

Review of Sarah Hammerschlag, *The Figural Jew: Politics and Identity in Postwar French Thought*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010.

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The Figural Jew is an absorbing study of the symbolism of the Jew in French culture from the French Revolution onwards, focusing on four formative postwar thinkers: Sartre, Levinas, Blanchot, and Derrida. Hammerschlag develops a counter-narrative to the dominant one, showing how the Jew became exemplary of both particularism and universalism in post-revolutionary discourse, and that contemporary debates about the significance and place of the Jew in France, and by implication the outsider generally, are founded in the trauma of the Dreyfus affair, which gave birth both to modern French anti-Semitism and to the reaction to it. It is, however, a critical narrative; she shows how, in each of the four thinkers, there is a tension between the real Jew and the figural one, that the Jew as metaphor or ideal type risks being unfaithful to the Jew as an empirical person and Judaism as a lived religion. The tension is endemic to Jewish philosophy, as Aaron Hughes demonstrates in his marvellous recent book *Rethinking Jewish Philosophy* (2014). Is a Jew a member of a people or the bearer of a universal vision, so that potentially everyone is a Jew? Hammerschlag argues that the issue is bound up with the relationship of philosophy and literature in the west, especially the philosophical critique of poetic language, and the myths of nationalism and autochthony. In Blanchot and Derrida the Jew as trope, or, as Derrida puts it, the exemplar of exemplarity, becomes a means for valorizing the claims of literature against philosophy, and for developing a new sense of community.

The first chapter concerns the background of these post-war debates, beginning with the legend of the Wandering Jew, the French and German Enlightenments, and the French Revolution. For Enlightenment thinkers as for the revolution, Jews represented everything that was resistant to the ideals of fraternity and equality, an irredentist particularity. By the time of the Dreyfus affair, the Jew paradoxically had come to embody liberal and anti-clerical Republican universalism, and thus was inimical to the nationalist and Catholic right. The stereotype of the restless, rootless, intellectual Jew contrasted with a French identity based on blood and soil. Hammerschlag juxtaposes Maurice Barrès, one of the principal theorists of French anti-Semitism, with Bernard Lazare and Charles Peguy, both of whom turned Barrès's argument on its head. For them, the Jew represented the downtrodden, and thus an antithesis to the powers of church and the state. Lazare, who was an early Zionist, sought to assert Jewish national identity, founded on Jewish historical experience; Peguy sees the Jews in exile as having a prophetic function. As Hammerschlag shows (46), Peguy's perspective is Christian and theological; Jews are good "for Christians," are essentialized and dehistoricized. They are allied with a true Christianity against the powers that betray it. Peguy's valorization of Jewish difference, of the Jewish

unhappy consciousness, and its implicit racism, will resonate through the rest of the book.

In the aftermath of World War II, Jean-Paul Sartre wrote *Réflexions sur la question juive* (1946), the first post-Holocaust treatment of anti-Semitism. Hammerschlag shows that the Jew is emblematic of Sartre's existential subject, who is constituted by the gaze of the other. Between the anti-Semitic projection of the Jew as a figure of innate difference and the liberal assimilationist agenda, Jewish authenticity consists of accepting the Jewish condition as the product of historical circumstances and fantasies. Sartre, as he admitted later, was totally unaware of Jewish history and culture; his knowledge of Jews was derived from anti-Semitic stereotypes. Hammerschlag traces the trajectory from *Réflexions* to his final interviews with his secretary, Benny Levy, himself an orthodox Jew. She shows that Sartre's preoccupation with Judaism is in dialogue with his engagement with Hegel and his Marxist commitment. Sartre adopts Hegel's view of the Jew as alienated and uses it to critique Hegel's "optimism" (102) about an ultimate synthesis. The Jew represents a plurality and that can never be absorbed in a totality. Similarly, Marxist determinism is in tension, throughout Sartre's work, with the freedom of the individual, exemplified by Jewish history as a history of resistance to that of nations and classes. In the final interviews, the Jew came to embody messianic hope, despite the "insurpassable gap between the *is* and the *ought*" (106). Sartre has affinities with Hermann Cohen, as well as anticipating Blanchot and Derrida. But, as Hammerschlag notes, Sartre is only able to think of Jews negatively, as an ideal critical of dominant ideology. He cannot separate the representation of Jews from their reality (116).

The next chapter is on Levinas, who must surely be central to any discussion of the figure of the Jew in contemporary French thought. Levinas also encapsulates the central problem of the book. For Levinas, deracination is a precondition of "ethics as first philosophy." The subject is displaced by the call of the other. But if Judaism teaches the primacy of ethics, then everyone who responds ethically is a Jew. On the other hand, Judaism is the religion of a particular people, with its own texts and problems, and with its nation-state. Hammerschlag thinks that Levinas never resolves the tension between his confessional and philosophical writings (134). Judaism is not only a universal trope for the ethical critique of the paganism of blood and soil, as represented by Heidegger, but it is the carrier of that message to the world; it has a prophetic and eschatological function. In this respect, Levinas resembles Cohen and Rosenzweig, the reading of whose *Star of Redemption* in 1935 had a decisive impact on him. Following Rosenzweig, and in line with the later Sartre, he sees in the history of Judaism a critique of the politics of the nation state, as adumbrated by Hegel. Instead of race as the historical determinant, there is election, the ethical response to the other, paradigmatically enacted by Abraham. Despite the care Levinas takes to separate his Jewish and philosophical writings, they are part of a single programme. For example, his Talmudic readings prioritize universalist interpretations, in Kantian and Maimonidean fashion. His commitment to Israel never overcomes the paradox of the exemplum of deracination having a nation state, nor can it confront the ethical problems incurred by the state, without wishing to claim a Jewish exceptionalism.

Maurice Blanchot and Levinas were friends for nearly seventy years, and frequently were in dialogue with each other, most notably in Blanchot's work, *The*

Infinite Conversation (1969). Blanchot is both extraordinarily close to Levinas, and utterly remote from him; as Hammerschlag says, he pushes Levinas in a direction he does not wish to go. He is, to begin with, an atheist; for Levinas's God who makes ethical demands on us, he sees an impossibility, an impersonal "there is" (186). The poet responds to the Outside, to death, without the comforts of myth. Poetry is characterized by divergence, *errance*, from ordinary language and thought; poets are in exile. Thus "all poets are Jews," as Marina Tsvetayevna says. Even a commentary as faithful as that of Blanchot's on Levinas necessarily diverges from him, creates distance, absence, and ambiguity. There is, of course, a paradox: Jews are the community of those without community.

The various lines pursued in the book converge on the last, long and brilliant chapter, on Jacques Derrida. For Derrida, like Blanchot and Levinas, the Jew was a trope, for difference, *errance*, ethics, and literature, but one complicated by his own intense and ambivalent relation to his Jewish heritage, and by his autobiographical preoccupation. His interest, Hammerschlag says, is in showing how the universalist and particularist views of Judaism trouble each other (205), and thus the experience of Judaism becomes the experience of deconstruction itself. She treats familiar themes and images in Derrida: circumcision, exemplarity, the Marrano, the last of the Jews. The last section is on Derrida's enigmatic essay, "Literature in Secret" (2008). Literature provides a path to a just society, to what Derrida calls, "the democracy to come" (252). In "Literature in Secret", Derrida argues that modern literature is the heir to the Abrahamic covenant, in that it betrays the secret of the relationship between God and Abraham. The writer, like the philosopher, acts a part; Derrida claims that through performance, one can explore one's conflicting identities, and that this can destabilize identity politics. The figure of the Jew mediates between the particularist and universalist extremes; one can adopt both, as Derrida does in calling himself "the last/least of the Jews" (264). In that way, we can become self-critical, aware of the ambiguities and ambivalences in our own histories and communities.

Hammerschlag has written a beautiful and important book. However, as one reads, one becomes aware that it is only one of the possible books among these tangled thickets. For example, she could have written on Derrida's *Silkworm* and "Faith and Knowledge", with perhaps different results. Or, in "Literature in Secret", on the hesitation between speech and not speaking in the watchword, "Pardon de ne pas vouloir dire." But these are just caveats, or invitations, to "Come and read"!

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