

H-France Review Vol. 17 (July 2017), No. 112

Susan Rubin Suleiman, *The Némirovsky Question: The Life, Death, and Legacy of a Jewish Writer in Twentieth-Century France*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016. xi + 357 pp. Illustrations, bibliography, and index. \$35.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-3001-7196-9

Review by Marc Caplan, Yale University.

The title of Susan Suleiman's new book, *The Némirovsky Question*, references the "Jewish Question" that haunts European liberalism from at least the 1840s, when Bruno Bauer wrote the essay *Die Judenfrage* that prompted Karl Marx's poisonously sarcastic response, until the Holocaust. At the same time, it echoes, perhaps less consciously, the title of the 2010 recipient of the Man Booker Prize, Howard Jacobson's novel *The Finkler Question*, which like Suleiman's academic study personifies the "Jewish Question" in the life of a self-contradictory Jewish intellectual (named Sam Finkler). Though writing as a scholar rather than a novelist, and arguably drawing different conclusions, Suleiman poses many of the same questions as Jacobson about where Jews fit in European society, what obligations Jews owe to Jewish traditions and Jewish collectivity, what privileges a Jewish identity confers on the ability to characterize or critique other Jews, and when a portrayal of Jewish selfhood might play into the hands of anti-Semites. For both Suleiman and Jacobson, "the Jewish Question" is neither historical nor objective, but urgently contemporary and movingly personal. Suleiman's work thus serves both as a lament for the Jewish culture that France lost with the Holocaust and an urgent appeal on behalf of Jewish culture in France today.

Irène Némirovsky (1903-1942) has been an aptly anomalous figure in French-Jewish intellectual history long before Suleiman began writing her book: born in Kiev to upwardly mobile, melodramatically mismatched Jewish parents, her family relocated to France after the Russian Revolution, where she pursued literary fame and distinction from an early age; after several years of success and celebrity—rare at the time for a woman, a Jew, and a foreigner in France—she was deported to Auschwitz, where she died. After a decline into posthumous obscurity during the first half-century following the war, her career began to ascend again when her daughter, Elisabeth Gille (1937-1996), published *Le Mirador*, a "dreamed memoir" of her mother's life and death that has become a significant addition to the field of "hidden child" literature in French. (One thinks, for example, of Georges Perec's *W ou le souvenir d'enfance*, 1975, which was a conscious model for Gille.) Her literary renaissance grew more spectacular with the 2004 publication of *Suite Française*, which became an international best seller and the recipient of the Prix Renaudot, the first such award given posthumously. In the subsequent decade, Némirovsky has become a contested figure, particularly in the American media, known as much for accusations of Jewish self-hatred and collaboration with Vichy-era propaganda sources, as for the literary merits of her writing.

Suleiman dedicates the seven chapters of her study, precisely and compellingly, to each of these issues; part biography (chapters one through three), part literary appraisal (chapters four and five), part family and social history (chapters six and seven), it is reasonable to say that this is the only book about Némirovsky that a "general reader" could ever want or need. What motivates Suleiman's unflinching

interest and discernment is her admiration for Némirovsky's talent, and her frustration with Némirovsky's often problematic political decisions, before and during World War II. As Suleiman is able to demonstrate, Némirovsky's artistry and worldview developed very much in tune with the rarefied milieu of immigrant, upwardly mobile Jews in France. An urge to belong, to be respectable—not just to “fit in” but to “blend in”—motivates the behavior of this group, in distinction both from well-established Jewish (*Israélite*) families whose rootedness in French society was for the most part accepted without question, as well as from more working-class immigrant Jews who provided a more visible target for anti-Semitism, and accordingly attracted the disapproval of other Jews, because of their language (Yiddish) and their politics (often socialist or Zionist or both). Unlike “established” Jewish families, who largely didn't worry about their place in French society, or working-class Jews who never expected to integrate into French society, Jews such as Némirovsky and her family undertook an ongoing performance of their *Francité* that in Némirovsky's case motivated her aesthetic decisions as much as her political, social, and religious commitments.

In literary terms, the genre for which Némirovsky was best known in her heyday, and which has caused her reputation to suffer so much upon her rediscovery, is what can be called the “arriviste” novel: the portrayal of a parvenu Jew who suffers spiritual and emotional disillusion in equal measure to material success. Némirovsky's first success as a novelist, *David Golder* (1929), is the primary example of this genre in French literature, yet it is a theme to which Némirovsky returns throughout the next prolific decade of her literary production. The predicament of the arriviste, as Suleiman demonstrates, is very much Némirovsky's own; even her eventual decision, a few months before her deportation to Auschwitz, to convert to Catholicism is far more characteristic of the Jewish nouveau riche than either *Israélite* families or working-class Jews. Yet is the physically unattractive and morally crippled portrait that Némirovsky sketches of these parvenus either an expression of “self-hatred” in the colloquial sense of Jews hating other Jews, or in a more psychological sense of a personal dissatisfaction projected onto the grotesque physiology, language, and actions of her characters? Suleiman offers two reasons for cautioning against these conclusions.

First, when one compares Némirovsky's work with other Jewish writers considering similar issues, yet unmarked either by the stigma of apostasy or posthumous condemnation for their political affiliations, one recognizes many affinities. Abraham Cahan (1860-1951), Suleiman's primary example, was the founder of the Yiddish-language socialist newspaper *Der Forverts* (“The Forward,” still publishing, in Yiddish as well as English, after 120 years) and also the great exponent of the “arriviste” theme in English with his 1917 Anglophone novel *The Rise of David Levinsky*. With his linguistic and political affiliations, it seems ludicrous to accuse Cahan of “self-hatred,” yet when the novel was first serialized, its venue was the magazine *McClure's*, which though ostensibly committed to a progressive “muckraking” political agenda was nevertheless dedicated to a polemic against admitting East European Jews, like Cahan and his protagonist, into the United States. As Suleiman portrays the subject, Cahan's publishing choices in this instance are as problematic as Némirovsky's decision to publish primarily in the literary journal *Gringoire*, which over the course of the 1930s devoted itself increasingly to anti-Jewish and pro-Vichy polemics.

Just as Suleiman dismisses the notion of Cahan as a “self-hating Jew” (although it may be noted that even if Cahan didn't hate Jews, many of the Jewish journalists who wrote for the *Forverts* hated him!), she similarly offers the counter example of the Yiddish author Sholem Aleichem (1859-1916), to whom she makes the lamentable error of referring as “Aleichem”; when Sholem Aleichem, writing in a Jewish language for exclusively Jewish readers, depicts his characters as money-obsessed, boorish, ridiculous, or grotesque—and he does indeed, often to astonishing comic effect—would we consider him a “self-hating Jew”? In fact, Yiddish and Hebrew literary critics of that era regularly castigated writers in these languages of whom they disapproved with charges of “self-hatred,” disloyalty, or focusing morbidly on negative stereotypes to the exclusion of using literature to imagine a positive image through which to define Jewishness. When one considers the extraordinary roster of literary and cultural figures who

have been condemned as self-hating Jews, one comes to realize that in the Jewish context “self-hating” is merely a synonym for “self-writing.”

Another example in this vein comes to mind who might be contrasted equally or perhaps more effectively than Jewishly affiliated authors whom Suleiman herself considers: Gertrude Stein (1874-1946). Stein—like Némirovsky, a foreigner, a woman, and a Jew—achieved great popular acclaim and cultural recognition in France between the wars, although Stein, unlike Némirovsky, continued to write in her native language (English), and Stein stood at the center of a multi-lingual avant-garde of authors, visual artists, and other bohemian figures quite distant from Némirovsky’s pursuit of French haut-bourgeois respectability. As Suleiman notes, there is no evidence that Stein and Némirovsky would have known one another personally or taken an interest in one another’s writing professionally. What is significant in this contrast, however, is the complete absence of reference to Jewishness anywhere in Stein’s public, published work. Though this is not an approach that Suleiman considers, her research nonetheless prompts the question of whether an engagement with Jewish characters, however fraught, ambivalent, or unfairly critical as Némirovsky’s was, is clearer evidence of “self-hatred” than the total excision of reference to Jewishness? Put in a less judgmental perspective, Stein and Némirovsky stand as inversions of one another insofar as Némirovsky makes Jewishness one of the animating presences in her dramatization of the inability of immigrants such as herself to make France their home, whereas Stein obliterates the notion of home in favor of cultivating an extreme version of her own foreignness, predicated on language, gender, and sexuality, but not an ethnic or religious otherness that could be construed as a substitute or compensatory mode of belonging.

The second approach that Suleiman proposes for considering Némirovsky’s depiction of Jews is to compare her work not with other Jewish writers, but with the image of Jews in contemporaneous non-Jewish works of French literature. As a writer in French, one would expect that Némirovsky’s primary literary models would be French, and Suleiman demonstrates that the literary relationships Némirovsky cultivated were generally among writers, nearly all of them male, who projected an attitude of social respectability and “traditional” French values; as France slid steadily and catastrophically into Vichy-era authoritarianism and collaboration with the Nazis—a process actually underway in social terms several years before France’s military defeat in 1940—these were likely to be the writers most inclined to cultivate anti-Semitic views, sometimes murderous ones. Suleiman notes that in her private journals, Némirovsky reveals a fondness for one contemporaneous French modernist, Louis-Ferdinand Céline (1894-1961), even after his genocidal anti-Semitism had become a matter of public record in 1937. In common with many minorities struggling to integrate into a dominant milieu, Némirovsky acquiesces to a negative image of Jewish materialism, vulgarity, and ugliness because that was the only image available in the world she wished to inhabit.

In the most famous work of her posthumous career, *Suite Française*, Némirovsky chooses to depict the social disruption wrought on France with the 1940 German invasion without any reference to Jewish characters or the specific dangers and suffering of Jewish people under Nazi and—in some respects the more punitively oppressive—Vichy occupation of France. In Suleiman’s reading of the novel, this decision seems not so much an instance of Némirovsky adopting the radically cosmopolitan stance of Gertrude Stein so much as affiliating herself with a French national identity to the exclusion of any claims to otherness, including her own (or her previous characters’) Jewishness. This ultimately offers further evidence of the paradox and pathos of liberalism as it has functioned historically in the European-Jewish context: the obligation to participate in a national culture, including the effort to represent the culture artistically, requires the Jew to excise any sense of Jewish difference from his or her (self-) presentation. One observes this paradox, or double-bind, as much in Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer’s *Dialektik der Aufklärung* (“Dialectic of Enlightenment,” 1947) as in Némirovsky’s final novel; in their study, Horkheimer and Adorno consider anti-Semitism exclusively in the third person, eliding the fact that the study itself owes its existence to the fact that its authors had been exiled to the U.S. because they were Jews.

For Némirovsky, the pathos of embracing this sort of liberalism—a liberalism of nationhood, implicit in the promise of France as a republic of *liberté, égalité, et fraternité*—manifests itself in at least two respects. In aesthetic terms, Némirovsky wrote in a conventional realist style derived from the nineteenth-century novel and short story, dedicated to the construction of a national identity in which psychological development progresses in tandem with social development. As Némirovsky records in her own journal, it is precisely the rationality of the realist aesthetic that proves inadequate to represent her own particular predicament; as Suleiman states, “Irène wrote in her diary...‘Feeling of nightmare. Don’t believe in reality’” (p. 110). The realist novel, for better or worse, demands a plausibility and a comprehensibility to which reality itself never adheres. In more explicitly political terms, Suleiman explains that Némirovsky declined to apply for French citizenship in 1930 because she didn’t want the application to be seen as undertaken to secure the Prix Goncourt, which at the time required French citizenship. The noblesse oblige of declining French citizenship out of fear of seeming too “pushy” in 1930 may well have cost Némirovsky her life in 1942.

Although it is inevitable that readers will regret decisions such as this—just as we cringe when reading of Némirovsky complaining in her diary that she owes 50,000 francs to “a dirty Jewess” (*une sale Juive*, p. 301, note 57)—Suleiman cautions against judging Némirovsky, in terms that are both insightful and eloquent: “While Némirovsky was responsible for her choices, she was not responsible for the fate that befell her. That responsibility lies with the Vichy regime and the German occupiers of France” (p. 94). This directive is particularly instructive in a case such as Némirovsky, when the choices she makes seem so painfully ill considered. The benefit of hindsight yields nothing if its beneficiaries use their knowledge to judge rather than to understand. Suleiman’s study preeminently offers an opportunity for understanding Némirovsky in a variety of literary, historical, and familial contexts, and this is its great, exemplary strength.

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ISSN 1553-9172