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Gisèle Sapiro, *La Responsabilité de l'écrivain. Littérature, droit et morale en France (XIXe-XXIe siècle)*. Paris: Editions du Seuil, 2011. 750 pp. Annex, notes, index. €35.00 (cl). ISBN 978-2-02-103288-8.

Review by Patrick H. Hutton, University of Vermont.

The writer in modern France has long held pride of place within the liberal professions, to such a degree that historians in recent years have devised a minor genre devoted to “intellectuals” as a social type whose identity was constructed amidst the rise and retreat of print culture.[1] Gisèle Sapiro makes an important contribution to this line of critical inquiry, one noteworthy as a synthesis at once comprehensive yet precisely focused. Her study spans the era of print literacy as it emerges out of the Enlightenment and fades after the Second World War in the face of a coming media culture. It is a work of immense erudition.

Sapiro explains how writers acquired, modeled, and remodeled their social identity over the course of the nineteenth century around the issue of responsibility—to self and to society. They sought ever greater autonomy in their endeavor, but were hemmed in by social conventions and, where they pressed their limits, were prosecuted for straying into forbidden subject matter. Even as their popularity and prestige grew with the democratization of literacy, they ran up against legal codes governing public standards of morality that were periodically reformulated in a rapidly changing political culture. Sapiro's purpose is to describe, explain, and evaluate the writers' responsibility for their ideas as dramatized in case studies of famous writers prosecuted in the courts of law, roughly from the early nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century. These include such literary celebrities as Pierre-Jean Béranger, Charles Baudelaire, Gustave Flaubert, and Emile Zola. She casts her interpretation in the broadest possible social and political contexts, as the issues they raised crystallized debates about the moral and social temper of their times.

For Sapiro, the birth of the writer as a modern social type was made possible by the destruction of the web of patronage, censorship, and arbitrary legal obstacles that burdened writing during the ancien regime. During the French Revolution, writers for the first time gained a right to free expression, though always with restrictions concerning public morals. Their rights were enshrined in the Constitution of 1791, confirmed in the Charter of 1814, and further specified and revised in laws concerning the press and publication in 1819, 1881, and 1939. Free of the legal liabilities that had thwarted their efforts during the ancien regime, writers in the nineteenth century set about their quest for autonomy. They would have liked to set their own limits, and over time developed professional associations to advance that cause, but invariably they were obliged to write within the protocols of a legal framework set by statesmen and jurists. Given the influence upon social mores that writers were believed to exercise, the confrontation of celebrated writers with the law set the stage for some of the most sensational trials in modern French history. In analyzing these proceedings and the wider public debates that surrounded them, Sapiro traces changing legal explanations offered to justify standards of public morality over the course of more than a century. Writers put on trial for challenging such standards often enjoyed the sympathy of the reading public, which enhanced their prestige as social critics.

Sapiro's narrative is highly structured. She divides her study into four parts, sequentially focused on particular historical eras. She then divides each part into three sections, the first laying out the larger political culture; the second profiling key adversarial issues; and the third explicating subjective arguments for and against the responsibility of famous writers put on trial. She works largely with a synchronic conception of time, for she wishes to show the ongoing tension between forces of continuity and change in the adjudication of the writers' role. She arrests the flow of long-range change by cutting into the past at poignant moments that illustrate confrontations between individual writers and keepers of the law. She highlights four historical eras: the Restoration, the Second Empire, the early Third Republic, and the Liberation. Within each, she exposes particular issues in search of resolution: for the Restoration, offenses against church and crown; for the Second Empire, public taboos about discussion of private life; for the Third Republic, scandalous topics alleged to threaten the integrity of public morals or the national interest; for the Liberation, political treason through collaboration with the Nazi occupiers. Each issue, in turn, is exemplified in celebrated trials of well-known writers accused of transgressing the boundaries of social expectation in their times.

Within this framework of judicial constraint, Sapiro interweaves a discussion of the writers' defense of the integrity, authenticity, and scope of their endeavor. She exposes the irony that the writers' advance into ever greater popular recognition was accompanied by the elaboration of special categories of writing that channeled and eventually narrowed their influence. She explains the long-range trend this way: in the early nineteenth century, *hommes de lettres* were regarded as the quintessential type of the modern writer. Generalists in their commitment to humanist values, they wrote on all manner of topics, but largely for a learned elite. Their prestige and influence were real, but their wisdom was increasingly perceived to be impressionistic, subjective, and wanting in verifiable evidence. Their ranks splintered as specialists emerged to rival them. Literary critics became a breed apart, and soon set the standards for literary taste and credibility. By mid-century, novelists and journalists were writing for a larger popular readership. The nineteenth century, moreover, was an age in which science gained unprecedented prestige as a way of truth by which to measure all others. Social scientists carved out areas of expertise within realms previously associated with the humanities. Accordingly writers, defending themselves against charges of scandal, would sometimes invoke the scientific nature of their creative endeavor, even in the realm of fiction. Gustave Flaubert, for example, defended his portrayal of marital infidelity as an honest effort to represent the reality of his society. Emile Zola would claim that his novels were experiments conducted in the manner of scientists.

Sapiro's study is capacious enough to pay close attention to the interests of readers as well, for the perceived power and influence of writers was greatly enhanced by the democratization of print literacy. Over the course of the modern era, mass popular literature eclipsed that of intellectual refinement. Sapiro's data and observations are informative on such topics as rates of literacy, the tastes of readers, new forms of print matter with a mass appeal (notably easy access to novels in the serial format of the *feuilleton*), the dramatic rise in newspaper circulation, the expansion of public education at all levels, and the establishment of a system of public libraries. All widened the divide between elite and popular readers. Writers hoping to live by their wits were obliged to keep the distinction in mind.

I would also remark on Sapiro's conceptualization of her study. Her interpretation may be read as a genealogical retrospection in the manner of Michel Foucault, to whom she acknowledges an intellectual debt. Her early work concerned writers during the era of the Second World War and its aftermath.^[2] While her narrative in her present study moves forward from the Restoration, her interpretation conveys the sense of a backward glance so as to put the writers' dilemma during the Second World War in a larger historical perspective. For this reason, the reader of this long and complex work might find it advantageous to turn to her later chapters on the Liberation before proceeding to the beginning of the text. These chapters are the anchoring reference for evaluating the convictions of the writers of the earlier eras, for they cast all the debates along the way in a different light.

This retrospective conceptualization subtends Sapiro's method of emplotment. As I read her study, her analysis of the first three historical eras reveals the advance of writers in their quest for autonomy, however the obstacles that they confronted were reinvented. Her depiction of the fourth era as that of the Liberation calls for a different kind of assessment. In her presentation of the first three regimes, writers were popular and greatly admired, all the more so for having challenged conservative pieties. They unsettled bourgeois sensibilities by opening to scrutiny authentic realms of human experience long regarded as forbidden territory in popular discourse. In this sense, they were moralists not scientists, providing insight into the ambiguities of what it is to be human. Accordingly, they would come to be recognized in the minds of their readers as heroic figures in modern French culture. They made the case for their right to free expression by affirming the integrity of their calling. They justified their creative work on the basis of aesthetics (art for art's sake), ethics (integrity of poetical vision), science (portraying life as it "really is."), or prophecy (insight into what the future may hold).

As for the writers of the Vichy era who opted for collaboration with the Nazis, their postwar prosecution put them on display, not as heroes but as villains, shameful in their opportunism, cowardice, complicity in Nazi crimes, and treason against the French nation. Here, as in the earlier sections, Sapiro reconstructs the intense debate about the nature of the writers' responsibility. She composes a profile of the writer as collaborator, based on a close analysis of the biographies of fifty-five among the accused. Though some were members of France's most distinguished academies, she characterizes them as writers of lesser stature, competent but not profound. Opportunists, they sought recognition and prestige in betting on a German victory. Flawed individuals, they put self-interest before principle, in contrast with those who risked their lives to contribute to the clandestine publications of the Resistance. Sapiro is sensitive to the complexity of assessing their guilt. She discusses the rush to judgment of the most notorious among them--Robert Brassilach, Georges Suarez, Abel Bonnard, Lucien Rebatet, and Charles Maurras, sentenced to death or life imprisonment. Collaborating intellectuals invoked defenses used in earlier eras--art for art's sake, the integrity of their creative vision, prophecies better judged mistakes than crimes. However in these circumstances, their apologies appeared weak and unpersuasive. Still, colleagues who loathed their writings expressed reservations about the severity of punishments for writers as opposed to industrialists. They were scapegoats (*boucs émissaires*), their writings easy targets as *prima facie* evidence of their crimes.

This manner of setting Vichy and the Liberation era apart enables Sapiro to showcase Jean-Paul Sartre's thinking about the responsibility of writers during the war years. The title of his lecture on this topic at a UNESCO conference in 1946 serves as the title of Sapiro's book. Sartre's insight emerged out of his situation during the war, but takes the debate about the responsibility of the writer to a philosophical plane that transcends all earlier discussion.

Sapiro presents Sartre's argument as a fortuitous opening made possible by the Collaborationist writers' fall from grace, one that would never have been voiced but for the Second World War. For all its horrors, for all the shame of the Collaborationist writers, the wartime experience of the French with the radical evil of Nazi oppression enabled Sartre to wrest the debate about the writer's responsibility out of the realm of national culture into that of human rights and responsibilities. For him, earlier formulations of responsibility as an ongoing negotiation between the writer's subjective intentions and society's moral expectations were inadequate. His assessment is uncompromising. Writing, he affirms, is first and foremost an act, and the writer, in his absolute freedom, must take absolute responsibility for what he has written. Here, Sapiro explains, Sartre returned to a consideration of the idealist principle advanced by Immanuel Kant in his ethic of the categorical imperative: right implies duty (*devoir*) and universal rights, the duty to act as if one were acting in behalf of all humankind. Kant, Sapiro qualifies, based his argument on the rational recognition of the relationship between the right to freedom and the moral obligation it entails. Sartre, by contrast, located that relationship in the existential conditions in which French writers found themselves under the Nazi occupation. In the face of crimes against humanity, their responsibility took on universal meaning that could not be apologized away.

Sapiro addresses the historicity of Sartre's situation with a certain irony. Never before had a literary critic ascribed such autonomy to the calling of the writer, and his argument fueled his ascent to literary prestige. However, that status was inextricably bound to the circumstances that had made his argument possible. His writings conveyed a stern asceticism that matched the temper of French wartime Resistance, but one too demanding to maintain in the postwar era. By then people were anxious to put the war years behind them in order to take up the tasks of peace and prosperity. The trials of those collaborators not immediately prosecuted were postponed and addressed only with reluctance and in the interest of moving on. In the more conventional milieu of the 1940s and 1950s, discussion of the responsibility of the writer reverted to the commonplace themes of the prewar era. Leagues of moral decency popped up once more, and the discussion of public morals took up the *fin de siècle* preoccupation with moral decadence in the contaminating effects of pornography. The sexually explicit writings of Henry Miller were put on trial, as were those of that old-time favorite, the Marquis de Sade.

More significant in the discussion of the responsibility of the writer in the postwar era, Sapiro suggests, was the redirection of critical attention to the distinction between the voice of the author and that of the text. Whereas the two were viewed as mirror images at the outset of the modern era, recognition of differences between them gradually emerged. The notion that a text takes on a life of its own among its readers gained wide appeal among literary critics by the 1960s. The view was stated boldly by Roland Barthes and subsequently by Michel Foucault in the provocative notion of the "death of the author." For Sapiro, the phrase reveals the diminished stature of the writer, as literary "theorists" assumed a role that in academic circles superseded them. Scholars turned to the issue of the rhetoric in which writers composed their creative work, thus privileging an interest in the form over the content of a text. Readers often displaced writers as the locus of the critics' concern. Texts were objective artifacts; readers formed varied and subjective interpretations about them.

The silver lining for writers in the contemporary age, Sapiro proposes, may be their discovery of the authenticity of a more modest vocation than that claimed by their nineteenth-century predecessors, some of whom had looked on their work as a kind of science. Today writers recognize that it is not the model of science, but that of narrative that enables them to concentrate on what they do best: drawing forth meaning out of the complexity of human experience. The search for truth lies not only in its certainties but also in its ambiguities. That, I think, is Sapiro's underlying judgment, and it is one that applies to her contribution as well. Everywhere in her study, she spotlights the antinomies of the writers' dilemma: art for its own sake versus art with a social message; dispassion versus *engagement*; beautiful versus useful writing; the intentions versus the acts of writers; the integrity of poetic vision versus pandering to readers' taste; freedom of expression versus the constraints of public morality, the creative versus the critical task.^[3] Such tensions are ubiquitous in her study, save for the historical moment of Sartre, which in the end was fleeting.

There is, therefore, no denouement to Sapiro's study. It suggests why she ends her narrative with an epilogue, rather than a conclusion. Her epilogue makes manifest that the responsibility of the writer is a never-ending story, certain to take new turns as print culture fades in the face of the media revolution of the late twentieth century. In a writer of lesser talent, such a decrescendo might be judged irresolution. But in Sapiro's case it is testimony of the depth of her understanding.

NOTES

[1] Michel Winock, *Le Siècle des intellectuels* (Paris: Seuil, 1999); Pascal Ory and Jean-François Sirinelli, *Les Intellectuels en France, de l'affaire Dreyfus à nos jours* (Paris: Colin, 1992).

[2] Gisèle Sapiro, *La Guerre des écrivains, 1940-1953* (Paris: Fayard, 1999).

[3] See p. 326 for Sapiro's diagram of her conception of the writers' responsibility, presented as a geometrical quadrant structuring the interplay of possible positions on the topic during the Third Republic.

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