

Ocean of Innocence

Virgil Teodorescu

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Ocean of Innocence

Virgil Teodorescu

Translator's Note

“Souvenez-vous que j'étais innocent”
'Remember that I was innocent'

Benjamin Fondane – “Préface en prose,” from *L'Exode*
(*Super flumina Babylonis*), in *Le Mal des fantômes*,
Paris, Éditions Verdier, 2006, p. 153.

I first encountered Virgil Teodorescu's “Oceanul inocenței” in a collection of poems from his pen ranging from 1931 to 1966, which he gathered in a volume titled *Blănurile oceanelor* (278-80), including texts in French written when the poet was a member of the 1940s surrealist group. This publication was a highly unusual feat under a Communist, Stalinist regime, but was made possible at that particular moment by a temporary slackening of the official censure's grip. Teodorescu's prominent position in *Uniunea scriitorilor* (The Writers' Union) certainly helped as well.

However, it is worth noting that prior to seeing his own work in print, Teodorescu also saw to it that a very substantial collection of Benjamin Fondane's poetry be published in Romania, and not only poems in the native language, but also some of Fondane's most important French texts written after his move to Paris, rendered in Teodorescu's translation (*Poezii*). This, several years before the publication of his own *Blănurile oceanelor*, namely in 1965, at a time when the censorship was still very much alive.¹ Roxana Sorescu points out that Teodorescu inserted in this volume his poem “Oceanul inocenței” at the very spot (symbolically, no doubt) where the censorship had excised the “Preface” given by Fondane to his collection *Privești* (1930).

“Oceanul inocenței” (1964) is Teodorescu's homage to a human being, poet, and thinker whom he held in high esteem and whose tragic end in the gas chambers of Auschwitz (refusing to be set free subsequent to interventions made on his behalf, in order not to leave behind his sister, Lina) he mourns in these

¹ My thanks to Claudia Gotea, who brought this collection to my attention.

verses. In the first part of the poem we encounter an allusion to the village of Herța, where the young Benjamin Wechsler spent some of his childhood and about which the adult poet Fundoianu wrote in his collection *Priveliști* (Landscapes). Located in the Cernăuți region in Bucovina, at the very border with Russia, the village was conquered by the Soviet Union and is now part of Ukraine. A second geographical allusion, in the second part of the poem, is more difficult to interpret: Cape Horn, part of the Tierra del Fuego archipelago, may be a double allusion, referring on the one hand to Fondane's sojourn and artistic activity in neighboring Argentina, and on the other to the legendary, often deadly difficulty of navigation in its waters,² which perhaps echoes the risks the poet himself took in his life and work.

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² Along the same lines, Monique Jutrin suggests that Cape Horn can be interpreted as an equivalent of the Pillars of Hercules in Dante's version of Ulysses' journey. Herța, she adds, was home to Fondane's paternal grandparents. (Private conversation.)

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To B. Fundoianu in memoriam

You,
who swelled the ashes of the Nazi ovens
with a fistful of your wandering dust,
and who, in somber seasons
were melting with your eyes the poem
like a lump of salt,
oh, poor flesh torn by beasts and doubts,
whipped by storms and by the sands of dunes,
by a thirst roaring like tornadoes from the sea
when they turn over in the orbit of the moon—
you, who have left Herța to roam the world over,
rip apart bridge by bridge,
and turn your gentle being into
a volcano of reflection and pain—
through the broken tune of our teens I see you,
walking on dewed grass that peeks
through cracks of pavement,
I see you as a new Columbus,
I see you falling in the void,
and I love you,
I love you,
seeker of sources
with hands splattered by flames,
with crushed fingers,
frozen
by the floods of your verse,
like ravens caught
by winter
inside a block of ice.

While you were bowed over
your pages—
the neighborhood's fences,
the pavement swollen by roots,
the nettles and red cows,
and autumn evenings
like wide ribbons,
vibrations objects can't contain,
the silence played by four hands on the keys
the love locked in a wooden coffin
ghosts gliding in the thoughts,

and porches with their wooden posts—
all were seeking salvation in your images.

But squalor ground itself in people.

The dream was bursting in the flesh
in nights too long,
the bruised earth moaned,
and you wanted to touch
the equator with your hand,
to carve new paths in the world's sap.
Palings came to life,
ferns grew in profusion,
and pumpkins spat their lungs onto the trails,
people and pigs ate pumpkins in the field
and sorrel picked by children from the ditch.
A black murmur was coming
set off by liturgies
at Cape Horn,
mounds of bones were thrown out
on rocky islands,
the movement laid buried deep
in women's warm loins,
pupils dilated,
swollen by magnetic ice.

Born you were a boundless poet.

Born to gather up
the agaves of hope,
born to unleash a mute song
filling it with the sound of life,
but the storm,
with its claws of steel,
grabbed you
and hurled you from on high,
and you went,
Ocean of innocence,
you went among masts in distant lands,
you passed under those grounds,
under the salty seas,
through vast savannahs, aimlessly,
you went bearing on your shoulder
an imaginary musket,
you slipped within yourself

to depths
not even deaf silence penetrates, —
and only late
back from the snows
regained your wellspring
that murmured nearby...

Translated from the Romanian by Monique
Yaari with Anca Roncea

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