

The “Ambiguities” of Irène Némirovsky

Olivier PHILIPPONAT

After being readmitted to French literary heritage following the international success of *Suite française* (2004), Irène Némirovsky’s work provides a unique insight into the intellectual landscape of the inter-war period, particularly with regard to the crisis of the novel, the new *mal du siècle* and the Jewish literary renaissance. However, Angela Kershaw’s recent book on the author shows the difficulties involved in reading and understanding a book once the Holocaust has changed our perception of it.

Reviewed: Angela Kershaw, *Before Auschwitz. Irène Némirovsky and the Cultural Landscape of Inter-war France*, New York/Oxon, Routledge, 2009, 234 pp.

After editorial resurrection, media storm, global distribution, biographical quest and inevitable controversy, the time seems to have come to study Némirovsky (1903-1942) with academic composure and thoroughness, bringing as well suggestions and interpretations. This trend has helped to fuel the literary complex that Irène Némirovsky’s book has become – a work discovered, commented on, praised and debated several times over, and one that shall not be forgotten twice.

In 2006, Martina Stemberger¹ analysed, in a deliberately psychoanalytical tone, some of the “oddities” of which this book shows signs; she gives an account of the phantasmagorias that prove troubling for the modern-day reader, which include several problematic “clichés”, dismissed since as anti-Semitic and irrelevant. Not only was it necessary to understand the function of such “clichés” – perhaps the metaphorical expression of an aversion to the maternal bond? – and their development in the hand of a writer who proclaimed her apolitical standpoint and did not hide her Jewishness any more than she displayed it, but – and this is one of the many merits of Angela Kershaw, a senior lecturer at the University of Birmingham – it was also important to show that the “cliché”, in all its dimensions, was one of Irène Némirovsky’s favourite devices, all the more so after she had discovered its devastating effects in spite of herself.

“Arousing interest”

Based on unequalled informative and comparative work and bringing to light some unexpected connections, Angela Kershaw’s study describes the incorporation of Irène Némirovsky, a Russian exile who settled in Paris in 1919, into the literary landscape of the inter-war period and the multiple ways in which that landscape is reflected in her work; to do

¹ Martina Stemberger, *Irène Némirovsky : Phantasmagorien der Fremdheit*, Wützburg, Königshausen and Neumann, 2006.

so she uses sociological tools such as Pierre Bourdieu's analysis of "fields of production"². In this respect she is particularly convincing in her assessment of the first novels, which shows the influence of the aesthetic debates of the 1920s. Irène Némirovsky refers repeatedly to authors of the previous generation such as Loti, Bourget, Daudet, Maupassant and Barrès, trying to establish a sense of familiarity for French readers; in addition, a "tale" such as *L'Enfant génial*, written in 1923, echoing Paul Bourget's *Nouvelles Pages de critiques et de doctrine* (1922), illustrates criticism of the "bad professors" of the New Sorbonne, suspected of conforming to the comparatism of Ferdinand Baldensperger (who was Irène Némirovsky's teacher). Was she not setting Slavic content in French form?

This is the other paradoxical aspect of her acclimatisation: having lived in the Ukraine, Crimea and Saint Petersburg, Irène Némirovsky deliberately conformed to the canons of the "mode russe" popularised in France by Kessel and Carco. "Némirovsky was exceptionally well placed to package Russia and sell it to her French readers in terms they would recognise and accept", writes Angela Kershaw. This was no doubt due to the periodicals which first published the work of this precocious writer, the daughter of parvenus who had been brought up outside of academic circles: *Fantasio*, *Le Matin*, *Les Œuvres libres*, all popular and widely distributed magazines that steered her away from "fields of limited production" such as the *Nouvelle Revue Française*.

In the same way, in *L'Enfant génial* and *Le Malentendu* (1926), she is seen to mimic stale stereotypes of the Jews, both mechanically and adventitiously. Angela Kershaw calls these ludicrous, colourful, self-indulgent clichés "false images" in the sense that they aim to "find" the French reader. Such a keen desire to be read, appreciated and assimilated is easy to understand in a stateless young woman whose mother had never loved her. Referring to *Le vin du solitude*, her "secret autobiography", she said in 1935: "That book was not written for those who, within a united, happy family, create an imagined solitude, nor for those whose early years were filled with care and tenderness...". Up until 1940 and 1941, in the novel cycles *Les Biens de ce monde* and *Les Feux de l'automne*, she used other stereotypes, this time linked to the French character – feminised patriotism and a sense of family and sacrifice – while focusing on the First World War, which she did not experience, and the perspective of Loti and Romain Rolland.

This concern over meeting the public's expectations was a new development at the time, noted by Thibaudet in his *Histoire de la littérature française* (1936). It suited Némirovsky's talent which, as Angela Kershaw sums up, "was for storytelling; it was not for proselytising". Even in 1942, having been separated from her readership by the anti-Jewish laws that deprived her work of any outlet, Irène Némirovsky continued to think in terms of how she would be received, noting in the margin of her manuscript, "Try to create as much as possible: things, debates...that will interest people in 1952 or 2052." People have wondered what lay behind the exceptional nature of *Suite française*: it could be the fact that it was written for readers of the next decade or century, given that those of 1942 were inaccessible to her. It was also that *Suite française*, which she presumed would be published posthumously, enabled a bold aesthetic synthesis between two techniques that she had never dreamed of merging: those of the novel cycle and the novella, that "door flung open for an instant on an unknown house, and swiftly closed again" (*La Vie de Tchekhov*).

² Pierre Bourdieu, *Les Règles de l'art*, Paris, Seuil, 1992.

“Refusing narrative judgment”

Even so, was Irène Némirovsky taken in by the stereotypes that she used so extensively in her books? On the contrary, from the mid-1930s onwards she made use of their falsity, wrong-footing her characters and readers by ascribing the former to the latter: would they still recognise themselves in the images? “Don’t you think she’s a little bit Dostoevskian?”, says a character in *Les Chiens et les loups*, talking about the emigrée Ada (1940). This reversal is clearly described by Angela Kershaw: conscious of selling the “Slav soul” and Jewish “incapacity to be assimilated”, Némirovsky, at the risk of being misunderstood, challenges the conditioned reflexes of the literary consumer. In her work diaries we encounter exclamations such as, “I shall certainly be told off again for talking about Jews at the moment, but so what!” All of which point to the fact that these “ambiguities” were not slips but the product of a calculated risk.

On this point, Angela Kershaw reminds us of a number of timely truths. Firstly, ambiguity is the last characteristic of ideology. Neither a realist nor an idealist, Némirovsky makes no judgment of her characters, who are tossed about between two opposing clichés, as demonstrated by people’s infinite range of reactions to *David Golder* in 1930. This was her systematic approach in *Les Chiens et les loups*, whose complex characters, neither Russian, nor Jewish, nor French, nor Christian but rather all of them at once, illustrate the changeable and unworkable nature of the notion of identity (in 1939, Irène Némirovsky was neither Russian nor French, and she had converted to Catholicism) and show a “racial relativism” that was inappropriate on the eve of the German occupation.

The misunderstandings linked to the presence of stereotypes in Némirovsky’s work, insists Angela Kershaw, are an undesirable effect of its reception and not of its production. In January 1930, the newspaper *Reveil juif* condemned, in revealing terms, not the fact that *David Golder* was a pandemonium of “hateful Jews” but rather that “this portrait of Jews who are ‘kings of oil or gold’ is pleasing to many anti-Semites³” – which is something else entirely. Her “refusal of narrative judgment”, both here and in the rest of her work, is sometimes seen as guilty neutrality; moreover, it is a token of its timelessness, since it provokes equivocal responses as much today as it did in the past.

A duty to a reputation

The misfortunes of Némirovsky’s reception constitute Angela Kershaw’s other field of discussion. It is uncommon in literary history for a single author to pass from anonymity to universal notoriety twice, at an interval of over 60 years, in an entirely new historical and socio-cultural context.

In 1930, the architect of the first revelation, Bernard Grasset, compared Némirovsky to Balzac, proclaimed a “masterpiece” and orchestrated a “critical circularity” around *David Golder*, telling newspapers to give an opinion and correct one another. They debated whether Némirovsky was a Russian or French author, whether her style was feminine or masculine, whether it was up to a Jewish woman, the daughter of a banker no less, to write “acerbic social satires” about the business community. This chorus of praise and overstatement – a process of “mythologisation” and soon considered suspicious – led to a subsequent bout of questioning, by people who did not intend to be taken in so easily. Grasset was accused of

³ I.-R. See, “Un chef-d’œuvre ?...”, *Réveil juif*, 31 January 1930.

having played with the truth (an advertisement was published in the press seeking the author of the manuscript) and the author of *David Golder* was suspected of having concealed a thesis novel, given away by proven clichés. And yet *David Golder* was not “an anticipation of the crises of the 1930s” but rather “a literary response to the *crise du roman* of the 1920s”, in other words a brutal work that expresses the subjectivity of the characters. In that period, Irène Némirovsky’s work was read at an inopportune moment.

The causes and effects were the same in 2004. Like Bernard Grasset in his day, the publisher of *Suite française* declared himself to be overwhelmed by an *illusio* (in Bourdieu’s sense of a blinding revelation); a consensual masterpiece was proclaimed and “part of our memory” (according to the back cover) was returned to us. “Memory” – this keyword became an order: *Suite française* was no longer a novel but a witness account miraculously reclaimed from the Holocaust. Suspicion followed soon after: Josyane Savigneau, in *Le Monde*, wrote of “a marketing strategy disguised as a duty to remember”, in other words a swindle. It did not take long for people to realise that *Suite française* was “hiding” other books and to endeavour to exhume *David Golder*. Némirovsky had fallen short of her reputation; the icon no longer coincided with the media image. She had lost focus. It was noted that *Suite française*, in which the “refusal of narrative judgment” still prevailed, was not the “digest of the Occupation⁴” people had hoped for. Some seemed surprised that this book, written before the first train deportations, made no mention of anti-Jewish persecution. Irène Némirovsky had betrayed her symbolic promises. She had cheated her own reputation.

Self-hatred?

In a heavy-handed attempt to expand the “mythologisation” of *Suite française*, the words “self-hatred” and certain others, in English-language editions, were taken out of the preface of Myriam Anissimov, one of those who “discovered” *Suite française*. The fact is that they were not appropriate: not only was Irène Némirovsky not from a Jewish background, but also Theodor Lessing, the inventor of the notion of “Jewish self-hatred” (1930) had endeavoured, from a Jewish perspective, to find a “theme that does not belong exclusively to Jews alone” but which “on the contrary, is of interest to all of humankind⁵” – referred to by Sartre as “inauthenticity” in his essay *Réflexions sur la question juive*.

Nevertheless, this editorial intervention seemed to prove that this was an act of political correctness and confirmed people’s suspicions. These were expressed most strongly in the United States by those whom Elisabeth Roudinesco, in her recent work *Retour sur la question juive*⁶, calls “inquisitors”, who are quick to identify anti-Semitism where it does not exist, or does not really exist, or does not exist at all. People have failed to take into account the fact that, unlike authors of the “Jewish renaissance” for whom it is the very subject-matter – Albert Cohen, Armand Lunel, André Spire, Jacob Lévy, Edmond Fleg, or the popular novels of Sarah Lévy, *Ô mon goye* (1929) and *Ma chère France* (1930), also problematic – for Némirovsky the “Jewish theme” often served as a mere setting, or a metaphor for subjects such as solitude, childhood regret, uprooting and the search for respectability.

⁴ Cf. Alice Kaplan, “La zone grise”, *The Nation*, 3 April 2008.

⁵ Theodor Lessing, *La Haine de soi, le refus d’être juif*, Berg International, 1990, p. 34. Not cited by Angela Kershaw, who refers to the study by Sander Gilman (*Jewish Self-Hatred: Anti-Semitism and the Hidden Language of the Jews*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986).

⁶ Albin Michel, 2009.

Angela Kershaw gives an account of these biased accusations and other “inappropriate ethically based criticisms”, which were not so much a part of its analysis as of the unhappy love affair – the bride was too beautiful, but did she really need to be made uglier? This ostracism culminated with the publication in *The New Republic* of a vengeful article bordering on diatribe. *Suite française* was said to be fraudulent and its author was described as the very definition of Jewish self-hatred. The source of this demystification was the disappointment of not having read the book that was expected: “... an authentic, even numinous document miraculously salvaged from the ashes of the great catastrophe, as poignant and as prophetic as the diary of Anne Frank, to which it has been frequently, and nonsensically, compared⁷”.

Today, as in 1930, Irène Némirovsky is thus less a victim of her ambiguities than of her mistaken reception and, no doubt, of dramatic media coverage. To sum up Angela Kershaw’s theory, let us say that she was writing for the majority what could only be read by the minority. The posthumous awarding of the Renaudot prize and the publication of unpublished work have, from that perspective alone, in no way solved the problem, because she was placed on equal footing with living authors who were infinitely more cautious, wiser for being informed about the Holocaust. Hence Angela Kershaw’s title, *Before Auschwitz*, which argues in favour of “a reading of cultural production which strives to avoid the ‘apocalyptic history’” and, following Michael André Bernstein, recommends embracing “sideshadowing” rather than “backshadowing⁸”. Primo Levi, in his last book, explained this more simply: “[...] one must be aware of the error that consists in judging distant epochs and places with the yardstick that prevails in the here and now⁹”. Alas, it is commonly thought that people must either have been blind or complicit not to have anticipated the Holocaust. In literary history as in cinema, tracking is truly a question of morality.

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⁷ Ruth Franklin, “Scandale française The Nasty Truth about a New Literary Heroine”, *The New Republic*, 30 January 2008.

⁸ Michael André Bernstein, *Foregone Conclusions: Against Apocalyptic History*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1994.

⁹ Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, Vintage International, 1989, p. 165.