

Coming to know something about history, intellectual or otherwise, would seem to be a matter of uncovering and mastering facts and setting them into structures or narratives in which they become comprehensible. But it is also a set of decisions to wave things away, to dismiss or ignore them. None of us is capable of taking in anything but a tiny fraction of what has happened, or of the people who made it happen or to whom it happened. We need a few figures, a few events, a few ideas, so we can tell the story and move on to something else. We end up leaving out almost everything and everyone.

Benjamin Fondane, a Romanian-French thinker, poet and surrealist filmmaker who was born Benjamin Wechsler in 1898, was among the last people to die at Auschwitz. This volume of his philosophical essays suggests a deep revision of the canonized Heidegger-Beauvoir-Sartre-Camus sequence, which is sometimes supplemented with theological outliers such as Martin Buber and Paul Tillich. Fondane was a late-breaking Kierkegaard-ian, insisting on the particularity of things, extremely critical of reason and science on political, philosophical and personal grounds. He is wilder and more unpredictable than the figures who have come to dominate the narrative; perhaps less "impressive", because less systematic, but at least as profound. The first essay collected here, "Existential Monday and the Sunday of History", attacks Hegel for the abstraction, emptiness and totalitarianism of his account of history. (The reference is to an aphorism from Franz Kafka's diaries: "You are destined for a great Monday! Well spoken, but Sunday will never end!") Then it condemns Heidegger, Sartre and others as neo-Hegelians.

The intensity of the moment when it was written - with the author in isolation in Paris in the days before his arrest and deportation - excuses some of its shortcomings (Fondane would have had difficulty checking some of the quotations, for example), and lends the critique a kind of overwhelming credibility. The matter of how we face history and our own lives within it had taken on for Fondane an extreme reality and urgency. He was quite aware that "history" was closing in on him as he wrote. The abstractions with which he confronted the abstractions of his opponents took on a surprising concreteness.

The other items collected here are much more satisfactory, both as personal documents and philosophical essays. "Man Before History" was written in 1939 as an existential confrontation with totalitarianism. The Nazism of Heidegger and nascent Marxism of Sartre and others hover in the background both as emblems of reason dragging people into madness, and as philosophical betrayals of Fon-

Killed by History

Recalling an existentialist who died at Auschwitz

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dane's heroes. These include Kierkegaard, of course, but also Nietzsche, Dostoevsky and Fondane's friend and mentor Lev Shestov, another neglected figure who is hard to annex to the usual story of existentialism. In "Man Before History" Fondane manages an honesty rare in philosophy and an unusually intense personal engagement with his own philosophical positions and with anti-totalitarian politics, at a place and moment where such a politics seems to have become irrelevant or impossible. It will take despair, he says, to bring the miracle: we must first reach the point at which we admit that "history no longer has an intelligible meaning for us":

Is that the conclusion that I wanted to come to? No. It is the conclusion to which my own thought has led me in spite of myself - a painful, bitter thought that has experienced failure — Without a doubt, just like you, dear reader. I cling desperately 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 measures to be put into effect. But the atrocious clamour of the world and my own anxiety demand not only a better future but also a past that has been put right; not just sufferings justified but also wiped clean, erased; not just healed but as if they had not been. Fondane wrote that before Auschwitz. We read it after, when the "painful, bitter thought" is even more necessary and the hope even more unreasonable.

In *Existential Monday* Fondane issues a pointed critique of Enlightenment science and reason, blaming the Utopian impulse to make the ideal actual for the twentieth century's murderous totalitarianisms, which make particular lives and bodies and sufferings either unreal or mere epiphenomena of concepts or fictional collective identities: classes, races, nations, and so on.' He regards the oppression and war he has witnessed and the genocide that is about to engulf him as the real effects of "Reason" in history.

We should be grateful to everyone involved for bringing such a rich and wild thinker and artist to the awareness of English-bound readers. Nevertheless I have a number, of misgivings about the editorial choices made in this volume. The book is too thin for the task of introducing or reintroducing a major thinker (it includes only seventy-five small-format pages of Fondane's writing), and even the texts that are represented are often full of ellipses. Just a few pages of what the editor and translator Bruce Baugh describes as "Fondane's most important philosophical work" - *La Conscience mal-heureuse* (The Unhappy Consciousness) - are given; perhaps a translation of that text in its entirety would have served readers better than these selections to give a sense of the depth of Fondane's thought. I am not in a position to assess Baugh's translation, but the texts, particularly the title essay, seem flat at moments or even grammatically challenged in English: for example, "No doubt they [Heidegger and Sartre] have replaced the term 'negative' with that of 'nothingness'". On the other hand, Baugh's notes track down many seemingly obscure references and resonances, and *Existential Monday* constitutes a sufficient spur to set in motion a revival of interest in the emblematic life and death - and the radical philosophy - of this neglected and fascinating figure.