

H-France Review Vol. 11 (March 2011), No. 73

Jeffrey Mehlman, *Adventures in the French Trade: Fragments Toward a Life*. Stanford, Cal.: Stanford University Press, 2010. xvi + 173 pp. Figures and notes. \$50.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-8047-6961-7; \$21.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-0-8047-6962-4.

Review by James Smith Allen, Southern Illinois University Carbondale

Jeffrey Mehlman is best known to literary specialists for his participation in the (post-) structuralist movement, which for more than thirty-five years he has interpreted for Anglophone audiences. The author of eight books, including this one, and countless articles and translations, Mehlman has explored the literary and theoretical implications of Jacques Derrida, Walter Benjamin, and George Steiner, among others, since his first monograph on structuralist approaches to autobiography appeared in 1974.^[1] Many of his mediations, such as the translations of French Freudians (1973, 1976) and the tracing of French anti-Semitism (1983), have themselves been controversial, embroiling him with the very authors whose work he has introduced to readers beyond the *métropole*.^[2] Despite, but also because of these encounters, Mehlman's interventions are of interest to historians of recent French intellectual life.

Adventures in the French Trade is the latest contribution to the "Cultural Memory in the Present" series, edited by Mieke Bal and Hent de Vries, dedicated to publishing the self-conscious reflections of many theorists, not just those working on French language and literature. As a consequence, there is much more to Mehlman's book than the first half of its title suggests, beginning with its disorienting demonstration of theoretical constructs in practice. For example, the "fragments toward a life"—primary sources all of them, such as reminiscences and literary excursions, yes, but also a short story, a commencement speech, correspondence, and entries in Harvard's alumni anniversary reports—constitute a heterogeneous collection arrayed in a largely associative order, framed otherwise by a preface at the outset and a coda at the end. The chapters feature sites where Mehlman has lived in the U.S. (New York, where he was born in 1944, via Cambridge, New Haven, Ithaca, Berkeley, and Baltimore to Boston, where he is now University Professor and Professor of French Literature at Boston University) and where he has been abroad (rural Saché, where as a youth he spent his first summer abroad, via Paris and environs to Buenos Aires, where approaching retirement he has purchased an apartment with his Argentine wife, Alicia Borinsky). Besides these "Cities," sections of the volume are "Fathers," "Teachers," "Students," and "Semblables et Frères," treated both literally and figuratively. To make sense of the author's work, readers must re-create the text themselves, as all good literary theorists would have them do.

According to Mehlman, "the centerpiece of this volume [is] the chapter titled 'Chiasmus'" (pp. xi, 157), a play of puns, coincidences, and associations—some inadvertent, others contrived—to sustain a metaphor borrowed from Paul Morand: the author's life and work as an anonymously sent letter, one postmarked first Cambridge 1927, then Aix-en-Provence 1966, Paris 1970, and Boston 1983. It is not apparent at first precisely why this essay reverses the chronology of Mehlman's contributions to French studies or why it figures their aleatory relations by a chiasmus in imitation of Jean Laplanche's meta-psychological chart (p. 61) or Charles Mauron's "musical score" (p. 64).^[3] This exercise, like many others in Mehlman's book, indulges in

discursive pyrotechnics for their own sake. But upon a closer reading, this chapter develops a certain logic. The reverse chronology highlights the continuities of Mehlman's interests in E. M. Forster's dedication of *Aspects of the Novel* in 1927 to Mauron, whose application of psychoanalysis to Stéphane Mallarmé in 1966 would lead to Mehlman's discovery of Laplanche in 1970, which in turn determined Mehlman's 1983 reading of Maurice Blanchot's anti-Semitic articles in *Combat*. Hence the tropological postmarks where Mehlman has spent time (more or less). Forster lived in Cambridge (before Mehlman was born), Mauron lectured in Aix (when Mehlman was a Fulbright fellow), Laplanche worked in Paris (just as Mehlman took up French psychoanalysis), and Mehlman taught in Boston (where he stumbled upon Blanchot's scandalous journalism). Similarly, the chapter's imagined chiasmus is a structural conceit based on turning points—cruxes in his own hourglass, if you will—in the author's intellectual trajectory through the texts he either read or wrote, “the apparent progress to where it is that I, as the locution has it, am *at*” (Mehlman's emphasis, p. 71).

At the heart of the book, however, are some deeply personal and painfully intelligible moments to “show just how indelible a mark the deconstructive sensibility can leave in one's sense of self” (p. xiii). This passing remark assumes real emotional weight in the endnote on how this commitment to literary theory cost Mehlman tenure at Johns Hopkins University (p. 161, n. 1). The author has bravely walked the talk—and repeatedly paid for it, as he recounts in his critical essays on the likes of Charles Munch (chapter four), Derrida (chapter eight), and Louis Wolfson (chapter fifteen). When Mehlman drops his theorist mask to address another audience, poignantly so—as he does about his conflicted relations with a parent (chapter six) and why literature should matter to graduating French majors (chapter fourteen)—his writing loses its textual flair to gain in humane clarity—and touching sincerity. Behind the brilliant surface of Mehlman's prose looms a warmer, more generous presence, whatever its posing elsewhere. The post-modernist presumes a referent after all, in this case, himself.

The principal readership for *Adventures in the French Trade*, however, is everyone interested in “the last of the French vanguards as it has settled into academic respectability” (p. xii), that is, what followed the waning Marxist paradigm in literary studies (as well as intellectual history) from the de-Stalinization of Communism in the late 1950s to the fall of the Soviet bloc in 1991. In this vein, the book belongs on the same shelf with Terry Eagleton's *After Theory*, Paul Ricoeur's *Memory, History, Forgetting*, and Victoria Bonnell and Lynn Hunt's *Beyond the Cultural Turn*.^[4] Mehlman has something interesting to say as well to specialists in Jewish studies and self-writing. Language may always already have the last word. But what we write, as well as how we write, still matters. Mehlman's book is thus germane to the moral imperative of authorial responsibility, one that some French theorists chose to elide in their polemics.^[5] Accordingly, theory has had its own Vichy syndrome: “There were speculative grounds, [Mehlman] claimed, for regarding the whole of deconstruction as a vast amnesty project for the politics of resistance and collaboration during World War II” (p. 78). It was a point of view willfully misunderstood in both France and the U.S. From this perspective, Henry Rousso could have added yet another “vector of memory” to France's painful past.^[6]

Mehlman cannot resist insistent references, however incidental, to scholarly and literary citations to himself—such as those likening him to André Breton (in his artistic intensity), to Stavrogin (in Dostoyevsky's *Possessed*), to Walter Benjamin (in his scholarly wit), and Robert Paxton (in his pursuit of wartime collaborators) (pp. xii-xiii, 114). But these “fragments toward a life” are much more than a vain display of discursive shards.^[7] They are in effect a literary theorist's idiosyncratic but probing answer to the question that Laura Lee Downs and Stéphane Gerson posed recently to sixteen American historians, *Why France?*^[8] Just be prepared to work a bit at what you care to make of it.

NOTES

[1] Jeffrey Mehlman, *A Structural Study of Autobiography: Proust, Leiris, Sartre, Lévi-Strauss* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1974), based on the author's doctoral dissertation written under the direction of Victor Brombert at Yale University.

[2] See Jacques Lacan, "Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter,'" *French Freud*, ed. Jeffrey Mehlman, *Yale French Studies* 48(1973):38-72; Jean Laplanche, *Life and Death in Psychoanalysis*, trans. Jeffrey Mehlman (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976); and Jeffrey Mehlman, *Legacies: Of Anti-Semitism in France* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983). Cf., in chronological order, Jeffrey Mehlman, *Revolution and Repetition: Marx/Hugo/Balzac* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977); idem, *Cataract: A Study in Diderot* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1979); idem, *Walter Benjamin for Children: An Essay on His Radio Years* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1993); idem, *Genealogies of the Text: Literature, Psychoanalysis, and Politics in Modern France* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); and idem, *Emigré New York: French Intellectuals in Wartime Manhattan, 1940-1944* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000).

[3] Laplanche, *Life and Death in Psychoanalysis*, p. 124; Charles Mauron, *L'Inconscient dans l'oeuvre et la vie de Racine* (Gap: Edition Ophrys, 1957), p. 27.

[4] Terry Eagleton, *After Theory* (London: Allen Lane, 2003); Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 2004); and *Beyond the Cultural Turn: New Directions in the Study of Society and Culture*, ed. Victoria E. Bonnell and Lynn Hunt (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

[5] Cf. the perspective on this problem, developed by another graduate of the doctoral program in theory at Yale, who felt especially betrayed by Paul de Man and his approach to deconstruction: Alice Kaplan, *French Lessons: A Memoir* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1993), pp. 147-74.

[6] Henry Russo, *The Vichy Syndrome: History and Memory in France since 1944*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991), pp. 219-71. Cf. Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, pp. 248-60, 448-56.

[7] Cf. two distinct sides to Mehlman's translation work, one serious, the other impish: Jean-Denis Bredin, *The Affair: The Case of Alfred Dreyfus*, trans. Jeffrey Mehlman (New York: George Braziller, 1986); and Pierre Bayard, *How to Talk About Books You Haven't Read*, trans. Jeffrey Mehlman (New York: Bloomsbury, 2007).

[8] *Why France? American Historians Reflect on an Enduring Fascination*, ed. Laura Lee Downs and Stéphane Gerson (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2007).

James Smith Allen
Southern Illinois University Carbondale
jsallen@siu.edu

nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/ republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172