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Maurice Samuels, *Inventing the Israelite: Jewish Fiction in Nineteenth-Century France*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2010. ix + 323 pp. Illustrations, notes, index. \$60.00. (hb). ISBN 978-0-8047-6384-4.

Review by Alan Astro, Trinity University.

In his new book, Maurice Samuels offers us an encyclopedically researched, lively, enjoyable, eminently *readable* study of an entire realm of the history of literature that had been largely consigned to oblivion: nineteenth-century works with Jewish themes, written by Jewish writers in France, who partook of romantic and realistic modes at the precise moments they were coming into existence. Samuels succeeds well in one of his major goals: to dismiss the legend that before the Dreyfus affair no fiction of such a sort existed. That view was held even by those whom one could have expected to know better, such as Armand Lunel, author of arguably one of the best novels on Jews in France, *Nicolo-Peccavi ou l'affaire Dreyfus à Carpentras*, crowned with the first Théophraste Renaudot literary prize in 1926. Lunel writes that until the twentieth century, “there was not yet in France a literature that one could call specifically and exclusively Jewish. . . . It is in vain that one would look for a Jew who had manifested himself as such in Belles-Lettres” (p. 3).

Countering such preconceptions, Samuels shows an array of earlier Jewish writers, some quite successful at the time, whose portrayal of their coreligionists bespeaks a wide range of religious, ideological, and esthetic options. He concentrates on six authors, corresponding to five different elaborations of Jewish experience.

The first is Eugénie Foa, whom Samuels sees as “the first Jew to write fiction in French and the first modern Jewish woman to write fiction in any language” (p. 33); she “invented, more or less single-handedly, the category of Jewish fiction in France.” (p. 72) (Samuels may be hypostasizing here the “category of Jewish fiction in France.”) Foa authored rather well-selling historical novels, in the then so popular strain of Walter Scott, which orientalized Sephardim in France and Algeria. Though not entirely unsympathetic to her characters, Foa presented Judaism largely as historically surpassed; her work is obviously of a piece with her own decision to convert to Catholicism.

The second is Ben-Lévi, pseudonym of Godchaux Baruch Weil, Proust’s great-uncle—a family connection that makes it all the more startling that this near ancestor of the creator of Charles Swann and Albert Bloch should be universally forgotten. In a foreshadowing of the debt of the author of the *Recherche* to that of the *Comédie humaine*, Proust’s great-uncle borrowed “Balzacian thematics and . . . techniques” to portray his Jews—but “from within,” as Samuels puts it (p. 88). Ben-Lévi’s figures are assimilates, but who retain a personal brand of loyalty to Jewish religion, a metaphorized link to their Jewish past. Such secular re-Judaization obviously foreshadows Swann’s, Bloch’s and Proust’s own Dreyfusism. Ben-Lévi advocates “a modernized Judaism—purged of tradition and reduced to primary ethical impulses and a sense of solidarity with other Jews” even across borders (p. 100). Samuels argues convincingly that such depictions allow us to “see the ideological groundwork for the Alliance Israélite Universelle,” the aid organization that modernized and Frenchified much of Mediterranean Jewry, as

well as a “reformist impulse,” “homegrown” in France, and not simply an import from Germany (pp. 34, 74, 110).

Third came Ben Baruch, the nom de plume of Alexandre Créhange, in turn represents the French equivalent of German Jewish neo-Orthodoxy, a kind of counter-reform program. Ben Baruch used a variety of generic modes: Enlightenment-inspired satire, when he lampooned attempts by richer, reform-minded Jews to commandeer community institutions and lord over poorer, more observant coreligionists; and retold Talmudic parables and Alsatian-Yiddish folkloric episodes, when he published a series of highly successful almanacs that helped “reinforce the bonds of imagined community linking Jews living in metropolitan France and in Algeria” (p. 140).

The fourth was Alexandre Weill, whose fiction also employed traditionalistic and folkloristic elements, but in a more redemptive, less literal sense: “Along with their ‘Talmudic superstitions,’ Weill’s village Jews have a seemingly direct access to the original core of Judaism, the ethical code of Mosaic monotheism. Weill finds in this code the solution to the ills of modernity” (p. 172). In keeping with Samuels’ analogies to movements in Germany, we may see in Weill’s work a harbinger of Martin Buber’s elaborations of a largely imaginary, estheticized Hassidism as a palliative to the alienations of contemporary Jewish life.

Finally came two men, Daniel Stauben and David Schornstein, who developed the nostalgia forms whereby acculturated Jews of Alsatian origin could long for an idealized Jewish past seen as irretrievably lost, but which serves the important ideological function of naturalizing their presence in France. An obvious parallel is with *Fiddler on the Roof*, which Samuels brings up as the Jewish nostalgia vehicle par excellence. One may point out that it, too, naturalizes Jews—as an archetypal American immigrant group—whereas in the work by Sholem-Aleichem on which the musical is based, Tevye emigrates not to the United States, but to Palestine.

Samuels is to be congratulated for the yeoman’s work he has done in providing what he shows to be a sorely needed corrective to the perception of the culture of nineteenth-century French Jewry as purely assimilationist. But there may be a fly in the ointment, which has to do with how the study is framed. The introduction of the book, precisely its second page, asks: “Were nineteenth-century French Jews really so politically and culturally deficient? Did they contribute nothing to Jewish culture?” Even if Samuels does not explicitly answer his questions, the book responds to them with a resounding “No!” However, I am not so sure that the implication that they contributed much to “Jewish culture” (Samuel’s term) *per se* is justified. Obviously, whereof Jewish culture consists is largely in the eye of the beholder, but that is precisely the point.

What is the Jewish culture that these writers may have helped build? For Samuels the answer seems to lie in the work of Proust. The “conclusion” (his word) to his study is entitled “Proust’s Progenitors” (p. 238). Insofar as Proust falls outside the period under consideration, this *envoi* lends a teleological tinge to what is otherwise an admirable work of historical research. Samuels sees in Proust an eminent product of these nineteenth-century French Jewish writers. This is an historically useful insight, suggesting that Swann, Bloch and Rachel did not necessarily spring fully formed from Proust’s literary genius as he forged them on the sheer basis of personal experience. But if Proust is a prime example of the Jewish culture that Samuels’ nineteenth-century writers contributed to forming, let us continue to inquire into the nature of that culture. The last sentence of Samuels’ book reads: “Most of all, however, Proust reveals how the meaning of Jewishness remains an open question, one that can be best asked by fiction and one that fiction, perhaps, alone can answer” (p. 261).

I salute Samuels for taking certain critics to task for “their attribution to Proust of a postnational, postracial sensibility,” whereby Jewishness appears as a “utopian” construct (p. 256), which would have little to do with Jews’ feelings of identity. (The best case of such thought, which I draw from a not

entirely unrelated context, is the claim by anti-Zionists, Jewish and non-Jewish, that they embody true Jewish values, whereas most Jews continue to be favorably disposed toward the State of Israel.) However, though Samuels repudiates the more extreme formulations contained in such readings of the Jewish theme in Proust, I am not so sure that a work wherein “Jewishness remains an open question” can be seen a contribution to *Jewish culture* in a positive, *non-utopian* sense.

Again, I am trying to keep to the terms in which Samuels frames such questions. Recalling how he distinguishes Ben-Lévi’s from Balzac’s Jews by pointing out that the former were seen “from within,” I would have preferred that he engage with the view of Proust as standing *from without*. This interpretation is cogently put forth by Ruth Wisse, an eminent professor of Yiddish and comparative literature at Harvard:

“Though the narrator is also detached from the French majority at Balbec, he is much more sorrowfully and explicitly estranged from the Jews. Proust’s familiarity and sympathies do not translate into a novel of Jewish experience, however deep and persuasive its knowledge of the subject. On the whole, I think we do well to respect the author’s guidelines, instead of taking it upon ourselves to decide, as anti-Semites do and as the rabbis must, who is a Jew and who is not. Proust’s work will continue to give pleasure from outside the Jewish canon.”[1]

If Proust’s work may be at least reasonably if not definitely seen as “outside the Jewish canon,” his forebears may have contributed less than Samuels implies they did to Jewish culture. From the point of view of a *useful* Jewish canon—if not from that of expert literary history—Armand Lunel might be right to have ignored, or justified in not having even heard of, those whom Samuels identifies as Proust’s and Lunel’s own literary progenitors.

Most subscribers to the H-France listserv will doubtless be little concerned with the possible contribution of these nineteenth-century French writers to the perpetuation of specifically Jewish culture. They may well be more interested in these authors’ early elaboration of what Samuels calls (in somewhat 1970s language) “ethnic fiction” (p. 17), their demand *avant la lettre* of a *droit à la différence*, the insights Samuels offers so competently—and with such rich detail—into these little-studied aspects of nineteenth-century France and its literature.

Indeed, I wish to reiterate that this study is a trove of well-presented, fascinating information that makes appear in greater relief the French Jewish imaginary of the time. It shows that one cannot see the period as one of unrelenting de-Judaization. But there is nothing in it that does not contradict the widely held view of an *overwhelming trend* in that direction. If Samuels had contented himself with documenting the period as finely as he does, and kept away from some redemptive impulse, his work would have been perfect. It is now just *nearly* perfect—which isn’t so bad!

NOTES

[1] Ruth R. Wisse, *The Modern Jewish Canon* (New York: The Free Press, 2000), p. 18.

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