclarer forfait...aujourd'hui ça va mieux...mais il faudrait me couper en morceaux plutôt que de me demander de le revoir.

... il m'a fallu plusieurs semaines de travail...

From two letters Fondane sent to Jean Ballard in March or April 1939
(Fondane 1998, pp.150 & 152)

“We cannot proceed from individual terms to those of history”

L'Homme devant l'histoire is a markedly different kind of text from *L'Ecrivain devant la révolution*. Instead of being composed in a great hurry with an uncertain function, it had a set role in the pages of a literary journal and was the product of drawn out, agonised reflection. Several of the concerns of the 1935 text are present again: the special, 'frivolous' role of the artist, the hubris of attempts to force the pathways of history, the folly of dismissing psychological and metaphysical considerations. But the complexity of Fondane's arguments and his developments as a philosopher are deepened here. His arguments are enriched with philosophical references, attesting to his voracious reading. And, while polemical, the imaginative rhetoric skilfully employed reminds us of the close relationship between Fondane's poetry and his philosophical thought.

The other texts in the debate each respond directly to Bénet's. While Fondane had an overview of the whole dossier, in refusing to summarise and conclude he chooses not to mention any of his interlocutors by name. But his text does interact with theirs, most obviously with Bénet's, taking Bénet's use of a quote from Gide (which in fact originated with Emmanuel Faÿ) and expanding it to undermine all claims for absolute authority implicit in ideological propositions like the one Bénet puts forward. Bénet's title seems to refer to the redundancy of what he sees as the veneer of diplomatic respectability with which the Nazis coat their wilful acts of force (Bénet 1939, p.411). In a sense, Fondane reverses this analysis. Attacking the limits of reason, he states that the Nazi project is rather a twisted outcome of just such claims to respectability. Such a view was unorthodox at the time, and still requires carefully considered reading. Yet Bénet and Fondane agree, at least, on the ineffectuality – and at times hypocrisy – of the discourse of traditional liberal humanism.

Bénet conflates Christianity with “la morale traditionnelle garante du droit de la

justice” (Bénet 1939, p.406) and points to the Nazis as barbarian pagans who have usurped its place. But his example of Otto Planetta (assassin of Austrian Prime Minister Engelbert Dolfuss)’s dying words of loyalty to Hitler, used by Goebbels to promote the supposed supremacy of the ‘Aryan superman’ in comparison to a ‘snivelling’ Christ, is understood more subtly by Fondane, whose mention of Nazi theorist Alfred Rosenberg demonstrates the value of knowing one’s enemy rather than simply dismissing them. He leads into a discussion of the figure of Christ himself, who was in fact ‘purified’ and ‘reclaimed’ by Rosenberg (Coyne 1935, p.186; see also Steigmann-Gall 2003; *Journal of Contemporary History* 2007), corresponding in a sense to the ‘heroic’ Christ of Luke and John, whom Fondane opposes to the existential sufferer of Matthew and Mark.

Bénet’s central claim for the heroic power of Christian spirituality to reintroduce order into the world is unreservedly rejected: “Ceux-là mêmes qui nous proposent le retour au Moyen Age chrétien, c’est à Planetta qu’ils nous demandent de retourner et non au Christ” (1939, p.449). While Fondane accords the greatest importance to spiritual themes, he sees them as pertaining to the individual and connected to social questions only in an indirect way which cannot be clearly defined. Chastel and Missac’s texts complement this view: “On ne peut passer du plan de la personne à celui de l’histoire” (Chastel 1939, p.421). In fact, while Fondane’s essay is not strictly a conclusion, it is possible to read the five other responses to Bénet as a kind of overture to it, as they sound a contradiction to Bénet’s misguided religiosity, which constructs the salvation of the real world as a straightforward spiritual and intellectual exercise. Fittingly, *L’Homme devant l’histoire* is immediately preceded in the journal by Secretain’s long (and Fondane-inspired) essay, which passes on the baton with a quote from Shestov – “toute pensée profonde doit commencer par le désespoir” (1939, p.440) – foreshadowing Fondane’s uncompromising closing words.

Questions and connections

Bénet’s text is qualified in the preface to the *Cartes truquées* debate. The writer – presumably Ballard – states that *Cahiers du Sud* does not place itself “sous le signe de cette orthodoxie” but hopes that readers “trouveront peut-être une réponse aux questions angoissées qui s’élèvent du monde actuel” (Ballard 1939, p.399). Fondane does not greatly share in this hope, although he does offer an involved analysis of the chaos and the floundering for responses, resonating with – and likely informed by – Grenier’s *Esprit de l’orthodoxie* and its attack on the “mythe [du] Progrès” (Grenier 1938, p.171). Further, beyond Grenier’s cultural, intellectual and social considerations, Fondane is most

concerned with the ‘anguished’ nature of questions raised for existence itself.

Invoking Aristotle, St Augustine, Plotinus, Spinoza, Leibniz and Hegel, Fondane asks if philosophers who separate the mind and its conceptions of order from reality are not performing a dodge which attempts to disavow responsibility for pain and suffering, considerations which have often been scorned by Western philosophy but which are central for existential thought such as that of Kierkegaard. This is complemented by his Biblical exegesis. Against the convictions of all who formulate and propose systems for the ‘true’ ordering of life, he invokes Job, reminding readers that “le même soleil ici-bas luit sur le juste et l’injuste” (Fondane 1939, p.444). Accusing Humanism of equally believing that ends justify means, he implies that even reasoned positions lead to a leap of faith: “affirmer, comme Rimbaud, que tout le monde est un porc...moi qui affirme cela, suis porc aussi” (1939, p. 441).

The reference to Rimbaud is not inconsequential. Presenting a challenge to philosophy and all who try to speak ‘seriously’ and ‘reasonably’, Fondane asks if poets and artists cannot speak with a special kind of freedom, as the masks they adopt give them a distance from their statements. When we put our reputations on the line by making committed statements and suggestions, he questions, do we not refuse the possibility of our helplessness in front of the world’s disorder? He uses Dostoevsky, Faulkner and Shakespeare as examples of writers who have been able to say what Plotinus or even Nietzsche could not in this provocative philosophical consideration of the role of literature, which will be explored further in Chapter 3.

For Fondane, the question ‘what is to be done?’ cannot be considered as one of purely rational enterprise. As in *L’Ecrivain devant la révolution*, he brings Freud to bear to argue that idealised behaviours cannot simply be imposed rigidly onto individuals and societies. Yet, despite his unmistakably post-Nietzschean qualities, neither can he accept *amor fati* (1939, p.445. See also Fondane 1990; Salazar-Ferrer 2001, 2007. Nietzsche’s use of the phrase is of course open to other interpretations). As his singular approach to ‘engagement’ does not represent an avoidance, neither does his view of the inherent chaos of the world entail a flight or refusal. Though his castigation of good intentions which oversimplify the real is unflinching, he is forthright in declaring that he has arrived at the conclusion that the universe is meaningless against his own desire. His only answer is to the immediacy of the situation, without blueprints for the future; the revolt of the individual and those who share the same concerns against the impassive contingency of history. In a world without divine order, individuals turn to faith not because they are convinced of a posited solution’s infallibility, but because there are no comprehensive solutions left.

Civilisation Shaken

Against a backdrop of anti-Semitism, persecution, the consolidation of fascism and preparations for war, intellectuals in Europe in 1939 were left without certainties or promising directions. The great anti-fascist display of 1935 had given way to ideological confusion. Nonetheless, the intervening period saw a continuation of the frenetic activity of the 1920s and early 1930s, including the proliferation of essays and diatribes in journals and remarkable artistic responses to the absurdity and desperation of human affairs. As ostensible foundations of coherence and stability in Western culture were shaken anew, Fondane's development as philosopher led him to critique the complacency of assumptions which were held about them in the first place.

His essay in the May edition of *Cahiers du Sud*, provoked by the prescriptions of Jacques Bénét, is a statement on the times, on the hubris of totalising, systematic approaches to life and on the danger of conviction in the universal application of reason.

La faute est peut-être à cet humanisme même, qui avait trop manqué de pessimisme, qui avait trop misé sur l'intelligence séparée et divine, et négligé plus qu'il ne fallait l'homme *réel* que l'on avait traité en ange pour finalement le ravalier au-dessous de la bête...(Fondane 1939, p.447)

If Fondane offers hope, it is hope without a blueprint, an absurd hope, hope born from despair, the hope of raging against the dying of the light when the conditions are beyond one's control. Demanding a commitment to the real, he nevertheless insists on a conception of existence that surpasses the finitude of reason.

4 The Frivolity of the Artist and Benjamin Fondane's Subversions of History

This chapter engages with some of the concerns of Fondane's essays which came through in the latter sections of the previous two chapters. The essays are linked by their focus on the function of art, particularly in relation to philosophy and politics. What follows below is an exploration and analysis of this treatment of the role of the artist and its wider implications for the philosophical coherence of Fondane's work. Treating the essays very much as literary works, the examination draws connections between Fondane's artistic writing (the term artist being used to denote creative writers and poets – and applicable to musicians – as well as visual artists) and certain contemporaries for whom the question of the freedom of art was also extremely urgent, especially Osip Mandelstam. The interaction of the essays with Fondane's other texts and his central philosophical influences is brought into play, as well as more recent critical and philosophical writing which offers useful lines of interpretation.

Frivolity

In *Benjamin Fondane et la révolte existentielle*, Olivier Salazar-Ferrer sketches the outlines of what he considers to be Fondane's "*théorie de la culture*", founded on "les prémisses de la philosophie existentielle de Chestov". There is not room to outline these prémisses here; suffice to say that

Fondane oppose à [l'idée développée depuis les Lumières...du perfectionnement de nos facultés rationnelles...sur la base d'une *libre conscience critique*] une *contre-culture* qui privilégie la *fonction démoniaque* de l'art, privilégiant la fonction cathartique du rire et de la cruauté. (Salazar-Ferrer 2007, p.110)

Looking specifically at *L'Ecrivain devant la révolution*, Salazar-Ferrer underlines the fact that in this conception the liberating effect ("d'un inconscient traumatisé par les refoulements commandés par l'éthique [Salazar-Ferrer 2007, p.110]) of art on the individual is only tangentially connected with the broader social situation. He connects "sa mission profonde" – if "socialement frivole" (Fondane 1997, p.87) – with Artaud's theatre of cruelty, as Fondane did (see [Fondane 1996a]) but also with the figure of Eros in Plato's *Symposium* (see Gill 1999, p.xxxv).

However, as Salazar-Ferrer notes, it is of course psychoanalysis which is mostly

obviously connected to Fondane's idea of the "rôle guérisseur du rire et...de la cruauté...par la fonction artistique" (Fondane 1997, p.86). The cathartic possibilities of art discussed by Freud in *The Future of an Illusion* (1970, pp.8–10) and *Civilisation and its Discontents*, directly inform Fondane's texts. Yet in the latter, Freud concludes that art "can do no more than bring about a transient withdrawal from the pressure of vital needs" (1963, p.18), whereas Fondane, with characteristic excess, sees it as much more powerful. He is closer in spirit to contemporary Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky and his 1925 *The Psychology of Art*, although he was presumably unaware of Vygotsky's work.

Further, on closer inspection, the 'seriousness' of the 'Nietzschean' frivolity of the artist which Fondane presents in his Congrès text departs radically from a psychoanalytic model. Where Freud sets himself the task of balancing neuroses with civilised life, Fondane, in Dadaist and – again – exaggerated tone, refers in *L'Homme devant l'histoire* to "la tour de Babel inhumaine...que nous avons appelée la civilisation" (Fondane 1939, p.447). The *Cahiers du Sud* text also hints at his fundamental disappointment with psychoanalysis in its attempts to ultimately impose the order of "petits préjugés scientifiques" (Fondane 1934 cited in Finkenthal 2000, p.55). The overall critique of the limits of reason in the essay can be read alongside Fondane's extensive criticisms of psychoanalysis elsewhere – notably in 1936's *La Conscience Malheureuse* (Finkenthal 2000) – as a fundamental refutation of Freud's conclusion that "an illusion it would be to suppose that what science cannot give us we can get elsewhere" (1970, p.52). The interaction of psychoanalysis with his own thought was more fruitful in his intellectual and personal relationship with Gaston Bachelard (see Salazar-Ferrer 2004, p.190), but this engagement with aspects of the philosophy of science also recalls his attacks on Freud's therapeutic methods as pseudoscience.

This rejection parallels that of Marxism in *L'Ecrivain devant la révolution*. For Fondane, Marx and Freud both come up with an excellent diagnosis, but the prescription is unacceptable. For all the brilliance of their discoveries, both resort to trying to "introduire de force un peu de raison dans l'histoire" (1939, p.446) and create a 'scientific' orthodoxy where evidence is made to fit doctrine and not the other way around. The repression enacted by ethics, as read by Fondane through Freud and, particularly in relation to Christianity, Nietzsche, is renewed in "le mouvement socialiste, un renouvellement du christianisme" (Fondane 1997, p.106) and in Freud's own conclusions, which "rapetissent misérablement l'homme" (Fondane 1934 cited in Finkenthal 2000, p.55). If this echoes the cautions of Grenier's 1938 essay, it also prefigures Deleuze and Guattari's view of "psychoanalytic interpretive practices as no less reductive than the interpretations of Nietzsche's ascetic priests" (Schrift 1995, p.267).

It cannot be overemphasised that Fondane sees the cathartic release of the individual's psychic energy through art as immeasurably important and yet only tangentially connected to the function of society. In the terms of Fondane's idea of art offering "consolations autres que sociaux...là où le social a totalement épuisé ses moyens" (Fondane 1997, p.102), art has the capability to provoke almost any reaction in the individual, but when doing its job properly releases potentially antisocial affects, relieving resentment. His reading of Baudelaire greatly helped to shape this idea. Fondane's theory may attract comparisons with Sartre's 'existential psychoanalysis'; however, it is perhaps better understood in comparison not to the negative balancing of therapy but to the unstable field of the carnivalesque.

As Dana F. Sutton explores in relation to Aristotlean ideas of catharsis in tragedy and comedy, in the Bakhtinian carnival, behaviours or utterances which would normally be considered unacceptable are sanctioned, but do not lose their potential for subversion: "licence is not simply a phase in a complacent evolution to foreknown conclusions; it means, at some level, disruption" (Segal 1978 cited in Sutton 1994, p.116). In whatever specific socio-cultural context the artwork is articulated, it needs a special degree of freedom, not as a safe way of neutralising repressed instincts but because the alternative is likely to be worse for the structure of that society: "the spectator's surrounding society has a considerable stake in the successful outcome of the cathartic process" (Sutton 1994, p.118).

The catharsis of art is indirectly linked to the functioning of any given society, but not according to any universal code of social behaviour. In *L'Ecrivain devant la révolution*, Fondane predicates its power on a favoured conception of the artist—"égoutier" as "selon l'éthique, une sorte de monstre, un individu subversif" (Fondane 1997, p.88). The special freedom of speech given to the artist is necessary, but retains its subversive possibilities. It is significant that poets were banned from Plato's *Republic* and *entarte Künstler* from the Third Reich – prohibitions which Fondane would see as misguided even on the ruler's own terms – not because of their effectiveness as political propagandists but because of a recognition of their *inherent* subversiveness.

Subversion

Only in Russia poetry is respected – it gets people killed. Is there anywhere else where poetry is so common a motive for murder?

Attributed to Osip Mandelstam

Writing in 1925 with a seemingly genuine enthusiasm for the new Russia and its apparently boundless possibilities, Vygotsky wrote

We do not know which existing but dormant forces in our organisms art will draw upon to form the new man...The possibilities of the future, for art as well as for life, are inscrutable and unpredictable. (1971, p.300)

He died of tuberculosis in 1937, living long enough to see the Soviet authorities betray these possibilities under the diktat of Socialist Realism. Fondane's intention to defend the independence of the artist against an audience mostly composed of dogmatic communists in 1935 is the more remarkable – and poignant – when considered in parallel to the situation of many writers in the USSR in the Stalin years, from Mayakovsky to Tsvetaeva. At the Congrès, the storm around Victor Serge gave a snapshot of what Berdiaev referred to at the time as “la négation de la personne humaine et de la liberté de l'esprit” (1935 cited in Klein & Teroni 2005, p.108), but Fondane could not have known exactly what Akhmatova or Mandelstam were going through at that very period.

What he does recognise is the danger of the removal of the artist's privileged status, necessary for his or her work, because ideally, (in the case of Brancusi for example), “[il] travaille sans arrière-pensée, sans s'être fixé un but précis...Une sorte d'irresponsabilité est le partage de l'artiste” (1995, p.37). Despite Osip Mandelstam's Hellenism, his “desire to be surprised by [one's] own words, to be captivated by their novelty and unexpectedness” (Mandelstam 1977a, p.63) testify to the ‘frivolity’ which saw him killed. Of course, Fondane knows that the liberal democracy, while in some way allowing the need for art's ‘carnival’ role (if only as a result of neglect [Fondane 1997, p.65]) remains suspicious of its subversive potential and ultimately also places limits upon the artist's free speech, as in the case of Aragon's *Front Rouge*.

When Fondane responded critically to Breton's plea for Aragon in 1932, far from

defending bourgeois values, he was attacking the Surrealists for not going far enough, for entering into the discourse of the law and thereby betraying the absolute independence of the artist (1999, pp.71–75). His stance on the encounter of the artist and politics could not be clearer:

Ce n'est pas l'irresponsabilité de l'écrivain que j'entends plaider – j'entends qu'il lutte, se batte et meure – mais qu'il se batte et meure pour une figure de l'esprit à laquelle il a été appelé, dans l'intérêt même de la cité, à donner un sens. (1997, p.105)

On a basic political level, the artist's struggle for independence of spirit can of course come into direct conflict with social authority, “teach[ing the spectator] to take a less respectful attitude” (Sutton 1994, p.101), as in the case of Mandelstam's *Stalin Epigram*. But for Fondane this conflict is a secondary effect of the artist's subversive role, which goes beyond politics. The artist's demonic creativity cannot be made to fit within the confines of any programmatic scheme for ordering the lives of individuals and directing society – such as the kind of Marxism expounded at the Congrès.

This point is illuminated by the words of Russian Joseph Brodsky in his trial for “parasitism” in 1964. Asked “who recognized you as a poet?”, he replied “No one. And who placed me among the human race?”(McFadden 1996). It is not impossible to conceive of a politics which could take Fondane's theory of culture into account, but it would have to respect this artistic independence and not reduce it to an assigned place in a totalising system, be it Marxism, Freudianism or “l'idée paracelsienne” (Fondane 1997, p.73). Rationality cannot be allowed to dominate affect. Any such configuration would have to be open-ended, founded on “une discussion large, courageuse, sincère, angoissante” (Fondane 1997, p.62), bringing to mind Homi K. Bhaba's notion of negotiation (2001, p.2383) .

This interaction between affect and intellect could possibly be construed as a kind of Deleuzian assemblage which lends itself to (post)modern anarchist thinking, as Michel Onfray attempts in *La Puissance d'Exister* (Onfray 2008); it is a central problem for Breton and Riviera and many who have been inspired by them; it may find expression in certain French feminist texts in which, according to Isobel Armstrong, “affect and thought are fused. Passions become epistemic” (Armstrong 2000, p.20). But for Fondane, politics are always secondary, permitted to draw him away from (in the words of Brodsky) “the positive vagueness...of 'life' and 'poet'”(McFadden 1996) only when absolutely necessary (Fondane 1997, p.82).

The subversive “esprit moderne...avec son pouvoir de fécondation, de propulsion,

de stimulant vitale” (Fondane 1999, p.141) which Fondane sought in art moved on both affective and ontological levels. The artist’s freedom of speech is not just a political necessity but a metaphysical principle: the distance or disjunction between the artist and their utterance allows them to say what they could not if they were personally invested in their statement. Bringing to mind Yeats’ line “it was the mask engaged your mind” (2000, p.76), Fondane asserts that

Shakespeare peut bien oser, en cothurnes et sous masque, nous confesser ce qu’un Plotin, un Nietzsche ou un Kierkegaard, ayant eu la même pensée, n’eussent jamais pu avouer, le visage découvert; et, par exemple (comme William Faulkner nous le rappelait récemment), que « la vie est une histoire contée par un idiot, pleine de bruit et de fureur ». (Fondane 1939, p.442)

A tension or dislocation is introduced between the artist, whose works can go beyond all conventions to proclaim the very meaninglessness of life, and the philosopher, who is held back by a personal connection to the world.

Although Fondane places Nietzsche among his philosophical examples in the quote above, his redrawing and expansion of artistic and philosophical territory can be read in conjunction with Nietzsche’s work and his own Shestovian understanding of Nietzsche’s challenges to the objectivity of philosophy (see Salazar-Ferrer 2001). In fact, on the very next page Fondane says “c’est Nietzsche, c’est Dostoïevski, c’est Shakespeare – celui qui ose penser hors la contrainte du social” (Fondane 1939, p.443). This paradoxical move underscores Nietzsche’s conception of and desire to be the artist-philosopher; indeed, in the words of Rilke he was “well qualified (*as a poet*) to make the attempt at a ‘resurrection of Dionysus’” (Rilke 1900 cited in Kaufmann 1995).

Walter Kaufmann’s 1950 essay *Nietzsche’s Attitude Towards Socrates*, in which he attacks over-simplification and lacunae in prevailing critical attitudes towards this attitude, can be used fruitfully to explore the interrelation of Nietzsche’s artist-philosopher and the role of the artist in *L’Homme devant l’histoire*. Without eliding Nietzsche’s criticisms of Socrates, Kaufmann convincingly argues for his ultimate admiration for the Greek as the embodiment of *Lebensphilosoph*. Socrates’ unending, subversive and entirely autonomous search for truth parallels the limitless quest of the artist. While Socrates briefly appears in Fondane’s 1939 essay in his common guise as the symbol of reason, given as the antithesis to absurd despair (represented in this case by Christ), Kaufmann’s interpretation is closer to Fondane’s more complex use of Socrates in his 1935 text, where Socrates’ own mental and spiritual revolt is emphasised. In a move which parallels Fondane’s irreverent

opposition of the suffering Christ of Matthew and Mark to the hero-of-reason-Christ of Luke and John, Kaufmann argues that the ‘traditional’ Socrates gives way in Nietzsche to “an ‘artistic Socrates’...nobody has ever found a better characterization of Nietzsche himself”, in Nietzsche’s own words, “the *Socrates who practises music*” (Kaufmann 1995, p.126).

This is no forced synthesis of two seemingly irreconcilable terms, such as Gide’s attempt to mix Montaigne and Marx, but an identification of Nietzsche and Socrates in terms of the Shakespearean fool, the ‘crazy wisdom’ of Tibetan Buddhism, the “*frivolité de l’artiste*” (Fondane 1997, p.90; see also Salazar-Ferrer 2004, p.171). To gloss Mandelstam’s phrase (1977a, p.58), “a suspicion of madness falls on the poet” as artist-philosopher. *L’Homme devant l’histoire* creates a schema of opposition, which can be reinforced to make its Nietzschean character explicit. Fondane’s Dostoevsky and suffering Christ, and Nietzsche’s Goethe and Socrates, on the one hand, versus the Christ of God’s divine plan and Socrates as “l’héros de l’Idée” (Fondane 1939, p.448) on the other: “*Dionysus versus the Crucified*” (Nietzsche 1908 cited in Kaufmann 1995, p.138).

Kaufmann’s picture of Nietzsche’s Socrates and the frivolity of Fondane’s artist can perhaps be read in terms of Alan Schrift’s Deleuze-inspired coinage of “the infinite processes of becoming that I am suggesting we call becoming-*Übermensch*” (1995, p.264). In this way we can better understand Fondane’s portrayal of the Nazi project as rational by looking at the Nazi misreading of Nietzsche. Fondane’s apposition of Nazi thought with liberal humanist thought is paralleled in that of Nazi eugenic Superman utopianism with the self-actualisation interpretation of liberal philosophy. In fact, as Schrift has it,

“*Übermensch*” does not designate an ontological state or way of being that a subject could instantiate...we can read *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* not as providing the blueprint for constructing a centred super-subject called “Overman”...Instead, an experimental approach attends to Zarathustra’s own experimentalism, noting as he does that one must find one’s own way, “for *the way* – that does not exist. (1995, p.263)

To apply Schrift’s term, Nietzsche and Fondane could be said to oppose becoming-*Übermensch* to totalising rational systems which negate the energy of life. If Fondane and Shestov decried the role of Plato and Socrates in the glorification of reason, Nietzsche’s Socrates and Fondane, the philosopher and the poet, find common ground in what Fondane scholars refer to as ‘irrésignation’ (Fotiade 1997, p.3).

Irrésignation

As with Mandelstam in the USSR, Fondane was true to the struggle of the “figure de l’esprit”, continuing to write throughout his life in hiding in occupied Paris right up until his death in Auschwitz. His poetic affirmation of 1942 adorns the walls of Yad Vashem: “j’avais eu, moi aussi, un visage marqué / par la colère, par la pitié et la joie / un visage d’homme, tout simplement !” (Fondane 2006, p.153). As with the Grand Jeu group, his contemporaries and occasional interlocutors, his poetic and philosophical activities are defined by a coherence, a shared search, which breaks down conventional barriers between the two. Richard Eldridge’s recent words on the function of poetry may be appropriate here:

Perhaps we should not call what we get from deeply absorbing, cathartic, yet contingency-acknowledging constructions of experience, knowledge. Even framing the issue about the role of literature in our lives in terms of knowledge as it is construed paradigmatically in the natural sciences expresses the philosopher’s characteristic bad faith in wanting everything circumscribed and life guided by rationally obligatory rules. Yet we cannot live as human persons without this literature; what we get from it is a sense of life in a human reality that is, if marked by brute contingency, not everywhere dominated by it. Arriving at this sense is a way of knowing by acknowledging what and where and how we are. (2007, p.148)

Fondane’s call for a new “humanisme prévoyant”, like Nietzsche’s call to counterbalance the Apollonian with the Dionysian, is founded on such a need to not “*sur-estime la raison*” (1939, p.447).

Eldridge’s concluding sentence may seem at odds with Fondane’s “soif d’infini” (Salazar-Ferrer 2008), but perhaps the terms can be reconciled if we read the meaning as a process of acknowledging the world (in so far, as Socrates would doubtless say, as we can be said to have knowledge of it) which does not necessarily entail accepting it: “Il n’y a pas assez de réel pour ma soif!” (Fondane 2006, p.21). Fondane’s revolt inevitably invites comparison with that of his better-known contemporary Albert Camus; in fact, the two talked and wrote to each other in the 1940s and *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* obliquely forms part of their dialogue (Salazar-Ferrer 2007, p.113). But Camus’ revolt is actually radically different from Fondane and Shestov’s existential tragedy, where reason cannot be relied upon as a weapon against the absurd. Their position is closer to that of Georges Bataille,

who also collaborated with Shestov. Like that of Bataille, the “résistance métaphysique” to Nazism of *L’Homme devant l’histoire* was a difficult and complex position to articulate in a context framed by most as a war of reason against barbarism (Salazar-Ferrer 2007, p.131).

For Fondane, fascism (and this may also be true of his suspicions of Stalinism) represented “un danger d’ordre messianique” (n.d. cited in Salazar-Ferrer 2007, p.132), a metaphysical threat of the annihilation of the spirit as well as physical violence and repression. Thinking disaster through Fondane is intimately linked to the extra-rational exploration by the artist behind her or his mask. It takes us to the limits of rational knowledge. As Maurice Blanchot writes in *L’Ecriture du désastre*:

A moins que la connaissance ne nous porte, ne nous déporte, étant
connaissance non pas du désastre, mais comme désastre et par désastre, frappés
par elle, cependant non touchés, face à face avec l’ignorance de l’inconnu[...]
(1980, p.11)

The catastrophe, recalling its original sense in classical drama of denouement, is a moment of revelation. If, as Blanchot aphoristically implies, knowledge is fragmentary and we are prevented from seeing the whole, the Fondanian commingling of affect into consciousness makes the artistic moment of revelation into a paradox where a kind of epiphany is experienced, yet its meaning cannot be grasped, always communicated in an indirect way. *Pace* Camus, the experience of the absurd is absurd in itself, and his articulation of this experience perhaps deepens Fondane’s affinity with Artaud, Arthur Adamov and Eugene Ionesco. He simultaneously tries to grasp the elusive real and exceed it.

If this seems abstract, it is worth recalling that for Fondane this “frivolité” of the artist is “beaucoup plus terriblement sérieuse que le sérieux le plus grave” (1997, p.90). His use of the term “messianique” also brings to mind Walter Benjamin, Fondane’s contemporary, similarly influenced by mystical and philosophical Jewish thought. In fact, Benjamin read Fondane regularly in *Les Cahiers du Sud*, to which he also contributed, mentioning his admiration for Fondane’s philosophical writing to Jean Ballard in his letters (Benjamin 1934; 1935). As Margaret Teboul has described, Benjamin and Fondane converge in their rejection of the “empty and homogenous time” (Benjamin 1974, chap.XIII) of history as conceived by post-Enlightenment thought – including, arguably, that of Marx – which is grounded in Hegel and “*Vernunft in der Geschichte*” (cited in Fondane 1939, p.446). They consider ‘progress’ as and through catastrophe: “leur déconstruction du temps *historique* vise à intégrer « l’état d’exception », la catastrophe”

(Teboul 2011, para.2). As the state of exception, the catastrophe is also the explosion of infinite possibility, messianic time.

If, similarly to Blanchot, “Fondane souligne que le réel dépasse tout ce que l’art le plus subversif pouvait imaginer” and “la guerre produit pour lui une crise de la représentation qui met l’artiste en face d’une distorsion jamais vue entre la réalité et l’oeuvre d’art” (Teboul 2011, para.6) the question is how to “tirer le signal d’alarme” (Benjamin 1974 cited in Palmier 2010, p.209). Fondane’s “dénouement de l’art *pour* l’art” (Teboul 2011, para.6) which leads him to a kind of anti-aesthetic poetics of art *qua* existential affirmation complements Benjamin’s “*weak* messianic power” (Benjamin 1974, chap.II), searching to break time open, “interrompre le continuum de l’histoire pour briser la réification qu’elle porte”(Teboul 2011, para.26), resurrecting humanity and the aborted possibilities of the past (Fondane 1939; Benjamin 1974, chap.III).

Messianic possibilities offer no guarantee of salvation. The important point for Fondane, as Teboul puts it, is that “l’inspiration messianique veut dire passer du renoncement à « l’irrésignation » et à la révolte” (2011, para.29). The artist should be provoked to look through their mask by the anxiety and indignation caused by ‘man’s’ alienation from history. The nature of this anxiety, indignation and revolt, a Nietzschean, Dionysian irrésignation which seeks new values through the ruins of the old, the search for a “point de rupture radicale” (Palmier 2010, p.210), invites comparison with post-War philosophers who sought to go beyond dialectics, such as Derrida, Foucault and Deleuze, as Bruce Baugh has shown (2003, p.49).

Without implying too close a kinship between any of these and Fondane, it is perhaps Deleuze who can most usefully provide ways of developing the interpretation of Fondane’s thought. Fondane’s theories of culture, with his attack on universal Ideas and their alienation of the individual, and the search for a cathartic art which will open up the infinite possibilities of life, find resonance in Deleuze’s description of

l’ambition de Nietzsche: là où les dialecticiens voient des antithèses ou des oppositions, montrer qu’il y a des différences plus fines à découvrir, des coordinations et des corrélations plus profondes à évaluer: non pas la conscience malheureuse hégélienne, qui n’est qu’un symptôme, mais la mauvaise conscience!...*intérieurisation de la douleur par changement de direction du ressentiment*...il met en jeu l’ensemble du phénomène qu’on appelle *culture*. (1999, p.152)

Deleuze and Fondane would seem to agree that history, dialectics and closed systematic analyses like Marxism and Freudianism operate through a process of exclusion. However, as both try instead to touch the “tout cela *ensemble*” (Fondane 1997, p.74), where Fondane finds an inexpressible opening onto the divine (the “besoin d’une métaphysique du religieux” [Fondane 1939, p.452]), Deleuze seeks “a logic, but one that grasps the innermost depths of life and death without leading us back to reason” (Deleuze 1997 cited in Baugh 2003, p.50).

The social and political contexts in which Fondane’s two essays were written were vital stimuli and counterfoils for the development of his philosophy and his exploration of “des rapports d’espoir et de consolation autres que sociaux” (1997, p.102). Is Fondane’s oblique movement towards a new, ‘anti-Humanist’ humanism, undoing the false dichotomy of reason versus unreason (Baugh 2003, p.49), born out of a generalised Benjaminian state of exception, possible? In her study of the cultural memory of May ‘68, Kristin Ross comments on Leslie Kaplan’s novel *Depuis maintenant*:

Kaplan evokes the way in which the suspended moment of the general strike allows, if only for an instant, the perception of all other possible lives, a vast unexplored territory of possibility...“everything is happening, everything can happen, it’s the present...Love can create this feeling, or art; it is rare to feel it in society”. (Ross 2002, p.141)

We can thus hint at possible formulations, but no more. Fondane’s *conscience malheureuse* probably cannot incorporate the notion of victory, which surely implies a *telos*; his “anarchisme métaphysique” (Salazar-Ferrer 2007, p.85) is dependent on its open-endedness. But against Plato’s Republic of philosophy and the portrayal of desire as lack, his irrésignation represents the necessary confrontation with contingency and the extra-rational.

As with desire for Deleuze, irrésignation exceeds itself, affirmative and infinite, plentiful yet endlessly restless. Just a few years before each was crushed under the weight of history, Fondane and Mandelstam independently found suitably Deleuzian images to express the vital, overflowing sensations and connections they felt and whose liberation they hoped the modern world would allow. In *The Word & Culture*, Mandelstam wrote “The race to modernity isn’t measured by subways or skyscrapers; but by the speed with which the sprightly grass pushes its way out from under the city stones” (1977b, p.49). In *Ulysse*, hinting at his refusal to let the deaths of the past be explained away as figures in the accounting books of history and concentrating the significance of the ‘spiritual’

possibilities of words, Fondane wrote “Je fais jaillir du blé dans les vieux marbres morts/des roses dans les vieilles bibles” (2006, p.69).

Writing life

Fondane’s two essays represent a challenge to the rational ideal: on the specific level of the cathartic freedom of art, which reveals the overwhelming plurality of existence, the impossibility of circumscribing it, and the libidinal energies at play in all areas of human culture, and on a more general level in a subversion of the concept of history and idealist philosophies which participate in its alienation of the individual and the exclusion of contingency, instinct and affect. This is not to say they are ‘anti-*thought*’; Fondane exhaustively seeks new modes of critical thinking. As Deleuze (referencing Shestov, incidentally) puts it: “Ce qu’on oppose à la raison, c’est la pensée elle-même; ce qu’on oppose à l’être raisonnable, c’est le penseur lui-même” (1999, p.107).

Deleuze’s second clause is important: read creatively along the lines of Fondane’s own opposition, it could imply the ‘reasonable being’ as an illusory ideal in itself versus the ‘thinker’ who is always-already *real*. The essays form part of the fervent project of existential attestation and affirmation which underpins Fondane’s entire body of work. From the lines cited above, *Ulysse* continues “Oh! L’homme beau sur tout cela, / l’homme puissant et qui décide et qui peut tout[...]et que rien ne peut balayer de la terre / (pendant qu’il chante)”. Together, *L’Ecrivain devant la révolution* and *L’Homme devant l’histoire* ‘chantent’ the power of and the need for the ‘chant’ of the artist, representing and defending the contingent experience of the individual within the social context and beyond. Like Chinua Achebe’s notion of cultural celebration (Feldman 2000), Fondane’s writing entails a recognition of life’s failures, suffering and catastrophes even while it resists them.

5 Conclusion: The truth of the writer: 1939 and onwards

A year after the publication of *L'Homme devant l'histoire*, Fondane was called up to fight the German invasion, just a few months after the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact had definitively pulled the rug from under the feet of the front unique and dismayingly exemplified the potential irrationality of 'rational' programmes which seek to direct the course of history. A prisoner of war, he was released for medical reasons, and from 1941 lived in Paris, more or less in hiding, until his arrest and deportation in 1944. Nevertheless, he continued to write frenetically, culminating with the strongest expression of his existential philosophy, *Le Lundi Existentiel et le Dimanche de l'histoire*, which was published in 1945 in Jean Grenier's *L'Existence*. Remarkably, during this time he also met or corresponded with an astonishing variety of other writers, including Camus, E.M. Cioran, Georges Ribemont-Dessaignes, Stéphane Lupasco and Max-Pol Fouchet, even managing to attend several of Bachelard's lectures at the Sorbonne (Salazar-Ferrer 2004, pp.213–225). All of these interactions exerted an influence on the continuing development of his thought.

It is perhaps Fouchet and his Algiers-based poetry journal *Fontaine* which are most relevant for Fondane's lived philosophical commitment to the role of the artist. *Fontaine* offered a "résistance poétique" (Salazar-Ferrer 2003, p.39) which ran the risk of falling foul of the censors, with all the attendant consequences for the individuals involved – members of its staff were eventually arrested – not to mention the dangers run in publishing Jewish poets. Around the same time as he wrote *L'Homme devant l'histoire*, Fondane had an article published in *Fontaine* in which he reiterated the critical position on poetic 'engagement' found in *L'Écrivain devant la révolution*, applied to the context of the impending war. Yet in the early 1940s, his own poetry appeared in Fouchet's journal, as well as in Paul Éluard's underground resistance journal, *L'Honneur des poètes* (under the pseudonym Isaac Laquedem). Although Fondane's unorthodox philosophical stance was in many senses highly isolating in the context of the war, these appearances testify to some kind of recognition of his own 'résistance poétique', the "*autonomie existentielle de la poésie...*« pas une 'poésie de guerre' mais une poésie du moi bousculé par la guerre »" (Salazar-Ferrer 2003, p.43).

Fondane's interventions in prominent intellectual debates in France in the 1930s were somewhat obscured by the historical circumstances of his death and the flourishing of Sartrean existentialism after the war, which in some ways repressed other currents of existential thought. The 'recovery' of Fondane's works, biography and personal

correspondence over the past twenty years or so by Francophone scholars has revealed their significance in both adding extra dimensions to these debates and directly influencing many other participants in these debates, including several who remain prominent today, like Benjamin and Camus. Fondane's texts reclaim possibilities beyond the lines of history and politics, but, as for those of many of his contemporaries, a fundamentally necessary part of their genesis and composition was an engagement with the momentous events of their period.

As the 1935 Congrès showed, anti-fascism in the 1930s was always bigger than dogmatic communism. If not 'engagé', *L'Ecrivain devant la révolution* and *L'Homme devant l'histoire* are politically engaged texts. Yet they are also much more: they form part of the fabric of Fondane's philosophical work, which cannot be disengaged from, indeed is predicated on, the experience of the 'existant'. Against the dark tide of history, Fondane's philosophy of attestation and revolt against the devastating battle lines drawn by ideals, given expression in his artistic theories and his own poetry and essays, allowed him to maintain a kind of impossible hope, which invites comparisons with the subversive effect of samizdat writers in the Soviet Union, achieved simply through their affirmations of existence. If many found his post-Nietzschean ethical stance difficult, his irrésignation still retains the power to provoke immediate recognition and admiration. Like Kafka, who inspired the title for his *Lundi Existentiel*, his writing explores the dynamics of being human within the absurdity of existence. His uncompromising fight against the alienation and devaluation of life prefigured the changes in the thought of communist writers like Aragon after the war and the disillusionment of Hungary and Prague.

Fondane's texts also prefigure many of the 'post-Marxist' attempts to reclaim the importance of art since the 1960s. Efforts like those of the Situationists to continue the work of Dada and Surrealism in uniting affect and intellect would not have had Fondane signing manifestos, but he would have recognised the 'problematique'. As *L'Ecrivain devant la révolution* shows, he accepted that capitalism was detrimental to society, and the neoliberal free market would provoke him as much as any other ideology. In a sense, his theory of culture sits nicely alongside Adorno's famous statement that "every pleasure which emancipates itself from the exchange-value takes on subversive features" and the critique of mass consumption as the newest of new religions (Adorno 2001, p.39).

The Congrès and the *Cartes truquées* debate marked an address to something that is beyond words, and Fondane would argue that if the world does have spiritual problems, these need to be addressed on spiritual, not moral, terms. On the surface, there would seem to be possibilities for linking Fondane's rebellion with eastern philosophies, as his acquaintances like Joë Bousquet or the Grand Jeu group did (Salazar-Ferrer 2004, p.61).

But his 'demonic' function of the artist-philosopher would appear to preclude forms of resolution. His anti-Hegelianism does, however, create possibilities of connection with Deleuze and other recent French thought, perhaps even the likes of Jacques Rancière (Wolfe 2006). Perhaps paradoxically in light of his 'anti-Enlightenment' stance, *L'Écrivain devant la révolution* and *L'Homme devant l'histoire* testify to a commitment to the absolute freedom of speech and the individual which has parallels with many similar commitments in French writing since the eighteenth century. For Fondane, life and art are a process of incessant questioning and attesting, with no universal answers to be found. This process represents the unyielding vitality of being.

Bibliography

- Adamowicz, E., 2005. 'Fist on the table: a review of *Benjamin Fondane* by Olivier Salazar-Ferrer'. *Times Literary Supplement*, (5315), p.11.
- Adorno, T.W., 2001. *The culture industry: selected essays on mass culture* J. M. Bernstein, ed., Routledge (London).
- Alexander, M.S. & Graham, H., 2002. *The French and Spanish Popular Fronts: Comparative Perspectives*, Cambridge University Press (Cambridge).
- Armstrong, I., 2000. *The radical aesthetic*, Wiley-Blackwell (Oxford).
- Ballard, J., 1939. Introduction to "Avec des cartes truquées". *Cahiers du Sud*, (XVIII), p.399.
- Baugh, B., 2003. *French Hegel: from surrealism to postmodernism*, Routledge (London).
- Béhar, H. & Carassou, M., 2005. *Dada: histoire d'une subversion*, Fayard (Paris).
- Bénet, J., 1939. 'Avec des cartes truquées'. *Cahiers du Sud*, XVIII (216), pp.401-413.
- Benjamin, W., 1934. Unpublished letter to Jean Ballard. JBMs126.3, Fonds Ballard, Bibliothèque Alcazar, Marseille.
- 1935. Unpublished letter to Jean Ballard. JBMs126.4, Fonds Ballard, Bibliothèque Alcazar, Marseille.
- 1974. 'On the Concept of History'. In *Gesammelten Schriften* I:2. Suhrkamp verlag (Frankfurt). Translated by D. Redmond and Available at: http://members.efn.org/~dredmond/Theses_on_History.PDF [Accessed September 20, 2011].
- Bhaba, H.K., 2001. 'The Commitment to Theory'. In V. B. Leitch, ed. *Norton anthology of theory and criticism*. W.W. Norton (New York), pp.2383 - 2397.
- Blanchot, M., 1980. *L'écriture du désastre*, Gallimard (Paris).
- Chastel, A., 1939. 'L'Eglise et le Monde'. *Cahiers du Sud*, XVIII, pp.417 - 422.
- Coyne, J.J., 1935. 'Alfred Rosenberg as German Prophet'. *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review*, 24(94), pp.177-188.
- Deleuze, G., 1999. *Nietzsche et la philosophie*, Presses universitaires de France (Paris).
- Eldridge, R., 2007. 'The ends of narrative'. In J. Gibson, W. Huemer, & L. Poggi, eds. *A Sense of the World: Essays on fiction, narrative and knowledge*. Routledge (New York and Oxon), pp. 138-150.
- Feldman, G., 2000. 'An Interview with Chinua Achebe: Views of Home From Afar'. *Publishers Weekly*, 246(27). Available at:

<http://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/print/20000703/40452-pw-chinua-achebe-views-of-home-from-afar.html> [Accessed September 21, 2011].

Finkenthal, Michaël, 2000. 'Fondane et la psychanalyse'. *Cahiers Benjamin Fondane*, (4), pp.54-55.

Fondane, B., 1939. 'L'Homme devant l'Histoire ou le Bruit et la Fureur'. *Les Cahiers du Sud*, XVIII, pp.441 - 454.

—1943. 'D'Empédocle à Stéphane Lupasco ou 'la Solitude du logique''. *Cahiers du Sud*, XIX(259), pp.71-76.

—1990. *Le Lundi Existentiel et le Dimanche de l'Histoire*. Éditions du Rocher (Paris).

—1995. *Constantin Brancusi*, Fata Morgana (Paris).

—1996a. *Le voyageur n'a pas fini de voyager* P. Beray & M. Carassou, eds., Paris-Méditerranée (Paris).

—1996b. 'Réponse à une enquête sur le cinéma soviétique: A propos du film "Montagnes d'Or"'. *Bulletin de la société d'études Benjamin Fondane*, (5), pp.6-9.

—1997. *L'écrivain devant la révolution : discours non prononcé au Congrès international des écrivains de Paris (1935)* Janover, Louis, ed., Paris-Méditerranée (Paris).

—1998. *Benjamin Fondane et les Cahiers du Sud: correspondance* M. Jutrin, ed., Éditions de la fondation culturelle roumaine (Paris).

—1999. *Fundoianu/Fondane et l'avant-garde* P. Răileanu & M. Carassou, eds., Fondation culturelle roumaine (Paris).

—2006. *Le mal des fantômes* P. Beray, M. Carassou, & M. Jutrin, eds., Verdier (Paris).

—2007. *Écrits pour le cinéma: le muet et le parlant*, Verdier (Paris).

Fotiade, R., 1997. Editorial. *The Lev Shestov Journal*, (1), pp.1-3.

Freud, S., 1963. *Civilization and its discontents* translated by J. Strachey, Hogarth Press (London).

—1970. *The future of an illusion* translated by J. Strachey, The Hogarth press and the Institute of psycho-analysis (London).

Gide, A., 1950. *Littérature engagée* 11th ed. Y. Davet, ed., Gallimard (Paris).

Gill, C., 1999. Introduction to Plato's Symposium. In *The Symposium*, translated by C. Gill. St Ives: Penguin (London), p. x-xlvi.

Glover, J., 2001. *Humanity: a moral history of the twentieth century*, Yale University Press (New Haven).

- Grenier, J., 1938. *Essai sur l'esprit d'orthodoxie*, Gallimard (Paris).
- Guiraud, J.M., 1998. *La vie intellectuelle et artistique à Marseille à l'époque de Vichy et sous l'occupation, 1940-1944*, J. Laffitte (Marseille).
- Journal of Contemporary History*, 2007. 42 (1&2)
- Jutrin, M. et al., 1996. Editorial. *Bulletin de la société d'études Benjamin Fondane*, (5), p.1.
- Kaufmann, W., 1995. 'Nietzsche's Attitude toward Socrates'. In *Nietzsche: A critical reader*. Blackwell (Oxford), pp. 123-143.
- Klein, W. & Teroni, S. eds., 2005. *Pour la défense de la culture: les textes du Congrès international des écrivains, Paris, juin 1935*, Éditions universitaires de Dijon (Dijon).
- Kritzman, L.D., Reilly, B.J. & DeBevoise, M., 2007. *The Columbia History of Twentieth-Century French Thought*, Columbia University Press (New York).
- Lottman, H.R., 1998. *The Left Bank: Writers, Artists, and Politics from the Popular Front to the Cold War*, University of Chicago Press (Chicago).
- Mandelstam, O., 1977a. 'About an Interlocutor'. In *Selected Essays*, translated by S. Monas. University of Texas Press (Austin), pp. 58-64.
- 1977b. 'The Word & Culture'. In *Selected Essays*, translated by S. Monas. University of Texas Press (Austin), pp. 49-53.
- McFadden, R.D., 1996. 'Joseph Brodsky, Exiled Poet Who Won Nobel, Dies at 55'. *New York Times*.
- Minet, P., 1935. 'Sur une séance du congrès de la culture'. *Cahiers du Sud*, (175) pp.607 - 610.
- Onfray, M., 2008. *La Puissance D'Exister*, Librairie générale française (Paris).
- Ory, P. & Sirinelli, J.-F., 2004. *Les intellectuels en France: De l'affaire Dreyfus à nos jours*, Perrin (Paris).
- Paire, A., 1993. *Chronique des Cahiers du sud, 1914-1966*, IMEC (Paris).
- Palmier, J.-M., 2010. *Walter Benjamin: Un itinéraire théorique*, Belles Lettres (Paris).
- Racine, N., 1966. 'L'Association des Écrivains et Artistes Révolutionnaires (A.E.A.R.): la revue "Commune" et la lutte idéologique contre le fascisme (1932-1936)'. *Le Mouvement social*, (54), pp.29-47.
- Ross, K., 2002. *May 1968 and its afterlives*, University of Chicago Press (Chicago).
- Salazar-Ferrer, O., 2001. 'Fondane lecteur de Nietzsche'. *Bulletin de la société d'études Benjamin Fondane*, (4), pp.23-31.

- 2003. 'Fondane et la politique de la revue *Fontaine*'. *Cahiers Benjamin Fondane*, 6, pp.38 - 45.
- 2004. *Benjamin Fondane*, OXUS (Paris).
- 2007. *Benjamin Fondane et la révolte existentielle: essai*, Corlevour (Paris).
- 2008. 'Entretien d'Olivier Salazar-Ferrer avec Goulven Le Brech sur *Benjamin Fondane et la révolte existentielle*'. *Le Grogard*, (8 and 9).
- Schrift, A., 1995. 'Putting Nietzsche to Work: Deleuze'. In *Nietzsche: A critical reader*. Blackwell (Oxford), pp. 250-275.
- Secretain, R., 1939. 'De notre révolte à notre refus'. *Cahiers du Sud*, XVIII, pp.428-441.
- Serge, V., 1972. *Seize fusillés à Moscou: Zinoviev, Kaménev, Smirnov..., Spartacus* (Paris).
- Shulman, A.K., 1991. 'Dances with Feminists'. *Women's Review of Books*, IX(3).
- Steigmann-Gall, R., 2003. *The Holy Reich: Nazi Conceptions of Christianity*. Cambridge University Press (Cambridge).
- Sutton, D.F., 1994. *The catharsis of comedy*, Rowman & Littlefield (Lanham).
- Teboul, M., 2011. 'Walter Benjamin et Benjamin Fondane devant l'histoire et le temps'. *Cahiers Benjamin Fondane*, (14). Available at: <http://fondane.com/MTeboul%20Walter%20Benjamin%20et%20BF%2011.htm> [Accessed September 10, 2011].
- Tonnet-Lacroix, E., 1993. *La littérature française de l'entre-deux-guerres (1919-1939)*, Nathan (Paris).
- Vygotskiï, L.S., 1971. *The psychology of art: by Lev Semenovich Vygotsky. Commentary by V. V. Ivanov translated by Scripta Technica*, M.I.T. Press (Cambridge, MA).
- Wilde, O., 1905. *The Soul of Man under Socialism*, T.B. Mosher (Portland).
- Williams, R., 1976. *Keywords: a vocabulary of culture and society*, Taylor & Francis (New York).
- Wolfe, K., 2006. 'From Aesthetics to Politics: Ranciere, Kant and Deleuze'. *Contemporary Aesthetics*. Available at: <http://www.contempaesthetics.org/newvolume/pages/article.php?articleID=382> [Accessed September 23, 2011].
- Yeats, W.B., 2000. *The collected poems of W. B. Yeats*, Wordsworth Editions (Ware).

**Subversions of History: *The Writer Before the Revolution and Man Before History*
by Benjamin Fondane**

**A critical edition with translations,
accompanying essay and notes on the
translations**

Andrew Geoffrey Paul Rubens

In two volumes

For the Degree of Master of Philosophy

University of Glasgow

French (School of Modern Languages and Cultures)

October 2011

Volume Two

Note on the translations

The Writer Before the Revolution and *Man Before History* indicate parallel narratives of opposition in their titles. They are both fiercely polemical texts, though they do not hide the fact that their author was a poet as well as a philosopher. The titles contain both literal and figurative senses: the writer is confronted with revolution and the individual with history both as real events and as philosophical challenges. The parallel is profound: in a sense, the writer before the revolution is a special, specific instance of man before history. The confrontation of the individual with the abstractions of history is at the core of Fondane's thought, and these essays complement each other well as an introduction to it. Together they form an important intellectual response to the political situation of the 1930s, which is not only a valuable contribution to relevant debates of the time but also uses their concerns to develop broader and deeper literary philosophical questions, from the role of art to the absurd.

Although many passages are very witty and often penetrating, Fondane's argumentation is complex. As with one of his key influences, Nietzsche, his rhetorical and often highly contextualised uses of language can mislead or leave ambiguities. The reader must be aware of his multi-layered and sometimes subtle uses of irony, as in the passage concerning 'educated' men and the tortoises (p.77), or 'rational' people ignoring evolution and any other idea that does not suit their own ends (p.56). The essays also draw upon many literary and philosophical references, from Lautréamont to the Bible, which are sometimes employed idiosyncratically and, while highly enriching, can be demanding. In the footnotes I have leaned towards plentiful explication, in the interests of academic comprehensiveness and to avoid leaving the reader with obscurities. Certain references have dated, like the mention of Alfred Rosenberg, a high-profile Nazi whose name is not as well-known as, say, Goebbels or Himmler today.

It is also important to remember the philosophical rigour of the texts, evident in the usage of terms like *nous* and *noumenon*, especially in regards to common words which are used with specific philosophical meanings (e.g. 'sensible' meaning 'capable of being perceived by the senses'). Occasionally, and fittingly, words combine artistic and philosophical ideas. The word 'demonic', applied by Fondane to the character of the artist, refers back to Plato, both in regards to the supernatural inspiration of Socrates, and also to the personification of love in the *Symposium*, where Eros, like Fondane's artist, acts as a link between the human and the divine.

True to the medium, the essays are multifaceted: poetic and philosophical, highly 'literary' and yet conversational. *The Writer Before the Revolution* has an especially

interesting liminal status between the oral and the written, as it was composed hurriedly (in three days, responding to speeches perhaps even as they were being given) in the hope of being read out, while another possibility, publication in a journal, was simultaneously in the back of the author's mind. I have tried to balance the text's orality with its literary aspects. This tension, and the knowledge that Fondane's intended listening audience was an intellectual one, overlaps with the occasional use of obscure language, such as *imprimatur* or *sourcier* ('diviner'), which I had to check against the manuscript to ensure it was not a typographic error for *sorcier*.

Certain key words proved difficult to translate. *Esprit* is used extensively to mean mind, spirit, or both. Avoiding using 'mind or spirit', which I felt to be awkward, I have gone with whichever I felt to be most appropriate for the context; the other sense can often be inferred. In *The Writer Before the Revolution* the meaning of consciousness or intellect is prominent, in *Man Before History* it is often the sense of spirit or individual will which predominates. The specific Hegelian use has, of course, been given as spirit. Unless otherwise stated, 'knowledge' has been translated from *connaissance*, although *connaissance* has also twice been given as 'understanding' (pp.54 & 66). *Cité* was particularly difficult. Although probably in part a reference to ancient Athens, which Fondane refers to, he seems to use it in the general sense given in the *Trésor de la langue française*, simply "*communauté politique indépendante*", often employed here as a synonym for 'society'. I have used 'polity', which keeps both connotations; while 'cité' is more common in French than 'polity' in English, it accords with Fondane's particular usage. One idiom, *en chantant dans les supplices* ('singing through the torture, p.81), is worth glossing here; it refers to the indomitability of Christian martyrs, with no relation to 'singing', or confessing, under duress. Aragon's wartime poem, *Ballade de celui qui chanta sous les supplices*, is a testimony to the courage of fellow *résistants*.

Fondane's style can be abstract, as in his personification of ethics (p.53); his 'highbrow' French can make syntactic difficulties for translating into English; and – paradoxically – as French is not his mother tongue, despite his proficiency, very occasionally difficulties arise from non-native constructions. However, the most interesting problems when translating his writing relate to the subtlety and ambiguity of certain ideas and how to transmit them. One crucial sentence is exemplary. Writing about the death of Socrates, Fondane writes

Elle ne souligne l'obéissance à la cité que pour la rehausser de plus d'éclat sur le plan révolutionnaire de l'esprit, tel qu'il le concevait et qui voulait que le mépris de sa propre vie fût l'acte suprême de la liberté de l'esprit. (p.58)

The pronoun *la* which I have underlined in the citation could refer to either *soumission* from the preceding sentence, *obeissance* or *cit  *. At first I struggled to pin down meaning, but came to realise that this ambiguity, whether Fondane intended it or not, is there in the text and essential to transpose. I would like to thank Fraser Goodall for the helpful discussion we had over this phrase.

In working on these essays I have been very aware of Fondane's unique style and have hopefully translated it without leaving the English too Gallicised. I have sometimes reproduced his capitalisations and italicisations of certain words where I felt this was his unusual manner of emphasis rather than a French convention. Following a principle of 'one stop look-up', the translator's footnotes are marked with an asterisk (*) and combined with Fondane's own notes.

The Writer Before the Revolution

Undelivered speech for the Paris International Writer's Congress 1935

The division of labour, which we already saw above as one of the chief forces of history up till now, manifests itself also in the ruling class as the division of mental and material labour, so that inside this class one part appears as the thinkers of the class (its active, conceptive ideologists, who make the perfecting of the illusion of the class about itself their chief source of livelihood), while the others' attitude to these ideas and illusions is more passive and receptive, because they are in reality the active members of this class and have less time to make up illusions and ideas about themselves.

Marx, *The German Ideology*^{1*}

I had not intended to speak amongst these senior luminaries, several of whom were my teachers, as it was far from my mind that almost no-one would dare to bring a writer's truth here, by which I mean the truth of a writer who is at the same time a man, and not a writer at the expense of the man, or a man at the expense of the writer.^{2*}

The events which have pushed writers to come together in a congress in order to take defensive measures put us before problems which are both ambiguous and confused, being themselves born of confused and ambiguous events. These are, furthermore, blunt and tragic events and our problems can only be real and tragic.

To speak of a threat is to speak of defence, and of legitimate defence, but to speak of defence is also to speak of action and of immediate, efficient action. To uphold the ideological confusion over our wishes, our resources and our possibilities is to remove all practical efficiency from that defence. It seems to me that we must start by making all of our problems clear and in this aim express in all sincerity our doubts, our fears, even our impotence. This takes courage. Oh, far more courage than to blindly throw ourselves into action! Far more courage than to accept readymade methods, whether they come from our enemies or especially if they come from our friends. The struggle to which we have committed ourselves is not the struggle of a moment. It is pregnant with future events. It is at the moment of commitment^{3*} that the for and against must be weighed. It is at the moment of commitment that we must know what notions are involved in our debate and in what sense we mean to fulfil them. To set off with eyes shut is to arrive with eyes shut. Our action may be urgent – that need not stop our ideas from being clear. Because what do

we represent in terms of *force*?^{4*} Just about nothing beside the masses of workers who are at our sides. We represent, to be exact, only *ideas* – and if our ideas are worthless, so too will be our action.

Congress and meeting

This work of clarification by a congress which unites writers from so many nations, from different, if not contradictory, schools and educations, implied from the beginning the awaited opportunity of a wide discussion which did away with apprehensions, frictions and differences and reconciled tense, hesitant and isolated wills around several clear and lengthily polished texts, themselves born from an honest, sincere and open debate. But this rapprochement which the imminence of danger has made necessary, this coming together which is the only notable and effective goal of this congress, was it to be achieved before an audience of non-professionals whose political convictions – conversely to those of writers – were fixed long ago and which take on as a result a confessed colour of prejudice and dogmatic intolerance? Instead of expressing amongst themselves, with a view to conciliation, the appreciable differences which each of them wanted to see disappear as quickly as possible, writers have found themselves forced to confess directly to the public and thereby to focus on, lay out and call attention to the very points we wanted to put to rest.

The public is let in to applaud: this is what is disconcerting for us. Because behind the applause, there is the fear of not being applauded; there is the vague, threatening possibility of silence, of murmurs and boos, a possibility which was in fact unreservedly fulfilled during Professor Salvemini's speech.^{5*} A heavy atmosphere envelopes this room where writers, although chosen in advance according to a bare minimum of revolutionary claims, are scared to diverge too obviously from the wider agenda in the auditorium, which holds the power to applaud or heckle, and to incline one way, or overcome, or suppress or cause to hesitate the most courageous among us.

The congress also gives us the uncomfortable spectacle of great writers who, brought together in their shared anti-fascist attitude and not through a common platform, find themselves unable to speak freely and make us see, despite their efforts, the hesitations, the awkwardness, the unease which grips them. Others decided to get out of it by being clever, while without a look of pity for their well-intentioned colleagues the writers who are already in the ranks made a crude and unintelligent display of their acquired convictions. It is clear that if the congress had taken place *between ourselves*, Gide and Malraux would have spoken much more clearly than they did, Waldo Frank and

Heinrich Mann^{6*} would not have watered down their message so much, Guéhenno would have lacked the opportunity to cut such a resentful figure in front of us^{7*} and the debate over the surrealists would have turned in the direction of a clear and amiable clarification of ongoing disputes, instead of taking the shape of Aragon's haughty indictment,^{8*} which shirked the duty of affirming that the current magnitude of the revolutionary movement among France's intellectual youth is due principally to surrealist activity. In short, we can see that the congress, if it had taken place *between ourselves*, would have had the single objective of creating agreement between writers themselves and not between writers and the audience.

We are therefore still at the point we were at before the congress. We are agreed on what we do not want: subjugation, bullying, censorship and the prospect of concentration camps, but we are none the wiser as to the methods to use to avoid the arrival of these disasters. We were invited above all to clarify alarming problems for the writer, but these problems were evaded and except for the voices of Gide, Malraux, Tzara, Eluard and (...),^{9*} nothing has distinguished the tone of this writers' congress from the average political meeting.

We have heard the same old refrains testifying to Marxism's manifest – and I very much hope temporary – incomprehension of the vital problems for the writer. We have not had the opportunity to discuss the position of the writer within Marxism, not had the smallest possibility of shedding light on the role the writer means to play within it, on the real effectiveness he wields, on the methods he means to employ or on the freedoms which he holds to be indispensable. In this way our voluntary *absence* risks becoming dangerous for the very cause we wish to commit ourselves to. Unable to change his nature, the writer will end up abandoning it completely. He will carry over the contradictions which reside in him all the same, but he will do so hypocritically instead of freely, and finally, whether it be the writer or the worker, someone will *necessarily* be disappointed; someone will necessarily be fooled. It therefore matters, and in the very interests of the socialist struggle at that, that a wide, courageous, sincere and painful discussion is opened. It matters that the writer should express the meaning of his hesitations, that he should let us know his apprehensions, that he should show what is disturbing him. A doctrine called upon to govern the world and take control of the life and meaning of men does not have the right to remain deaf to the complaints of a group whose importance it does not fail to recognise and whose support it seeks. The difficulty of opening this discussion, the constant risk of awakening dogmatic suspicions, of being called counter-revolutionary and bourgeois, makes one suppose that the misunderstanding is deep. It is our duty to avoid prolonging it and lance this abscess.

Tactics and Truth

A doctrine designed to shape the masses, and which appointed itself to do so, even though most do not yet have the grounding of an education, needed to simplify a certain number of cultural notions in order to make them understandable, despite the fact that these notions are infinitely more complex than they appear at first glance. A doctrine of action needs slogans^{10*}. As it concerns real situations which are close at hand and hostile, it must caricature the values which uphold them, and in order to do so, attack them at their sources, their roots, their origins. If the power of priests must be feared, well then, all of Christianity will be attacked, without judging what it could have of merit, necessity or historical worth. In the same way, Hugo and the Romantics, needing to make their art overcome the hostility of the professors, had to attack Racine. Nietzsche showed us that any movement which works to gain a degree of power must inevitably abandon ethical and “eternal” requirements and employ immoral methods without shame – calumny for example. All tactics are lies, calumny and hypocrisy, in spite of the fact that in the human – the all too human^{11*} – domain we would not know how to contest their validity. If we allow publicly that our adversary is in error, but that – as is often the case - their life is irreproachable, their voice sincere and their research disinterested, our honesty is praiseworthy but our tactics are bad. We will earn the esteem of ethics, but gain nothing in regards to the particular problem which weighs on our hearts, and in which it is important we triumph at all costs. Ethics can make accommodations; when our cause has triumphed, it will forgive us. In addition it must be said that ethics forgives almost anything on condition that one succeeds; it is fashioned in the image of History, that great whore, succeed and you will be thanked.

Yet if tactics, as we have just described them, only have value *if we take them for truth*, they similarly only have value if those who came up with them are fully aware of this. With the professors overcome and Romanticism triumphant, nothing stops us now from thinking of Racine as a great poet, and when the churches are swept away nothing will prevent us from allowing the history of Christianity a little justice and granting the free expansion of man’s religious need. I say that nothing prevents it, but this is not enough. It is important that this justice be done because everything that, historically, has existed is an enriching force which forms part of our spiritual heritage; even human error is a part of our riches. Nothing which man has been could stay alien to us. We do not want a new society which we have voluntarily impoverished, we only want to rid outdated values of their dross. We want to free the living from the corpses, we want to do away with the poisons put out by the old institutions, the old idols and the old values, but not with what is

young and what was young, living and spiritual in those institutions, idols and values.

We are presented with two problems: what is the lifetime of a tactic? How *appropriate is a tactic* a) at a particular moment and b) in a particular group? Which means: at what *moment* can the truth be revived? For *whom* must it come alive again?

Failing to pose the problem in this way entails the most serious setbacks: we risk unduly prolonging a tactic which was necessary but is so no longer, and as a result losing the essential truths forever. We also risk employing this tactic in places where it is hardly suitable, and so cannot be believed. Where it cannot be believed, it alienates instead of winning over, it repels instead of attracting, it loses, crucially, its reason for existence, which is to *lead us to a choice* and not to throw us into doubt, solitude or the arms of our adversaries.

Yet the communist error has been to employ a tactic which has shown itself effective on the worker among a group with an intellectual, ethical and metaphysical education. A single, prohibitive and negative mode of knowledge^{12*} which has gone unquestioned among the workers finds understandable resistance amongst writers and intellectuals. Oh, not intentional resistance, the residue of bourgeois prejudices, not ill-will, but reticence born of acquired understanding, of habits of analysis and judgement.

The bourgeoisie, which shaped us, formed us less than we think. It ignored our education. It permitted us to withdraw into ourselves, to oppose the polity, to develop a subtle instrument of knowledge in silence. By keeping us at a distance from its sumptuous meals, in mostly neglecting to invite us to its banquets of power, it left us free to explore all the domains supposed to be unproductive, those of thought, of psychological analysis and of solitude. Only social disorder could tolerate this acquisition, this luxury which is born of a privation, and perhaps a properly organised society will never want to permit us it. But since it has happened and has value, it is important that this illegal gain should not now be misunderstood and disdained. To give you an example: a socialist society would never allow itself the luxury of building a work as useless as the palace of Versailles, and I understand this. If pure beauty costs too much, I accept that a socialist society does not have the right to undertake it (see Marx, *Morceaux Choisis*, p. 106).¹³ But a beauty which is already made, a beauty whose possibility will always stay deep within us like a wish or a desire, must not be disdained. It is fine to say to workers that Westminster Cathedral is the cathedral of others and that they will build no more of them, but there is no need to repeat it to writers, for disaffected as we may be, we would still like it to remain. It is a testimony to what is human, and one of the most beautiful instances of what is human.¹⁴

The Mind and Economics^{15*}

The correct relation made by Marx between the mind and the economic structure of societies is an accepted fact. The mind alone will never be able to demolish the partitions placed between men if we have not beforehand destroyed the economic inequalities which allow the mind to exercise its liberty. But was this assertion of the primacy of economics over the mind – not in the practical order, where this primacy is real, but in the order of thought – Marx’s deep conviction or only an efficient tactic? It probably was! Yet for my part I would like to think that in Marx’s mind it was but a “means”, and that even if it was his deep conviction, this changes nothing. Is it so monstrous to admit that Marx could have made a mistake, when we admit it freely for Socrates, Plato or Spinoza? A genius, even the greatest, has the right to make mistakes.

It is right that this dominance of the mind, which has been used to cast scorn on so many human values, be humbled at last. It is right that we should have made up our minds to consider values found elsewhere than in knowledge, erudition and pure wisdom. It is right that unknown heroisms, risen up from human labour, should have attained their rightful places. It is right that a place be assigned to the mind and to pure intellectual values, which no longer risk damaging the social sphere. But by that I mean that these steps have *practical* value. We must always be ready to come back to the distinction between the theoretical and the practical.

In practical terms, economics must take first priority, but theoretically this is not so. Even if economics is a source of spiritual values, it is neither the first nor the highest of these; it offers a possibility for freedom of expression, as writing offers a *possibility* of setting it down and the printing works offers a possibility of distributing it. To undo the mind’s shackles is not to *create* the mind, it is simply to help it. The Marxist position would only be correct if the economic mechanism functioned automatically, but economics is not a blind force which does without the cooperation and indeed the *conscious* cooperation of men. It has been necessary to *observe* the laws of economics, bring them together, compare them, direct them, it has been necessary to comprehend their point of conjunction with psychological forces, it has been necessary to bring them into people’s consciousness and cause them to act, it has been necessary to watch over them and when, insidiously, they wished to contradict the dialectic – through the birth of fascisms, which it had not predicted – it was necessary to pull together the spiritual weight of considerable human forces to oppose the impassive wall. That is to say that economics is a discovery, an acquisition, an admirable instrument forged by the mind – born, like all things of the mind, from its infinite and patient care with regards to chance and matter.

Drawbacks of the Primacy of Economics

This theory, which would not trouble the working class, troubles us. You were able to see that Gide, Malraux and Waldo Frank were noticeably troubled, without even mentioning Julien Benda,^{16*} whose theoretical resistance is perhaps only cunning. It troubles us, and why? Firstly because man turns himself into a central, macrocosmic idea, a religious idea, and because the mind and freedom, however little they have been fulfilled up till now, are a part of his instincts, of his indivisible fortune, of his biological fabric. Don't bother with scientific arguments: fifty years after the discoveries of Darwin, man has buried that theory, happy at last not to be descended from a monkey. Man may be a dangerous megalomaniac, but that is what he is. He is ferociously idealistic, he likes what glorifies him, even wrongly, and he hates what reduces him, even rightly. It is for these same reasons that the Soviets refuse to recognise psychoanalysis, which seems to them, though scientifically rigorous, a demoralising critique of man.

I said firstly, which assumes something following. Here it is: more than other men, we are more specifically targeted and also offended by the theoretical demand of the primacy of economics and the conception of the mind as a "reflection". Because we are the workers, the technicians and the engineers of the mind. There is an ethics of the mind, a terribly demanding ethics, which goes as far as to want our complete sacrifice to the idea or the work undertaken. That's all well and good. But what use is it to trouble ourselves with theoretical distinctions which, in practical terms, have no importance? Why split hairs?

Without doubt it would be stupid to pick a fight with Marxism for the pleasure of putting an idea to rights. But alas, we cannot have this idea without its various consequences – and we cannot attack these consequences while they are fed by the Idea. If the mind no longer comes first, but is only a reflection, our immediate task has become mediate, our visible God has become invisible and the very meaning of our sacrifice, in changing meaning and weight, escapes us. In a word, instead of being the ones who must take their ideas and their forms to men, the category of "reflection" has us receiving ideas from the economic structure while we simply lend them our talent.

"Here are the good ideas", we are told, "here is honourable human material, here are the respectable values and the odious values, put yourselves to work: make the values of the polity attractive to us and make what has been established as worthless odious to us." The polity is completely ready to welcome us with open arms, to celebrate us, even to idolize us – for our talent and our good will. All in all it has been decided that values are made *elsewhere*, or worse, that they have already been fixed once and for all. Good and

evil, ethical, metaphysical, religious and sexual questions, all of that has been seen, checked, classed and sorted *outside of our control*. The values being fixed, the same for everyone and known by everyone, our role commences at last. We have been recognised as having a special sort of aptitude for polishing, embellishing and working over these moral, social or economic materials; our role consists in giving them a new form which is accessible to everyone. It seems that there is nothing left to discover, other than endless flourishes of form, and whether these new values were even necessary is not for us to worry about, other men are assigned to that task.

A logical consequence of this idea that is being created of the writer (an idea which others have not failed to set out before you) is the presentation of a vision of history which plays down, reduces and demeans – with the best intentions in the world – the purest summits of the human spirit, just as today’s writer must receive his material and ideas and only has the right to dress them up lyrically, and it also emerges that he has never done anything else all throughout history. He has always been the slave or the lackey of the economic regime fate has caused him to be born in. With a greater or lesser degree of willingness, with greater or lesser genius, he has taken in the dominating values of the dominating classes and made them attractive. Only a short time after Tolstoy took Shakespeare by the throat, in an ethical struggle of individual with individual, Gorky^{17*} speaks of the genius of Shakespeare and of the genius of Dostoevsky as talent misused, subjugated by the feudal or bourgeois society they found themselves in. There is no longer a free individual taking a stand against another free individual, these are no longer two creators speaking, but a fabric upon which appear the shadow puppets of a lackey of the bourgeoisie, and, why not, an obedient servant of socialism. There is no point in talking of Shakespeare or Dostoevsky’s conception of life, they have had no more *personal* ideas than Gorky; let us talk only of the relations of production in Elizabethan or bourgeois or socialist society as illustrated – brilliantly – by these writers.

Would we have the conceit to deny the influence of society on the writer, the interdependence of the mind and the economic system? No, but no more than we would deny the influence of climate, background, present moment or Taine.^{18*} No more than we would deny the influence of the child’s sexual development, as Freud has it. And it may be that tomorrow the paracelsian idea^{19*} of the influence of the stars and meteorological conditions will become scientific again, for all I know. Yes, we will accept all that, but preferably all of it *together* rather than each influence on its own. And were we left but a millionth of the whole, which seemed to escape any specific, clear and measurable influence, through our vanity, pride, stupidity, folly, or *raison d’être*, we would see the indomitable evidence of the primacy of the mind and our creative virtue.

The Writer in Society

So the writer is to be a “reflection” of the society he lives in? In that case the word freedom can no longer have any meaning: the mirror is only the servant of our face, it does not have the option of refusing the image projected on to it, it does not have its own opinions. But the writer taken as a “reflection” must not be confused with the obedient writer or the servile writer. Where obedience is spoken of freedom must necessarily be spoken of also. Obedience presupposes conditions of coercion, of interest, of advantage and not those of a living and spontaneous choice. Take away the coercion, or the interests (which are a disguised form of coercion), and the obedient writer will obey no longer. For the word obedience to have a meaning there must be conflict between two or more forces and each side in the conflict must be fully aware of the conflict’s significance. Only he who knows *why* he coerces can do so (the will to power, material interest, etc), while only he who experiences in himself a conscious resistance to a particular coercion feels coerced.

Yet, in strong societies, in balanced societies, the word coercion was as unknown as its opposite, the word freedom; authority was not coercion. However much the ideas which organised these societies may seem false to us, they were believed to be *true* not only by those who reaped the profits from them but also by those who bore their burden. We may speak of there being a human hierarchy, but not of the existence of classes: classes only started to exist on the day that new values penetrated people’s consciousness, the day that indivisible authority had to be replaced by the fist in order to maintain the state of the things which were established but which had ceased to be accepted in trust. It is at the moment that a fissure opens between the real and the legal – up till then identical – that revolutionary periods start to foment: Athenian democracy, the revolt of Spartacus, Christianity, the Reformation, etc.

As a result, only revolutionary periods know the exercise of coercion and participate in that of freedom. If a revolution succeeds, its table of values will reign for a long historical period. In such a case there is no abusive coercion, since nobody thinks of doubting the legality of that Authority, since freedom has no meaning. We must avoid the error of judging a historical era according to our ideas rather than according to its own. There were eras when slaves believed in the validity of their enslavement; neither slaves nor masters had the least idea that there was injustice there. But in a revolutionary period like that of 5th century Greece, Socrates, condemned to death, knew perfectly well that his conviction was unjust. The words freedom and coercion existed for him, and Socrates’ surrender to the decree of his judges was only an apparent surrender. It only emphasised obedience to the polity in order to raise it with more brilliance on the revolutionary level of

the mind, such as he saw it, which required the contempt for his own life to be the supreme act of the mind's freedom.

The case of Socrates is the start of a long series of facts which tend to disrupt Marx's simplifying opinion that there is only revolutionary activity on the economic level and that revolts of the mind, the manifestations of its freedom, [p. 77], are only a "reflection" of class tendencies. It can happen that the writer, in certain periods, takes up against the social state of affairs and the coercion of the mind at the same time, that he is at once a rebel and a revolutionary – the cases of Voltaire, of Rousseau, of Nietzsche, of Rimbaud and of the socialist writers are proof of this. But it can also happen that the writer who is perfectly conformist on a social level is a spiritual rebel – such was the case of Pascal, Fénelon, Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Lautréamont,^{20*} or the heretical Christians – and also that writers who are perfectly conformist from a spiritual point of view be social revolutionaries: such is the case of bourgeois liberalism from Zola to Barbusse and such, I fear, is the official conception which the Soviet State is trying to inculcate in its writers.

The truth must be spoken, however unpleasant it may be: in general, the writer is, at a social level, the most conformist of beings, he has been monarchic, feudal and bourgeois with a fickleness which leads one to predict that he will soon be communist, as soon as the wind changes. His social conformity is not a characteristic of pure servility, it seems rather to be a distinctive characteristic of his essence.

Walter Pater's reflection on the subject of Leonardo da Vinci is worth meditating on for a moment: "He trifles with his genius...yet he is so possessed by his genius that he passes unmoved through the most tragic events, overwhelming his country and his friends, like one who comes across them by chance on some secret errand."^{21*} It would be too easy to accuse the writer of being cowardly and craven – of being a capon as Montaigne said of himself – if he had not, I may add, given abundant evidence that he knew how to live dangerously, with little regard for his own life. Racine, who had an admiration for Louis XIV which may seem excessive to us (just like Dostoevsky in *The House Of The Dead*: "You write that everyone loves the Tsar. I venerate him."),^{22*} nonetheless risked falling out of the King's favour as soon as the question of Port-Royal was posed; this was also the situation of the Protestant writers of the Reformation.

It seems crazy to us, yet writers have testified more to spiritual crises, religious crises above all, than to political crisis. Writers such as Pascal and Fénelon were persecuted for their religious ideas, rather than for anti-religious ones as Voltaire was; Nietzsche or Dostoevsky worked themselves up over a religious idea, even Rimbaud demanded "freedom in salvation",^{23*} but you knew that... The greatest of the writers we honour, even those such as Rousseau or Ruskin, only embody a socially reactionary kind

of person in their struggles against civilisation or mechanisation. Marx's doctrine invites us to establish a bond of interdependence between these isolated cases of spiritual revolt and the revolutionary movement of rising or descending classes, to see within them only purely passive reflections of the economic struggles of class. This hypothesis appears attractive to our mind, which has become more and more determinist, but we would not dare to affirm it as the exact truth. Did Gide not write these significant lines about Dostoevsky: "The happenings in Dostoevsky's life, however tragic, are but surface disturbances. The passions overwhelming him seem to shake him to the depths; but beyond, there remains an inner chamber, unreachd by outside happenings or by passion".^{24*}

Is it that the writer detests social issues? No, it is an effect of *indifference*, of a devouring and exhaustive attraction to the conflicts at work in his *interior realm*, of the exclusion of *surface* passions to the benefit of profound passions. If today's artist, provoked by social issues, seems to become interested in them all of a sudden, it is because an overly agitated social context keeps him too long at the surface of his passions for him to distract himself from them and reconnect with his interior realms. For him to abandon himself to his interior struggles, the society where he lives must have a stable base at all costs, enjoy a relative balance; he is keen to see that balance establish itself in order to find again his indifference to surface passions. It is this indifference alone which allows the entrance of profound passions.

The artist's support of revolutionary movements is therefore motivated by different reasons than those which cause the great majority of humans to act. The short interlude where the artist throws himself headlong into action is, for him, just so much lost time. It is entirely right that an attentive society should gain from this, but to give this *momentary* accordance an exaggerated importance would be making a fool's bargain. The writer's mimicry seems to pay off easily, he likes playing the hero, he likes flattery even more – even the purest of geniuses plays to the gallery sometimes. No, the writer is not a man of action, in the sense of a man who *directly* acts on social issues, who directly acts on the surface passions. His activity is long-term, it is intermediary, it is addressed not to the social but to the individual, and to the individual not from surface passion to surface passion, but from profound realm to profound realm. In this sense we may say that the artist is human; it is incorrect to call him humanist.

Nietzsche said that the poet is a *frivolous* being and I think like him that he is a flighty being, a daredevil, now needlessly bold, now scared of his own shadow. Heir of fables, of myths, of *Mother Goose Stories*, he must constantly renew these fables, take off the varnish which covers them, break their shell and dress up in Nessus' shirt – for the purpose of seeing if it *really burns*.^{25*} However, on the other hand, he doesn't really like

action, revolution, he doesn't really like dying on the barricades – all things which he *knows* he is unable to do – even though he talks about them often and fairly verbosely. The fact that he gives himself over as something he is not, that he is so afraid of letting us see his frivolity, that he plays at heroism, is yet another sign of his frivolity. He is unaware that it is his frivolity and not his heroism which is at the contradictory and tragic centre of our fate.

I was saying that the writer *needs* a stable society, balanced social values, solid ground beneath his feet, as undisturbed a surface as is possible. As a writer – and if his art itself was not at stake – it would be of absolutely no difference to him whether society turned to fascism or to communism, but as he is hardly allowed to be a writer in these troubled times and is called upon as a man, he is obliged to follow through on his ethical duties. Ethically, unless he is a lackey or is crazy, he can only fight fascism and desire the arrival of a socialist society, a society which, negating economic contradictions, promises at once a bit more justice and a bit more duration.

This is why we must not deceive ourselves about the meaning of his assertions, as even while demanding guarantees of his freedom he seems to pose conditions. It would be a mistake, a lack of psychological dexterity, to believe that by freedom he means the right to turn against the socialist society. He hardly means to claim for the fascist the right to sabotage the State; his *indifference to the social sphere* is the most certain guarantee we have of his good intentions. In demanding freedom, he thinks only of his own: the right to carry his *status as a writer*, just as it is, into the socialist State. This would be a simple thing and would be immediately accepted if it were not the case that behind the communist State there is a whole body of doctrines which are immensely respectable but which, born of an ethical demand, bring about a deadly confusion between ethical values and artistic and cultural values.

Freedom, as it is understood by the writer, is only the reestablishment of a *distinction* between those two modes of human activity, very different in their goals and very different in their methods of expression. Ethics, profiting from its intensive presence in the revolutionary movement, has been accorded privileges, a sort of precedence, by the accepted principle that an artwork is constituted solely of its social content. However, it is important for art to separate these powers as soon as possible. Just as ethics can, in a roundabout way, end up at the artwork, art, in a roundabout way, most often ends up satisfying ethical demands.

But we must ensure respect for the very principal of that roundabout way, which presupposes an independent language. The artist has a mission of exploration in the individual; he is a creator of psychological values (drawing on the mythological, the

religious and the sexual) and not possessed of a talent servile to a predetermined content, even if this content has, in addition, a sentimental and emotive importance for him which he does not at all intend to shy away from. We know very well that *the expression of art differs from the expression of social values, even though they are ethically identical*. Once the aesthetic is accepted as a mode of action and knowledge, the least informed of minds can plainly tell that it will not be able to speak the language of ethics without compromising its own sphere.

There is a double discrepancy between these two modes of the mind's activity: 1) morphological and 2) functional. While ethics uses the language of discursive reason, the artist works in the domain of lyrical irrationality, which means that even though he tends to emphasize goodness, health, joy, courage, freedom and loving others, he does so in the seeming form of evil, illness, despair, cowardice or – in a way which further increases the misunderstanding – in the form of humour which blurs what there still is left of clear values in our ethical feeling for art. The artist must point out as quickly as possible that humour, irony and lyricism are categories of art and art is incapable of speaking everyone's common language, that of ethics.²⁶

By art's functional activity we mean to name the deep, irrational necessity which means that art cannot be anything other than what it is, as if it were the bearer of a mission whose meaning must necessarily escape us, and escape the artist in the first instance.

We are free, after having noticed it, to interpret this "demonic" element which we often make out in the art work (without ever being able to fully define it) in the way which suits us best. And yet we go on as though art had a social function – a civilising function – and its demonic content, far from being a contemptible aspect, finds itself actually having an effect of social change upon man. Note that where ethics says "be good, love your fellow man", Lautréamont will say "be vampires" and Baudelaire will say "woman is natural, therefore despicable".^{27*} And where ethics counsels resignation before death, Rimbaud will ask us to rebel against death. We will have to take this contradiction as the *specific* difference at play in the two lively and dissimilar methods of searching for the same values, in order to arrive at the same end.

The social activity of ethics attacks the anarchic or antisocial instincts of man by repressing them by force, in a more or less brutal manner. This is based in coercion, intimidation and humiliation. Freud has widely proven that these repressed instincts are not eliminated and we must recognise them elsewhere, in the multitude of symptoms which are the substitutive fulfilments of the repressed instincts. But these symptoms which psychoanalysis strives to cure, and which are only partially liberated by those gigantic explosions, wars, are insignificant compared to what they would be if there was not a

function able to continue the work of ethics and to cure man from the deep wound which it never stops making much worse. That function is made up in part by the healing role of laughter and in part by the healing role of cruelty: the one and the other are only brought to their highest expression by the artistic function.

There is therefore every indication that as a result ethics limits its role to prohibiting antisocial instincts at whatever cost, even if man suffers cruelly from this prohibition and even if, under the influence of suffering, he seeks sly, crafty and hypocritical ways to divert its effects. Even if he refuses to allow this redirection of his sadism, he will only turn it against himself, thereby creating the source of a social misfortune as serious as in the first example. Art, however, instead of repressing, *liberates*. It makes the spectator or the reader *relive* numerous sadomasochistic sensations and through this discharges an enormous potential for innate aggression. Carlyle said that a man who laughs heartily cannot be fundamentally bad;^{28*} we can say the same of a man who has killed with Sade or celebrated a “black mass” with Huysmans.^{29*}

But for art to be able to serve as an outlet, for the artist to do the job of the sewage worker, he must take it upon himself to live the torments, the anguish and the crimes of men. He must live the sadomasochism of humanity, tortured by the coercive prohibitions of ethics, in full: this greatly explains his demonic possession. To say, as Gorky has done, that Dostoevsky “justified man’s brutish, animal instincts”^{30*} is to understand nothing of art’s function, which cures the instincts only by awakening them, just as the psychoanalyst re-awakes the traumatic events which are forgotten or unconscious in the patient in order to cure them. In this way Dostoevsky does society and its civilising role an invaluable service, which writers acting as servants of ethics cannot offer, setting themselves as they do to prohibit and not to cure. Therein is the meaning of the struggle which Tolstoy undertook against Shakespeare: in the name of morality, at the moment when Tolstoy himself ceased being an artist in order to become a preacher.³¹

If art is so, the artist, according to ethics, is a sort of monster, a subversive, an interloper, a magician, a bit crazy, of sickly sensibility and mysterious temperament, and it is this that accounts for his either absolute indifference or exaggerated conformity within the social framework. In one of his latest *Journals*, André Gide, analysing himself with his usual ruthless scrutiny, asked himself precisely in regards to Tolstoy whether the moral activity he experienced towards the end of his life was not due to his artistic personality diminishing and if he, Gide, was not devoting himself so fervently to current political causes simply because the artist in him had declined.^{32*} Such an analysis of the self gives us the perfect measure of courage and perspicacity, and I wish to do homage to it here.

This hypothesis of Gide, this notion he has hardly even sketched out, illustrates our

own hypothesis better than anything else: namely that the artist has to be dragged into social or moral debates unwillingly, in periods of unrest and aggression and must pay for that activity with a reduction in his creative activity. But the reduction of creative activity also entails a suspension of his therapeutic work, and society must understand that it has every interest in releasing the artist from a mission he is unaccustomed to and which he can only carry out at a cost to the polity. If, as Gide also says, “the road to hell is paved with good intentions” and we can therefore conclude that it is with good intentions that bad books are written,^{33*} it is not too late to attract the attention of those who, with utmost sincerity, and believing they will help us better serve the cause of the revolution, urge us to leave the dark and badly paved road of art because of good intentions which we can predictably tell will end up hurting that same revolution.

I spoke earlier of the artist’s *frivolity*; the reader must have pulled a face on seeing this. Perhaps now he will understand the meaning of this frivolity; let him confront the seriousness of life, the seriousness of ethics, with a despair and tenacity which may deserve better than to be called “frivolity”, frivolity in social terms, but far more terribly serious than the gravest seriousness. This explains why it was Baudelaire, the sadist, the necrophiliac, the inveterate phoney, the dandy, the opium addict, who was and is our teacher, and not Hugo, the apostle, the exile, the champion of progress and of the crowd. It explains why the pioneer’s role is to die on the barricades, but that of the poet to perfect, in a solitude that is his work, an absolute place, where the worst of human torments will be lived. It explains why Mallarmé and not Zola or Vallès^{34*} was our 19th-Century saint. Like the juggler of Notre-Dame, in our own way we help the evolution of societies without being suspected of it, and without knowing it ourselves.^{35*} That this jugglery, this frivolity, contains an instant of the eternal or the most desperate beliefs within man – you will have understood this for yourselves.

On The Idea Of Culture

The world of the spirit comes to us marked by contradiction, and contradiction has followed us here. I have seen a united front build itself around words: culture, revolution, courage, freedom, but you have realised as I have that everyone understands these words in their own way and they have ended up being emptied of all real content before your very eyes, becoming slogans used wildly and haphazardly. A vicious circle has dominated our whole debate: culture has been defined as a collection of freedoms and freedom as a dimension of culture; it seems that the word revolution must signify the act of freedom in culture, an act of presence and growth, of novelty and force – this is, I believe, Jean

Cassou's^{36*} line of thought – and yet Guéhenno sees this revolutionary act as a freedom exercised outwith culture, or at least characterized by its purely ethical nature.

Guéhenno's idea, shared by the majority of the orators and by the Marxists in particular, can be outlined in the following way: 1) 'humanity' and 'culture' are interchangeable terms, 2) the terms 'humanity' and 'the people' are also interchangeable, 3) the words 'the people' and 'the rights of the people to life, bread and happiness' are, once again, interchangeable, 4) this right to life and to happiness seems to be interchangeable with the rational idea that man is master of his fate and that he alone is responsible when it goes wrong. Accordingly the word culture seems to mean, finally, men's action in recognising the rationality of fate and seeing in this an instrument of our liberation from the domination of paradox, mystery, the indeterminate and the inconceivable, which are declared stripped of their powers and considered instruments of oppression, blackmail and the dispossession of man by man.

My summary is a little succinct, though perhaps you would describe it as precise; but in that case, we must draw the conclusion that this congress, held here in defence of culture, has taken it upon itself to defend a new, strange, unfamiliar thing, because the word culture has never had the meaning we are giving it. Up until now the essence of culture was the same kind of thing as products like alcohol, sugar or radium, which do not exist in nature in the raw state of plants, mineral deposits or metals, but must be the product of a long and patient extraction from the raw material, a sort of highest point whose roots, whose trunk, whose origin, whose material foundations we like to forget.

To let the bourgeoisie think that it has been the alcohol, the sugar and the radium of the world would be to do them too much honour, but it would be an insult to the workers to label them as beetroot or hornblende.^{37*} Spiritual precedence evades all hierarchy, all classification by order of wealth, power and privilege: humanity in its entirety is effectively just an enormous mass of material which secretes a negligible quantity of radium. If the bourgeoisie has, in practical terms, made art and the spirit accessible for the well-off alone, as if it was necessary for it to stress the relative scarcity of the spirit compared with the abundant production of *things* – judging the spirit limited and exhaustible in the manner of the raw materials which it consumes at a terrifying rate – this hardly affects essences or values and only belongs to the historical record of miserliness, which a single decree would end tomorrow.

The only distinction it will be necessary to encourage in the future will be the splitting of humanity into intellectual workers and manual workers – I mean those who work with thoughts and those who work with things. If it was decided in the end that culture was a bourgeois ornament, we would be obliged to let the sugar slumber in the

beetroot and the radium in the hornblende, but if culture cannot have a bourgeois meaning, then it cannot have a proletarian meaning either. It will be *produced* by everyone, instead of being produced by the bourgeoisie alone, it will be *consumed* by everyone instead of being consumed by the bourgeoisie alone. Lautréamont's famous proposition that poetry must be made by all and not by one^{38*} must be understood in the sense that it will be made for all and not just for the few. Everyone will be entitled to it, without restriction, according to the exact measure of their individual needs, both in quantity and quality.

The word culture is a sort of magic word which indicates man's action on the powers which escape him, with the aim of reducing them to detached and manageable signs. In this Ali Baba's cave – and I do mean it to be a cave of thieves – we find every sign, every technique, every open sesame, all the keys which transform occult forces, domesticating them – prayers, exorcisms, superstitions, logarithms, lexicons, right up to rhyming dictionaries – thrown into a frightening jumble. Culture is essentially a *technique* which has us transforming a 'thing' into a 'value', whatever area it ends up being applied in, whether transforming wheat into flour, coal into diamonds, primitive instinct into duty, the appearance of the world into poetic images or real life into concepts. This technique, proving itself to be multifaceted, takes in just about every sphere of human activity; it spreads out in every direction. Here it seeks out what is useful or pleasant, there the recreational and superfluous, here it gives itself rules and there freedoms. There is a moral culture and an artistic or religious culture, but there are also techniques which are black jewels, which portray the "flowers of evil" of cruelty, vice, indolence and luxury.^{39*} The technique of knowledge has been pursued as far as possible, but not further than the technique of a conception which Fénelon, after Saint John of the Cross, called Un-knowing.^{40*} The techniques of pleasure and joy, which have found magicians and diviners for their expression, are close to, rather than opposing, the techniques of suffering, destruction and anguish. It would be a mistake to believe that it is possible for man to have the necessary awareness and understanding to fully distinguish what is useful from what is harmful and make a sensible choice from among virtues which are *imperceptible* most of the time .

Culture is a spiritual order which responds to the totality of our human needs, it is our needs and not our conscious intelligence which created these tools, of which the least we can say is that they respond to a necessity, although that necessity cannot always be *comprehended*. This vast world shaped by man in darkness leads us to the Socratic, paradoxical discovery of the knowledge of our own ignorance. There exists, whatever anyone says, a *culture of ignorance, which is the ultimate fruit of our culture* and through it man is put into communication not only with facts, but with forces, not only with men, but

with the spirit, not only with the land, but also with the planet, a technique, in a word, of the microcosm, but also of the macrocosm. To submit these innumerable techniques, which together form our culture, to the dictatorial appraisal of ethics, is to take the spirit for one of those palaces which have hosted celebrations, absolutely lacking in meaning, and, as utilitarians, install a museum, a ministry or a car garage.

Ethics is an ideal term,^{41*} it too has a long cultural history, and this would be to let it become a usurper; such manifest lack of understanding has already led to the destruction of Greek art by the Christians, the library of Alexandria by Omar and Hitler's book-burnings. The predominance of ethics, which holds great sway over revolutionary periods and the times leading up to them, is a death sentence for culture; it is a part devouring the whole. Ethics *must* not be allowed to carry out the autopsy of culture as if dealing with a corpse; culture is a living instrument; it *is* not, it *becomes*, it is the sense and the symbol of all our labour; no cultural discovery could put an end to culture without putting an end to the possibility of man in the world.

Marx's statement that philosophers have *interpreted* the world up until now and that it is now time to *change* it, a call to arms, a polemical thought, certainly did not have the radically critical intent that has been given to it for its author. Let's think about it: there is nothing in all of history to suggest that concern for the interpretation of the world has ever been contrary to the world's transformations; since the birth of philosophy the world has been prey to upheavals, revolutions, changes and convulsions as willed as they are profound; we cannot reproach philosophy with having any stabilising or stagnating effect on society, seeing that at no point has society been relieved from the future's lash, and from ancient slavery to modern socialism, by way of Christian, feudal, monarchical and bourgeois revolutions, it hardly seems that history has stopped for an instant to interpret itself or indeed contemplate its own navel.

If it is true that philosophers have only interpreted the world, we must do them justice and admit that the world has, to their great astonishment, to their great indignation, not stopped changing before their eyes, and it will continue to change and to transform itself, without worrying about philosophers, exactly as in the past. However, in the ideal domain where philosophy operates, in the domain of *interpretation*, sterile in Marx's eyes, the problems and questions have stayed the same. Thought continues to turn around the same impossible and relentless points; whether the world is governed by aristocratic, democratic, feudal, fascist or socialist societies, the essence of these problems is barely changed. The social sphere cannot encroach onto things beyond its boundaries since neither has it any power over them; it can naively accuse these problems of being irresolvable or sterile, but it cannot stop man from worrying over their resolution, as long

as these problems continue to be not only the hair-splitting of absurd scholasticism but the product of profound worries and anguishes which are themselves products of traumatic objective realities, like birth, death and the meaning of man's existence, not in society, but in the universe.⁴²

Marxism has made a tactical error, emphasising its inability to give answers – or even ask questions – on these points by completely banning us from thinking about them. These are hardly questions that a learned political assembly is competent to judge; they are not questions which the police has the right or the means to suppress; to declare that it is counter-revolutionary to talk of chance, luck, sickness and death, that it is counter-revolutionary to be bored, to feel anguish, to fear death or to commit suicide, that it is counter-revolutionary to say that the earth is only a little seed sown in starry space and that man is only an ant in an anthill is the result of a tactic which is as incorrect as it is ineffective.

Men are born thinkers, philosophers, metaphysicians, and the most violent pressures, the worst coercive tortures will not be able to stop them from expressing their contribution to humanity, though that contribution may seem useless or dangerous. The immorality of such circumstances is plain to see. It is likely that Dostoevsky, if he was alive today, and whether he loved the Soviets or not, would not stop rebelling against the metaphysical existence of two and two makes four. This two and two making four which so offended him is not, as people will rush to tell you, a bourgeois two and two; the reason he fought against was not a socialist reason; and the God that he called upon was called from a real abyss and not a bourgeois abyss. If, however, despite the evidence, tactics overcomes the truth, in that case there is every reason to fear that culture itself is only a counter-revolutionary concept; thought would also be counter-revolutionary; and in the measure that each of us, be they a committed militant, experiences anguish, insomnia, discouragement or boredom, be they Lenin, Stalin or Mayakovsky,^{43*} harbours a counter-revolutionary within themselves. The role of culture is not to give official recognition to a collection of prohibitions, nor to canonise the methods of coercion; it is not its place to keep silent about Mayakovsky's suicide; on the contrary, in such an event it is up to it to mark out the boundary between the social and the personal; it is up to it to take the necessary lessons from the event and to bring it to its highest ethical, metaphysical or religious expression.

We must think twice and mull over our words at length before sacrificing the highest and most important dimensions of human existence in the name of a tactic which can only be judged on its efficiency. It would be naive and criminal to decide that, because of its outwardly bourgeois aspects, culture is in league with counter-revolutionary forces

and to take only the word along with us, after having stripped it of its substance. Despite the hatred of the Jews, two thousand years of active anti-Semitism have not been able to put an end to these detested adversaries, and while Marx may wish for “the dead to bury the dead”^{44*} we have practically run out of methods for killing or burying alive the men born with a gift of second sight, whose secret mission is to put us in touch with the mysterious forces of the universe and to conserve in individuals that spiritual freshness which opens up to them relationships of hope and consolation which are outside of social relationships, coming in to play only when the social sphere has totally exhausted its resources. Let us make sure that we keep hold of this culture, and not let it be the heritage of our adversaries; let us ensure that this culture will no longer be able to serve their camouflaged interests; yet, taking it with us, let us allow it to keep as much of its living substance as possible.

Noli Tangere Circulos Meos^{45*}

The same confusion reigns over most of the words of our vocabulary as soon as they are related to action. It seems that liberty or courage have become sacred entities whose utterly effaced meaning escapes our grasp. Thus Guéhenno spoke of courage. He was applauded. Every time a writer took the stand and spoke like a magician, or a clairvoyant surrounded by his animal showpieces, they were applauded. Is it really courageous to speak to an audience who applauds you? On the other hand, the elderly Italian antifascist, Professor Salvemini, was booed right here. Whatever he said, he knew it had to be said, knowing full well that you would not like it: that is courage, or the word has no meaning. It is one of the words and spiritual substances that no social condition, no new humanity has the right to change. Ten against one is cowardice, even if those ten are communists and the other is a fascist. This is a sort of first Euclidian theorem of ethics.

To refuse the writer the right to have a psychoanalytic, surrealist or religious conception of art, to do so in a coercive way, refusing them the imprimatur (while the community guards the right to publish the work, and feed the author) is to restrict freedom. Words do not have one meaning before and another beyond the Pyrenees; this is the second Euclidian theorem of ethics.

Freedom is freedom and courage is courage and we must know if a well-constituted society intends to make use of its forces according to the effectiveness of their deployment, in a word, according to their economy. Thus, expressions like “Nietzsche’s heroism” or “Pascal’s courage” have a real meaning, just like the “heroism” of Dr X the radiologist who dies at his work, or of Y, the worker who is gunned down by the police while on a

picket line. The state of the world means that Archimedes must die on his circle – and that that must have a meaning; that the worker must defend his freedom – and that that must have a meaning also. History would no longer have the least meaning if the opposite had constantly happened, if Archimedes had died on a barricade and the worker on a circle. Once the fiercest moments of struggle have passed, the moments of war and legitimate defence, everyone must return to their place. Because, if it is possible to imagine that Archimedes could always die on a barricade – it has happened – it is difficult to imagine the circle, art and culture defended by the worker. I do not intend to claim the writer's lack of responsibility – I intend the writer to struggle, fight and die – but let him fight and die for a design of the spirit to which he was called upon, in the very interest of the polity, to give a meaning.

A Few Words On Freedom

Julien Benda, the man of all confusions, the Levite of non-being, has made before you a completely arbitrary distinction between our Western thought and Eastern thought, socialist thought, in order to underline that there is no continuity between them, but rather rupture. Such was the intellectual paucity of this congress that he was met with effusions, shouts, proclamations and hysteria, as if he had forbidden socialist writers from handling arguments and responding with reasoning and facts.⁴⁶ Though bullied and scorned, Mr Benda must, in his pride, have taken himself for Julian,^{47*} or some ancient pagan philosopher caught in the primitive Christian world.

Yet it was easy to reply to him that socialism, though first brought into being by the Soviets, is a Western conception, its precursors filled our 19th Century, its scientific creator, Marx, himself a follower of Hegel, was German and Jewish. But Nietzsche already triumphantly replied to Benda: he saw, correctly, in the socialist movement, a renewal of Christianity – a Christianity which, having kept its ethics entirely intact, simply displaced the metaphysical term and replaced heaven with the earth. It is a *practical* Christianity, it proclaims like the first version that the world belongs to the meek and that the last shall be first; only it takes it upon itself to make this idea, which is purely ideal in Christianity, real and actual in this world. Where, then, is the rupture, the solution for continuity? Unless Mr Benda is making the same reproach to Christianity which he is currently making to Marxism.

He did not do any better when he opposed the Western definition of freedom to Marxist freedom: freedom which is only in harmony with an essence which exhausts it, instead of being a choice, a conscious separation, repels him. He recognises that in

Western thought, Spinoza's definition is an exception, but he has forgotten Bergson's definition, though it is not suspected of being Asiatic, where he writes that freedom is the ripe fruit of the self.

There exists a kind of freedom which is given to us in contradiction – a freedom to oppose this or that, a freedom born in the societies and eras where no unity or synthesis could be achieved on the basis of a spontaneous act of trust or love. This is our current freedom, the freedom of the 19th Century, the freedom of pre-revolutionary eras. But there is not the least trace of this freedom in the greatest centuries of the Jewish theocracy, nor in the Greek century preceding that of Socrates and Aristophanes, nor in the Middle Ages, nor under Louis XIV: here there is spontaneous agreement, without the least hesitation or reluctance, in a way which is living and vital and not coerced – and that is 'free' freedom.

There is no doubt that freedom understood as opposition is an unlimited freedom here on earth; we have pushed it to its very limit; we have had the right to oppose everything, to deny everything, man, life and God. The freedom of harmony, on the contrary, has only been brought into being on earth in a relative way: during such favourable historical moments men have felt in agreement on a certain number of religious, social or cultural points – but not always all these points together; and usually these men were only a large majority, rather than an indivisible totality. Further, this freedom of harmony, which *exists* in Western thought, has only been fully expressed by mystics. Western thought, dualist in essence, has recognised the world and our existence only as an outward appearance, an illusion, a fall and has continually opposed to it a true world, that of ideas, of the *noumenon* or of faith. This conception, which is also that of Plato and of Christianity, as it was that of Hegel, posed a world of contradiction, our world, in relation to a world where contradiction has been reabsorbed: Plato's Ideas, the Christian hereafter, Hegel's *Aufhebung*. It therefore follows, in that case, that we have lived in a double register and that all our words and notions have had a double meaning: freedom in a world of contradiction can only signify opposition, but freedom in the Idea, the hereafter or the Spirit signifies rapprochement, conciliation and harmony.

In posing freedom as harmony, Marxism did not break with Western thought in any way; it simply claimed to have found in economics the ideal centre, the fixed point where contradictions resolve themselves, reconcile themselves, it declared that Hegel's Spirit – his rendering of the divine in history – is the primacy of economics. Paradoxical or not, Marxism posed itself as a dualism which is finally reconciled in a superior unity: the socialist system of production.

The question is therefore no longer whether freedom as harmony is a continuation of Western thought, the question is whether the harmony posed by Marxism is possible, if

it is real, if it is spontaneous and not coerced, *if it really plays out all our contradictions and reconciles them*. I am not an economist, but according to the little I know, it could well be that the contradictions of our bourgeois economy are resolved by a socialist economy; it could also be that our political contradictions are resolved by it; but it is impossible for us to allow that socialism must and can respond to substances which are outside of economics, like the situation of man, not in society, but in the world, in the cosmos and in time. The meaning of life, rather than the *social* meaning of life, the internal meaning of the individual, rather than the relationship of the individual to the social sphere, the fate of the individual rather than productivity of the individual, all these are beyond the surveillance and the rules of economics, as they are beyond the physical laws of the universe.

Accident, luck, chance, talent, happiness or finitude are concepts which economics can neither supervise nor govern, since it cannot even *conceive* of them. On this level, Marxism would have spared us some painful disappointments if it had withdrawn and posed itself purely as a philosophy of the social sphere. It would have spared us the miseries and the weaknesses of a promethean reason which will soon have to be chained and delivered to the ravenous eagle. Its weakness on this point is such that it was obliged to solicit not our agreement but our submission, and not freely but by coercion. Instead of the past and the future being reconciled (as was the case with the machine and bourgeois industry with the socialist abolition of private property), reconciliation has here been declared impossible: the religious, the psychological, the sexual – there are so many domains declared *taboo*; it is forbidden to think of them. But as a result of this rejection, harmony could not be achieved, *Aufhebung* did not take place, unity was not brought about; and how could it exist since, according to Heglian-Marxist dialect itself, unity and harmony suppose a conciliation, a reabsorption of the contradictory terms and not the choice of one of these terms at the total exclusion of the other?^{48*} Coercion is therefore only a displaced conciliation; it is unfortunate because in ethics it signifies injustice, but in dialectics it signifies war.

There was no strict necessity for a synthesis of social contradictions like Marxism to be accompanied by a forced synthesis of man's vital and metaphysical contradictions. In this way Marxism succeeded in making itself unbeatable on the one hand and extremely vulnerable on the other; it is freedom on one hand and coercion on the other; it is truth on one hand and error on the other. The economic contradiction of the bourgeoisie throwing its commodities into the sea while the world dies of hunger, just to raise prices, has been resolved by the Soviets. But the fact that the Soviets throw tons of necessary spiritual and religious commodities into the sea, to raise their own prices, while the world dies for need

of them, is this not evidence of the internal contradictions of metaphysical socialism?

The Marxist critique of the contradictions of the bourgeois economy swept through us like a beam of light; but we remain alien and hostile to its radical critique of our spiritual values. In place of the pertinent ideas of the first critique, a wave of platitudes, hopeless slanders and processes of intimidation has washed over us: that in itself proves that there is a weakness there in the doctrine. There would have been no need to accuse the least attempt at elucidation, made in good faith not from outside but from inside socialism itself, of blackmail, bad faith, bourgeois-ism, fascism and being counter-revolutionary, if it had been as simple to respond as clearly and lucidly as the Marxist critique has done in the purely economical domain or even in the more troubled domain of the economy's immediate relationship with the social phenomena of culture. Freedom of discussion would have been allowed long ago if there was no fear for the delicate structure of the doctrine. But a doctrine which seeks to shape the world, and already shapes the fate of hundreds of millions of men, must be constantly surveyed, discussed, adapted and readapted to the real demands of men – and that is pure Marxism as well.

Marx was without doubt a great genius, but he was not the pope; he did not hear voices; he did not receive a revelation; he did not proclaim his propositions as infallible dogma, but rather, on the contrary, as attempts, hypotheses, empirical experiments.⁴⁹ Much of his scientific material has already been corrected by events without it affecting his reputation; if, in good faith, we endeavour to bring back into discussion the obsolete parts of his work, in order to find more acceptable, more practical solutions, we must not be accused of acts of sabotage and malice. Until that task has been accomplished, we are compelled, from within the socialist society, to call for the preservation of that freedom ('bourgeois' if you want to call it that) which, as a freedom of opposition, can only take as its focus the parts of the socialist society which have not – or not yet – been reconciled, and on the subject of which no placatory solution has effectively been reached^{50*} which allows men of good will to agree on all the essential points of the human dispute.

Man Before History or, the Sound and the Fury

The *Cahiers du Sud* have asked me to ‘conclude’ this study they have initiated.^{51*} For my part, I would prefer to be the one asking the questions. Doubtless, I could, like anyone, propose projects and reforms, by which I mean the reforms and projects of anyone; but I have some doubts as to their *effectiveness*. The conclusion of this debate nonetheless seems evident from the epigraph which adorns the first article, if I am permitted to complete the text of Mr Gide as follows (emphasising my addition): “It’s no fun to play in a world where everyone cheats – *beginning with myself*”. Completed like this, Gide’s thoughts⁵² seem to me truly to be beyond any suspicion: any man cheats when, expounding a proposition of general and universal character, he finds a way to except himself from it. Truth begins at home.^{53*} If it suited me to affirm, as Rimbaud does, that everyone is a pig, well, I who affirm this am also a pig; as one cannot see how I alone would extract myself from the situation. That is a method that is honest yet advantageous, it dispels confusion. Perceiving that most of my peers have adopted Gide’s proposition without, however, agreeing on the principles and solutions put forward (each accusing the other of cheating), would I not have to conclude that everyone cheats – *except them* ? Paradoxically, this state is admittedly not a new one and we only have to recall the history of philosophies, religions and morals to persuade ourselves that it has always happened in this way: the mere possibility of a truth acting on the world rests on the postulate that I who speak am alone in having *merited* it by virtue of disinterest and application, while *others* have necessarily missed out because they wanted to bend it to their interests, their ignorance or their whim. We understand nothing of history if we do not start from the fact that error has always been taken for *a sickness of virtue*.

Let’s leave for another time the question of knowing whether a thought intended to be *informative* – which is the very definition of a thought^{54*} – preserves the right and the freedom to not cheat, if, in short, anyone who refused to cheat would not be taken for a public menace: a sophist, a cynic, a sceptic, insane, etc. For the moment, let us note only - call it pure *coincidence* – that the most audacious and honest of thoughts do not come to light in *serious* works, but in *frivolous* ones, which hold the distinctive characteristic of dispensing with the author’s *responsibility* for what they are saying. “Why should I refuse you the truth, since I risk nothing?”, the poet or novelist seems to insinuate from time to time. In this way, under the cover of a character – a character who, to diminish the risk still further, he presents to us as half-mad – Dostoevsky can allow himself to affirm (something which Aristotle could never do, though he had the desire to do so): “Can a man possessing

consciousness ever really respect himself?”, or “In short, anything can be said about world history, anything that might occur to the most disordered imagination. There’s only one thing that can’t possibly be said about it – that’s it’s rational. You’ll choke on the word” (*Notes from Underground*).^{55*} And Shakespeare certainly dared, in buskins and through a mask, to confess to us what Plotinus, Nietzsche or Kierkegaard, having had the same thought, could never admit with their face uncovered, for example (as William Faulkner recently reminded us), that “life is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury”.⁵⁶ But if this is so, it is Mr Gide who is correct: “It’s no fun...” It really is no fun to play a game where everyone cheats; we cannot choose between millions of people who all claim to hold the *unique* answer – other than by violence and force. It’s no fun to know that the modest project of reform we offer the world will either stay in an obscure file or triumph one day at the cost of thousands dead and defeated. But what is still less fun is the thought that the only way to avoid cheating at the game is to pass oneself off as *irresponsible*.

I was saying that we were in a world where each one of us comes with a *fixed idea*, impervious to that of our neighbour; but I hope the reader will have understood from what preceded that even this fundamental law suffers an important exception: even a world given over to the sound and the fury does not let itself be conceived without a minimum of structures, of common principles, where unanimity is created between the most diverse kinds of men. Not necessarily a unanimity of friendship, but a unanimity of defence, which Plato defined as follows (in *Sophist*, 249), : “Still, if there is a person who must be fought against with all the powers of reason, it is he who does away with science, clear thinking and the intellect – *whatever argument he claims to affirm in doing so*”.^{57*} Admittedly, in writing this, Plato was thinking of his adversaries the sophists, educated and crafty men, and not of the ignorant barbarians of Asia who threatened to bring the sword to noble Greek cities, and I implore my reader, obsessed with current affairs, to do the same and push away the tempting idea that the enemy of reason and clear thought would be Mr Hitler, or Mr Rosenberg.^{58*} No, the formidable enemy of Plato and of the ‘*Nous*’^{59*} is Nietzsche, is Dostoevsky, is Shakespeare – he *who dares to think outside the constraints of society*, he who dares to affirm that everyone cheats starting with himself. To all intents and purposes, the philosopher, the politician, the leader, and the priest can only impose *their* truth by postulating that they are the only honest people in a world where everyone cheats. Because if there is no-one who does not cheat, including the philosopher, or if – to the contrary – everyone is honest, including the philosopher, the pitfall is the same: everyone is right or everyone is wrong, and so even the ‘*Nous*’ would see itself constrained to admitting publicly that life is a tale told by an idiot.

Evidently, it was not for all philosophers to test the truths sensed by Dostoevsky and Shakespeare. But even those who really had a real insight into them recoiled in fear before the logical impasse and its formidable consequences. To persuade us, they too attempted well-crafted arguments: it is necessary to envisage what happens not only in relation to oneself, but to everyone; the collective has more rights to occupy Providence than individuals; through thought, man must achieve a state of generality such that he becomes indifferent as to whether he exists or not; evil is necessary to Good, if only as contrast; evil does not exist, it is a privative act, an absence, etc. This is a brief summary of the best arguments of Plato, Plotinus, Saint Augustine, Saint Thomas, Leibniz and Hegel.^{60*} These arguments work but, it must be admitted, rather weakly; on the other hand, the threats employed have been more effective: “*Homo liber de nulla res minus quam de morte cogitat*”,^{61*} wrote Spinoza, and Plotinus captured the essence of the thoughts of antiquity with these few words: “To admit evil in the universe (author’s note: and there is no evil more terrible than unreasonable thought) is to bring evil into the intelligible world” (En., II, 9, XIII).^{62*} In other words, to admit evil is to place it within reason, and if reason is God, to place it within God.

To see that it required nothing less than that supreme threat to force the philosopher to deny the intimate evidence (sometimes experienced profoundly) that a mindful man cannot respect himself and that there is no trace of reason in history, one only has to read the melancholy confession of Plotinus, though it takes a very ‘elevated’ tone: “Here below, there are beings which are destroyed because they cannot conform to the universal order; for example, if a tortoise found itself caught in the middle of a choir dancing in a perfect order, she would be tread underfoot because she would not know how to escape from the manifestation of the order which directs the steps of the dancers. However, if she conforms to that order, she will experience no harm” (II, 9, VII).^{63*} It is clear that here is the responsibility of the intelligible world magisterially *saved*: the Laws can only dance perfectly and need not worry themselves about the others; the others, that is to say history, the anonymous multitude of tortoises, are trodden under the feet of the dancers. Of course, we are not without a comforting idea, given to us by the assurance that there exist, all the same, several elite tortoises who know how to conform to the universal order. But, for the few learned tortoises who have arrived at a generality such that they become indifferent as to whether they exist or not, or, moreover, for the several mystical tortoises who, for love of the intelligible, throw themselves deliberately under the feet of the dancers in order to taste the delights of being crushed by such perfect feet, there are so many stupid, ugly, clumsy, ignorant tortoises – millions! – born without the least sense of rhythm who will be mercilessly crushed, without even knowing why. And it is not even really certain that the

learned tortoise will herself be so musical that she will not commit, from time to time, some false steps, some careless error! She *believed* herself to be indifferent as to whether she exists or not and, suddenly, we have that Stoic mentioned by Seneca, surprised by a storm in the middle of the sea, whose limbs begin to tremble. Does he still believe that it is enough to align himself with the cadence of universal order? Or really, in that moment, does he make out that there is no privileged fate for the ‘educated’ tortoise and that it is Dostoevsky who is right, and Shakespeare, or indeed their common Master, the Bible, which said, in its way, that life is a tale told by an idiot by its reminder, its insistence, that the same sun here below throws its light on the just and the unjust... It seems to the philosopher that to affirm that is to undermine God and yet it is Jeremiah, after Job, who cries “Cursed be the day of my birth!” (20-14).

*Sound and fury!*⁶⁴* An immense cry of terror rises from our miserable earth, and we ourselves are half-crushed: is the time for fine words not past and must we not listen to the reader who cries, “We must act, something must be done, anything”? In reality, in the place of my reader, I would cry the same thing “But act, come on, act, do something, in the name of God” – but do you believe that we have not already exhausted the domain of the possible? Do you believe that misfortune is of these times only, that Plotinus, that Saint Augustine, that Spinoza, that Leibniz were sheltered from the steps of these divine dancers? Do you believe that they didn’t hear, that they did not pity the millions of crushed tortoises, that they did not pity themselves who were also crushed, despite their strict obedience to the universal order? They too would have wanted to act, to do something, no matter what! But what could they do? They knew that History had already tried everything, tested all forms of politics, all possible resources, all forms of charity; and yet never had war been idle on earth, neither famine, nor plague, nor terror. What was there left to do? Scream in terror like Job, like Jeremiah? Admit their powerlessness and call upon God? ‘Educated’ men cannot scream in terror; they too ‘know’ that it is useless to call upon God. God has never intervened in the finite world and, besides, if he wanted to it would be forbidden to him by our principle of contradiction. We must get out of this by ourselves, and if we have suffered defeat, resort to self-control, that is to say accept the inevitable (*Amor fati!*), even if to do so we must block up our ears so as not to hear the human screams and cry like deaf people that the Idea alone exists, that only universal order and the triangle exist, that which cannot be bombed nor killed, and that after all it doesn’t matter if a few extra tortoises are crushed...And are they not, in any case, subject to generation and corruption? “As for intelligence, it seems to be in the soul like a sort of substance and cannot be destroyed.” (Aristotle, *On the Soul*, I, IV)... “It is the case that sensibility cannot exist without the body and that intelligence is *separate* from it” (*id.*, III,

IV).^{65*}

The conflict today is not between sensation, unable to exist without the body, which cries for help, which cries: do something, which screams in terror – and the *intellectus separatus* of the Stagirite. Certainly, efforts of conciliation were often attempted – witness Plato's *Republic*, *The Social Contract*, Kant's *Perpetual Peace* or *Capital*. But in that direction intelligence met certain defeat. There was only one way to obtain victory: to remember that it was *separate*. The only thing in man's power is to break with that faculty of sensation which cannot be employed without the body, to become *indifferent* to history and to limit himself only to the perfection of the self, to move towards renunciation, that is to say the suppression of contradiction. And is it not due to and in the form of being "separate from the body" that the intelligence is, in the words of Aristotle, something *divine*? From Aristotle's secular and level-headed idea, others have drawn the necessary conclusions: it is not our helplessness to change History which is evil, the dreadful and incomprehensible irrationality; evil is, entirely to the contrary, in the strange and passionate taste which we have for Creation, in the absurd appetites which we have for the sensible world, in that pitiable habit which we have of being injured and humiliated by the sins of the world of empirical experience. God only really gave us one gift: intelligence separate from the body, indifferent to pain and joy and whose deliberated and continuous improvement alone can lead us to the deification of man *hic et nunc*. Thanks to an understanding of intelligence, the screaming beast of suffering and terror could – by the tap of a magic wand – transform itself not only into *homo sapiens*, but also become similar to God. It would be pointless to recall here all the Greek, Christian and Indian mystics who, according to various degrees and with processes and intentions which were sometimes very different, ended up at this double move: 1: A rupture with a necessarily unreasonable world, object and source of pain. 2: The deification of separated intelligence and the acquisition of peace and joy in intelligible forms.

There is no greater conjuring trick in human History than this *transmutation of all our values*: we have ended up believing that that which is desirable but not in our power is Evil, and, on the other hand, that that completely negative thing, without substance, renunciation, is the highest Good.^{66*} It must be said: the modern world has understood nothing of this hopeless attempt to make man and history fit together. It has also deceived itself in regards to Christianity, accusing it of advising against action and putting the key of history back into the hands of God. It is not Christianity, it is the *philosophia perennis* which must be held responsible for that attitude. The transcendent concept^{67*} for which man relinquished the world was never God, but only intelligence, the *Nous*. Further, if such speculative decisions were taken, they never weighed very heavily on society; and *in*

practice, the Greek world, like the Christian world, never stopped making an effort to introduce a bit of reason into history by force. But it is true to say that people of modern times have believed themselves able to reconcile at last the demands of disconnected intelligence and the *interests* of that sensibility which cannot be experienced without the body. From now on, we believed, intelligence was going to renounce occupying itself with only perfecting a few rare chosen ones; its new task is to *transform* the world; will have at once the bread and the idea; war will finish, as will suffering and inequality, the real will be rational; and we will have, what is more, a “Philosophy of History!” Such an exaggeratedly *optimistic* view (cf. Hegel’s “*state as God*”^{68*}) is at the source of the greatest evils afflicting the modern world. A reason which, above the head of philosophers, addresses the masses, must necessarily hold to its demagogic promises: to achieve its goal, that ideal balance of forces where contradiction will at last disappear, to let man have a place in that universal history which is only “the manifestation of the Spirit in *time*”, it is necessary to compel him to renounce (provisionally at least) everything which, in him, was linked to that faculty of sensation which cannot be practiced without the body and which is – we have realised – the origin of all our irrationalities. So that one day soon the rational can become the real, it must be that the real pays the fees, starting by becoming rational! In waiting for peace, bread, happiness – immediately and in this world! – they must firstly be sacrificed, and right away, to the Idea. What matter the cost of the bill presented to us by wars, the revolutions of the Idea; what matter even its failures! Is it not certain that *die Vernunft in der Geschichte*^{69*} will end up triumphing one day? It is, unmistakably, the one substance which cannot be destroyed... But if this was a consolation in the time when, in the name of the idea, we had relinquished the world, it is now nothing but a suppurating ulcer at the heart of a world to whom the Idea had promised everything. If Intelligence separated from the world was not affected by the adversities which sapped the world of antiquity, it risks being compromised by the adversities of the modern world in which it has committed its responsibility.

I am among those who have been profoundly marked by the events of these past years; those who are not consoled with having lost everything that can be lost; those who could not forget, even in the middle of victory, the dead, the injured and the children dying of hunger; still less can I forget them in the middle of defeat, and be contented with flattering myself with the ‘value of example’, with the ‘revenges’ of the future. I am ready, certainly, since I am threatened, to defend my life, our life and our liberty against the wave of cruelty and violence which seems to place us right in the middle of the Apocalypse of John. But as for protesting against the ‘immorality’ of the people on the other side and professing that that immorality is due to their disobedience of the principles of reason –

that Reason which we are now the only ones to invoke – I am no longer in agreement. Because it seems to me that it is precisely the advent in the modern world of independent Ethics, of Kantian man conceived along the lines of the angel, elevated to ‘universal legislator’, which finally provoked this wave of *confessed* immorality. This would require lengthy elaboration, but a few examples will not hurt... It is when we decide that it is *beneath* man to have small vices and we suppress the legal right to drink alcohol that drunkenness and organised crime spread through the nation; it is when we decide that society must be able to do without that miserable institution which we call prostitution that we provoke a wide scale of quasi-official traffic in human flesh; it is when we raise a League of Nations which takes upon itself to end all war forever that we witness the most unusual violation of pacts, of words and of basic rights, in preparation for *all-out* war. Freud has shown us that it is enough to restrain peccadilloes into repression to ensure that, with short notice, the worst psychic cataclysms will be unleashed. Nature has not resisted the inhuman tower of Babel which we have built and which we call civilisation; it is not the fresh upsurge of violence or the taste of blood which we notice, but the fact that they have made their way into history *established in principles*, whitewashed in science. Would you propose that, in order to sort things out, we should increase the dose of reason? Perhaps it would be better to consider a cure of detoxification... If the sick person is a cynic, it’s perhaps because his education was too hypocritical; if he is breaking the windows now, let us lock him away if possible, but let’s not conceal the real causes. If four centuries of humanism and apotheosis of science have only led to a return of the worst of the horrors which we believed were gone forever, the fault is certainly not, as Mr Maritain has said, with that “noble counter-humanism”,^{70*} which had foreseen the disaster and from which stem the prophetic figures of Luther, Kierkegaard, Shestov, even of Nietzsche. The fault lies perhaps with that humanism itself, which had lacked enough pessimism, which had placed far too many of its hopes into detached and divine intelligence, and neglected more than was necessary *real* man, whom we had treated as an angel and finally reduced to a level lower than beasts... I will not say that a far-sighted humanism, founded on the misery of man, would have saved us the wars, the revolutions, the cataclysms, which have never been lacking in any period of history. But it would have certainly saved us wars on a national scale, revolutions on a world scale, and machinist barbarism, and the warfare of gas and germs – and racism. A humanism which did not *over-estimate* reason would certainly not have put all the assets of science into the hands of those who we today claim are without reason! And must we complain of the ‘immorality’ of the national-socialist Caliban or, rather, of the presumption of the humanist Prospero who had believed – and, what is worse, persists in believing– that it is still up to him to introduce *die Vernunft in*

der Geschichte, reason into history? Without doubt, before revising our values, we must defeat this Caliban at our doors, but not in order to start with the same errors once more, the same nightmare, to congratulate ourselves on having *ourselves* put some reason into History! And are we certain that there is only a huge Irrationality facing us and not simply the same reason as ours – but more aware of itself, more consequential?

In refusing to accept the responsibilities resulting from our reason, in persisting to want to see in the national-socialist ‘barbarism’ an *original* essence and not a deforming mirror which shows us, swollen, the very traits of our culture, we are yielding to an *amour-propre* which will cost us dearly. We laugh scornfully when the boomerang we have thrown returns to its source – barely disguised. Do you want an example? So be it! Let us take the most well-known. Everyone, including priest-haters and the detractors of Christianity, was scandalised by that little phrase which Mr Goebbel’s propaganda has made universal: “How did Planetta die? Crying: Heil Hitler and long live Germany! How did Christ die? On the cross, snivelling”.^{71*} We have been completely scandalised by that phrase, and it was not even hypocrisy; it was recklessness, which is worse! If you permit it, I will translate it as follows: “Planetta died without cheating in a world where everyone cheats; tortured, he arranged his feet with those of the universal laws; he died for the Idea; but Christ died saying: the kingdom of this world is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury!” I know that you will not accept my translation; well, too bad! Let’s come back to the pure, literal sense. But even in this case, tell me, is it Christ, by any chance, who would be the prototype of our reason, the hero of the Idea? Is it the death of Christ or indeed of Socrates which is at the principle of our civilisation? In that case how did they die, the philosophers, the Stoics, even the Christian martyrs? Did they not cry *Heil...* something, an ideal, whatever it was, Justice, the Law, Virtue, Piety? Did they die “snivelling” or, on the contrary, “singing through the torture”? Which Christ died best according to reason, he of Matthew and Mark who stammered: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” or rather he of Luke who said “Lord, I put my soul back into your hands” and he of John who said “All is accomplished”? You can well see that, as ‘barbaric’ as he may be, Mr Hitler is not only reasonable, but he even embodies Reason *sincere at last*, that reason which, well before the German dictator, had been disturbed that Christ had died “snivelling” and which was so happy that John thought it best to have him die nobly, making him cry in the manner of Planetta: “Heil Jehovah! Everything is accomplished!”

As stupid and petty-minded as the comparison between the death of Planetta and that of Christ may be, as revolting as it appears to us, and is, its most delicate point does not touch those who proffer it so much as ourselves, our own civilisation, who made it

possible...Here, and on that point, all our humanism shoulders the responsibility for having never, frankly, wanted to recognise that everywhere where there is History, *it suffices unto itself*: we are at the opposite extreme to the religious position. Those same people who propose a return to the Christian Middle Ages^{72*} ask us to return to Planetta and not to Christ; otherwise, they would understand that the Middle Ages was just as powerless before evils and suffering and human misfortunes, no better armed before the ‘immorality’ of history than the present century. It was a time when executioners and victims, nobly, accepted their task, the former condemning with the purest of intentions, the latter dying with the most sublime resignation. Yet, even though it assured the victory of reason at any cost by violence (a violence which is hardly exceeded by that of our era), these *exercitia spiritualia* put the Christian of the Middle Ages before a suffering, miserable, powerless God, dying ignominiously on a wooden cross. If it hadn’t confused God and the world, this Middle Ages would really have understood what it only paid lip service to, that this powerlessness was not cowardice, a lack of bravery or even a lack of resourcefulness, but *heroism*, and therefore triumphant powerlessness, stronger than all the forces of the world and of reason... Yes, even today, even empirically, the greatest heroism that we can ask of a man is to not sacrifice himself to an Idea... With a few speeches and a well-run press, millions of men will agree to sacrifice themselves, such is the need for self-sacrifice in the structures of humankind. But what is not in the structures of humankind is true *humility*; not the kind that consists of training the will and gaining self-mastery, but the kind which consists of recognising that we have no power, that we do not amount to much in all, so little that we can, without shame, be afraid, and tremble, and cry and call for help. There is more true humility in praying to God for one’s own flesh, in asking him, for example, to deliver you from a terrible toothache (as Saint Augustine did, *Confessions*, IX, c.4) than to ask him to give over his intelligible essence and, delighting in the union, mix his will with ours.

It may be that the supreme heroism, I mean the most difficult thing for man, is not the sacrifice of one’s life, but to *admit spiritual defeat*. It is harder for our spirit to confess: “I can do nothing, nothing, there is nothing more to do” than it is for us to give our life. The courage of the naked truth is more terrible than self-sacrifice, the terrors of the humiliated spirit are more tragic than the trembling of the flesh. One who protests, when nothing is going right, that history is reasonable and the enemy ‘immoral’ – how far he is from the terrible and naked humility of Shakespeare admitting his defeat by the sound and the fury, of Dostoevsky crying that he cannot respect himself! Are we at the threshold of the religiousness^{73*} which only starts, it seems to us, when history ceases to have an intelligible meaning for us? As long as there is still something to do, as long as we can

hope to win by our own forces and those of the Idea, as long as we have not yet lost everything irredeemably, then the link is not yet open between man and God, unless it is not the illusory link of *amor Dei intellectualis*.^{74*} It is only when man has been broken, defeated, and is at the point of daring to cry that life is a tale told by an idiot, a nightmare, that the resort to exceptional recourses comes into being in the soul. It is not the heroism of Planetta; it is rather that proposed to us by Christ: “Eli, Eli, *lama sabachtani?*”^{75*} History is no longer commensurate with our reason, but with God. Is that what I want to come to? No, my own thoughts have lead me there despite myself, the thoughts of one who has suffered failure, bitter and painful, but who does not yet want to despair, nor find facile relief in saying “That’s the way it is!” and letting the dead bury the dead. Admittedly, just like you, dear reader, I cling hopelessly to the intelligibility of History; just like you, I hope, even though I have my doubts; just like you, I dream of useful reforms, of great methods to put into action. But the atrocious clamour of the world and my own anguish demand not only a better future, but also a repaired past, not just of sufferings justified, but also wiped away, erased – not just cured, but so it is as if they never happened. It is impossible for History or for Reason to undo what has been done. If we are to believe the Theologians, it would even be impossible for God to do this. With my human reasoning, I understand this very well, I must be torn unwillingly from the charms of natural philosophy.^{76*} And, certainly, if natural philosophy had succeeded, if it had sorted out life so that it was not a tale told by an idiot and the human tortoises were not crushed under the feet of the Laws, there would be no need for religious metaphysics. But if it has been created, it is because natural philosophy completed its role, because it can no longer reply to our anguished questions. One who has need of these answers, and at any cost (refusing to bow before the inevitable), will continue to demand them even if they have to be given *by means against which all his human faculties recoil*; but when he has failed everywhere, it is no longer up to man to set the conditions.

Appendix I: Research Note

The translation of *L'Écrivain devant la révolution* was greatly aided by access to the original manuscript, held in the collection of Fondane's French publisher, Michel Carrassou, in Paris. Unfortunately, the manuscript of *L'Homme devant l'histoire* cannot be traced at present. However, primary research into the correspondence between Fondane and Jean Ballard, and between Ballard and other *Cahiers du Sud* contributors, including those of the *Cartes truquées* issue, was very helpful for contextualising the text. Several unpublished letters between Walter Benjamin and Jean Ballard were especially noteworthy as explicit evidence that Benjamin read Fondane. This correspondence is held in the Fonds Ballard, Bibliothèque Alcazar, Marseille.

Notes

The Writer Before the Revolution

- ¹* **Translator's note:** Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology*, translated by C. Dutt, W. Lough and C.P. Magill. International Publishers (London), 2004, p.65. Fondane cites from *Morceaux choisis*. Gallimard (Paris), 1934, p.118. It is worth noting that where the English translates *geistigen und materiellen Arbeit* as “mental and material labour”, the French has “*du travail spirituel et du travail matériel*”. The German *geistigen* can connote both ‘mental’ and ‘spiritual’. In light of Fondane’s reading of art’s spiritual functions in Marx, this seems significant.
- ²* **Translator's note:** This first sentence is crossed out on the manuscript, I have followed the French edition in reproducing it here.
- ³* **Translator's note:** *engagement*.
- ⁴* **Translator's note:** All italics are Fondane’s unless otherwise stated. I have followed the French edition in rendering the parts of the manuscript Fondane had underlined in italics.
- ⁵* **Translator's note:** Gaetano Salvemini (1873-1957), an Italian historian and politician, exiled from Italy for his antifascist activities and teaching at Harvard by the time of the Congress. His speech, unexpected and difficult to easily dismiss due to his impeccable antifascist credentials, condemned the authoritarianism of the USSR, going as far as to compare the Russian penal use of Siberia with the German concentration camps and explicitly drawing attention to Victor Serge and Trotsky, “the least conformist and most lucid and courageous words which were spoken at the Congress” according to Sandra Teroni and Wolfgang Klein in *Pour la défense de la culture: les textes du Congrès international des écrivains*. Éditions universitaires de Dijon (Dijon), 2005, p.22; my translation.
- ⁶* **Translator's note:** André Gide (1869-1951) and André Malraux (1901-1976), perhaps the most famous intellectuals of the time and certainly the highest-profile ‘fellow travellers’, were the honorary Chairs of the Congress. Both they and the American writer Waldo Frank (1889-1967) and German Heinrich Mann (1871-1950, brother of Thomas) came from a critical liberal tradition which in Fondane’s view (and certainly in Gide’s own in later years) sat uneasily with the diktats of the socialist realism stance on culture; he felt that in their speeches they repressed their scrutiny in regards to the USSR. Gide, for example, saying that “the USSR[...]is] a country where the writer can enter into direct communion with his readers” mentioned that “this cannot happen without several hazards” but said “there will be time to talk about them later”. *Pour la défense de la culture*, p.186; my translation.
- ⁷* **Translator's note:** Jean Guéhenno (1890-1978), independent socialist writer and journalist. Against Julien Benda’s speech which posited communism as a break with Western thought, he used the Congress to aggressively defend Marxism rather as its culmination. See *Pour la défense de la culture*, pp.99-101 and 504 – 508.

-
- ^{8*} **Translator's note:** Louis Aragon (1897-1982)'s emphatic break with Surrealism coincided with his wholesale conversion to hardline communism. Condemning any criticism of the USSR, such as that of Salvemini, as 'counterrevolutionary', he responded to the debate over the refusal to allow the Trotskyist Surrealists to speak at the Congress (under pressure from the Soviet delegation) by lambasting them in his speech for their failure to adhere to reality and 'materialism'. See *Pour la défense de la culture*, pp.463 – 471.
- ^{9*} **Translator's note:** *et encore* then two illegible words crossed out on manuscript, followed by ellipsis. Tristan Tzara (1896-1963) was a Romanian (later naturalised French, like Fondane) poet, founder of Dada and sometime Surrealist. He became a left-wing militant in the 1930s while maintaining his own ideas of artistic independence, reflected in his Congress speech where he spoke of the poet as *révolté* (rebel). The poet Paul Éluard (1895-1952) was a founder of Surrealism who would later follow Aragon's move to socialist realism, but at the Congress caused a minor storm by being permitted to read André Breton's speech, which was highly critical of both the USSR and the vague nature of the Congress: "How many writers, even reactionary ones, would one find in France who would dare to proclaim that they were against culture?" (*Pour la défense de la culture*, p.397; my translation).
- ^{10*} **Translator's note:** *mots d'ordre*.
- ^{11*} **Translator's note:** A reference to Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900)'s *Menschliches, Allzumenschliches* (*Human, All Too Human*), originally published in 1878.
- ^{12*} **Translator's note:** *état de savoir*.
- ¹³ However I am not sure if a socialist society will not occasionally put forward the idea of a collective and voluntary sacrifice in the aim of fulfilling such a vision of luxury, beauty or progress. Did Marx not write that "In England, strikes have regularly given rise to the invention and application of new machines [...] to quell the revolt of specialized labour." Yet far from damning the bourgeois strike-destroying inventions, he writes "If combinations and strikes had no other effect than that of making the efforts of mechanical genius react against them, they would still exercise an immense influence on the development of industry."
[Translator's note: Reproduced here is the English translation from Marx of the passage Fondane cites. Karl Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy*. Global Vision Publishing House (New Delhi), 2009, p.155.]
- ¹⁴ The tactic consisted of saying to the worker: you will have a new society where your salary will be increased. To the writer must be said: bourgeois liberty leaves you to starve, well, you will have your liberty along with the means to live – and you will not live at the price of your lost liberty.
- ^{15*} **Translator's note:** *L'Esprit et l'économique*. Like the German *geist*, for which it is usually given as a translation (e.g. in Hegel's works) *esprit* can mean both 'mind' or 'intellect' and 'spirit' depending on the context. Despite the spiritual concerns which underpin Fondane's works and his Hegelian and Marxist reference points in this essay, 'mind' here is the meaning in the context of the debate over intellectual freedom; it refers to the *esprit* of individuals rather than a Hegelian 'spirit in history'.
- ^{16*} **Translator's note:** Julien Benda (1867-1956) was a liberal intellectual and later fellow traveller whose *Trahison des Clercs* (1927) had helped bring the question of *engagement* to the fore. His speech posed communism as an 'Eastern' break from the traditions of Western thought, an analysis which draws Fondane's scorn for its perceived simplifications and inaccuracies, despite Benda's attempt to affirm the intellectual's independence from materialism. See *Pour la défense de la culture*, p.80.

-
- ¹⁷* **Translator's note:** Maxime Gorky (1868-1936) was one of the founding figures of Soviet socialist realism and allowed himself to be presented as a close friend of Stalin. Originally intended to address the Congress, he was too ill to attend and died the next year of tuberculosis. A message he had written was read out at the Congress.
- ¹⁸* **Translator's note:** Hippolyte Taine (1828-1893), French critic and historian.
- ¹⁹* **Translator's note:** A set of cosmological medical theories based on the writings of Paracelsus (1493-1541), popular in the 17th Century.
- ²⁰* **Translator's note :** Blaise Pascal (1623-1662) and François Fénelon (1651-1715) were non-conformist Catholic philosophers. Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867), Stéphane Mallarmé (1842-1898) and Isidore Ducasse, known as the Comte de Lautréamont (1846-1870), were major influences for the Surrealists and for Fondane.
- ²¹* **Translator's note:** Walter Pater, *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry*. University of California Press (Berkeley), 1980, p.78.
- ²²* **Translator's note:** Fondane's reference is erroneous. The quote is in fact from a letter Dostoevsky wrote to Alexander Vrangel, 13th April 1856 (David Allan Lowe and Ronald Meyer, eds., *Complete letters*. Ardis [New York], 1988, p.254). Fondane probably read it in Gide's 1923 book on the Russian writer (*Dostoïevski: articles et causeries*. Gallimard [Paris], 1981, p.35), in English as *Dostoevsky*, translated by Arnold Bennett. Greenwood Press (Westport), 1979, p.35.
- ²³* **Translator's note:** From *Mauvais sang*, in *A Season in Hell and Illuminations: Poems*, translated by Bertrand Mathieu. BOA Editions (New York), 1991, p.14
- ²⁴* **Translator's note:** *Dostoevsky*, p.51.
- ²⁵* **Translator's note:** Nessus' shirt was the poisoned tunic, steeped in the blood of the centaur Nessus, which killed Herakles. Metaphorically, in English it simply means a "destructive or expiatory force or influence" (OED), while in French, where its use as an idiom is more common, it can refer either to a 'burning passion' or, as here, to a *cadeau empoisonné*, a poisoned chalice ("...sip from the poisoned chalice...for the purpose of seeing if it *really is poisoned*").
- ²⁶ Letter of the 23rd of October from Lautréamont to Monsieur Verboekhoven, partner of Lacroix, the publisher: "So we always end up celebrating goodness, only through a more philosophical and less naïve method than that of the old school, to which, alas, Hugo belonged..."
 "Naturally, I exaggerated the tone a little" (Lautréamont)
 [Translator's note: my translation. See *Oeuvres complètes*. Gallimard (Paris), 2009, p.30]
- ²⁷* **Translator's note:** Fondane is paraphrasing: he has "*la femme est naturelle donc infâme*". Baudelaire's infamous aphorism is "*la femme est naturelle, c'est-à-dire abominable*" ("woman is 'natural' – that is to say, abominable"). *My Heart Laid Bare, and Other Prose Writings*, translated by Norman Cameron. Haskell House Publishers (New York), 1975, p.176.

-
- ^{28*} **Translator's note:** I have translated directly from Fondane here, the original is "No man who has once heartily and wholly laughed can be altogether irreclaimably bad." *Sartor Resartus*. Oxford World's Classics (Oxford), 2008. Book 1 ch. 4, p.26.
- ^{29*} **Translator's note:** A reference to J.K. Huysmans' novel *Là-bas* (1891). The title is often left in French, but is sometimes given as *Down There* or *The Damned*.
- ^{30*} **Translator's note:** I have translated directly from Fondane. This particular attack of Gorky's on Dostoevsky is from his speech to the Soviet Writers' Congress of 1934. The English translation of the relevant extract is "Dostoyevsky has been called a seeker after truth. If he did seek, he found it in the brute and animal instincts of man, and found it not to repudiate, but to justify." In H. G. Scott, ed., *Soviet Writers' Congress 1934: The Debate on Socialist Realism and Modernism in the Soviet Union*. Lawrence and Wishart (London), 1977, p.463.
- ³¹ Why then this "indifference to social issues" and nonetheless – as I emphasised earlier – an *attraction* to the religious? We should consider, in addition to other hypotheses which we do not have room for here, that our religious feelings are founded upon an evaluation of the world along the lines of error and evil, that of all our needs the religious need is the most deeply masochistic, demands our deepest abnegation – therefore our deepest cruelty – and never stops dangling the tragic possibility of sin before our eyes. If the artist is the man who seeks out the most terrible torments, he can hardly refuse himself that one.
- ^{32*} **Translator's note:** See *The Journals of André Gide, 1889-1949: 1924-1949*, translated by Justin O'Brien. Northwestern University Press (Evanston), 1987, p.159.
- ^{33*} **Translator's note:** Gide is famous for his twist of the apocryphal saying. "C'est avec les beaux sentiments qu'on fait de la mauvaise littérature", or "It is with noble sentiments that bad literature gets written" (English translation from *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Quotations*, translator unknown, Oxford University Press [Oxford], 2004, p.114) first appears in his journal entry from the 26th of December 1921 (Gallimard [Paris], 1996, p.1151) and was reprised in his study of Dostoevsky (*Dostoevsky*, p.143). Interestingly, there is no written reference from Gide to the original saying until a letter to François Mauriac on the 23rd of March 1929. Gide takes issue with Mauriac for implying that he is saying that good books are only written with "mauvais sentiments" and that "l'on pourrait tout aussi bien faire dire au proverbe : « l'enfer est pavé de bonnes intentions », qu'il n'y a pas de bonnes intentions dans le Ciel" ("We could just as well reply to the proverb 'hell is paved with good intentions' that there are no good intentions in heaven"). However, this was not published until the *Oeuvres complètes* in 1939; Gide's connection with the phrase was presumably derived from public speaking such as the lectures which formed the basis of the Dostoevsky book. Fondane's further tweak here may partly be intended as a reminder to Gide himself.
- ^{34*} **Translator's note:** Jules Vallès (1832-1885), prominent French journalist and author, a socialist and communard.
- ^{35*} **Translator's note:** The juggler of Notre Dame was an apocryphal tale, turned into a short story by Anatole France in *L'Étui de nacre (Tales from a mother-of-pearl casket)*, translated by Henri Pène Du Bois. Books for Libraries Press (Freeport), 1972, p.75. A juggler becomes a monk and is accused of

blasphemy by his brothers for his inability to offer anything to a statue of the Virgin Mary other than his juggling. However, the statue comes to life and blesses him.

- ³⁶* **Translator's note:** Jean Cassou (1897-1986) poet and writer, later to become editor of *Europe* and a founder of *Résistance* during the war. His Congress speech is on p.90 of *Pour la défense de la culture*.
- ³⁷* **Translator's note** A general term for dark amphibole, a group of rock-forming minerals. Radium is in fact extracted from pitchblende (uraninite).
- ³⁸* **Translator's note:** In *Maldoror*. New Directions Publishing (New York), 1965, p.333
- ³⁹* **Translator's note:** A reference to Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal (Flowers of Evil)*, 1857.
- ⁴⁰* **Translator's note:** *Non-savoir*. This refers to the meditative practices of Quietist mysticism which seek unity with the divine through self-abnegation and an acceptance of the impossibility of 'knowing' God. The actual term is used infrequently by Fénelon, indeed the only occurrence I can trace appears in a letter to Charlotte de Saint-Cyprien (François de Salignac de la Mothe-Fénelon, *Oeuvres de Fénelon*, Dufour [Paris], 1826, p.126). I am indebted to Dr Chad Helms, translator of many of Fénelon's works, for the suggested translation.
- ⁴¹* **Translator's note:** Term in this sense denotes the final stage in a (cultural) evolution. This is an ironic and pejorative reference to Kant.
- ⁴² I realise that Marx's doctrine pushes "eternal" ideas – moral, religious, political and philosophical – out of existence. What appears to be *unchanging* across the changes of history, surviving amongst the worst contradictions, appears to Marx to be an illusion born from a fact that is *common* to all historical eras, even if each is apparently unique in relation to the others: the fact that our entire history is driven by class antagonism and that "one fact is common to all past ages, viz. the exploitation of one part of society by another. No wonder, then, that the social consciousness of past ages, despite all the multiplicity and variety it displays, moves within certain common forms, or general ideas, which cannot completely vanish except with the total disappearance of class antagonism." This tells us that Marx refuses the least autonomy to the spirit, ideas or culture and denies the possibility of them having any veracity. Truth, Liberty and Justice are therefore condemned to death along with the social forms which gave them birth. In that case, the word culture has no meaning and the "defence of culture" is a heresy. Man's only immediate occupation is to institute relations of production, a culture reflecting these relations of production will *automatically* be born, to demand *this* or *that* from a writer is pure silliness, he will express nothing of what is demanded of him, because all he can do is reflect relations of production. The Soviets, establishing these relations according to the manner they conceive them, will *automatically and without effort* obtain the culture they desire. If, on the other hand, the writer is treated as a free agent who can subscribe or resist, it is either a waste of time which would have been better spent changing production, or a change of perspective in marxist doctrine, and in the latter case everything that the writer gains in autonomy is balanced by the loss of the absolute nature of the relations of production. The eternal ideas, Truth, Justice, Freedom, etc, reappear. The world "culture" is anti-marxist. [**Translator's note:** The Marx quote in this note is from *The Communist Manifesto*. Wildside Press (Maryland) , 2008, p.32. This passage does not appear in the version of *Morceaux Choisis* that Fondane used and I have been unable to trace the specific French edition in which it is found, assuming he does not paraphrase. Fondane

has: “*L’exploitation d’une partie de la société par l’autre partie est un fait commun à tous les siècles passés.*” - “*Il n’est donc pas étonnant que la conscience sociale de tous les siècles, malgré sa diversité, ses variations, s’exprime dans certaines formes communes, formes de conscience qui ne disparaîtront qu’avec la disparition totale des antagonismes des classes*”. It is not clear why he breaks up the citation.]

⁴³* **Translator’s note:** Vladimir Mayakovsky (1893-1930), Russian poet who committed suicide after becoming disillusioned with the USSR under Stalin, although by 1935 his legacy was being co-opted by the regime.

⁴⁴* **Translator’s note:** *The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, translated by D.D.L. Wildside Press (Maryland), 2008, p.18.

⁴⁵* **Translator’s note:** "Do not disturb my circles!" (μη μου τὸς κύκλους τάραττε). Reportedly the last words of Archimedes, said to a Roman soldier who, despite being given orders not to, killed him during the conquest of Syracuse; as quoted in *World Literature : An Anthology of Human Experience* by Arthur Christy. American Book Company (New York), 1947, p.655

⁴⁶ The arguments of Mr Nizan, though colder, were no more satisfactory.

[**Translator’s note:** Responding to Benda, the novelist and philosopher Paul Nizan (1905-1940) proclaimed a synthetic Communist humanism which at once confronted Western values and partly integrated them. See *Pour la défense de la culture*, p.264.]

⁴⁷* **Translator’s note:** Julian the Apostate (331/2-363), Roman Emperor who renounced Christianity and returned the Empire, briefly, to pagan tradition.

⁴⁸* **Translator’s note:** The manuscript has “*totale*”, omitted in the published French edition.

⁴⁹ “We do not in any way regard Marx’s theory as something final and inviolable, we are convinced, on the contrary, that it only laid the corner-stone of the science which socialists *must push* further in all directions, if they do not wish to be left behind by life.” (Lenin)

[**Translator’s note:** This excerpt is from *Our Programme*, one of three articles intended for *Rabochaya Gazeta*, written by Lenin in exile in 1899. In the end the journal was not published. The translation I have used here appears in the introduction to Marx’s *Selected Works* from 1935 (International Publishers [New York], p.xviii). It was first published in English 1925 in *Lenin Miscellany III* and appears in *Lenin Collected Works*. Progress Publishers (Moscow), 1964, Vol. 4, pp.205-226. In French, it also seems to have first appeared in the 1925 *Recueil Lenine*. It seems to have been a well-known citation in France in the 1930s, appearing, for example, in *La Critique Sociale*, no. 8, April 1933, in an editorial by Boris Souvarine on the 50th anniversary of Marx’s death.]

⁵⁰* **Translator’s note:** The manuscript has “*aucune solution apaisante n’est efficacement intervenue*”, the published French changes “*efficacement*” to “*effectivement*”.

Man Before History

- ⁵¹* **Translator's Note:** A collection of essays by contemporary writers responding to a diatribe by Jacques Bénét condemning the decline of (Catholic) spiritual values, commissioned by *Cahiers du Sud* and published together in the May 1939 edition. The other essayists were Gaeton Picon, André Chastel, Jean Grenier, Pierre Missac and Roger Secrétain.
- ⁵² ...Or “quoted” by Gide, Mr Bénét having failed to give the source... [**Translator's Note:** Bénét uses the Gide citation which Fondane ‘completes’ here as the epigraph to his essay in *Cahiers du Sud*, followed by “*Cité par André Gide*” in parentheses. The original phrase comes from Emmanuel Faÿ, first cited by Gide in his journal on November 21st, 1923: “Été voir Bernard Faÿ qui me parle longuement de son frère Emmanuel, l’ami de Marc. Il vient de mourir à New York. Il ne s’est pas tué, mais c’est tout comme: il s’est laissé mourir. Il disait à son frère, un des derniers jours : «*On n’a pas le cœur à jouer dans un monde où tout le monde triche*»”. Gallimard, 1996, p.771. Gide also recollects Faÿ’s words on November 17th 1927 (p.862): “Ces mots d’Emmanuel Faÿ que me redisait son frère, ces mots qui furent presque ses *novissima verba*, me hantent, m’obsèdent.”]
- ⁵³* **Translator's note:** *Vérité bien ordonné commence par soi-même*. *Vérité* replaces *charité* in Fondane’s twist on this common saying.
- ⁵⁴* **Translator's note:** This definition is probably a reference to the thought of Gaston Bachelard, possibly the concepts he develops in *Rationalisme appliqué*. Although this text was not published until 1949, Fondane corresponded personally with Bachelard from 1936 and Bachelard cites his *Faux traité d’esthétique* in *L’Air et les songes*. See Monique Jutrin, ‘Fondane lisant Bachelard en 1943’, *Cahiers Benjamin Fondane*, no. 4, 2001. With thanks to Olivier Salazar-Ferrer.
- ⁵⁵* **Translator's note:** Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes from underground: an authoritative translation, backgrounds and sources, responses, criticism*. Edited by Michael R. Katz. Norton, 2001, pp.12 and 22 respectively. In Fondane’s French text, “a man possessing consciousness” is rendered as “*un homme conscient*”. For accuracy, I have given Katz’s respected translation here, but where *un homme conscient* reoccurs later in the body of the essay I have used ‘a mindful man’, which fits better with the flow of Fondane’s writing.
- ⁵⁶ “It is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.” *Macbeth*, Act V, scene V.
 [**Translator's note:** Fondane’s footnote gives the English. Gallimard’s translation of Faulkner’s novel appeared in 1938. Plotinus (205 – 270) is regarded as the founder of Neoplatonic philosophy. The philosophers Friedrich Nietzsche (1844 – 1900) and Søren Kierkegaard (1813 – 1855) were great influences for the existential thought of Fondane and his mentor, Lev Shestov (1866 – 1938).]
- ⁵⁷* **Translator's note:** My translation from Fondane’s French: “Or, s’il est quelqu’un que l’on doit combattre avec toutes les forces du raisonnement, c’est celui qui abolit la science, la pensée claire ou l’intellect – *quelque thèse qu’il prétende affirmer à ce prix*.” It is unclear which French version Fondane used. Seth Benardete gives “And so one must fight with every speech at one’s command against him, whoever, in making science (knowledge) or intellect or mind disappear, insists upon anything in any

respect whatsoever.” *The being of the beautiful: Plato’s Theaetetus, Sophist, and Statesman*. University of Chicago Press, 1984, II.43.

- ⁵⁸* **Translator’s note:** Alfred Rosenberg was a member of Hitler’s cabinet and key Nazi theorist.
- ⁵⁹* **Translator’s note:** The Greek νοῦς, the faculty of intellectual apprehension and of intuitive thought.
- ⁶⁰* **Translator’s note:** Plato regarded material existence as inferior both to the ideal forms he posited and knowledge of these; he held that the ideal society was strictly regulated by rational philosophy. Plotinus and the Neoplatonists considered evil to be a privation rather than a true reality. Augustine (354 – 430) shared this view and thought that evil could be considered to contribute to goodness in the context of the whole, in the way that ugly shadows contribute to the overall beauty of a painting. Thomas Aquinas (1224/6 – 1274) also thought that evil was not an intrinsic property but rather whatever moved an agent away from good, i.e. its ultimate goal as rationally conceived. Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646 – 1716), in his philosophical optimism, saw the world as the rationally perfect totality within which individuals contribute to overall harmony. Evil, by the fact of its existence in this totality, can be considered a logical necessity. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770 – 1831) saw the individual as subordinate to the ‘spirit’ of history and its realisation.
- ⁶¹* **Translator’s note:** “A free man thinks of death least of all things”. Benedict de Spinoza (1632 – 1677), *The Ethics*. Echo Library, 2006, p.126.
- ⁶²* **Translator’s note:** My translation from Fondane’s French: “Admettre le mal dans l’univers (et il n’y en a pas de plus affreux que le penser déraisonnable, N.d.A), c’est porter le mal jusque dans le monde intelligible”. Here is one English translation of the relevant passage of Plotinus : “Once more, we have no right to ask that all men shall be good, or to rush into censure because such universal virtue is not possible: this would be repeating the error of confusing our sphere with the Supreme and treating evil as a nearly negligible failure in wisdom- as good lessened and dwindling continuously, a continuous fading out; it would be like calling the Nature-Principle evil because it is not Sense-Perception and the thing of sense evil for not being a Reason-Principle. If evil is no more than that, we will be obliged to admit evil in the Supreme also, for there, too, Soul is less exalted than the Intellectual-Principle, and That too has its Superior.” *The Six Enneads*, translated by Stephen MacKenna and B.S. Page. CCEL, 2004.
- ⁶³* **Translator’s note:** My translation from Fondane’s French : “Ici-bas, il y a des êtres qui périssent parce qu’ils ne peuvent se conformer à l’ordre universel; par exemple, si une tortue se trouvait prise au milieu d’un chœur qui dansât dans un ordre parfait, elle serait foulée aux pieds parce qu’elle ne saurait se soustraire aux effets de l’ordre qui règle les pas des danseurs. Au contraire, si elle se conformait à cet ordre, elle n’éprouverait aucun mal”. Mackenna and Page have “the natural movement within the plan will be injurious to anything whose natural tendency it opposes: one group will sweep bravely onward with the great total to which it is adapted; the others, not able to comply with the larger order, are destroyed. A great choral is moving to its concerted plan; midway in the march, a tortoise is intercepted; unable to get away from the choral line it is trampled under foot; but if it could only range itself within the greater movement it too would suffer nothing.”
- ⁶⁴* **Translator’s note:** In English in Fondane’s text.

-
- ⁶⁵* **Translator's note:** My translation from Fondane's French : "Quant à l'intelligence, elle semble être dans l'âme comme une sorte de substance et ne pas pouvoir être détruite"... "C'est que la sensibilité ne peut s'exercer sans le corps et que l'intelligence en est *séparée*". It is not clear which version he used. Translating from the Greek, J.A. Smith gives "The case of mind is different; it seems to be an independent substance implanted within the soul and to be incapable of being destroyed"... "the faculty of sensation is dependent upon the body, mind is separable from it". Kessinger Publishing, 2004, pp.14 & 56.
- ⁶⁶* **Translator's note:** *Bien souverain*, Fondane's translation of *summum bonum*; normally *souverain bien* in French.
- ⁶⁷* **Translator's note:** *le transcendant*.
- ⁶⁸* **Translator's note:** See for example *Hegel: Selections*. Scribner, 1957, pp.388-389
- ⁶⁹* **Translator's note:** 'Reason in history' (from Hegel).
- ⁷⁰* **Translator's note:** Jacques Maritain (1882 – 1973), Christian philosopher, with whom Fondane had a long correspondence. Maritain makes this reference in *The Twilight of Civilisation* (Sheed & Ward, 1943, p.8) which was originally a lecture given at the Théâtre Marigny in Paris on the 8th of February 1939 and was published as a booklet later the same year by Éditions des Nouvelles Lettres.
- ⁷¹* **Translator's note:** Otto Planetta (1899 – 1934) was executed for his assassination of Austrian Prime Minister Engelbert Dolfuss, an event which helped to bring about the *Anschluss*. I can find no reliable source for the Goebbels quote. An American Christian anti-Hitler pamphlet from 1939 attributes it to 'The Official Guide for the Education of the Hitler Youth' (A. P.Mayville, *Hitler's "Mein Kampf" and the present war*, American Goodwill Association, available at <http://www.hitler-library.org/Mein-Kampf-And-The-Present-War-AP-MAYVILLE.pdf>, accessed 8th July 2011).
- ⁷²* **Translator's note:** A reference to Maritain.
- ⁷³* **Translator's note:** *religieux*.
- ⁷⁴* **Translator's note:** 'Intellectual love of God', from Chapter 5 of Spinoza's *Ethics*.
- ⁷⁵* **Translator's note:** "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"
- ⁷⁶* **Translator's note:** *la Physique*. This is the *Physics*, Aristotle (384 BC – 322 BC)'s seminal text in which he outlined his principles of natural philosophy, which seeks general, rational, philosophical principles ordering the entire physical world. Fondane's metonymic use of the proper noun here does not transpose well into English; I have used 'natural philosophy' as this is what is connoted and makes the meaning clear.