

Translation and Trajectories: On Benjamin Fondane and Restoring the Writer's Voice

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Un jour viendra, c'est sûr, de la soif apaisée,
 nous serons au-delà du souvenir, la mort
 aura parachevé les travaux de la haine,
 je serai un bouquet d'orties sous vos pieds,
 – alors, eh bien, sachez que j'avais un visage
 comme vous. Une bouche qui priait, comme vous.

Préface en prose, from *Exodus* by Benjamin Fondane (2006, p.153)¹

The mention of silenced voice immediately provokes an emotive vision of the individual political prisoner in her or his cell. The abstract principle of freedom of speech comes to mind, as does the defence of both prisoner and principle by organisations like PEN or Amnesty International. Yet PEN themselves also campaign on another form of silence which receives far less attention: the difficulties many voices have in being heard, including, sadly, those of political prisoners, because they do not speak in English. For every Nadzedha Tolokonnikova, there are countless others whose words are cut off. The question of what is lost in translation is perhaps of secondary concern to that of what is being lost by not being translated.

This applies much more widely than for prisoners of conscience alone. The 21st century is witnessing the triumph of linguistic imperialism. A sharp decline in foreign language learning among English speakers is going hand-in-hand with a dearth of translation into English, a 'crisis', according to 'Research Into Barriers To Translation And Best

¹ A day will come, no doubt, when the thirst is quenched
 we will be beyond memory, death
 will have finished the work of hate,
 I will be a clump of nettles beneath your feet,
 well then, know that I had a face –
 like you. Like you, a mouth that prayed.

Practices', a 2011 report by the Global Translation Initiative, which is 'alarming, because it points to the cultural isolationism of the English-speaking world'. Linguistic marginalization is often a function of political control, as has most explicitly been seen in colonial and imperial configurations. Indeed, the hegemony of English is at least in part a direct result of the influence of the former British Empire and the de facto American one. This dominance is underwritten by technological imperatives like the ubiquity of English on the internet. Voices are being marginalised not only for speaking minority languages like Navajo or Basque but also major ones such as Arabic or French. The effect is as overwhelming as it is largely unnoticed. The site of the European Council of Literary Translators' Associations (www.ceatl.eu) states that only around 3% of all books published in English are translations.

This dangerous silence affects academic discourse as much as any other area. It is less common than it once was for academics to be bi- or multi-lingual, especially since obligatory language courses have been dropped at undergraduate level. Strange as it may seem in an era of internet communications, it is probable that a great deal of important research languishes without recognition or profitable exploitation because of failures to translate. This is sadly ironic in the specific case of Modernist studies, considering Modernism's visions of internationalism and eclecticism. The pushing of, say, Czech surrealism to the margins implies a linguistic bias of cultural memory as much as a geographic one.

However, even in the early 20th century, members of the international avant-garde were already alert to the subtle processes of linguistic imperialism. In 1925, the editors of the Romanian avant-garde magazine *Integral*, including the Franco-Romanian writer Benjamin Fondane, printed an editorial decrying the lack of co-ordination between the various European movements. The magazine was itself created with a vision of synthesis between such movements and published articles and poems in French, German and English as well as Romanian. Building on *Integral's* concerns that the Romanian display at the seminal 1925 Paris world exposition left visitors completely unaware of the modernist activities taking place in that country, the editorial called for the creation of an international modernist association (Anon., 1925).

If individual voices can be important in a political context, this is also true for critical discourse and for creative literature. This is clear, for example, with Holocaust narratives such as those of Irène Némirovsky or Anne Frank, speaking from beyond the grave (and beyond the statistics), resurrected lost voices which, through their very individuality, allow the reader, to a degree, to touch the reality of a major event. The international consideration of their texts is dependent upon the work of their translators. In literary and

academic discourse, editor, critic and translator share the function of disseminator, which underscores the fact that the silencing of one voice can also have wider ramifications, as a gateway to other voices is barred. Individual texts are not simply of merit in and of themselves. They also participate in the conversation of writing, giving the reader different perspectives on historical events, other writers and literary and social contexts. Publishing, translating and commenting 'lost' authors can open up whole new vistas and take the conversation in new and valuable directions.

This is perhaps most obvious in the case of translation, where the reception of a certain voice into a different language is so clearly mediated by the disseminator, such as Baudelaire's Edgar Allan Poe in France, which gave Poe a completely different status from the one he held for anglophones. A translation can also, therefore, quite literally create a new voice for others to respond to. Translation overlaps with commentary and criticism as well, where one influential interpretation – for example, Alexandre Kojève's lectures on Hegel in France – can dominate. Just as multiple translations approach the original text and re-frame it, differing critical interpretations are vital to approaching authors and texts, each new voice enriching existing voices as well as being valuable in and of itself.

The voice of the Benjamin Fondane (1898 – 1944) has been affected by various configurations of silencing. His physical voice was literally silenced in the Holocaust. His voice as a writer, as the rest of this essay shall discuss, met various obstacles to its realisation. Further, the unique voices he gave to those he caused to speak through his writing – in his writing on Rimbaud and Baudelaire, for instance, and especially in his promotion of the Russian philosopher Leon Shestov – went unheard as long as his work did. Finally, and perhaps crucially, his work has been under-translated, although, alongside the republication of his work in French, this is changing. Martin Stanton has referred to him as 'surely the most under-estimated intellectual of the 1930s' (2002).

Fondane was a poet, philosopher, film-maker and critic, who emigrated to Paris from Bucharest in 1924 and made his mark on the literary scene. He switched from writing in Romanian to French, which did mean that his voice was silenced for many of his readers in his home country, although the traditionally Francophile Romanians were and remain substantially more polyglot than, say, the British. He published essays in the major revue *Les Cahiers du Sud*, among others, actively participated in the evolution of avant-garde groups like the Dadaists and Surrealists and debated with philosophers like Gaston Bachelard, E.M. Cioran and Albert Camus. Like so many of his generation, his speaking in the world was cut off by the catastrophic events of the Second World War. As a Jew, the German occupation

left him unable to live publicly. He could not publish openly or continue to participate in public speaking, such as a series of lectures he had been invited to give in Argentina by Victoria Ocampo. Finally, he was murdered in Auschwitz, although, unswerving in his sense of poetry's importance, he kept using his writer's voice right up until his death, publishing poems in resistance journals before his arrest and reportedly continuing to write poetry in the camp.

The impossibility of publishing openly due to the occupation was to the detriment, notably, of his major poetry work *Le Mal des fantômes*², not to be 'heard' until 1980 (with a new edition from Verdier in 2006). The chaos of the events of the 1940s also meant that his manuscripts were divided after the war and the networks he had used to distribute his work were damaged. Over and above these impediments, the dramatic post-war ascension to fame of the existentialism of Jean-Paul Sartre, as well as the philosophical writings of Camus, took over the domain of existential philosophy to such an extent that interest in the counter-current of existential thought promoted by Fondane and his mentor Leon Shestov was marginal. Their theologically open approach to the absurd was simply unfashionable: a clear example of one voice being drowned out by another.

Fondane's work itself revolves around concerns about the importance of the voice and the stakes involved in speaking. His poetry, in particular, is a sustained effort to make a human voice heard among the negating clamour of modernity. Most strikingly, he pre-empted his own personal catastrophe and the loss of his voice in his poem *L'Exode* [The Exodus] (Fondane 2006, p.153):

Un jour viendra, sans doute, quand le poème lu
se trouvera devant vos yeux. Il ne demande
rien! Oubliez-le, oubliez-le! Ce n'est
qu'un cri, qu'on ne peut pas mettre dans un poème
parfait, avais-je donc le temps de le finir?
Mais quand vous foulerez ce bouquet d'orties
qui avait été moi, dans un autre siècle,
en une histoire qui vous sera périmée,
souvenez-vous seulement que j'étais innocent
et que, tout comme vous, mortels de ce jour-là,
j'avais eu, moi aussi, un visage marqué
par la colère, par la pitié et la joie,
un visage d'homme, tout simplement!³

² This title is not easily translated. Possibilities include 'the sorrow', 'ache', or 'pain' 'of ghosts'.

³ A day will come, no doubt, when this poem
will settle before your eyes. It asks
nothing! Forget it! Forget it, it

This existential attestation, this voice which reached beyond its own fate, also pre-empts its own 'rediscovery'. Despite the difficulties involved, efforts to un-mute Fondane were being made right from the time of his death, including attempts by Paul Eluard and Cioran to see his work in print again, but sometimes echoes must take time to travel and be re-amplified. Now, Fondane's poem adorns the entrance to the Holocaust memorial to Yad Vashem. This, however, brings us to the issue of a voice's context: Fondane can on no account be reduced to a 'Holocaust writer'. He does leave an inimitable literary testimony to those dark times. According to Henri Meschonnic, of his contemporaries, 'pas un, ni même ceux qui ont été dans la Résistance, pas un n'a écrit la révolte et le goût de vivre mêlé au sens de la mort comme Benjamin Fondane'⁴ (introduction to Fondane, 2006, p.13). However, he is not simply a witness but a writer of poetry and philosophy which can be read on its own terms.

The sincerity of Fondane's engagement with the possibilities and consequences of the voice are evident in his own poetic crisis. Like Rimbaud, Fondane underwent a bitter disillusionment with poetry's capacity to create an ideal vision independent of lived experience. Fondane, too, silenced himself, in 1923, calling the poems he had written in Romanian into question and abandoning poetry for four years: 'pendant quatre ans, je me suis tu, comme un muet, mutilé de guerre à cent pour cent'⁵ (Salazar-Ferrer, 2004, p.17). His struggle over poetry's ontological status and significance eventually lead him to write his *Faux Traité d'esthétique [Pseudo-Treatise of Aesthetics]*, subtitled 'an essay on the crisis of reality'. However, unlike Rimbaud, who disavowed poetry and set off for a merchant's life in Africa, he recovered his poetic voice, in large part through his encounter with Shestov, whose radical existential philosophy allowed him to invest his poetry with a new connection to reality and also prompted his own philosophical investigations. This shift is encapsulated in the tormented and ironic first lines of *Ulysse*, the 'long poem' which begins the five-part

is only a cry, which cannot be put in a poem
 perfected, had I even the time to finish it?
 But when you step into this bouquet of nettles
 which used to be me, in another century,
 in a story which is old news for you,
 remember just that I was innocent
 and that, like you, mortals of this day,
 I had, as you do, a face marked
 by anger, by pity and joy
 quite simply, a man's face!

⁴Not one, not even among those who were in the Resistance, wrote of rebellion and the taste for life mixed with a feeling for death as Benjamin Fondane did.

⁵For four years I fell silent, as if dumb, one hundred percent war-wounded.

sequence of *Le Mal des fantômes* : ‘J’étais un grand poète né pour chanter la Joie | - mais je sanglote dans ma cabine’.⁶

Leaving aside other agencies of silence, overcoming his own self-silencing was a hard enough task for Fondane, and one he took very seriously. The *Mal des fantômes* incessantly dramatizes the difficulties of speaking, and the need to do so. The poem fights to articulate the individual voice amongst the clamour of history; it is the sustained revolt of human experience in the response to the crushing and proscriptive manifestations of philosophical idealism: totalitarianism, bureaucracy, war and censorship. The ‘ghosts’ of the title, suffering from the negating effects of modernity on their reality – exiles, refugees, ‘ordinary’ people left at sea by the grand narratives of history – attest to their existence with unanswered cries, as they are reduced (at best) to statistics.

Vies humaines rongées comme de vieilles monnaies
retournent dans le grand courant numismatique
- d’où prendraient-elle le repos ?
les voici imprimées de figures fraîches.⁷

These lines from Fondane’s poem *Titanic* (in Fondane 2006, p.129) condense opposing meanings, at once condemning the reduction of human life to quantitative definition and monetary value and giving them new life – ‘fresh faces’ – and value in poetry.

This dramatization is particularly direct in the ‘call-and-response’ parts of *Exodus* which employ the trope of ascribing each letter of the Hebrew alphabet a different dramatic voice (Fondane 2006, p.155):

HETH
Nous avons erré dans les rues
et sangloté dans les vitrines,
nous tournions autour de choses
qui tournaient autour de nous

TETH
L’Esprit est chair, je vous le dis
Et Dieu lui-même est eau de vie,
celui qui l’a rejoint le sait
celui qui en a bu est ivre.

⁶I was a great poet born to sing of joy | - but here I sit, weeping in my cabin.

⁷ Human lives chipped away like old coins
turn in the great current, numismatic
– where could they find rest?
here they are, printed with fresh faces.

JOD

Nous ne l'avons pas rencontré ;
 Nous nous sommes couchés sans force,
 le ventre creux, la nuque vide,
 sur le premier trottoir venu.⁸

Exodus powerfully links the mass displacement provoked by the German occupation with the Biblical exodus, the modern-day exiles seeming as helpless in front of contingency and as abandoned by God (and his humanist substitutes, reason and progress) as the Israelites in the desert.

The use of Hebraic tropes was not incidental; one of Fondane's striking strengths is his prevision of the catastrophe bearing down upon Jews, not least himself, and the manner in which he gives it voice. In his poetry his prescience, and his alarm, obtain a value which escapes any utilitarian criteria and attest to the power a single voice may have for the listener, affectively and, perhaps, metaphysically. Fondane's invocation of each person's powerlessness against the absurdity of the contingent is met by his paradoxical response of revolt and affirmation of the very experience of being human. 'Le poète juif, traqué et menacé, exprime dans ses poèmes écrits durant la guerre l'angoisse et la solitude des hommes traqués'⁹ (Salazar-Ferrer, p.126). His refiguring of Ulysses as Wandering Jew (*juif errant* in French, which also allows the existential *je errant*, the wandering 'I', to come into play) generalises this experience. The Greek and the Judaic, twin pillars of Western civilisation, are combined in the body of the everyman, as with James Joyce's Ulysses-figure, Leopold Bloom.

⁸ HETH

We have roamed the streets
 sobbing in the windows
 we circled around things
 which circled around us.

TETH

The Spirit is flesh, I tell you
 and God himself is eau de vie,
 he who has joined him knows this,
 he who has sipped is drunk of it.

JOD

We have not met him;
 we have lain down worn out
 stomach hollow, necks bare,
 on the first pavement we found.

⁹ In his wartime poems, this Jewish poet, hunted and threatened, expresses the torment and the solitude of hunted men.

The richness of Fondane's poetic universe is bountiful reward for bringing his voice back to life. There is ample reason for a re-examination of his philosophical writing, and through him that of Leon Shestov. Like his poetry, in its performance of the struggle of the individual voice, his philosophy was directly influenced by the crisis in language articulated by Dada. In this respect Fondane's thought and expression may be fruitfully connected with other modernists who were similarly influenced, such as Maurice Blanchot or Samuel Beckett, and the way the inability to speak functions in their texts. Fondane's discovery of Shestov allowed him to take a unique direction in engaging with this crisis. The Russian's 'philosophy of tragedy', which emphasises the lack of certainty in the world and our inescapable fate of trying and failing to communicate something beyond it, provided the cornerstone of Fondane's major philosophical work, *La Conscience Malheureuse* [The Unhappy Conscience].

This awareness of instability and the lack of clear solutions, already present in the tropes of exodus and being lost at sea in his poetry, also informs his political essays. These include *L'Écrivain devant la révolution* [The Writer Before the Revolution], another 'silenced' text, written for the 1935 International Congress of Writers Against Fascism and left unpronounced due to a lack of time. Yet despite the overtly political context of that text, he wrote most directly on the rise of the Nazis and what this meant for Europe and the world in *L'Homme devant l'histoire* [Man Before History], published in *Cahiers du Sud* in 1939 as part of his philosophy brief, and it is in that late essay that the Shestovian 'pensée de l'échec subi, amère, douloureuse'¹⁰ are most keenly felt (Fondane, 1939, p.454).

Fondane also had a cinematic voice which deserves to be rediscovered, writing theory, criticism, scripts and 'cine-poems'. Here, too, the question of voice itself was central for him. Informed by his philosophical ideas on language and its insufficiencies, he saw silent cinema as a unique medium which offered the possibility to meaningfully communicate beyond words, to say something without using an actual voice. He even went to Argentina at the instigation of Victoria Ocampo and wrote and directed his own avant-garde film, *Tararira*. Unfortunately, although he completed the film, it too was silenced. Possibly due to anti-Semitism, the producers eventually decided not to release it, and the reels have been lost. It was, however, given a ghostly re-appearance as part of the artist Guy Maddin's re-imagining of lost films at the Pompidou Centre for Modern Art in Paris last year.

Ranging from philosophy to poetry to cinema to criticism, Fondane's literary and

¹⁰ Thoughts of one who has suffered failure, bitter and painful.

artistic activity retains an unusual coherence. All of his work seems to be part of an expression and exploration of the existential questions which animated him, from the uncertainty of modern life to the failures of language. It is difficult to delimit the different genres of his work. His poetry asks philosophical questions and his polemical prose abounds in poetic rhetoric. Just as his re-voicing of Ulysses in his poetry reminds us that a plurality of voices may speak through one individual, insofar as his singular books on Baudelaire and Rimbaud can be considered literary criticism, these astonishing philosophical essays bestow new voices upon the nineteenth-century poets.

Fondane's *Rimbaud le Voyou* [*Rimbaud the Hoodlum*] was first published in 1933 and was his biggest contemporary success, although it was only republished in French in 1980 (by Plasma, with a new 2011 edition from Non Lieu). The title of the book marks it out as a polemical riposte to other modernist conceptions of Rimbaud: Roland de Renéville's *Rimbaud le Voyant* [*Rimbaud the Seer*], published in 1929, had envisaged a visionary Rimbaud, illuminating other-worldly truths, amenable to both French Catholic thinkers of the period as they sought to recuperate the *poète maudit* and the Surrealists, who were claiming him for the pantheon of enlightened Surrealists *avant la lettre*. The iconoclastic effect of Fondane's approach is perhaps best summed up in André Breton's reaction, recounted in Robert Fraser's biography of the English Surrealist poet David Gascoyne (2009, p.115):

Gascoyne was strolling up Picadilly [...] with Fondane's book under his arm. Coming along the pavement towards him he spotted Breton. Breton took a deep bow. 'Ce livre-là', he remarked, indicating the volume beneath David's arm, 'est dirigé tout à fait contre moi!'¹¹

Refusing what he saw as selective reading, Fondane recasts the brilliant author of the *Illuminations* in the shadow of *A Season In Hell*, insisting on Rimbaud's struggle with reality and the illusory nature of the escape from it through poetry. His stubborn non-conformism is as good a reason as any not to be complacent and content with the voices which are familiar to us. This is encapsulated in the first lines of his essay (2011, p.23):

Si un Rimbaud ne venait pas de temps à autre jeter le trouble dans l'idée que l'esprit se fait de lui-même, l'homme pourrait enfin dormir sur ses deux oreilles.¹²

¹¹That book is aimed entirely against *me* !

¹² If a Rimbaud didn't come along now and then and throw the impression our minds give of themselves into disarray, man could slumber soundly at last.

If his book on Rimbaud sent shockwaves, at least through the interwar French intellectual scene, which deserve to be recreated, his last prose work, *Baudelaire et l'expérience du gouffre* [*Baudelaire and the experience of the abyss*], despite being only taken to draft stage, attests to the power of his ability to combine reading art with metaphysical enquiry. Against the likes of Paul Valéry, whom he takes to task for concentrating only on raising Beauty to the level of an absolute metaphysical ideal and judging poetry on aesthetic criteria alone, he construes a Shestovian, post-Nietzschean reading of Baudelaire whose poetic force and newness derives in large part from the betrayal of his *triste moi*, his personal experience of suffering and angst, through his delicate lines.

Against the striving for the impersonal in Mallarmé, Fondane argues for a Baudelaire who makes poetry personal, even despite the poet's own critical judgement (this contradiction is the grounds for the theory of *la conscience honteuse du poète*, the poet's shameful conscience, which Fondane develops in *Faux Traité d'esthétique*). The valorisation of the human and the personal in poetry became the cornerstone of Fondane's own poems, and it is a stance which remains vital, fresh and often contentious today. Once again, the power of the human voice is affirmed, as its stifling on aesthetic grounds is shown to be as unwarranted as political silencing.

It is easy to be ignorant of or underestimate the importance of voices which may be silent to us largely because of a lack of attention to foreign cultural and linguistic contexts and marginalised currents of thought, instead of or over and above political suppression. While untranslated authors and iconoclastic philosophers can seem like esoteric objects of study, their relevance is twofold. Firstly, paying attention to them forces us to re-examine the limits of our own perspectives in the fields of knowledge whose boundaries and significance are altered by their presence. Secondly, and most importantly for those in academia, because this is one area in which academic and critical research plays a crucial and inimitable role. Only through the concentrated effort of individual researchers in seeking out, re-publishing, translating and critically evaluating the documents they have left behind can such unheard voices be brought to life.

The impetus for this essay was the relative lack of awareness of Benjamin Fondane's work in the anglophone world and the sense that a rich case study provides a glimpse of the iceberg of non-English language voices which are muffled to us, though they may be just over the border. As English PEN states, 'the crisis facing literary and cultural translation into the English language is a shared problem of all English-speaking countries' (English PEN,

n.d.). Fondane is a particularly useful example in terms of illustrating this crisis, not only because his partial and temporary silencing involves such a variety of configurations, including racial hatred, political antipathy, intellectual fashion and linguistic trends, but also because his writing directly addresses the struggle to be heard. This essay has mainly focused on his poetry and poetic criticism, but his contemporary analysis of the rise of Nazism and his efforts to disseminate the thought of Shestov also remain intensely relevant. It is clear that for Fondane and for so many 'lost' or under-known writers like him, responsibility for breaking the silence and restoring voice, both to the writer and the other voices we hear through him or her, rests in the hands of editors, translators and researchers.

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