

A false Treaty on Aesthetics

Un fals tratat de estetică

Speranța Sofia Milancovici

Universitatea de Vest „Vasile Goldiș” din Arad

Facultatea de Științe Umaniste, Politice și Administrative

e-mail: m_speranta@yahoo.com

Abstract

The questions that Benjamin Fondane ask himself about the avant-garde phenomenon are expressed under their most complex form in the ample essay, Faux traité d'esthétique, with a subtitle Essai sur la crise de la réalité, published by the prestigious Danoël et Steele publishing house and dedicated, mostly, to aspects regarding the surrealism.

An event which marked a turning point in the intellectual biography of Benjamin Fondane: we're referring to his meeting with Lev Șestov, the existentialist philosopher whose disciple he will remain for the rest of his life.

What came out of the spiritual Șestov – Fondane meeting, in a literary and philosophical field, was the transformation of a poet into a philosopher who engaged in ample disputes with important names from the philosophy of the thirties, taking upon himself a difficult task, that of arguing against certain points of ample philosophical systems, built by Husserl, Heidegger or Freud.

In the contact's conjuncture with the way of thinking of the Russian philosopher, Fondane conceived the application of these concepts in the case of poetry as well, creating an "existential poetics", a sort of anti – aesthetics in the tradition of the șestovian anti – philosophy.

Fondane's philosopher statute requires a special kind of discussion, given the fact that, although his aesthetics is, in the French period of his creation, dominated by philosophy, he does not create a philosophical system, the essence of his thought being of a poetical nature, "naturally lyrical"

Rezumat

În ceea ce privește atitudinea și întrebările pe care Fondane nu încetează a și le adresa despre fenomenul avangardist, acestea își găsesc forma cea mai complexă în eseul de mare amploare, Faux traité d'esthétique, subintitulat Essai sur la crise de la réalité, apărut la prestigioasa editură Danoël et Steele și dedicat, cu precădere, aspectelor legate de suprarealism.

Critica sa la adresa acestei mișcări se intensifică și trebuie pusă în relație cu un eveniment care a marcat o cotitură în biografia intelectuală a lui Benjamin Fondane: este vorba despre întâlnirea cu Lev Șestov, filosoful existențialist al cărui discipol va rămâne toată viața.

Ceea ce a rezultat, în plan filosofico-literar, din întâlnirea spirituală Șestov – Fondane este transformarea unui poet într-un filosof, care va intra în polemică aprigă cu nume de rezonanță ale filosofiei anilor '30, asumându-și o sarcină deloc ușoară, aceea de a combate, în anumite puncte, sisteme filosofice ample, construite de Husserl, Heidegger sau Freud.

În conjunctura contactului cu gândirea filosofului rus, Fondane a conceput aplicarea acestor concepte și în cazul poeziei, construind o „poetică existențială”, un fel de anti-estetică în tradiția anti-filosofiei șestoviene.

Statutul de „filosof” al lui Fondane necesită o discuție specială, dat fiind faptul că, deși eseistica sa este, în perioada franceză a creației sale, dominată de filosofie, el nu creează un sistem filosofic, esența gândirii sale fiind poetică, „lirică în mod natural”

Key words: surrealism, avant-garde, existentialism, philosophical system

Cuvinte-cheie: suprarealism, avangardă, existențialism, sistem filosofic

In regard to the questions that Fondane never ceases to ask himself about the avant-garde phenomenon, they can be found under their most complex form in the ample essay, *Faux traité d'esthétique*, with a subtitle *Essai sur la crise de la réalité*, published by the prestigious Danoël et Steele publishing house and dedicated, mostly, to aspects regarding surrealism. His criticism regarding this movement intensifies and must be related to an event which marked a turning point in the intellectual biography of Benjamin Fondane: we're referring to his meeting with Lev Șestov, the existentialist philosopher whose disciple he will remain for the rest of his life. In his records regarding his meetings with the Russian scholar, Fondane himself testifies to the importance of the impact Șestov's personality had on his intellectual structure: "I met Șestov for the first time, on a spring day in the year 1924, at Jules de Gaultier. Two years before that I had published in Romanian six chronicles to his book *The Revelations of Death...* and I was completely ignoring whether the author was dead or alive... And suddenly, in front of me was this great, slender, old man, in Gaultier's ancient parlor. My emotion was authentic and I think that I expressed it directly". [1]

After some years, Fondane records his separation from Șestov, due to his death: "I received a telegram ... On the 20th December 1938, Șestov died. He had had the tuberculosis of the elderly. In the afternoon we went to the Boileau clinic. He was laying down on a bed, calm, pacified, with a serene and beautiful face ... Therefore, my conversation on the 24th of November would have been the last. The letter from him on the 5th of November was the last that I received from him, the last that he wrote." [2] The content of the entire volume, entitled *Rencontres avec Léon Chestov*, was born from the discussions between the two of them and Fondane's incentive to write down these conversations was the incredible and terrifying intellectual solitude in which the master lived.

What came out of the spiritual Șestov – Fondane meeting, in a literary and philosophical field, was the transformation of a poet into a philosopher who engaged in ample disputes with important names from the philosophy of the thirties, taking upon himself a difficult task, that of arguing against certain points of ample philosophical systems, built by Husserl, Heidegger or Freud. In his paper aimed at existentialism, Emmanuel Mounier includes Șesov among the Christian existentialists, setting him apart however from other compatriots of his from the same category, by building a dehumanizing philosophy and an absurd God. But what really makes Șesov stand out as being unique in the philosophical context of the beginning of the century is his placement at the confluence between literature and philosophy. In the terms of Olivier Salazar-Ferrer, he built an "existential hermeneutics for literary texts", applied to Cehov, Dostoievski, Shakespeare ...

In the contact's conjuncture with the way of thinking of the Russian philosopher, Fondane conceived the application of these concepts in the case of poetry as well, creating an "existential poetics", a sort of anti – aesthetics in the tradition of the *șestovian* anti – philosophy. „Ainsi, c'est la mise en contact de l'esprit des avant-gardes avec la philosophie chestovienne qui va permettre la rédaction de *Rimbaud le voyou et du Faux Traité d'esthétique*." [3]

Fondane's philosopher statute requires a special kind of discussion, given the fact that, although his aesthetics is, in the French period of his creation, dominated by philosophy, he does not create a philosophical system, the essence of his thought being of a poetical nature, "naturally lyrical" [4].

In the false treaty on aesthetics Fondane imputes to surrealism the fact that it tries to save poetry "by making it pass as a mental document, as knowledge, as a governess of ideas and noble sentiments", or, to put it differently, a form of knowledge, thus reaching a "violation of the poetic right by the poets themselves" [5]. And poetry is not the only stake here, but existence generally speaking: "This battle, although it's nearing its end today, does not only belong to France and to the moment. It belongs to all countries and all times. Reader from the antipodes or from one of Robinson's islands, this problem is also addressed in your home as well." [6]

There's a natural deduction as to why surrealism in particular was Benjamin Fondane's target. The author of *The False Treaty on Aesthetics* provides us with the clarification himself: "The surrealist school is neither local, nor strictly actual, nor specifically French; if it was born in France, it was because, due to its degree of intellectual maturity, (with all the decadence symptoms that brings along with it) France was destined, above all others, to live such experiences; the others can bear the weight, because in the end they will get there as well.

I know how difficult and unpleasant it must be to admit that this sectarian, aggressive and limited to three or two personalities school represents ... the way of thinking of our era in the field of arts ..." [7]

Benjamin Fondane starts off from the materials offered by the surrealist manifests of André Breton who, under Freud's guidance and in the name of imagination's freedom, launches himself in reflections regarding the dream (as an essential part of the psychic activity) and the miraculous, the only two things capable of animating and enriching a creation: "I'd like to sleep, so that I may let myself be guided by those who sleep themselves, as I let myself be guided by those who read me ... so as my conscious rhythm of thought ceases to prevail." [8]

It is certain that the first manifesto on surrealism had the purpose of structuring the group around the magazine „Littérature”. Elaborated between May and July 1924, the text fits its demands to theoretically establish the coordinates of the surrealist practice. As André Breton himself recorded it, the manifesto was a great success. The assertion made by the Kra publishing house, which had a hint of publicity in it, was not excessive at all, claiming that all the young literature world is talking about Breton and his text.

It has been said that surrealism established itself, both theoretically and practically, into a reactionary movement. If we analyze, ad litteram, the manifesto from 1924, we can pertinently enlarge upon this idea.

It must not be omitted that in 1916 the initiator of the movement adheres to the Dadaist movement, whose anarchic and nihilistic character appeals to him for a while. As soon as he departs from Tzara's group, starting with the spring of 1924, he devotes himself to the practice of automatic writing, which he already experimented with in the creation *Les Champs magnétiques*, written together with Phillipe Soupault, an interesting and uncanny attempt we could say. Apart from the pioneering of automatic writing, the two of them break loose from the literary stereotypes through the way in which they "speak" together.

By developing the above mentioned technique, Breton initially publishes fragments from the future manifesto in the magazine „Journal littéraire”, after which he announces that these pieces will constitute the preface for the work *Poisson soluble*. However, the necessities of the year 1924 probably demanded the debate of pressing matters in the manifestos – some sort of rigorous programs meant to organize the spirits and the writers, but also to decide the fates of culture in general.

The first lines of the manifesto are meant to trenchantly attack the "realist attitude" inspired by the positivism of Anatole France. This attitude, attributed by Breton to a real artistic failure, is translated into, from a literary point of view, the abundance of the novel and, from a spiritual perspective, through the dominion of logics. The Romanian style proposes simplistic information with a circumstantial character, particular in a futile manner, which offers Breton – the reader the feeling that the author of such a text is greatly amused at his expense. In order to exemplify his thesis, the theoretician exemplifies with a fragment from Dostoevski's *Crime and Punishment*. Breton thinks that the room's description from the Russian author's novel must be ignored at best, if not eliminated altogether.

To live under the empire of logic is in direct contradiction with Freud's way of thinking and with the attitude which favours the freedom of imagination. In the name of the latter and in order to save it from the suffocating domination of realism, Breton plunges into several reflections regarding the dream and the miraculous, the only two possible to ever "fertilize" a creation. The dream, as a fundamental component of the psychic activity, too long neglected by the previous orientations,

now occupies a leading role, opposing the wake up call, which sets man under the empire of memories.

The second manifesto edited by Breton (1946) unjustly attacks the value of some people such as Rimbaud or Baudelaire, as well as other names from the literary world, aggressiveness being the dominant characteristic of the text. Moreover, Breton seeks to theorize the surreal and to offer a scientific approach to it. The text shocks through its virulence, hatred and desperation. The whole endeavour looks like (perhaps too much for the world of art!) someone trying to settle a score. Even if it's apparently presented as a continuation of the essay published in 1924, its tone and purpose are significantly different. This so called sequel shows the tensions that had arisen within the group at the end of the 1920s, also scarred by the departure of Louis Aragon. The total of surrealist activities is nowhere near satisfactory, this second study firmly noting the author's claim that the group should join the principles of historic materialism. Naturally, the idea quickly found opponents. In the spirit of some sort of continuity, the text does however go into the investigations of the previous essay, confessing to the influence of the Marxist reflection and Hegel's dialectics.

In fact, Benjamin Fondane's essay subject on this matter is the way in which poetry can be liberated by the aesthetic, ethical or political borderlines, because when faced with the prestige of rationalism, it loses its existential implications, charging itself however with an ideological, political or moral function: „L'annexion culturelle et la neutralisation de la pensée poétique d'origine magique, mystique et religieuse par la culture rationaliste de l'Occident est donc la source d'un malaise existentiel profond au sein de la culture.” [9] Moreover, the essayist puts up for discussion the relation between reality and realism. Even if he refuses the idea according to which art (and especially poetry) has the attributes of reality, claiming, at the same time, that poetry is not a means of cognition, but of an identifying experience, as a way of life, Fondane does however acknowledge the fact that the poet needs reality: “Would it be possible for an aesthetic continuity to exist, without an identity liaison of the same reality? Hard to believe ...” [10] he notes. However, being void of the attribute of reality, the artistic forms are not easy acts or free games generated by psychic activity. “B. Fundoianu nurtures the belief that the theoretic, the speculative and the ethic bring a certain prejudice to the rights of poetry. As long as the non – rational of the surrealists is a means of cognition, and sur-reality is a form of reality, they oppose poetry. This is the reason why B. Fundoianu has a critical attitude towards surrealism” [11], Victor Stoleru notes. The essayist in discussion is on a different side to that of surrealism, being among its “dissidents”, together with writers such as Antonin Artaud, Robert Desnos, Arthur Adamov, Tristan Tzara.

One of the papers on which Benjamin Fondane focuses his attention is *Le Procès intellectuel de l'art* by Roger Caillois. The author in question condemns the so-called impure elements of art, in other words the subjective ones, in the spirit of the platonic concept of *mimesis*. Fondane reacts against this way of bringing art under the incidence of scientific laws: “... Caillois attacks a pure art, a poetry who is going through a state of crisis, of disease... D. Caillois attacks poetry in a *weak point*... I will name this weak point *the shameful conscience of the poet*.” [12] The essayist gives this expression the meaning that even the poet, under the pressure of the moment, has lost his faith in the very essence of the poetic, as well as the capacity to understand the transcendent, the religious, the mystery, in one word, Poetry. In other words the shameful conscience is the profound, intimate conflict, between the existential way of thinking and the speculative one. Fondane also identifies this attitude towards poetry in André Breton's *Communicative Vessels*, especially in the theory according to which the rose is no longer beautiful, it no longer exists, once the inventory of leaves, petals and thorns is done ...

The essay of Jean Cassou, *Pour la poésie*, is the substance of another part of *The False Treaty on Aesthetics*. Fondane is against the idea according to which “we must therefore limit ourselves ... to the action of fighting against the unjust society, to the communion, the love, the human solidarity.” [13]

From Jean Cassou's perspective, the poet's refuge in his ivory tower, the singular suffering, the miserable conscience are nothing but proof of a selfish preoccupation in the context in which the world is beset by profound conflicts.

Fondane defends the spirit's autonomy, the authentic poetic experience, militating for a disengagement of poetry and for a re-dimensioning from his existential perspective. Therefore, the title of his essay finds a justification, in the sense that the poetry is defined only in opposition to the alienation methods, taking into consideration the fact that „l'art ne cesse que là où commence la pensée réfléchie... et la réalité ne commence que là où finit l'intelligible”. [14]

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