

Maxime Decout, *Ecrire la judéité: Enquête sur un malaise dans la littérature française*. Seyssel: Les Editions Champ Vallon, 2015. 299pp. + index. 24 €. ISBN-13: 979-1026700012

In *Ecrire la judéité* Maxime Decout has taken on the challenging task of writing an archeology of Jewish identity throughout French literature, from the early 20<sup>th</sup>-century literary antisemitism to current debates on the new antisemitism. The book reads more as a survey than critical argument. As such, it is compelling and will prove an extremely useful resource for the student and scholar of French Jewish studies.

Decout's book includes literature written by Jews, as well as non-Jews writing about Jewish identity and the Holocaust. At once erudite and synthetic, the book also provides valuable analyses of key texts in the history of French literature (Marguerite Duras, Romain Gary, Patrick Modiano, Georges Perec, inter alia) engaged with Jewish identity and the Holocaust, literally or figuratively.

With the exception of some American contributions to the scholarship on the construction of French Jewish identity, Jewish memory, literary collaboration and Jewish identity as hermeneutic tool [1], Decout's book testifies to an impressive familiarity with a vast corpus, from less known Jewish authors to contemporary reflections on the new antisemitism, via major writers such as Perec, Modiano, Albert Cohen and Edmond Jabes.

The author convincingly shows that Jewish identity has shaped literary debates and influenced the trajectory of French letters in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and that it continues to affect literature and theory. Indeed, literary theory itself has developed, in the context of postwar France, arguably in response to the recent history of Collaboration and genocide. Decout shows that far from constituting an exotic subfield of French literary studies, Jewish identity is the touchstone of modern France's struggle with universalism and particularism. And if one admits that the most significant work of modern literature is Proust's *Recherche*, one must by the same token acknowledge that the Jewish question lies at the core of French literature and aesthetic theory. Indeed, literary aestheticism up until today, continues its struggle with Jewish identity, as witnessed in the "affaire Renaud Camus" in 2000.

To be sure, writing on Jewish identity in France necessarily involves reflection on French literary antisemitism, from Dreyfus to Vichy and Auschwitz up to contemporary expressions of Jew-hatred. Modern French Jewish identity is torn between assimilationist Franco-Judaism with its idealization of the Republic, and the tragic interruptions of the honeymoon between Jews and the Republic during the Dreyfus crisis and Vichy France. Decout begins his survey with the after-effect of the Dreyfus affair and what he calls the "Jewish literary renaissance," a Jewish politics of style as a response to the trauma of betrayal, with writers such as Albert Cohen, Edmond Fleg and André Spire. He explores the Jewish-universalist response to the literary nationalism and antisemitism of the time. Writers partaking of "the Jewish renaissance," in the 19<sup>th</sup>-century tradition of Franco-Judaism, identified themselves as Jewish and French at the same time and assert that

identity via a new literary style in which Jewish cultural and linguistic elements combine with the great tradition of French prose. Jewish *and* French—such would also be Emmanuel Levinas’s response to the post-Six-Day War allegations of dual loyalty. “Space is not one-dimensional,” Levinas would write in 1968 in response to General de Gaulle’s anti-Israel press conference. [2]

In chapter two Decout examines what he calls the crisis of Jewish memory, i.e., the postwar literary and theoretical production that deals with the Holocaust and shatters literary and artistic modes of representation. More often than not, that production tends to subsume Jewish identity under the traumatic experience of suffering and genocide. Decout devotes intriguing pages to the conflict between postwar Jewish identity and the literary, somewhat dogmatic formalism that emerges after the war and tends to do away with history (an avoidance that is itself a symptom of historical trauma). Decout examines Romain Gary’s response to the *Nouveau Roman* and the erasure of psychology (or “personnages”) (p. 99), as well as the rebuttal of formalism by less known yet iconic author Piotr Rawicz.

Perec’s experimental mnemonic literature—a play on memory, amnesia, and OULIPO formalist strategies, especially in *W* and *La Disparition*—arguably accomplishes the synthesis of the conflict between formalism and Jewish memory in French letters (p. 102). Decout further writes important pages on Gary’s rejection of the pathos of the disaster (p. 139) and on the post-Auschwitz and desecrating laughter in *La danse de Gengis Cohn*. He sees Gary’s path as opposite to Jabes’s and Blanchot’s celebration of the fragment and the deconstruction of the “Book” as a response to the Holocaust seen as the triumph of Hegelianism and of philosophy of totality (p. 145). The author then engages with the question of literary Judeophilia, dwelling on Duras’s philosemitic radicalism that tends to disembody Jewish reality. (p. 173) Decout’s analyses are illuminating, while at the same time perhaps too generous for literary philosemites who do not accomplish much more than an awkward reversal of antisemitic stereotypes.

In his following chapter Decout engages with the political harnessing of Jewish identity in the 1960s (p. 191) with emphasis on Duras, who portrays the Jew as Jorge Semprun [3] did at the same time: the Jew is the rebel, the one who *refuses*, in the absolute sense. Revolutionary philosemitism reduces the Jew to a sort of Gnostic rebel, a Cain who fights against the order of the world. To be sure, a consequence of such idealization of the Jew is to foster a logic of exemplarism and ultimately to condemn all Jews who do not conform with such idealization (the conservative Jew, the Israeli, the Zionist, etc.). Again I would argue that Decout is too lenient toward French literary philosemitism—despite his admission that in Duras, Maurice Blanchot or Jean-François Lyotard Jew-loving borders either on self-caricature or disembodiment (pp. 220, 243-245). However Decout’s sympathy for them may well come from the fact that his book is more an archeological survey than a critique. He engages more critically with philosemitism in the conclusion of his book, in the context of the new antisemitism.

Decout’s next chapter examines Jewish identity as a hermeneutic and epistemological tool (p. 211) in the works of Blanchot, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, Jean-Luc Nancy,

Jacques Derrida, among others. In the postmodern, philosemitic, celebration of nomadism and the desert (p. 233), one will perceive echoes of the Gnostic tradition, as though Judaism were being read through the prism of Meister Eckhart or Angelus Silesius—influential figures for deconstruction from Heidegger to Derrida. This is again the idea that Jewish identity exemplifies the impossibility of any kind of self-consistency and is supposed to deconstruct the very concept of identity. In that sense, Jewish identity becomes a philosophical concept meant to undo the philosophy of the same and of totality—again, a very heavy burden for empirical, historical, Jews, henceforth endowed with the glorified mission of personifying an otherness that never returns to the same, a nomadism that never settles, a suffering that never comes to rest. I am more skeptical than Decout about this operation of harnessing the Jews to a combat against Western metaphysics and against the nation-state, and I would warn against the effects of such exploitation on real Jews and on the Jewish State. The disastrous reversal of postmodern philosemitism into a new demonization of the Jews can easily be observed in recent works in which Jews who do not conform to an ideal of progress, revolt and nomadism, are portrayed as enemies of humankind, in a recycling of ancient anti-Judaic clichés. [4]

In the last pages of his book devoted to the current context, Decout appears to be giving disproportionate importance to Renaud Camus when dealing with the new antisemitism, and overlooks what distinguishes Camus's traditional antisemitism from the phenomenon that Blanchot has so astutely characterized as "antisemitism bereft of antisemitism"—i.e., a postwar antisemitism that has to find ambiguous, insinuating, and captious ways of reasserting itself. On that matter, Decout is absolutely right to see in Alain Badiou's idiosyncratic take on the so-called "meanings of the word Jew" [5] an insidious form of antisemitism in the name of a dogmatic and empty universalism. Decout argues that the figurative reading of Jewish identity can lead to the inability to deal with the new antisemitism (indeed, if the Jew is a trope of persecution and marginality, then any victim of persecution and marginalization would be a victim of antisemitism).

Finally, by approaching Jewish identity from multiple angles (traditional antisemitism, new antisemitism, Jew as figure of the writer, uses and abuses of Jewish memory), Decout deserves praise for having opened the path to a significant renewal of French Jewish studies.

## NOTES

[1] See among other works, Maurice Samuels, *Inventing the Israelite: Jewish Fiction in Nineteenth-Century France* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009); Sarah Hammerschlag, *The Figural Jew: Politics and Identity in Postwar French Thought* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010); Philip Watts, *Allegories of the Purge: How Literature Responded to the Postwar Trials of Writers and Intellectuals in France* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998); Susan Handelman, *The Slayers of Moses: The Emergence of Rabbinic Interpretation in Modern Literary Theory* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1983); Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009).

[2] “L’espace n’est pas à une dimension,” revue *Esprit*, April 1968.

[3] *L’évanouissement* (Paris: Gallimard, 1967).

[4] See in particular Enzo Traverso, *La Fin de la modernité juive: histoire d’un tournant conservateur* (Paris: La Découverte, 2013) and Judith Butler, *Parting Ways: Jewishness and the Critique of Zionism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013).

[5] Alain Badiou, *Circonstances, 3: Portées du mot “juif”* (Paris: Léo Scheer, 2005).

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