

## **Text, Context, Identity: The Paradigm of the Jewish Intellectual in the Romanian Culture**

Case Study: Benjamin Fundoianu/Fondane

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**Abstract** - The present scientific project analyzes the possible reaction to being Jewish (assuming/denying/dissimulating) of Jewish intellectuals in Romania. We gradually reach the text by taking in consideration the context in order to identify how the former can express the relationship between origin, experience and environment. We aim to answer, at the end of the research, the challenge of establishing if the paradigm of the Jewish writer in exile (voluntary, self-imposed or imposed – by whom? Why?) still has open doors and if Judaism still represents a literary identity in crisis. Research has thus an interdisciplinary character, and the measures follow the natural steps from theory to applied analyzes. In the subsidiary of the subject, namely one oriented towards acknowledging and accepting, by the general public, the fact that the contribution of the Jewish intellectuality to the culture of the majority is fundamental, the goal would be to reflect, in parallel mirrors, the way in which the Jewish intellectual community infiltrated itself in key areas of the Romanian culture and to what measure this infiltration was done by informing the creational individuality or precisely by adhering to the majority's culture.

**Keywords:** *text, context, identity, Judaism, crisis.*

We set out in the analytical endeavor of this subject starting with the fact that the narrative/lyrical and argumentative (logical) identity doesn't represent but partial aspects of the personal identity. Each of these aspects determines different attitudes, regarding ethics as well as taste, the sense of justice or other such norms.

The identity issue and the reference model of the being to this identity, in literature, becomes a form of circumscription of the individual's personality in question.

The existential trail often has a fundamental relevance regarding the interpretation of a/an writer's/artist's work etc., to the point where these two aspects can be linked.

Moreover, a tumultuous existence and a troubled conscience demand such an approach, within the common boundaries of equilibrium and without giving in to the temptation of an exaggerated biographical interpretation.

The Judaic personalities' paradigm in the Romanian culture is an impressive one, a significant percent out of the names included in this gallery later standing out in the socio-cultural western life, mostly the French one.

Paul Celan or Victor Brauner, Benjamin Fundoianu, Tristan Tzara, Ilarie Voronca etc., are eloquent examples in this case. The list spectacularly goes on with Gherasim Luca, Norman Manea, Henri Gad, Leon Feraru, Dolfi Trost etc.

Practically, we are talking about writers, philosophers, columnists, artists, film-makers etc. Therefore, the method in which such a subject is to be tackled should have an interdisciplinary character.

One of the terms that define, in its essence, the structure of the paradigm's majority is that of dissimulation. As they have "played" with their own identity, they "are playing" with the spiritual confessions as well.

The complexity of the image is comprised in a kaleidoscopic fashion; various curtains fall and arise; statements that seem true are, after a few lines, are disavowed and their entire personality seems to perpetually be composing and decomposing.

A discussion centered on the ideological aspects portrayed in the intellectual activity of those in question shows us a kaleidoscope, identifiable in the socio-cultural macro-structure of the beginning of the 20th century. The Romanian scenery, tormented by internal conflicts and colored by a myriad of publications, some evanescent, others traditional, unites with relative difficulty, but with certainty, integrating itself in the European climate of the moment.

The decisive sign of this period was without a doubt that of an inherent struggle of great paradigm changes. In this climate, the issue of identity has become more pressing than in other contexts.

Dualism is a key concept in regard to the being of this paradigm's exponents. The theoretical reflections regarding the origins hide a dramatic balance of the spirit in search of its own determination, between two religions, between two ethnic groups, between two ways of being in the world and of relating to it.

The autobiographical fragments hence restored come to clarify the shades of gray in the spiritual complexity of the text.

The identity related attitudes transcribed represent assuming, rejecting (even denying) and/or dissimulation. Each of these relations to one's own origin reflects organic experiences which find their expression (text) in the real space (context) of the years prior to the second world conflagration.

The restraint, the philosophical register, kept afar from the socio-political turmoil, from the concrete register, of the life of the Jewish communities is also one of life's aspects which regard the identity related issue. The cultural perspective, timeless and seemingly detached from the author transcribes an interior frame of mind.

Are these people living under a double or even triple identity (Judaic – Romanian – French or that of an adopting country), in an organic, natural, appropriate way?

Can we talk about a scission, an identity drama or a crisis? Or are they different people, such as, for example, Benjamin Fondane who, once integrated into the French cultural universe, proclaims the death of his Romanian avatar, by a death certificate? How do these Jewish intellectuals, from Romania, relate to the culture matrix?

The current research study hasn't ruled out, not by a long shot, the established subject, the alarming aspect from a cultural point of view being that certain renowned names on a European scale or even world wide, that developed in Romania, find acknowledgement in adoptive environments which are much more welcoming, but completely ignored in the matrix space. Therefore, the current endeavor consists of a mandatory cultural recovery attempt, without which the native intellectual geography would have irritating shades of gray.

A challenge which we also hope to launch is to establish to what measure, after quite a few historical years, and light-years from a civilization-wise point of view, from the moments before the second world war, Judaism, overlapping the creational entity, still represents a form of identity in crisis and if, finally, the paradigm of the exiled Jewish intellectual (voluntarily, auto-imposed or dictated – by whom? By what?) still has validity.

The specific objectives which we have in our sight are: emphasizing a more profound perspective regarding the connection between the text and context (the accepting/denying/hiding of the identity are each full of meaning at a textual level), the understanding of the Jewish creational entity referral mechanism to the majority's culture (the case of rejection, even shocking the collective mentality by an ostentatious display of one's own superiority – the Benjamin Fundoianu case, the Nicolae Steihardt model and the conversion to Christianity), defining the outline of the Jewish intellectual's paradigm of Romanian expression and trying to understand the mechanism of voluntary exile to which certain representatives of this paradigm subject themselves to (Paris - the destination of choice for the exiled Romanian intellectuals between the Wars - Gherasim Luca, Ilarie Voronca, Henri Gad etc. Other focused on cultural areas - the United States of America - Dolfi Trost, Norman Manea etc.

We can follow the stages of this cultural identification, from fidelity to rejection, from faith to abnegation, from praise to blasphemy.

We choose the Benjamin Fundoianu/Fondane case in order to exemplify our theoretical considerations. A few aspects regarding his Judaic origins are essential in order to understand him. A very complex personality, that seemed to reunite more beings into a single one, the literate in question

has opened, through the multitude of fields in which he stood out, but also through the intellectual contacts which he had underway, the path to a wider vision, connected to the problematic of the identity and relating to the creational alterity.

His real name is Benjamin Wechsler, the son of Isaac Wechsler, a small tradesman from the market town of Herța, and of Adela Schwartzfeld, who named him, according to the Judaic tradition, after his maternal grandfather. In the Hebrew language, ben-jamin means "the son of the right hand" or, in other words, "the son blessed by the right hand"[1].

The family's environment is one especially favorable to intellectual development, taking into consideration the fact that the mother comes from a high class society family, comprised of Jewish intellectuals. The maternal grandfather, Benjamin Schwartzfeld, a pedagogue and researcher of the Jewish history, one of the pioneers of Jewish Illuminism in Romania, founded the first school for Jewish children in Iasi. The mother's brothers, Elias (1855 – 1915), Moses (1857 – 1943) and Wilhelm (1856 – 1915) are all scholars, high ranked intellectuals, renowned journalists and historians. The first of them wrote an extremely well documented history of the Jews from Romania.

Moses Schwartzfeld, a renowned folklorist, left behind him a very interesting chronicle of the Jewish avatars, "as the Romanian sees it, as he thinks he understands it, but not as it really is or was"[2]. The volume demonstrates, starting with quotes from popular literature, how numerous and fierce were, in popular belief, the superstitions regarding the "devil, impure, baby killer" Jew!

Although, as Andrei Oisteanu pertinently points out, the modernization and emancipation of the Jewish community from Romania cannot be thought of without taking into consideration the fundamental contribution of the Schwartzfeld brothers, although only one of them, Elias, still lives to see the days in which their dreams came true, which were established by the 1932 Constitution. But he too participates only from a distance to the moment of acknowledgement of equal rights and chances of the Jews, being expelled out of the country in 1885, along with other Jewish journalists or writers, who were considered negative elements by that time's government.

Even if Benjamin sees the light of day at Iasi, his childhood is inseparably tied to Herta, a genuine "stehl" with a pregnant Jewish culture, numbering several hundred Jewish families. Nowadays, the settlement situated at 50 km from Iasi, is included in Ukraine's territory. The surroundings of his first years of life can be found in the poetic and philosophical substance of his texts, both in the Romanian creational stage as well as in the French one.

Interesting to point out that Benjamin Fundoianu's birth place is one of great cultural, ideological and even political contacts. It is where the interests of the Hapsburg, Ottoman and Tsarist Empires intertwined, it is here where we find religions, attitudes, ways of "being" in the world.

Consequently, we're talking about a multicultural space in its essence, a framework which, being as molding as it is, leaves a distinct touch on a personality of such an acute

sensibility and receptive finesse as the one of the writer in question proved out to be.

His inclination towards sociology, literature, philosophy takes shape as far back as primary school, when the person in question publishes works in magazines such as Ovidiu Densuseanu's "New Life", "The Chronicle", "Waves" etc., under pseudonyms like Ofir, Ha-Shir, Alex Vilara, Wechslerescu, Iașanul, Dionmède, Dănoiu and, finally, Benjamin Fundoianu. This pseudonym is derived from the name of his father's mansion, situated nearby: Fundoia. The pseudonym will eventually be transformed, when he establishes himself in France, in Fondane.

Benjamin Fundoianu, who turned out to be an ambitious publicist, tackled, quite nonchalantly, even the controversial field of international politics, and the events which marked the Jewish community left their toll on his political conscience.

The first articles which he published stand testimony to his concerns regarding the evolution of Zionism and the different debates which animated, at that time, the Jewish newspapers and communities. From the beginning, the position of the young Fundoianu is one defined as negating socialism.

The cultural environment in his family, as well as the fact that Iasi, a city with an old and numerous Jewish community had become a centre of cultural rebirth, determined Fundoianu to vividly partake in the intellectual movement supported by the Jewish publications of that time: the magazine from Galati "Hatikvah" ("Hope"), "Lumea Evree" ("The Jewish World"), "Mântuirea" ("The Salvation"), "Bar-Kochba" or "Hasmonaea" etc.

Out of the Jewish intellectual figures who substantially left their mark on Fundoianu's intellectual configuration we can mention the Yiddish poet Jacob Groper (Jacob Groper), the publicist Alfred Hefter, the poet A.S. Rodion and the ideologist writer A.L. Zissu, editor of the Zionist magazine "Mântuirea" ("The Salvation"), whose novel, "The confession of a chandelier", is translated and its preface written by Fondane, in Paris, 1928.

Thus, with real intellectual elegance, Fundoianu leads a double existence, on one hand on a literary level, on the other hand, in the world of journalism.

As far as his journalist career is concerned, some consider that Fundoianu really gained the respect of his peers thanks to an interview published in "Mântuirea" ("The Salvation") from the 30<sup>th</sup> of March 1919, an interview regarding the Jews' situation in Ukraine, in relation to Bolshevism. He interviewed Arnold Margoline, minister of foreign affairs in the evanescent Republic of Ukraine. The discussion focused on issues such as the participation of Jews in the Ukrainian leadership structures, the organization of Jews into political parties, cultural Jewish autonomy etc.

Although he tackled aspects related to the Jewish problem, the perspective which Fundoianu tackled was always a cultural-ideological one, keeping a distance, even as a collaborator of "Mântuirea" ("The Salvation"), from the Zionist militant movement. However, some of his essays do debate issues regarding anti-Semitism, but, as Leon Volovici

points out, they almost always have a timeless and intellectuality refined form.

In the position of a Jewish publicist, editor at magazines of the same orientation, Fundoianu has constantly occupied himself with afferent issues, but usually from a strictly cultural or philosophical perspective. He rarely involved himself in problems regarding the actual lives of the Jewish communities. The literary critics noticed the timeless and refined intellectual vibe which emanates from Fundoianu's writings, in this sense, Leon Volovici, who wrote the preface for the volume of essays on Judaic themes, notes that: "...in the essays published in the thirties, Fundoianu/Fondane transcends the area of Judaism, involving it as a way of access in the exploration of the creation's sense and as a possible answer to the philosophical existential interrogations" [3].

The journalistic activity from "Mântuirea" ("The Salvation") has as a result, the reunion, under the title of "Judaism and Hellenism", of the series of eleven essays regarding these themes. Spread through the numbers of the publication between the years 1919 – 1920, the essays have been long forgotten. However, the year 1999 has brought about their content, by the appearance under the publishing house Hasefer, of a volume of these essays, under the editorial supervision of Leon Volovici and Remus Zastroiu.

The young philosopher tries, following moral aspects, social aspects, but also aspects related to art or the divinity, to present in a synthesis the two cultural matrixes. In these studies, Fundoianu underlines the fact that Hellenism is characterized by aestheticism, which is exterior to the conscience's liberty and tributary to destiny, whilst aesthetics is capable of characterizing Judaism, taking into consideration the fact that the Jewish God is found the absolute justice with which Iov's virtues are measured, who suffered terribly, but had faith till the end.

Even from the first essay in the series in question, an essay which has as a starting point Martin Buber's book, *Vom Geist des Judentums*, Fundoianu points out the danger of generalizing. Unity is depersonalization, as is the notion.

From this perspective, Hellenism would be synthesized to the idea of paganism, Christianity and Judaism, fundamentally different, coming to overlap one another, opposing Hellenism.

Consequently, the essayist suggests a series of contrasting elements to serve as reflection subjects: "The Greek wants to rule the world, the Jew wants to better it; for the Greek, the world already is, whereas for the Jew, the world will be; the Greek looks at the world, the Jew is its sibling; the Greek recognizes it in its material aspect, the Jew in its spiritual one; for the Greek the deed is in the world, for the Jew, the world is in the deed" [4].

An essayist in the whole sense of the word, Fundoianu defines, practically and theoretically, the very essence of this type of writing, in the moment in which, throughout his pages, he states that, he will not demonstrate anything by that which he will write, he will only suggest... As a matter of fact, Dan Manucă observes that among his literary opinions, "Fundoianu doesn't need to be read as much for the circulated information, as for the spontaneity of their

linkage” [5]. Of course, the importance of the philosophical system that the essayist in question has built, must not be diminished, but what captivates in Fundoianu’s case, from the first contact with his writing, is a rarely encountered effervescence of thinking, sprinkled with unexpected connections and surprising informational jumps, which create the sensation that the sum of all the leads opened by one of Fundoianu’s essays always seem to get away, like the facet kaleidoscope of his personality.

The volume that has as its title the name of the comparative essay series on Hellenistic and Hebrew culture also reunites other essays on related issues to the ones regarding the life of the Jewish community from Romania, ideas about Palestine, Jewish writers or bits and pieces of life transposed into celluloid through which the young Fundoianu took a stand, in the papers of that day, as a remarkable person both with his uncanny erudition (at such a young age) and with an exceptional sensibility.

Out of these, “Utopia and territory” stands out with its capacity to surprise the antonymous essence of Judaism: “A contradictory people. We are attributed the lowest form of materialism and Judaism is the history of morals, the history of idealism - a contradiction which could very well be the foundation of our existence. It is our very existence: on one hand, the inclination towards abstract laws and ideas; on the other hand, the mature and strong instinct; on one hand, the moral ascension, the spiritual beautiful; on the other hand, the desire to have a steady life; on one hand, the light; on the other hand, earth. What a beautiful and life creating contradiction!”[6]. The central idea of the essay makes a synthesis between pragmatism and idealism, to overcome the antagonistic states attributed to the Jewish nature.

“At the Jewish cemetery in Iași” has as a starting point a walk among the Jewish tombstones, so that, in the end, the essay receives philosophical implications, targeting the parent-son relationship, both at the dimensions of the divinity in relation to its creations, as well as within the micro-universe within the family. After an attempt to evoke the paternal figure, the essayist leaves the gloomy setting, on the same path that, in the first few lines, guided him towards the cemetery, a deceiving technique, given the fact that the overall feeling is that of a perpetual return: “And I leave on the trail ... convinced that I’ll find him here, without tears or anger tomorrow and next year as well, till the day others will come by here to find me as well”[7].

Unlike the previously discussed, the essay similarly entitled, “The Jewish Cemetery from Newport” tackles a totally different subject: this time we’re talking about an analysis of the meanings of one of Longfellow’s poems, whose title Fundoianu borrows for his essay. The reason? The last verse of the poem: “But dead nations are never reborn”[8]. In the context of Israel’s founding, Fundoianu’s finding develops naturally: “Poets are not prophets – not even when they want it... Nowadays, an entire people strive to prove this verse wrong. Will they succeed?... If I would ever have the honor of being a friend to one of Jerusalem’s town councilors, I’d suggest we christen with the name of a skeptic a street from the sacred city”[9].

Another essay tackles the discriminatory attitude regarding the Jew’s condition, reflected, as an example, in the opposition between Mistral, “the poet” by excellence, and Bialik, “a Jewish poet”. The distinction marked by the usage of the definite and the indefinite articles offers Fundoianu the opportunity of a brief incursion in the depth of the causes which trigger such differentiations: language, ancestors, thematic.

Out of the subjects tackled by the essayist, the novels “The confession of a chandelier” and “Samson and the new Dragon” by A.L. Zissu, the energetic publicist, Zionist leader and at the same time, personality which contributed to Fundoianu’s intellectual refinement, could not be missed.

Besides, with the relocation to France, the Judaic themes are reduced close to zero in Fundoianu’s activity, except for his intellectual collaboration with A.L. Zissu, but in the preface which he signs when translating his novel, Fondane points out the fact that he is not bound to the Zionistic leader by Jewish political ideals, but by a similar perception of the Jew’s human destiny’s significance, projected into metaphysic, in relation to the divinity.

The moment he questions himself about the issue of identity, Benjamin Fundoianu feels the need to go back to the tradition of Judaism, to the Bible foremost, which he studies in detail as a source of intellectual and artistic inspiration.

The Hebrew cultural elements also appear later on in his creation. We’re talking here about the French philosophical universe which he created and about “Rymbaud le voyou” (“Rymbaud, the vagabond”)[10], where we can find very frequent referrals to the Cabala.

We can notice the anxious background which determined him to be receptive in regard to expressionism and existentialism. The prayer ritual of the Jews is not the only one who can be noticed in the verses, but also the memory of the cemetery where the ancestors rest. The idea of wandering is also obsessively repeated, the idea of an impossible return because there is nowhere to return to, of the status of pariah of a society which has estranged itself from God, a Godless society.

As far as “Exodus (Super Flumina Babylonis)” [11] is concerned, this is some sort of epic poem of the Jewish people, but also the crying (calling) of a man in the wild, of a soul abhorred by the crimes of the war.

In other words, “At the River of Babylon” is a direct attack targeted at fascism and, moreover, at any form of totalitarian form of subjugation of the human spirit. The preface in prose, which opens the “Exodus” can be read as an analogue poetic testimonial, in a philosophical order, to the work “Le Lundi Existentiel et le Dimanche de l’Histoire” (“The existential Monday and the Sunday of the history”) [12]. It’s a way of communicating from one soul to another, a plea for Man, as a supreme value, which was exactly what Benjamin Fundoianu left behind, this spirit of elegance regarding the attitude towards the human condition.

The fact that Fundoianu was born at an unfortunate time, fatal for the immense complexity of his soul, for his structure of a catastrophic dignity and perseverance is certain: the one of the Holocaust. Whereas, the one in question was truly,

aside from the person without roots, but paradoxically, obsessed with them, Jewish. A true Jew, with an inadaptability and an outstanding spiritual fertility.

Both in his case as well as in others, there still are testimonials from the camps, unpublished letters, manuscripts (the relation between them and the collective memory must be ascertained, it is an imperative of the research!), texts which transcribe essential relations of the context with the text, omitted till now from the research plans. The subject at hand focused interpretative energies, without being exhausted by the research which took place. The issue of relating to the identity, with the emphasizing of the attitude related facets which he can build, is at this point, an area that must be studied more carefully.

One of the fundamental goals of the scientific project at hand is to open up the roads towards contact or divergence points between the text and context, in other words between the everyday reality and the identity related text.

The current research project wishes to be the preface to a larger one, whose goal would be to reflect, in parallel mirrors, the way in which the Jewish intellectual community infiltrated itself in key areas of the Romanian culture and to what measure this infiltration was done by informing the creational individuality or precisely by adhering to the majority's culture.

Aside from the obvious interest of the specialists for the theme at hand, there's a generic objective that is taking shape in the subsidiary of the subject, namely one oriented towards acknowledging and accepting, by the general public, the fact that the contribution of the Jewish intellectuality to the culture of the majority is fundamental, and eliminating any trace of discrimination based on ethnic criteria is and will

always be an issue of intellectual hygiene and social elegance.

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