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Book Reviews

France at the crossroads

David Lehmann | Spring 2006 - Number 201

Irène Némirovsky, *Suite Française* (translated from the French by Sandra Smith; London: Chatto and Windus, 2006, £16.99)

Pauvre France! The country seems to be the butt of criticism from all quarters, among its own people and from abroad. French films are tediously introspective and precious, dark Gauloises have all but disappeared, the French social model is a laughing stock, even the universalist citizenship that is France's pride has shown a racist face, and the French people themselves look with unease upon a Europe their leaders have created and cherished over 50 years.

Of course, these problems are not only those of France, and it may simply be that the French intelligentsia's way of exaggerating both the exceptionalism and the universalism of their heritage, notably vis-à-vis the Anglo-Saxons, makes them uniquely, though unfairly, vulnerable to ridicule of this sort.

In fact the agonizing reappraisal of France goes back a long way. 1968 was, among other things, a grandiose, angry, but also satirical, outburst against the sclerosis and self-satisfaction of the elites of left and right. In 1971, however belatedly, Marcel Ophuls's great documentary film *Le chagrin et la pitié* revealed in a mass medium how much active and passive collaboration there had been during the war and how exaggerated were the stories of widespread resistance, while in 1972 Robert Paxton's *Vichy France* further examined that same question in a work of academic history.

The shame would have been less if the story of the Resistance had not been previously built up by Gaullists and Communists. Compare post-communist Eastern Europe and post-dictatorship Latin America. Experience tells us that only a handful of people living under dictatorship or enemy Occupation ever join subversive organizations, even if they sympathize

with them. This is not because they are cowardly, but because they have many obligations and real dilemmas, notably to family and friends whom they might endanger or even, under torture for example, betray.

We need reminders of our fragility, but reminders that do not offer the easy option of victimhood – the world's fastest-growing political industry. So now this merciless chronicle of a society that seems to have lost its moral bearings has come to do just that. It makes for compulsive reading. With surgical precision in the lineage of Flaubert and Stendhal, it describes how France responded to the cataclysm of June 1940. And, to the reader who would mutter, 'I would not have done that' or 'I would not have said that', the author's ghost replies: *de te fabula narratur*.

Suite Française comes to us incomplete, as is well known. But the incompleteness does not matter too much because it is not a narrative with a beginning, a middle and an end, but rather a series of parallel vignettes following the fate of a few families or couples chosen from the entire spectrum of social classes, whose paths cross in rather contrived coincidences.

To some extent there is a bias that portrays the morality of the privileged classes in an even worse light than the poor – but only to some extent. The aristocrats and landowners of provincial France, the urban plutocracy, are portrayed as if possessed by evil: only the finely honed elegance of the author's language separates her account from a popular morality tale. The life of the very Catholic and very bourgeois Péricand family is in every particular shot through with selfishness, haughtiness and an obsession with the everyday pettiness of domination. Madame Péricand returns from the theatre to tune into the radio in June 1940. The servants listening anxiously at the drawing room door make her think of the unseemly mixing of the social classes in the chaos of a sinking ship. Later, in the flight South, she forgets – or abandons – her ancient immobilized father-in-law in a village, and we leave him laid up in the care of a peasant family, in his dying moments dictating a new will to the local notary, depriving his children of much of his fortune. The old man's favourite pastime had been to tantalize his family about the fortunes he would – or would not – leave to them, or to 'his' orphanage. Even his adored cat Albert, ferried across the countryside with the family and all its accoutrements, merits an episode of cruelty: in a chapter that Sandra Smith translates with great skill, the cat prowls in the shrubbery, catches and then eats a bird in gruesome slow motion.

As the invasion threatens, Madame Péricand's brother-in-law, a priest and TB sufferer, volunteers to take the orphans to the countryside. The description of his mixed feelings of charity and fear in the face of these 'unfortunate children' is masterly:

He walked towards them with all the kindness and goodwill he was capable of, but all he felt in their presence was coldness and disgust, not a single glimmer of love.

Days later they would lynch Father Péricand in the grounds of a deserted château.

Némirovsky's irony is sometimes too direct, too explicit. If a knife can be turned in the wound, she turns it. She leaves nothing to chance in her almost misanthropic portrayal of dishonesty, self-deception, hypocrisy, violence – but above all an obsession with status, *bienséance*, and keeping up appearances even at the cost of life itself. As Charles Langelet, a connoisseur whose 'beautiful hands . . . had never done a day's work', carries his treasured possessions out of his house he imagines himself as 'a golden-haired Pekinese in the midst of the jungle' and snorts at the thought of the servants he is abandoning. Later he is killed by a car while hurrying, slightly tipsy, along the darkened city streets.

Are there any less unappealing characters? One or two: the Michauds, a couple of bank employees who pine after their son, lost at the front, while suffering humiliation at the hands of a financier they have faithfully served all their lives. (He had reneged on a promise to give them a lift out of the city, taking instead his mistress and her dog – the same woman who will kill Charles Langelet while driving her car.) The Péricand family also have a teenage son who is desperate to put himself heroically in the front line for his fatherland. And there is a courageous tenant farmer who dares to confront the Comtesse de Montmort – she who gives thanks that the Germans are here to keep the peasants in order.

And . . . the Germans. The German soldiers are portrayed as good-looking, their officers very cultivated; the French worry about their fate when it is learnt that they are to be sent away to the Eastern front and the French girls are seduced en masse by the Germans' tall physique and blond hair, not to speak of their access to consumer goods. The gentle affection between an officer and the 'host' on whom he is billeted is contrasted with her marriage to an unfaithful and unattractive husband. The German state, Nazism and the impending extermination of the Jews, which hung over the author as she wrote, are unmentioned.

The extraordinary, but by now widely known, story of the text itself is sparsely told in the moving Preface by Myriam Anissimov to the French edition, translated here, slightly abridged, as an Appendix. Irène Némirovsky was born in Kiev in 1903. Her father was a highly secularized Jewish banker and, after the family escaped from the Revolution in peasant disguise in December 1918, took them via Finland to France. Irène had spoken and written French from her earliest childhood and once in France wrote short stories and novels about bankers, aristocrats and failures, and about mother-daughter hatred. Her own mother in effect rejected her and later, when her two daughters were orphaned, turned them away from the luxurious Nice dwelling where she managed to survive the war. Although much published in France, Irène was refused French nationality and her baptism in 1939 did not, of course, save her from capture, deportation and death in Auschwitz in 1942, followed shortly afterwards by her husband Michel Epstein. The publisher Albin Michel continued to support the girls during and after the war 'without any charge against the royalties due to Irène Némirovsky'. Her manuscript accompanied her daughters from convent to convent and even when they lived in

caves, but they only opened it in the 1990s. Denise Epstein, the younger daughter, by now over 60, transcribed it painstakingly over two years. In an interview with *Libération*, she told of her life as a left-wing activist 'always on the side of the oppressed and the unfortunate'. She was born in 1927, but fame has now been thrust upon her in her 70s as the person who, finally summoning up the courage to rediscover her mother, rescued a pitiless, and perhaps pitiful, record of a people under enemy occupation. Sandra Smith conveys the sense that she is engaged in something more than a translation. She is particularly good in the scenes of ever-unrequited love, the only love there is in this book, between the Michauds' son and the peasant girl who nurses him to recovery, and between the German officer and his well-bred, unhappy host.

This is not just a book about France. Just as *Hitler's Willing Executioners* was a misguided polemic, so it would be misguided to apply Irène Némirovsky's almost unbearable pessimism to France alone. And there will remain forever the mystery of why Jews and their persecution do not get any mention at all from an author who, even as she wrote, knew that, as a Jew, her life would soon be ended.

David Lehmann's books include *Democracy and Development in Latin America: Politics, Economics and Religion in the Post-war Period* (1990) and *Struggle for the Spirit: Religious Transformation and Popular Culture in Brazil and Latin America* (1996). *Remaking Israeli Judaism: the Challenge of Shas*, written with Batia Siebzehner, will be published in 2006 by Hurst and Co.

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