Editors' Preface: Literature and History: Around *Suite française* and *Les Bienveillantes*

The almost simultaneous publication and remarkable recent successes of two novels in France, Irène Némirovsky's posthumous *Suite française* (2004), and Jonathan Littell's *Les Bienveillantes* (2006)—translated as *The Kindly Ones*—serve as powerful reminders that the traumatic memory of the "Dark Years" of defeat, Nazi occupation, the Vichy regime, and French complicity in Hitler's Final Solution continue to fascinate and unsettle the French more than sixty years after the Liberation. The two novels and their reception around the world have added a new chapter to our memory, interpretation, and understanding of the war and of the Holocaust. But these works have also posed a series of questions to readers that the authors in this volume of *Yale French Studies* have attempted to answer. What exactly do these two works, written at an interval of sixty years but published within two years of one another, tell us about our relation to the war? What do they say about the role that fictional narratives play in our interpretations and understanding of the war and its legacy? What do these novels say about the relation between literature and the current state of historiography in the United States and in France? What can we learn from these novels about what constitutes an ethically and politically responsible engagement with the history of the war on the part of novelists—a question that is all the more pressing given the recent publication in Europe and the United States of a number of controversial fictional narratives about World War II? What new forms of historical, ethical, and political knowledge does fiction transmit? What, finally, do these works and their reception tell us about the aesthetic, political, and ethical expectations of our own times?

The publication of *Suite française* in 2004 created a national and indeed global sensation. Moreover, it restored the reputation and
Irène Némirovsky and the “Jewish Question” in Interwar France

“POSTHUMOUS FAME”

Hannah Arendt, introducing Walter Benjamin to an American public in 1968, wrote: “Posthumous fame is one of Fama’s rarer and least desired articles, although it is less arbitrary and often more solid than the other sorts, since it is only seldom bestowed upon mere merchandise. The one who stood most to profit is dead and hence it is not for sale.” Arendt may have been too idealistic, since even posthumous fame can be for sale: the author’s rediscovered works will benefit somebody—if not heirs, then the publisher. Nevertheless, there is something truly earned (instead of merely “marketed”) in the phenomenon of sudden, widespread, posthumous fame, which makes a work, and an author, suddenly stand out many years after the latter’s death. This is certainly what happened to Walter Benjamin, who was virtually unknown in the United States before the publication of the book of essays whose preface Arendt wrote. And it is also true of Irène Némirovsky, a prolific and successful novelist of the 1930s who was almost completely forgotten in France and was totally unknown elsewhere when her posthumous novel Suite française burst on the scene in the fall of 2004. It won a major literary prize in France, the only such prize to be awarded to a writer posthumously, and soon became an international bestseller, translated into more than thirty languages. In the United States, it remained on the New York Times bestseller list for over two years.

What was it about Suite française that captured so many readers’ imagination? Here was a historical novel about the defeat of France by the German army in June 1940, and about the occupation that followed. But historical novels about the Second World War are not lacking. The outstanding fact about Suite française, which fascinated readers, was that it’s not a historical novel in the usual sense, for it was written at the very time the history it recounted was unfolding. Tolstoy, one of Némirovsky’s heroes and models, wrote War and Peace half a century after the historical events that he narrated in fictional form, but Némirovsky wrote her novel about the German occupation of France when it had hardly begun—and she didn’t have a chance to finish the story. Born in Kiev in 1903, Némirovsky had been living in France since she was a teenager, but had never obtained French citizenship; she was deported as a “foreign Jew” to Auschwitz in July 1942, and died there of typhus a month later. Her husband, Michel Epstein, also a Russian immigrant to France, suffered a similar fate a few months later. If the manuscript of Suite française survived and was eventually published, it was thanks to their two daughters, Denise and Elisabeth, who as children were hidden during the war and who as adults devoted a great deal of effort to bringing their mother’s work back into public view.

Némirovsky’s tragic death added an important extra dimension to the appeal of the book, and her publisher emphasized it by including an appendix of excerpts from her journal and correspondence, as well as her husband’s frantic letters pleading for her release after her arrest. But all this, heartbreaking as it is, would not have been enough to make readers admire the novel itself. What I and I assume many other readers admire is the precision of Némirovsky’s gaze and the justness of her understanding of contemporary history: what we see with the clarity of historical hindsight, she analyzed in the midst of her present.²

There is, however, a question that has troubled many readers of Suite française: Why did Némirovsky, who was wearing the Jewish star as she was writing the novel (the Germans imposed the wearing of the yellow star by Jews in the Occupied Zone starting in June 1942), never mention the fate of the Jews in Vichy France, and why are there no Jewish characters in her account of l’exode and of the year that


2. Nathan Bracher, in his book-length study of Suite française, notes that “when one compares the concrete details incorporated into her narrative with the results of the most recent historical research into the May-June 1940 exodus in France, one can only be struck by her novel’s factual and analytic fidelity to the historical event.” See Bracher, After the Fall: War and Occupation in Irène Némirovsky’s Suite Française [Washington DC, Catholic University Press, 2010], 90.
followed! I am going to leave this question in suspense for now, but will come back to it later.

After the war, several of the works Némirovsky wrote before she died but couldn’t publish during her lifetime appeared in print—however, times had changed, and her renown as a writer quickly faded. In 1992, her younger daughter Elisabeth Gille published a book of what she called “dreamed memories” about her mother, imagining herself into her mother’s mind and voice. That was the beginning of Némirovsky’s re-emergence into public memory, but it was only after the publication of Suite française that she became truly famous.

The consequence of Némirovsky’s posthumous fame has been that almost all of her considerable oeuvre is now back in print in France, and much of it is being translated into English; books and articles about her life and work are multiplying. It is a phenomenal comeback, and if she cannot be here to enjoy it, at least her surviving daughter Denise Epstein has benefited from it (after a quiet and financially often difficult life, Denise Epstein became a celebrity at age seventy-five; her sister Elisabeth died of cancer in 1996). Another consequence, however, has been that as people started reading Némirovsky’s earlier work, many were shocked by what they considered as negative, or even downright anti-Semitic portrayals of Jewish characters. A number of critics and journalists, in France as well as in the U.S. and England, have expressed dismay and outrage at this discovery. Recently, a critic reviewing the English translation of a Némirovsky novel from 1940, The Dogs and the Wolves (Les chiens et les loups), in the Times Literary Supplement went so far as to claim that a “Nazi publishing house” intent on the “perpetuation of racial stereotypes” would have been very happy with it. The reviewer was immediately taken to task by Némirovsky’s translator Sandra Smith, who published a letter of defense in a subsequent issue. The review was indeed extreme in its fury at the author, even as it accented the “savage irony” of her tragic fate. A similarly outraged review article had already appeared in 2008 in The New Republic, calling Némirovsky “the very definition of a self-hating Jew.” Others, including a number of critics in France, have also expressed concern over anti-Semitic stereotypes and “self-hatred” in Némirovsky’s works. In fact, already in the 1930s some Jewish critics and readers in France reacted accordingly, to which Némirovsky usually responded that she couldn’t possibly be anti-Semitic since she was a Jew and proud to be one.

Why does the question of Némirovsky’s supposed anti-Semitism and “self-hatred” arouse such strong feelings and disagreements, especially among Jewish readers? Non-Jewish critics, then and now, generally praise her work, or if they have reservations, these don’t bear on the question of her portrayals of Jewish characters. The reason for the passion, I think, is that even though the question seems to concern the attitudes of this one writer who wrote and died many decades ago, it really touches on something much broader. It concerns ambiguities and dilemmas of Jewish identity in modern times, both before and after the Holocaust, in the U.S. and in Europe. Today’s responses to her life and work, which include her daughter Elisabeth’s book about her, highlight the differences between pre-Holocaust and post-Holocaust perspectives on anti-Semitism and on Jewish identity.

7. Myriam Anissimov, a French novelist and essayist who wrote the preface to the original edition of Suite française, spoke of “self-hatred” in Némirovsky [this phrase was omitted from the American edition, in which Anissimov’s preface appeared as a postface]; I have listened to a number of archived radio programs in France where critics came down heavily on the “anti-Semitism” of David Golden and some of Némirovsky’s other works.
9. See, for example, J.M. Coetzee’s article in the New York Review of Books, where he specifically states that he won’t touch on this issue; the question of the reception of Némirovsky’s works in the 1930s deserves a full treatment of its own, and is addressed at least in part by Angela Kernsaw: Before Auschwitz: Irène Némirovsky and the Cultural Landscape of Interwar France (New York and Oxford: Routledge, 2009).

3. Elisabeth Gille, Le Mirador [Paris: Presses de la Renaissance, 1992]; the book was reissued in 2000 by Stock. The modern precedent for this kind of pseudo-autobiography is of course Gertrude Stein’s The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas [1933]. Gille, however, inserts a few occasional brief chapters (written in the third person) about her own life after her parents’ deportation.
"SELF-HATING JEW": ANALYTIC CONCEPT OR BLUNT INSTRUMENT?

The term "Jewish self-hatred," first developed by the German-Jewish philosopher Theodor Lessing in 1930,10 was put into contemporary circulation by Sander Gilman in his 1986 book by that title. Gilman, a noted scholar of modern German literature and culture, analyzes what he calls the psychological "structure of self-hatred," which is not limited to Jews but can be observed in any group that is devalued in a given society, from women to foreigners to racial minorities. Self-hatred, as Gilman explains it, is a process in which the member of a devalued group internalizes the negative stereotypes by which the majority defines the group and seeks to distinguish himself or herself from those stereotypes as an "exception." Thus, in Jewish self-hatred, Gilman writes, "Jews see the dominant society seeing them and . . . project their anxiety about this manner of being seen onto other Jews as a means of externalizing their own status anxiety."11 This projection is a form of splitting: the self-hating Jew seeks to make himself into a "good" or exceptional Jew who is different from the stereotypical "bad" Jew. Hannah Arendt had already analyzed the phenomenon of "exceptional" Jews in her writings in the 1930s and later, but Gilman gave a systematic account of this psychological phenomenon. While one can argue with him on specific issues, there is no doubt that he treats Jewish self-hatred as an analytic concept, not a bludgeon. In ordinary discourse, however, and even in some critical writing, "self-hating Jew" often functions as an accusation: the person accused of being a self-hating Jew is implicitly contrasted with the "non-self-hating" or "self-loving" Jew, among whom the one launching the accusation presumably counts himself or herself. This kind of splitting recreates, curiously, the very same process that the concept of self-hatred seeks to analyze. It's as if the accuser were saying: "Némirovsky—or Franz Kafka or Gertrude Stein or Hannah Arendt or Philip Roth or Joseph Roth or Isaac Babel, among the greats of the twentieth century who have been called that—is a self-hating Jew, but I am not." Such splitting excludes precisely the possibility of ambiguity and ambivalence, concepts I find more useful in discussing psychological attitudes toward Jewishness, or any other minority group identity, in relation to the mainstream.

Furthermore, since the term "self-hating Jew" can be, and has been, applied to very many people (the above list could be much longer), it becomes so broad as to be almost useless. What modern, urban, educated, secular Jew has not, at one time or another, felt a sense of shame, or merely uneasiness, at the look or manner or behavior of "other Jews" that he or she recognizes as being of the same ancestry or ethnicity, yet also perceives as embarrassingly different from his or her own self or ideal? It would, I think, be dishonest to claim that one has never felt ambivalence about being Jewish, if one is a relatively assimilated Jew living among a non-Jewish majority. I believe this is true even in the United States today, where multiculturalism and minority "differences" are celebrated; and it was certainly true of both Europe and the United States in the decades before World War II, when difference was a negative word and openly anti-Semitic discourses were widespread and almost casual. Even among non-anti-Semites or anti-anti-Semites, Jewish "difference" and stereotypical representations of Jews were often taken for granted, both before and after the war (witness Sartre's well-meaning but stereotypical portrait of the "Jew" in his Réflexions sur la question juive, published in 1946). It can hardly come as a surprise if many Jews at the time wished they could give up that privilege.

Rather than speak of Jewish self-hatred, I contend that it makes historical as well as philosophical sense to speak of the ambiguities and ambivalences regarding Jewish identity and self-definition during this period; the problem concerned not only the relations between Jews as a minority and the wider culture in which they lived, but also relations between and among Jews themselves. There exists a historically rich and complex term to designate this problem: the Jewish question.

10. Lessing, Der jüdischeSelbsthass (Berlin, 1930); in French, La haine de soi: le refus d'être juif, trans. Maurice-Ruben Hayoun (Paris: Berg International, 1990). Paul Reitter, who is completing a book on Jewish self-hatred, traces the first use of the term to even earlier, a 1921 article by the Viennese journalist Anton Kuh. (My thanks to Paul Reitter for letting me read part of his manuscript). As Reitter notes, the concept of Jewish self-hatred, if not the term itself, arose out of discussions and debates within the German Jewish community in the late nineteenth century, concerning Jewish religious and Jewish national practice.


"THE JEWISH QUESTION": A BRIEF OVERVIEW

What did the words "Jewish question," or jüdenfrage, or "question juive" refer to, in the century or so before the Nazis' claim to have
found the Final Solution to it discredited the term from civilized usage. According to historians who have studied the evolution of this term, die Judenfrage entered public discourse in Germany with the publication of Bruno Bauer's book (first published as a series of essays) by that title in 1843—to which Marx responded with his own essay by that title a year later. While Marx and Bauer disagreed on details, they agreed on one point: namely, that “the social and economic drive of the acculturated Jew was the real crux of the Jewish question.” In other words, this question could only come about after the political emancipation of Jews in Europe had opened the door to Jewish participation in national life. What the “Jewish question” put into question was precisely the trustworthiness of Jews as members of the nation. Bauer claimed that even acculturated Jews didn’t really want to be fully “absorbed” into the Christian mainstream, clinging to their “illusory” Jewishness, while Marx claimed that Jews represented the essence of capitalism and were therefore inimical to a just society. Either way, as Jacob Toury noted in his historical semantic study of the term, “the ‘Jewish question’ as a slogan did not take root until it had established itself as an anti-Jewish battle-cry” [92]. This is what enabled the virulent anti-Semitisms of the late nineteenth century to propagate and popularize the term, carrying it through the 1930s and beyond. The “common denominator” between earlier and later anti-Jewish uses of the term, Toury concludes, was “the insistence upon the alien character of the Jews as a group” [100, my italics] in relation to the mainstream.

12. Given the contemporary associations of this term with Nazi ideology, it cannot be used without some indication of distancing. I will therefore use it only in quotation marks.

13. Marx’s essay, in two parts, with substantive excerpts from Bauer’s, is in Karl Marx, Selected Writings, ed. Lawrence H. Simon (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1994).


15. Even though Jews in Germany did not gain full citizenship rights until after the 1848 revolutions, by the early decades of the nineteenth century many had achieved economic and professional success as well as intellectual recognition; a considerable number had even converted to Christianity in order to try (mostly unsuccessfully) to gain full integration into German society. On the history of German Jewry, see Amos Elon, The Pitty of It All: A Portrait of the German Epoch, 1743–1933 [New York: Metropolitan Books, 2002].

16. Vicki Caron, “The Jewish Question’ from Dreyfus to Vichy,” in French History since Napoleon, ed. Martin S. Alexander (London: Arnold, 1999). For Caron, the “Jewish question” is synonymous with anti-Semitism; her essay is about the historiography of anti-Semitism in France.

17. Brasillach’s article, “La question juive,” appeared on the front page of Je suis partout (15 April 1938). Rebabet’s “Esquisse de quelques conclusions” appeared on page 9. A note on page 1 states that the articles in this special issue—which also contains a large number of anti-Semitic cartoons—were written and assembled by Rebabet.
population, divided by class, language, degree of religious practice, ideological and political allegiances, and many other factors.

To vary the examples a bit, I will cite a Hungarian one. In 1917, at a time when the so-called “Golden Age” of Hungarian Jewry was already drawing to a close, the distinguished scholarly journal *Huszadik Század* [Twentieth Century], founded and edited by the Jewish historian Oszkár Jásci, ran a special issue on “The Jewish Question in Hungary.” Of the sixty Jewish and non-Jewish intellectuals who responded to the survey ("Is there a Jewish question in Hungary, and if so, what is its essence? What is the cause of the Jewish question in Hungary? What do you see as the solution to the Jewish question in Hungary?") only a few stated that there was “no Jewish question”—these were the staunchly optimistic Jews who reaffirmed their belief in Enlightenment ideals. “According to my experience there is no Jewish question in Hungary,” wrote the Director of the Budapest rabbinical seminary, Dr. Lajos Blau, “but supposing that there is, it is essentially a leftover of medieval feeling and thought in non-Jews who insist on a Jewish question.” Such “leftovers,” Blau claimed, would disappear once people became enlightened. Alex Bein has noted in his book on the history of the “Jewish Question” that for many Jewish leaders in Germany as well, “the Jewish question existed only in the imagination of or through the activities of Jew-baiters.”

The great majority of respondents to the 1917 Hungarian questionnaire, both Jews and non-Jews, stated that there was indeed a Jewish question. According to most Jewish respondents, its “essence” was anti-Semitism, itself a reaction to the problems and tensions of modernity. [This response is not that different from that of the notables who claimed that there was no Jewish question except in the minds of anti-Semites]. Among the responses by non-Jews, the one by a university professor from Transylvania stands out for its tone as well as its content: yes, there is a Jewish question, wrote the professor, and its essence is in some Jews’ refusal to become Hungarian, in their stubborn clinging to a “nationhood” different from the

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18. This is taken in large part from what I wrote in the “Introduction” to the book I co-edited with Éva Forgács, *Contemporary Jewish Writing in Hungary: An Anthology* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2003), xxxii-xxiv.

19. See Zsidókérdés, asszimiláció, antiszemitizmus [Jewish Question, Assimilation, Anti-Semitism], ed. Péter Hanák (Budapest, 1984), 21; this volume reprints some but not all of the responses to the survey. My translation, here and elsewhere. Further page references to this source for the 1917 survey will be given parenthetically.


21. Among the best known of these was the British novelist Israel Zangwill, whose works such as *Children of the Ghetto* (1892), which thematized the split between traditional and modern Jews in England, were widely translated, in Hungary, Károly Pap [1897–1945] wrote some outstanding stories and novels on the same theme, as did Isaac Babel in Russia, Abraham Cahan in the United States—and Němirovsky in France.

pressures and contradictions faced by assimilated Jews—or those who aspired to that status—remarked that in the course of the nineteenth century “the Jewish question became an involved personal problem for every individual Jew.” 23 Arendt herself did not believe in individual solutions to the “Jewish question.” All such attempts ended in failure, she argued again and again, including in her quite harsh essay on Stefan Zweig, written shortly after the latter’s suicide in 1943. Zweig’s error, Arendt notes somewhat cruelly, had been to believe that being part of the “international society of the successful” would grant him equal rights as a Jew; he ignored the political realities around him, and when he finally saw “a world in whose eyes it was and is a disgrace to be a Jew,” all he could do was to kill himself. But, Arendt concludes, “From the ‘disgrace’ of being a Jew there is but one escape—to fight for the honor of the Jewish people as a whole.” 24 Arendt here was expressing the Zionist view on the “Jewish question,” which she had arrived at on the basis of her own experience in Nazi Germany; but she also had a very keen understanding of the existential dilemmas of those she called assimilationists, and who lived the “Jewish question” as an individual rather than as a collective problem. In one of her essays from that time, Arendt referred to the “hopeless sadness of assimilationists,” precisely because their hopes of assimilation had been so devastatingly crushed. The essay is titled “We Refugees,” which implies that she includes herself—but since she claimed not to believe in individual solutions, she may have wanted to point up the difference between a Zionist like herself and individualists like Zweig and others who had seen their illusions destroyed. 25

Whatever one may think of the collective solution, I believe that most Jewish writers in Europe in the first half of the twentieth century, and many Jewish writers in Europe and the United States today, grapple with issues of Jewish identity in existential and individual terms. If for anti-Semites, the “Jewish question” was summed up as “What shall we do with the Jews?,” for individual Jews the question often appeared—and continues to appear—as a form of inner division and as a personal dilemma, most strikingly summed up in Kafka’s famous question to himself: “What have I in common with the Jews? I have hardly anything in common with myself . . .” 26 But Kafka’s modernist formulation—which allowed him to envision existential estrangement in universal rather than in specifically Jewish terms in his fiction—was not the only way to formulate the existential dilemmas faced by Jews who were out of the ghetto. “What have I in common with the Jews? Do I have to marry a Jew? Must I feel solidarity with Jews who don’t speak my language, don’t dress like me, don’t belong to my world, just because they’re Jews? And what about my fellow-citizens, the non-Jews—will I ever belong to their world, really? Maybe I would belong if I converted, so should I convert?” These were among the more banal, everyday questions that emancipated Jews in Europe could ask themselves in the early twentieth century—and some of the same questions continue to be asked today, not only in Europe. Today, we must add to them some version of “What is my relation, as a Jew, to Israel and Israeli politics?” with its myriad contested, often painful replies.

THE “JEWISH QUESTION” IN INTERWAR FRANCE

Since France was the country of emancipatory rhetoric and political assimilation, French Jews for a long time shared the Republican egalitarian ideal and were largely hostile to Zionism; but neither did they need to seek total assimilation by completely renouncing their Jewishness, for they could maintain the idea that Jewishness was a purely private, religious affair that in no way affected their loyalty to France. Many Jews rose to high positions in the service of the French state under the Third Republic, including the army, and yet kept close family and institutional ties with other Jews and observed endogamy, even if they stopped practicing Jewish religious rites. 27 Some historians have referred to the decades before World War I, when Jews could aspire to high public office even while maintaining a serene identification as

Jews, as the “Golden Age” of French Jewry. However, Maurice Samuels has recently shown that despite this happy moment of Franco-Jewish synthesis, the existential versions of the Jewish question were an intense and vexed subject of discussion by Jewish writers in France throughout the nineteenth century.

The hoped-for harmony between French and Jewish identities came under stress by the influx of Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe starting in the early 1880s, a trend that continued in increasing numbers after World War I. The arrival of these “Juifs de l’Est,” most of them poor, Yiddish-speaking, and either much more religious or much more left-wing in their politics than French Jews, not only elicited waves of anti-Semitism in France but also created problems for established French Jews who sought to distance themselves from the new immigrants. The crisis of the Dreyfus Affair in the last decade of the nineteenth century exacerbated both anti-Semitism and questions of French-Jewish identity. While the career of Alfred Dreyfus in the French army demonstrated France’s political acceptance of Jews as full citizens, the social and ideological reactions to his condemnation and then to the Affair itself demonstrated just how deeply divided the country was over the “Jewish question.” For many middle- and upper-class Jews who had lived with the conviction that there was no problem being both French and Jewish, the Dreyfus Affair was a watershed—and not all Jews chose the side of Dreyfus.

Issues of political allegiance and social class came to the fore with even more intensity in the period between the two world wars, when France was flooded by Jewish immigrants fleeing Hitler’s Germany and other parts of Central and Eastern Europe. Hannah Arendt has some wonderfully humorous remarks about the way she and other German Jews were received in France circa 1933:

French Jewry was absolutely convinced that all Jews coming from beyond the Rhine were what they called Polaks—what German Jewry called Ostarben. But those Jews who really came from Eastern Europe could not agree with their French brethren and called us Jaockes. The sons of these Jaocke-haters—the second generation born in France and already duly assimilated—shared the opinion of the French Jewish up-

per classes. Thus, in the very same family, you could be called joacke by the father and a Polak by the son.

The ambiguities of naming were also apparent in the major linguistic and social divide of the period, the one between “Israélites” and “Juifs.” Long-established French Jews, most of whom were middle class, usually referred to themselves as “Israélites”; the more recent arrivals, wherever they came from, were “Juifs.” The question of how to name oneself, or other Jews, became the theme of quite a lot of writing during the interwar years. In 1930, Edmond Cahen, who was the editor of the “reform” Jewish journal, Archives Israélites, published a novel titled Juif, non! . . . Israélite, whose title says it all—but within the text, assimilated middle-class Jews are occasionally referred to as “Juifs,” which shows how uncertain the division was. Today, “Israélite” is very rarely heard in French usage and appears slightly ridiculous, but both the opposition of the two terms and the uncertainty about their use continued into the postwar years. Thus in November and December 1945, the newly founded journal Les temps modernes, whose editor-in-chief was Jean-Paul Sartre, ran brief biographies of two “typical” Jews in France: “Vie d’un Juif” told the story of a poor immigrant from Turkey who survived the war even though most of his family was deported, while “Vie d’un bourgeois français, magistrat israélite” told the story of a Jewish magistrate whose father had been an army officer; the father staunchly believed that Captain Dreyfus was guilty. The magistrate himself, who was a young man during the Affair, believed that Dreyfus was innocent, but he sometimes felt “repulsed” by others who shared this belief.

Aside from the linguistic conundrum, the tension between “Israélites” and “Juifs” in the interwar period occasionally took on harsh political connotations, since many of the former sought to limit the number of the latter in France. Emmanuel Berl, a well-known essayist and journalist from a distinguished Jewish family, wrote increasingly hostile editorials against immigrants in the 1930s, and moved so far to the right in his desire to proclaim his patriotism that he became a speechwriter for Marshal Pétain for a few weeks in June.

30. “We Refugees,” in Arendt, The Jewish Writings, 270.
31. See Les temps modernes, December 1945, 535–47, the article on “Vie d’un Juif” appeared in November 1945, 338–43; no author is credited for either article. A note in the inaugural October issue of the journal explained that these “Vies” of typical individuals would be published regularly as quasi ethnographic documents, but the series does not seem to have been continued beyond the first few issues.
and July 1940 (a few months later, he had to go into hiding like most other Jews in France). Berl lived long enough to look back on his own past, and although he never repented his positions, he did admit he had underestimated the virulence of Hitler's anti-Semitism and that he was shocked by Pétain's "Jewish decrees" of 1940 and 1941, which forbade writers like himself to publish.\(^{32}\)

Némirovsky's place in this linguistic and sociological field was untypical, though by no means unique: she was a "foreign Jew from the East," but not a "Juif de l'Est" or Ostjude in the usual sense, since she was wealthy, well educated, politically conservative (or at least, non-Leftist). Thus, while most "Juifs de l'Est" clearly belonged among the "Juifs" in the Israélite/juif dichotomy, she and her husband Michel Epstein (whom she married in 1926) did not. Her choice to marry someone like herself—the child of a wealthy banker, Russian, Jewish, not at all religious, wanting to live well and be assimilated in France—is significant, for it reinforced her status as a "foreign Jew;" other Russian emigrant writers, like Nathalie Sarraute or Elsa Triolet, chose French, non-Jewish husbands. Némirovsky's choice also confirmed her class allegiance: although her father, a "self-made man," came from a very poor Jewish family, her mother's family had middle-class pretensions, which explains why Irène had a French governness and apparently spoke only French with her mother as a child. As the many interviews and photographs of Némirovsky that appeared in the press after the success of *David Golder* (1929) and throughout the 1930s attest, she lived a life of bourgeois ease and comfort; her aspiration, in literature as well as life, was to be a respected member of the establishment—her ideal was the Académie Française, not the avant-garde.\(^{33}\)

Despite her class allegiance, however, which would normally have placed her among the Israélites (indeed, one of her close friends was Jean-Jacques Bernard, son of the famous playwright Tristan Bernard, and an Israélite of the highly assimilated kind), Némirovsky did not really belong in that category since she was a recent immigrant to France, and not French. Why she did not request French citizenship in the 1920s, when it was easier to obtain than in the late 1930s (at that time she requested it twice and was refused both times), is one of the questions that puzzle people who try to understand her life choices. The lack of French nationality made her much more vulnerable during the war, but even before then it placed her in a somewhat ambiguous position. This in-between position lends, I think, particular acuity to her views of and on Jews—though it also skews her views somewhat, for she very rarely portrays French Jews in her fiction. With the exception of one major character I will discuss in a moment, all the Jewish figures in her fiction are more or less recent arrivals in France, having made their fortune—or trying to make it—after a childhood of poverty in Odessa or some other city "in the East." They are at best newly rich, foreigners and outsiders who rarely have any social contact with French people, including French Jews. In her serialized 1939 novel *Les échelles du Levant* (which was not published in book form until 2004, under a different title), the main character is such a foreigner, with a heavy chip on his shoulder as he reflects on his outcast status; although he is not explicitly identified as a Jew, he is clearly portrayed as one.\(^{34}\)

**THE "JEWISH QUESTION" IN NÉMIROVSKY'S FICTION**

We can advance our understanding of both Némirovsky and of the complexities of the "Jewish question" in interwar France by reading her novels and stories that feature Jewish protagonists as explorations of the "Jewish question" from an individual Jewish point of view. By "individual Jewish point of view," I mean that Némirovsky was writing about her Jewish characters from the inside—sometimes observing them harshly and even unfairly, but always from a position that can accommodate our seeing her gaze as that of a Jew. Not a member of "the Jewish community" or "the Jewish people" defined in collective terms, but a Jew nevertheless, who struggled precisely with those issues of Jewish identity and Jewish belonging that defined the "Jewish question" for Jews, not for anti-Semites.


Only about a quarter of Némirovsky’s stories and novels feature Jewish protagonists. But those that do are among her strongest works—and they all raise the question of Jewish identity and its contradictions, even if it is not a subject that preoccupies the Jewish characters themselves. The protagonist of David Golder, which remained for many years her best-known work, never asks “What does it mean for me to be a Jew?” let alone “What does it mean to be a Jew in modern Europe?” But the reader is prompted to do so, and Némirovsky’s rather cruel views on that question are precisely the reason that some readers find the novel “anti-Semitic” (the way some readers, but not I, find Roth’s Goodbye, Columbus or Babel’s Red Cavalry anti-Semitic). Her short novel Le bal, written around the same time as David Golder, is probably best seen as a mother-daughter tragedy, or else as a story about social climbing, though not necessarily about Jewish anxieties (in the film version, the social climbing couple are not Jewish). Yet it too gains a significant dimension if we give full weight to the fact that the father in the story is a wealthy “self-made” Jew who has married a vulgar, socially ambitious, uneducated French woman in what turns out to be a mismatch of sought-after assimilations, the husband seeking non-Jewish Frenchness and the wife aspiring to (Jewish) wealth.

Aside from works that deal with Jewish assimilation only indirectly, Némirovsky wrote two works in the late 1930s that explicitly foreground the question of Jewish identity as it is posed by the Jewish characters themselves: the 1937 short story “Fraternité,” and the novel published in 1940, Les chiens et les loups (The Dogs and the Wolves). I will focus here on “Fraternité,” which is short enough to be discussed in detail and has the distinction of being the only one of her works that features a French “Israélite” as its main character.

Némirovsky made extended notes about this short story in her writing journal, and they offer some excellent insights into her frame of mind at the time.35 She wrote the story in less than a month, in October 1936 when she was pregnant with her second child and feeling somewhat anxious about lack of inspiration for a novel. It was published in February 1937 on the literary page of the politically conservative weekly Gringoire. Before considering her journal entries and other contextual details about the publication of this text, I’d like to offer a close reading in light of the “Jewish question” as I have been discussing it. The story stages a brief but memorable encounter between an “Israélite” and a “Juif,” on a train platform in the French countryside in “the present,” roughly late 1936. The character through whose eyes and mind we observe this encounter is the wealthy banker Christian Rabinovitch, whose name is almost too transparently indicative of his inner division—and it is also a false note in the text, because French Israélites were never called Christian; they had ordinary French names that appear in the Christian calendar, without carrying any religious connotation—Henri, Léon, Alfred—or occasionally a Biblical name such as Emmanuel, which could also be borne by non-Jews. Despite this false note, however, Némirovsky makes good use of Christian’s name, which she does not reveal right away. Instead, she begins by describing him physically and emotionally: he is around fifty, a widower, thin and somewhat frail, sedentary in his ways, with a strong tendency to anxiety and worry, especially about his health and that of his grown children, and also about the future, which he feels is always capable of bringing misfortune when one least expects it. His Jewishness is alluded to quite early, by means of a narrative cliché (“his hips, always dry, seemed withered by an ancient thirst, a fever transmitted from generation to generation”) and bit of internal monologue (“My nose, my mouth, the only specifically Jewish traits I still possess”36), but only about one third of the way into the story do we learn his name [77]. At that point, it has an almost comic “punch-line” effect, or else that of an allegory: a man named Christian Rabinovitch cannot possibly be anything other than conflicted about his identity. Dressed in fine English wool and carrying a case with expensive hunting rifles (but we are told he hates hunting), Christian is on his way to a country weekend at the home of an aristocratic friend; he has had a car accident, and this is why he is reduced to taking the train and thus exposing himself to a chance encounter with a man he would normally never meet, a poor immigrant Jew who is sitting near him on the train platform, hugging a child whom he later identifies as his grandson.

To Christian’s shocked surprise, this poor Jew from Russia is named Rabinovitch. When Christian tells him that that is his name as well, the immigrant asks him when he arrived in France. Christian

35. IMEC [Institut de Mémoire de l’Édition Contemporaine, Caen France], Némirovsky archives: NMR 14.13, dossier on “Fraternité.”

asserts stiffly that both he and his father were born in France, but the other man is not deterred: "so it must have been before your father," he tells him, because "all the Rabinovitches come from over there" [81]. At this point Christian recoils, and asks himself the Kafka question (reported in free indirect discourse by the narrator): "What was there in common between this poor Jew and himself?" This is of course the question posed by the story's title as well. Are Christian's "brothers" the wealthy bourgeois and aristocrats he frequents in his work and social life (he refers earlier to "the rich bourgeois, his brothers," 77), as is promised by the French slogan of liberté, égalité, fraternité? Or is his brother this poor Jew with his "feverish" eyes that seem to "run from one object to another," looking "anxiously" for something he will never find?

Although the story is told from Christian's point of view, Némirovsky gives the immigrant Rabinovitch a long monologue in which he recounts his and his family's tale, and here we have in concentrated form a history of Jewish upward mobility and emigration from Russia, complete with the various choices that Jews made: one son, refusing to be a humble tailor, went to university and ended up as a Zionist in Palestine, where he died of tuberculosis; another son became a photographer and settled in Berlin, while the father left Russia after the Revolution and settled in Paris. But when Hitler came to power, the Berlin son had to leave Berlin—he came to France for a few years and now lives in Liverpool. It is this son's child who is with the immigrant Rabinovitch on the station platform. The monologue reaches its high point with the immigrant's reflection on exile:

Where doesn't God throw the Jew! Lord, if only we could be left in peace! But never, never are we left in peace! No sooner have we won, by the sweat of our brow, a piece of dry bread, four walls, a roof for our heads, than comes a war, a revolution, a pogrom, what have you, and goodbye! "Pick up your stuff, get out. Go live in another town, another country. Learn a new language—at your age, you aren't discouraged, right?" No, but we're tired. [83]

Christian listens to all this without interrupting, then asks him about his "profession," to which the other replies that he does a little bit of everything. And he makes a remark that creates extreme discomfort in Christian:

Happy are the ones who were born here. Just see, looking at you, how wealthy one can become! And doubtless your grandfather came from

Odesa, or from Berdichev like me. He was a poor man . . . The fortunate ones, the rich ones, didn't leave, you can be sure of that! Yes, he was a poor man. And you . . . Maybe one day he too . . . ." [84, ellipses in the text]

And he points to his grandson [84]. In other words, only a couple of generations separate the wealthy Rabinovitch from the poor one.

The train's arrival spares Christian from having to reply to this, but when he finds himself alone again in his first-class compartment, his earlier question returns in more virulent form:

Wretched creature! Was it possible that he himself was of the same blood as that man? Once again, he thought to himself: What is there in common between him and me? There's no more resemblance between that Jew and me than between Sestres [Christian's aristocratic friend] and the lackeys who serve him! The contrary is impossible, grotesque! An abyss, a chasm! He touches me because he's picturesque, someone from another age. Yes, that's why and how he touches me, because he's far, so far from me . . . [85, ellipses in the text]

It doesn't require much thought to conclude that Christian doth protest too much. Even as he denies any relation to "that Jew" and tries to explain away his being "touched" by him, the reader is invited to draw a different conclusion. In the only passage in the story where the narrator intervenes above the character's head, we see Christian swaying back and forth, unaware that he is replicating the swaying of his ancestors in prayer or work. But even without this narrative intervention, the reader is aware that Christian and "that Jew" have a number of traits in common, despite their enormous social distance: they are both beset by anxiety, and the narrator uses the word "inquiétude" in relation to both; furthermore, they are both devoted fathers who worry about their children: the immigrant Rabinovitch worries over his son in Liverpool and about his grandson; the French Rabinovitch worries about his son Jean-Claude who wants to marry the aristocrat's daughter—will this mixed marriage work out? Christian Rabinovitch has his doubts, for they will probably never truly understand each other. And finally, he himself concludes that the source of his disquiet is his Jewish heritage:

That's what ails me . . . That's what I'm paying for in my body, my mind. Centuries of wretchedness, illness, oppression. Thousands of poor bones, feeble and tired, created mine. [86]
When the train finally stops and his Catholic friends come to greet him, Christian abandons these bitter ruminations. But his body continues to mark his difference, since he shivers from the cold air while his Catholic host revels in it. And we can be sure that he will have a terrible time at the hunt the next day. Hunting really isn’t his thing.37

Is this story, which packs so much into a few pages, proof of Némirovsky’s “anti-Semitism” and “self-hatred”? Personally, I don’t think so, though I realize that it is possible to read it that way if one has a mind to. Némirovsky does not eschew stereotyping, both physical and psychological: the little Jewish boy has big ears, bright nervous eyes like his grandfather, while Christian thinks of his own mouth and nose as his “Jewish traits.” On the psychological level, the anxiety and feeling of insecurity that even the wealthy “Israëlite” lives with on a daily basis are attributed to his Jewishness. But was it a sign of anti-Semitism to suggest, in 1937, that Jews had reasons to be anxious about their security in the European world? My sense is that Némirovsky was particularly attuned, as a “foreign Jew from the East,” to all the ways in which even the country of emancipation and equality for all could become a very cold place for Jews. In “Fraternité,” she presents the painful self-questioning of an assimilated French Jew as he confronts what is for him a distant Jewish heritage.

The exact nature of this heritage is left somewhat vague in the story: is it biological, racial even, or is it the heritage created by a shared history of “wretchedness, illness, oppression” as Christian puts it to himself? In her journal notes for this story, Némirovsky seems to vacillate between those two views: in one entry, she writes: “the rich one is [thinks he is] totally free of his religion, but the poor one is too. Their brotherhood does not reside in religion, but in race, oh Hitler, you’re not wrong.” This is immediately followed by “J’ai des scrupules,” which could mean something like “What have I just said? Maybe I’m wrong.” But this is in turn is followed by “And yet, there is before and above all the inalienable right to truth.” She knows

she is skating on thin ice, but she maintains the thought. A few lines later, however, she implies that the “brotherhood” and the “heritage” reside above all in history, not biology. Commenting on the immigrant Rabinovitch’s monologue as she plans to write it, she says:

the meaning of all these experiences is that things always end badly, in failure . . . to start over, and then over again, to bend your back and start over. But the one who didn’t have to do that, the rich one, still has sickening fear [in English], that heritage.” Below that, she writes: “In sum, what I demonstrate is inassimilability, what a word, oh Lord . . . I know that it’s true.”38

Hers was not a happy view of Jewish existence. Her conclusion that the Jews are “inassimilable” may appear to tally with anti-Semitic views of the time, for anti-Semites also harped on this theme. But she didn’t write that word in the text: the story is more ambiguous than what she writes in her notes. On the other hand, she also writes in her notes that when she submitted the story to the Revue des deux mondes, its long-time editor, René Doumie [who was not Jewish] rejected it on the grounds of anti-Semitism! She then submitted it to the weekly Gringoire, which had published some of her other work and where it appeared on February 5, 1937. A few years later, Horace de Carabuccia, the paper’s editor, would take risks in publishing her work under a pseudonym when she desperately needed the money. In February 1937, however, her turning to Gringoire was a decision fraught with problems. The paper had become more openly anti-Semitic after the 1936 elections, which had brought the Popular Front to power and the Socialist leader Léon Blum [an extraordinarily cultivated “Israëlite”] to the position of Prime Minister. Gringoire’s chief political editorialist, Henri Béraud, published increasingly ugly diatribes against Blum, whom he called “Prime Hebrew,” among other insulting names. Némirovsky’s friend Joseph Kessel, a highly successful novelist [and another Jewish immigrant from the East—his parents were from Lithuania], who had been in charge of Gringoire’s literary pages for several years, wrote a letter of protest after one of Béraud’s more vicious articles had appeared at Christmas 1936, and stopped publishing in the paper; by a striking coincidence, Kessel’s letter was reprinted by Béraud himself, who claimed that other

37. The relation of Jews to hunting is almost a topos in interwar literature and film: in Cahen’s just now! . . . Israëlite, the Jewish protagonist’s “Frenchness” is shown not only by his valor as a soldier in World War I but also by his love of the land and especially of hunting, the Jewish aristocrat in Jean Renoir’s film Le règne du jeu is a refined but expert hunter. Christian Rabinovitch’s dislike of hunting indicates his problematic assimilation into French society, despite his native status.

38. Notes and draft for “Fraternité,” at IMEC, NMR 14.13
choices one makes. To say that Némirovsky was responsible for her choices is not to condemn her for them; and even less is it to suggest that she was "responsible" for the fate that befell her. That responsibility lies with the iniquity of the Vichy regime and the German occupiers of France, and it would be unconscionable to suggest that her arrest and deportation were in some way her fault. But ascribing responsibility to Némirovsky for her career choices is the only way, I think, to fully recognize her as a human subject. Her choices may have turned out to be "wrong" ones in retrospect, but she made them, the way we all make choices, not knowing how they will turn out and hoping for the best.

It is impossible for us to know, exactly, how readers of Gringoire in February 1937 interpreted "Fraternité"; but even if they read it as a confirmation of their worst prejudices, that reading would not invalidate the one I am proposing here. Némirovsky's conclusion about Jewish "inassimilability" is not, in my reading, a sign of anti-Semitism, but rather a sign of Jewish anxiety and unease—and it is important to note that Jewish writers in other hostile environments were arriving at the same conclusion. For anti-Semites, inassimilability was due largely to the Jews' own refusal to assimilate, their clannishness in "sticking together"—whence the paranoid theories of worldwide "Jewish conspiracy." For racial anti-Semites, there was the added element of "blood" or "race," which would prevent Jews from properly "mixing" with the French. A sympathetic reading of Némirovsky points out, by contrast, that in her view the determining factor of Jewish inassimilability is neither sociology nor biology, but history: centuries of persecution and exclusion have had their effect, even among Jews who are now privileged.

More importantly, as Némirovsky sees it, the impossibility of Jewish assimilation is not only the result of the Jews' atavistic inability to transcend their origins (whether you call them racial or historical); it is also a consequence of French xenophobia and class snobsm. This is not apparent in "Fraternité," where the assimilated Rabinovitch seems to have only solicitous and unprejudiced Christian friends, but it is emphasized in the last novel she published in book form during her lifetime, Les chiens et les loups, which is her

42. The Hungarian novelist and short-story writer Károly Pap, who called himself a "writer of the Jewish people" and who perished at Bergen-Belsen, was expressing similarly despairing views in his stories of the late 1930s. Pap too was accused by some members of the Jewish community of being a "self-hating" Jew.
most sustained effort to examine the “Jewish question” and the last of her works in which Jewish characters appear. Her conclusions are not hopeful as far as the possibility of Jewish assimilation into French society is concerned. In one of the most dramatic moments in the novel, two Jews from Kiev, one poor and one rich, one apparently assimilated the other not, confront each other. The poor one, who this time is an actual blood relation of the rich one, his first cousin, cries out: “You who look down on us, who feel contempt for us, who want to have nothing do with the Jewish riffraff! Just wait a bit! Wait! You’ll soon be labeled one of them! And you will be part of them, you who left all that behind, you who thought you had escaped.” One can hardly think of a more pessimistic—or more prescient—view that the same fate awaits all Jews in Europe, even those who thought they had put the ghetto behind them.

And now, finally, we can return to the question I left hanging in the beginning of this essay: Why is there no mention of Jews or Jewish persecution in Suite française? Those critics who like to see in Némirovsky an example of “Jewish self-hatred” attribute this absence to her lack of sympathy for, or identification with, Jews. She and her husband had converted to Catholicism in February 1939, and some notes in her journal suggest that her conversion may have been more than a mere survival strategy. But nothing allows us to say that she had no sympathy for Jews, and even her presumed lack of identification comes up against the harsh fact that in the spring of 1942, while she was most intensely working on her novel, Némirovsky walked around the village of Issy-L’Évêque wearing a yellow star. Whether she liked it or not, she was identified as a Jew, and she made no effort to escape it (which is yet another question that readers inevitably ask about her: why did she not attempt to leave France, or at least the occupied zone, as most Jews in her situation did?).


44. In June 1938, as she was beginning to work on a novel she originally titled “Le Charlatan ou Enfants de la nuit” (it would eventually become Les échelles du Levant, which appeared in installments in Candide in 1939 and was published as a book in 2005 under the title Le maître des âmes), she made a few notations that suggest she was meditating on Christian themes: “Je mène à tout ceci, je ne sais pourquoi, une idée de Chrétien... Jésus n’est qu’un homme comme nous, c’est à dire qu’il est un Dieu...” and further on, writing the title “Les Enfants de la nuit,” she puts a possible epigraph: “La parole de Jésus: ‘Vous, soyez des enfants de lumière.”’ [IMEC, NMR 14.1, dossier on Les échelles du Levant].

A more plausible explanation for the absence of Jews in Suite française is that, since this novel is wholly focused on the way “ordinary French people” responded to the first year of German Occupation, there was no real call to focus on Jews. One could say that by not showing any of her French characters as being aware of the Vichy statutes that excluded Jews from public life, or of the roundups that began as early as March 1941, Némirovsky was realistically depicting their indifference to the distress of fellow citizens, not to mention the distress of foreign Jews like herself. But this explanation overlooks a somewhat important question: if Némirovsky wanted to depict the responses of “ordinary French people,” why could she not imagine at least one “ordinary French person of the Jewish faith” as part of that category? Here we could go into some minute historical analysis, starting with the fact that in June 1940, the Jews were not yet persecuted in France so there was no point in singling them out among others on the road fleeing the German army; and when the second part of the novel takes place, between October 1940 and June 1941, the setting is a tiny French village that could be plausibly represented as having no Jewish inhabitants. But still, this explanation seems a bit weak.

I would therefore like to propose a stronger explanation, one that focuses precisely on the question of assimilation. As I have suggested, Némirovsky had arrived, by 1940, at the rather hopeless conclusion that Jews would never feel—or be—fully accepted by the French. Could this have translated into the impossibility of her representing Jews “together with” the French, as if she could not see them in the same viewfinder—or in the same story and same history? If so, then that would be the most pessimistic conclusion of all, consonant with the despair and bitterness that she felt—for good reason—as she was writing what would turn out to be her posthumous masterpiece.