

Maurice Samuels, *Inventing the Israelite. Jewish Fiction in Nineteenth-Century France*, (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2010), pp. 323.

by *Catherine Fhima*

With *Inventing the Israelite. Jewish Fiction in Nineteenth-Century France*, Maurice Samuels proposes to explore the ways in which obscure, even unknown and today forgotten, 19th century French Jewish writers responded to the challenges posed by modernity by writing literary fiction as French Jewish citizens. He thus intends to show the emergence of an innovative literature, characterised by a wide variety of viewpoints, which places the search for a balance between the Jewish and French identities at the heart of its literary project. The authors studied are hence identified as the inventors of a new Jewishness, working towards the formulation of an original and specific typology in the European landscape, that of the “Israelite”, as the title, *Inventing the Israelite*, suggests. The book consists of five chapters of more or less equal importance, some of them drawn from articles in reviews or collective works. A significant introduction outlines the structure of the book while a conclusion, more like an additional chapter, dealing with Marcel Proust, creates a link with the 20th Century. Maurice Samuels thus concludes his demonstration with the pre-existence of a self-aware minority literature, disposed towards proposing solutions to all the dilemmas posed by the Jewish identity in modernity. The authors whose works are examined in this book are: Eugénie Foa (1796-1853), Godchaux Baruch Weil, alias Ben-Lévi (1806-1878), Alexandre Créange under the pseudonym Ben Baruch (1791-1872), Alexandre Weill (1811-1899), Auguste Vidal, alias Daniel Stauben (1822-1875) and David Schornstein (1826-1879) who sometimes signs as Georges Stenne. Using case studies and concentrating on an essentially literary analysis grid, Maurice Samuels chose to work on a corpus of texts consisting solely of novels and short stories with Jewish themes. A chapter is dedicated to each author, apart from the last one, which includes both Daniel Stauben and David Schornstein. Several lines of enquiry are suggested, emphasising the original nature of these literary experiments. Thus, to start with, this first emancipated generation produced accounts of the French Jews’ living conditions, during the period from the Restoration until the beginning of the Third Republic. However, expressing themselves as Jews was no easy matter. French modernity, intrinsically hostile to all forms of collective specificity, placed difference under constant stress. Each of the authors studied provided different and varied answers forged in a literary context that borrows its writing codes, either from the sentimental or Romantic novel (Eugénie Foa), or from Balzac (Ben Levi) or George Sand’s realism (Stauben). All of them, however, tried to develop the idea of Jewish uniqueness as being complementary to emancipated France’s universal values, despite the dangers assimilation posed to the fine balance

between specificity and universalism. They unanimously acknowledged the breakdown of the social structure of traditional Judaism.

Confronted with secularisation, the authors examined methods of perpetuating Jewishness within a modernity, which politically was still struggling to establish itself in a Republican context. As a result, according to Maurice Samuels, these authors became “theorists”, proposing eminently French works in which they suggested responses to assimilation or paths towards an aggregation with the majority. Some expressed themselves in religious terms. Thus Godchaux Weill alias Ben Levi promoted reformed Judaism in the form of short stories that were published essentially in the *Archives israélites*. He adopted a political and ethical position. Deeply committed to the notion of citizenship and convinced that Judaism can adapt to historical circumstances, he interceded in favour of its religious modernisation in order for it to arrive at a universal morality. His rival, Ben-Baruch (Alexandre Créange) proposed contrasting religious alternatives. Published in the conservative newspaper, *l'Univers israélite*, his edifying stories sought to show how traditional Jewish values were compatible with the values of emancipation. In his writing he encouraged a return to ancestral traditions and developed his concerns with social justice. The religious question inspired him to adopt other positions, linked to a political and patriotic commitment. The same can be said of Alexandre Weill who was Fourierist, Legitimist and Republican in turn. He invented the literary genre of “Village tales” that George Sand, who was herself inspired by this genre qualified as a true “democratic novel” p. 168, and in which he displayed the range of Alsatian Jewish traditions in a resolutely realistic style. This prolific author fiercely attacked the Talmudic Judaism he was brought up on while inaugurating a unique manner of preaching universalism by encouraging Moses’ biblical religion: for him adapting Judaism to modernity was a political necessity in order to gain access to the universal. Then, there were others who situated the Jewish identity at the level of historical fiction writing rather than religious controversy. Thus, Eugénie Foa, said to be the inventor of the Jewish historical novel, used the past to deal with the Jewish condition, evoking the position of women, marriage, divorce, mixed marriages, a subject that was still taboo. *In fine*, touching upon conversion (also her own personal trajectory), she was the writer who followed the path of assimilation the furthest. For their part, in a clearly nostalgic mode, with their stories of a genre that Samuels qualifies as ghetto nostalgia, Daniel Stauben and David Schornstein, made use of the past as a literary tool to explore the Jews collective future. The 1848 Revolution and the violence against the Jews changed the context of the production of works by writers of this period. The feeling of a loss of Jewish social cohesion led these two writers to dream of the return to childhood traditions, which they revived through literature. Nonetheless, it is with a view to constructing the present that these authors used the past, with its proximity to tradition, in an attempt to situate the trajectory of the Jews in a continuity both of memory as well as historical: history replaced religion and messianism.

Inventing the Israelite fills a gap in literary studies. Until now, there was no far reaching study of French Jewish writers of this period, following the lineaments of the Jewish identity through specifically French literary forms. We must thank Maurice Samuels for having led the way towards a re-evaluation of the varied literary responses to what it signified to be Jewish, through the interesting careers of forgotten authors from post emancipation modernity until 1870.

We must nonetheless express certain reservations. The usage of certain categories and concepts raises important socio historical problems. Thus, Samuels claims that these Jewish authors invented the category of ethnic fiction in French (p. 17 and p. 35). This idea is as audacious as it is problematic in the French context of the early 19th century, still little affected by theories of “race”. It would have benefitted from being suggested as a line of investigation, rather than being formulated as an assertion. In addition, to accuse the writers of the following generation of having voluntarily done away with their predecessors is debatable. In fact, rather than adopting an ethical and psychologistic stance, (the anti assimilation criticism addressed to writers whom the author also seems unfamiliar with) it would have been more productive to elaborate an epistemological approach. This would imply distinguishing two types of historically constituted “literary spaces” which would allow us to discern the evolution of expressions of Jewish identity. By further situating his authors in a socio-cultural configuration of circulation (Jewish or non Jewish literary trends, publications, reviews, places of social interaction, instances of consecration, analysis of the reception they received), Maurice Samuels would have revealed the marked differences between the two periods. He would, in particular, have better evaluated the change in paradigm provoked by the Dreyfus affair, which affected the areas of interrelations between the Jews and the other groups in French society. It also had an impact on the literary value of works and of the Jewish identity, which we must recall is itself a category of analysis developed with modernity. Eugénie Foa and Daniel Stauben’s generation did not form a Jewish literary movement. However, from 1905 onwards, it was with poetry that a specific collective type of literature was inaugurated: “the Jewish Renaissance”. In fact, Samuels does not take these incontrovertible transformations into account. He uses the Jewish identity as an element unaffected by historical discontinuity, arguing that a literary and identity based guiding principle connects Ben-Lévi to Proust. He thus presents their works at the same level, as a “*laboratory to invent new possibilities for Jewish identity*”, p.259. This is in itself even more problematic than his justification based on the family relationship connecting the great uncle, an obscure and “non professional” writer to his grand nephew, an author recognised for a major work. All the more so, as by concluding with Marcel Proust, Maurice Samuels is guilty of the same error he criticises: he neglects far more significant works of fiction like ...*Et Compagnie* by Jean-Richard Bloch¹

¹ Jean-Richard Bloch, ...*Et Cie*, Paris, éditions Gallimard, 1918.

with which he could have drawn a far more pertinent parallel in terms of a “laboratory” .

Thus, by insufficiently constructing his object, i.e considering “French Jewish writers” in a relationship to the majority otherness², Maurice Samuels exposes his work to a major epistemological risk, which threatens any study of the Jews and Jewish identity in France. Not only does he paradoxically contribute to further marginalising the authors and their works (and to having them forgotten a second time), but at a wider level, by not confronting the relationships of otherness and domination, nor mentioning the mobility between elements of the society, in all likelihood we contribute to perpetuating the isolated position of the Jews in the historiographic space as well as in the French social sciences of this type. The dual specific/universal tension subsists within contemporary thought in the social sciences: we would be wrong to underestimate its wealth and to ignore it.

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(Text translated from French by Renuka George)

² The illustration by Alphonse Lévy, « Le Rabbi » (1886) which appears on the book jacket, is part of this problematic « Judeo-centrism ».