B. FONDANE – LITERARY THEMES APPEARING IN THE FRENCH-WRITTEN POETRY

Anda Elena Ignat
ignatanda@gmail.com

Abstract: B. Fondane expressed in his poetry, published in France, his own experience, anxieties of a living soul facing the decline of humanity and the death of hope, traveling everywhere and being unable to find a piece of land that may become a true homeland for him. He describes his generation exile, the history that becomes an enemy of humanity, and his call across time warns us and makes us reflect on our destiny and existence.

Keywords: decline, exile, travel, death, weeping.

In order to understand Fondane's poetry written in France, one has to start with the end - the end of Fondane's life in Auschwitz, Birkenau on October 3rd, 1944. And of course, the fact that he was a citizen of Jewish origin matters a lot. His verse is imbued with the Jew's destiny to wander far and wide, but never finding the Promised Land. The journey continues, the exodus is one with the emigrant's fate.

The journey takes him, the Jewish Ulysses through non-human lands ("terres inhumaines") or harbours out-of-tune like old pianos ("portes désacordés comme de vieux pianos"[1]) that do not seem welcoming for his restless soul. His thirst for the unknown is voracious and he wishes to defy death, seen as a loving, alluring creature.

This journey is made alongside companions that stay anonymous in a world that always seems to be lacking something. Seville, Paris, Dakar are just stops on a map of suffering, as well as churches where Jesus Christ represented on icons is voicing his cry, nailed to the wall ("Jésus-Christ/

[1] Benjamin Fondane, *Le mal des fantômes précédé de Paysages* traduit du roumain par Odile Serre, présentation de Patrice Beray, *Paris-Méditerranée, L'Ether vague – Patrice Thierry*, 1996, p. 103.

BDD-A4115 © 2008 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 08:55:48 UTC)

peint et cloué au mur jette son cri!"[2]). This cry belongs to past times, and so do prayers and beauty for the disenchanted traveller.

The poet feel that his journey is taking him nowhere because all the roads are blocked and he cannot keep on moving forward.

Even if it's late, the Jewish emigrants push ahead into the darkness, walking to the ends of the world: "les émigrants ne cessent d'escalader la nuit, / ils grimpent dans la nuit jusqu'à la fin du monde"[3]. This nocturne escalade is a different way to depict **an upwards exodus**, an attempt to surpass limits and to reach for the skies in search of something to quench their unsatisfied search. ("nous irons, bris d'une vielle danse/ sur toute la terre, et plus loin,/ porteurs d'un grand secret dont s'est perdu le sens,/ crier au visage des hommes notre soif incurable...."[4]. The poet realizes that his people bring along an important secret within their souls, but the meaning of it all is lost by now.

He partakes the cruel destiny of the emigrant who carries his life in a trunk, calling all people that have had a terrible destiny his brothers. He feels that he has a moral duty to them, especially to those that came from Romania, his abandoned country and also to those who are attracted by countries imagined by themselves, utopias, these eternal wanderers possessing hidden strengths but also a long lifeline cracked a hundred times ("une ligne de vie/ longue et cent fois brisée"[5]). This last image evokes the tragic destiny of his brothers, pushed from the back by the strong tide of history, always searching for a beginning, arriving nowhere and always leaving accompanied by the Decalogue's bell.

We are presented with unique characters, like the agent of a maritime company in Havre who has the duty to watch the emigrant's convoy, called Ribono Schelolam. He is also Jewish and communicates with God but cannot stop thinking about pogroms. The agent is thinking about other things too, e. g. the history that keeps repeating itself and the exodus of old men that run without abandoning their Thora.

[2] Benjamin Fondane, *Le mal des fantômes précédé de Paysages* traduit du roumain par Odile Serre, présentation de Patrice Beray, *Paris-Méditerranée, L'Ether vague – Patrice Thierry,* 1996, p. 106.
[3] Benjamin Fondane, *Op.cit.*, p. 108.
[4] Ibidem, p. 108.
[5] Ibidem., p. 109.

BDD-A4115 © 2008 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 08:55:48 UTC)

Despair is felt during the agent's monologue:

"que de fois faudra-t-il que la mer Rouge s'ouvre,/ que nous criions vers toi du fond de notre gouffre,/ la sortie de l'Egypte n'était-elle qu'une figure/ de cette fuite éperdue le long de l'histoire future,/ et Jérusalem n'était-il que symbole et que fable/ de ce havre qu'on cherche et qui est introuvable?"[6]

The Red Sea, the exodus presented in the Old Testament become just symbols of a forever-searched haven, a place that is forever out of reach.

Sometimes the destiny of the Jews is compared to the destiny of animals that are sacrificed in the arena before the eyes of a delirious public that enjoys the agony of the victims.

One question that arises often is where the emigrant is headed, and one possible destination is America. The poet understands the emigrants better after watching some of Charlie Chaplin's films and he can do nothing but empathize with them, to share their destiny:

"*Emigrants, diamants de la terre, sel sauvage,/ je suis de votre race,/ j'emporte comme vous ma vie dans ma valise,/ je mange comme vous le pain de mon angoisse,/ je ne demande plus quel est le sens du monde,/ je pose mon poing dur sur la table du monde,/ je suis de ceux qui n'ont rien, qui veulent tout/ - je ne saurai jamais me résigner."*[7]

The poet praises the tavellers, calling them the diamonds of this Earth, untainted salt like maybe the one Jesus was talking about in the New Testament. He confesses his worries, he mentions his anxieties, and even says that he doesn't ask himself anymore about the meaning of things and by an act of will he becomes the ever-unsatisfied one, the one that never resigns oneself, that wants everything beecause he feels he has nothing.

In *Emigrant's Lullaby* (*Berceuse de l'émigrant*) a series of illusions is shattered, the sense of displacement is very strong, the eternal wanderers lead dog's lifes, being always on the run, fearing the police, and feeling that their journey is cursed: "nous naviguons dans le multiple/ pays de la malédiction ", never ending.

[6] Ibid., p. 111.
[7] Ibid., p. 113.

BDD-A4115 © 2008 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 08:55:48 UTC)

The dreamed destination seems to be lost forever, so the poet tries to change the world up to the moment when he realises that the disgust and the solitude made him lose his connections with the world, finding only himself at the end of his self, dominated by the same thirst and hunger that are larger than life and having no hope left.

The question regarding the use of travelling (" – A quoi sert-il de voyager?"[8]) has to be answered by Ulysses, the alter ego of the poet, and he is also told about the benefits of a stable home. He is asked a second question, a rhetorical one, of course: what is the use of going away when you know from the start that you have lost; perhaps only the unquenched thirst is the reason that pushes ahead the traveler that knows that he will come back an old man, drunken on the sirens' song and missing out on a lot of things.

Fondane reminds us that the beginning of a journey is made only after the world has already been "consumed" and he asks himself if there is still a sun, a ray of hope for the ones involved in a perpetual exodus: "Nous portons avec nous/ le poids d'une race d'ancêtres/ qui ont trop aimé cette terre/ pour ne pas la haïr."[9] It is an impressive confession who expresses in a nutshell the destiny of the Jewish people and its offspring, and the fact that they are profoundly bound to earth never allowed them to fly:

"*Nous sommes issus de la pierre/ lourde et sauvage,/ nous fûmes des rocs, des racines,/ jamais oiseaux, jamais nuages - / feuilles des cimes - / Les dieux ah! Sont morts./ Nous cherchons/ des hommes. Des hommes/ qui n'aient pas peur d'achever/ ce qui reste des dieux.*"[10]

It is clear that at a time when there are no illusions left, the only being that can replace the fallen gods is man, but only the one that has the courage to destroy the last remnants of the gods, a rebelious man.

The poet becomes by means of his lyrical personna *the human path (la route humaine)* and, just as an apostle, sows and reaps the man. The poet seems to fear the void, but he makes himself believe that there is no such

[8] Ibid., p. 125.
[9] Ibid., p. 126.
[10] Ibid., p. 126.

BDD-A4115 © 2008 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 08:55:48 UTC)

thing as a void that sighs inside the ripe words, and acknowledges his solitude:

"*le vide qui sanglote/ dans les paroles mûres,/ il n'y a pas de vide,/ pourquoi me tourmenter?/ je vous donne mes mains, je vous donne mon ombre - / il n'y a pas de vide et je suis seul au monde.*"[11]

The void is what disturbs this lonely traveller the most, because if all his efforts end up by being swallowed by the void, everything he does is pointless.

America is perceived as a soul mate, a possible solution for stopping the exodus and an end to the exiled state, but the poetic personna cannot bring himself to end the voyage, so he invokes the protection of this mighty continent for all his people:

"*Amérique, ta terre est vaste!/ Aie pitié de ces pauvres et sales émigrants/ qui se déplacent, lents, avec leurs dieux anciens!// Je suis un étranger, je le sais./ Je n'ai pas de patrie collée à mes souliers,/ plus rien qui me retienne à quelque quai du vide.../ Puisses-tu me mener en laisse par la main!/ puisses-tu apaiser mon pauvre cœur d' Asie!/ N'es-tu pas une terre absurde, une oasis,/ un pays de chevaux libres de toute bride? // ... oubli de tout, de rien... Nuages d' Amérique!*"[12]

First the poet praises the vastity of America, and then he asks for sympathy on behalf of the poor and dirty emigrants who carry their old gods with them. He admits to being a stranger, who doesn't have a country or something else to keep him in place. He asks whether America is the oasis he dreamed about, the land of freedom, and in the end he invokes forgetfulness.

Needing a vast space to start afresh, his next destination is the Pampas/prairie. This is the place that is most similar to the foundation of the universe, a place where man can touch infinity with his elbows and can experience the true solitude.

At the end of his voyage, the lyrical persona urges Ulysses to dive together in the sea, waiting anxiously to listen to the deadly song of the sirens while they reach the ends of the earth.

[11] Ibid., p. 128.
[12] Ibid., p. 136.

BDD-A4115 © 2008 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 08:55:48 UTC)

The Romanian literary critic Marin Bucur states that Ulysses, the hero of the lyrical adventure, runs because history becomes crazed, and he wants to save himself by waking people up from their musing and from the sleepiness caused by utopias. He, the poet, comes a long way and will continue the exodus even when any other exodus would have ended. The poet called himself Ulysses when he needed to change his name and began to wander. He was the man. The poet was and continues to be the one who stands by his fellow man. His Ulysses did not run away from people, he ran away because of the sickness and squalor of this world. His wandering had been a perpetual announcement of good and bad things for people. The hero carries in his soul the pain of all emigrants, of all those humiliated by the cruel history, he is the prodigal son who doesn't find the loving father that hugs him, forgives him or shelters him.

The volume *Titanic* published in 1937 describes a new type of journey among new people (,,parmi les hommes neufs"), the voyage of a man that is sitting, but who still gazes through the windows: ,, le voyage d'un homme assis,/ mais qui regarde encore à travers les fenêtres..." [13]A new reality is what Fondane hopes to find following the perpetual exodus that, at a given time, seems to be freezing in time. Things begin to look unreal and even the concept of **reality** is questioned. What constantly preoccupies the poet is his statute as a wanderer:

"‹‹ A quoi servent-ils donc ces bateaux?›› se dit- il./ ‹‹ Assez du mouvement perpétuel, assez./ Je veux un autre pain, d'autre cuisines/ des choses fixes, s'il se peut. / Qu'on brise les fenêtres, dit-il/ et voyage-t-on sans soi-même?›› "[14]

We can notice here an obvious schizoid reality, the solitude of the one who doesn't ever feel complete (half real, half fictitious) ,, moitié réel, moitié fictif, / qui souffre du foie et du songe,/ qui aime ses dieux et les mange/ et dont le cœur durcit un morceau de pain...". Anyone exposes himself as much as he/she sees fit, the social persona sometimes overwhelming our true being. Because people do no longer afford to believe in gods and rely only on themeselves, the soul is the most affected, boredom (corresponding to symbolist spleen) infiltrates the sturdy heart. The self

[13] Ibid., p. 195.
[14] Ibid., p. 196.

BDD-A4115 © 2008 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 08:55:48 UTC)

perception is distorted and tragic at the same time: "on ne peut s'embrasser qu'à travers un miroir,/ se toucher qu'à travers un fleuve de silence".

The admiration for his suffering brothers is present in the lyrical cycle *Cities* (V*illes): "O marchandises tendres dans le berceau des cales/ trempées jusqu'à l'os par une canzon napolitaine/ aussi irréelle que les émigrants qui la chantent/ vous rêvez des ponts de troisième où des juifs chassieux/ sanglotent en hébreu, assis sur des caisses d'oignons,/ ils pleurent immobiles, perdus d' étoiles froides,/ et personne ne les attend de l'autre côté de la nuit..."*[15]

They are compared with luggage travelling aboard a ship, listening to Italian music as unreal as its singers, sitting on boxes filled with onions and crying, while nobody is waiting for the on the other side of the night.

"*... et je pense aux misères de toutes ces existences/ massées dans cette cale avec un seul hublot/ ouvert sur l'univers fictif - / figures rongées de sommeil et qui ont peur de vivre (...)// Voyageurs, voyageurs assis sur une chaise/ la nuit fond comme un fruit juteux entre nos mains./ Sur le pont des bateaux, des émigrants réels/ enlèvent de leur cosse/ le poids nourricier des étoiles fines ..."*[16]

The surreal image in the end suggests that for the ones travelling on history's Titanic there is no god that feeds them with manna, but they are feeding on their own dreams.

B. Fondane voices his own experience, the anxieties of a soul that witnesses the decline of humanity and the death of hope in the poetry published in France. Travelling all over the world, he cannot find a piece of land which can become a real home for him. He depicts the exile of his generation, the history that becomes man's enemy and his cry travels through space and time in order to warn us and make us think about our destiny and our existence.

The sacrifice needed for the exodus to end is the poet's own life, only death being able to stop his restless heart and the conscience that urges him to rebel in order to create a new world.

[15] Ibid., p. 207.
[16] Ibid., p. 223-224.

BDD-A4115 © 2008 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 08:55:48 UTC)

BIBLIOGRAPHY

FONDANE, Benjamin, 1996, Paris-Méditerranée, *Le mal des fantômes précédé de Paysages*, Traduit du roumain par Odile Serre, présentation de Patrice Beray, L'Ether vague – Patrice Thierry.

BUCUR, Marin, 1985, *B. Fundoianu/Benjamin Fondane - Priveliştile poeziei*, Bucureşti: Albatros.

*** *Biblia sau Sfânta Scriptură*, 2001, Bucureşti: Editura Institutului Biblic şi de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române.

BDD-A4115 © 2008 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 08:55:48 UTC)