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SUITE FRANÇAISE AND *LES BIENVEILLANTES*, TWO LITERARY « EXCEPTIONS ».

A CONVERSATION BETWEEN SUSAN RUBIN SULEIMAN AND RICHARD J. GOLSAN

This conversation is the written version of an ongoing dialogue we were engaged in, in person and via e-mail, for over a year. It was written, via e-mail exchanges, in April and May 2008.

Richard J. Golsan : In the new millennium a number of interesting and provocative novels have appeared which confirm that the memory of « les années noires » and the horrors of Nazism and the Holocaust remain fertile sources of inspiration for the literary imagination. The publication and notoriety of a number of these works suggests that Henry Rousso's famous « Vichy Syndrome » has not yet run its course, at least in literary and cultural terms.

Of the recent works published, certainly none have achieved greater notoriety and acclaim – or provoked as much controversy – as Irène Némirovsky's posthumous 2004 novel, *Suite française* and Jonathan Littell's massive 2006 novel *Les Bienveillantes*. Both works are « exceptional » by almost any standard.

Susan Rubin Suleiman : Yes, though of course they're exceptional in different ways. *Suite Française*, as you say, was published posthumously – becoming an international bestseller more than sixty years after the author's death at Auschwitz. It's the only work by a dead author, I believe, to have won a major literary prize in France (the Prix Renaudot). *Les Bienveillantes* is exceptional not only by the fact that its author is an American writing in French – to write a 900-page novel in a « second language » is no mean feat! – but also by its particular approach to the subject of World War II, which we'll talk about. It too won a major prize, in

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fact two of them, the Goncourt and the Grand Prix de l'Académie Française. Interestingly, both Littell and Némirovsky are non-native writers in French — translinguals, as they're called now. That's an exception they have in common.

RJG : The success of *Suite française* has generated remarkable international interest in the works and tragic life of Némirovsky. In this country, several of Némirovsky's earlier works have now appeared in translation as well. Another posthumous work, *Fire in the Blood*, which was published in France in 2007, has also been translated into English and published here.

SRS : I reviewed it, and *Suite française* as well, for the *Boston Globe*¹. She wrote *Fire in the Blood*, which is really more like a novella, almost simultaneously with the big novel, around 1940-1941. And the astonishing thing about *Fire* is that it never mentions a word about the war! It's a kind of « scènes de la vie de province », focused on youthful passion in the countryside and the havoc it can wreak — when the characters speak about « the war », they're referring to World War I. Yet, if the reader does the math, which the narrator almost forces us to do, it turns out that the « present » of the story (not counting the long flashback) is 1939-1942. I concluded in my review that Némirovsky must have been expressing a wish, the way Freud says that dreams express a wish-fulfillment: if only provincial life during those years could really have been totally oblivious of the war! As you know, Némirovsky was arrested in July 1942, in the small provincial town where the family had sought refuge in 1940, Issy-L'Évêque. Issy was in the Occupied Zone, not far from the « ligne de demarcation », and people have wondered why she didn't try to cross over to the unoccupied zone or even to Switzerland. She knew it was dangerous for them to stay there, especially since neither she nor her husband (Michel Epstein, another Russian émigré) were French citizens — their daughters were citizens, but that didn't do much good. It's quite ironic, really: she was a well-known « French » author and had requested citizenship at least twice, starting in the early thirties; but her requests were refused, despite letters of support from some very respectable and even right-wing writers and editors.

RJG : Some critics have dismissed *Suite Française* as a « minor literary classic² » that would likely have been forgotten, had it appeared closer to the time it was written. These same critics charge that the publicity surrounding the publication of *Suite française*, in which the work is characterized as a kind of « Holocaust story » because of the author's fate, is both misleading and fraudulent. Some maintain that the absence of Jews in *Suite française* constitutes evidence of the author's indifference to their fate during the Occupation.

SRS : I certainly wouldn't call *Suite française* a « Holocaust story »! Maybe one or two reviewers have made that mistake, but anyone who knows anything about

French history knows better. *Suite française* is a great novel about the first year of the German occupation of France, June 1940-June 1941, told from the point of view of « ordinary French people » — first the Parisians of various social classes who flee Paris in the *exode* of June 1940, and then the inhabitants of a small town in the Occupied Zone, very much modeled on Issy-l'Évêque. The book as we now have it (Némirovsky was able to complete only two out of five projected volumes) ends with Hitler's declaration of war on the Soviet Union and the departure of the German soldiers stationed in the town to the 'Eastern front'. As for readers who find it shocking — or even « antisemitic » — that Némirovsky didn't include any Jewish characters in these volumes, they are entitled to their opinion. But it's kind of hard to blame an author for *not* writing about something! One can be surprised, as I was, by her omission of the war from *Fire in the Blood*. One can even be surprised by her omission of Jewish characters from *Suite Française*, given how many other « groups » she covers during the exode; but to see the omission as a sign of antisemitism is a stretch! For what it's worth, there isn't a single Jewish character in any of the stories (more than a dozen) she wrote during the war, even though she had featured Jewish characters in many of her earlier works.

RJG : More serious are charges of antisemitism and even « Jewish self-hatred » on her part. But the real « evidence » against Némirovsky comes primarily from her earlier fiction, in the form of negative and stereotypical portraits of Jews, especially in works like the novel *David Golder*.

SRS : *David Golder*, published in 1929 by Grasset, was Némirovsky's big breakthrough — she was 26 years old at the time, and had published a couple of stories and a novel in small venues, but she was quite unknown. Bernard Grasset made her take two years off her age so that she seemed even more of a « phenomenon » — a very young, Russian-born woman who could produce such a brilliant novel in French. All the papers reviewed it in glowing terms, and not because they thought of it as antisemitic! It's true that the protagonist is a Russian-born Jewish financier, and that Némirovsky is pitiless in her portrayal of the milieu of wealthy foreigners (not all of them Jewish) and their fawning hangers-on in which Golder's family moves. But her portrayal of Golder himself is complex, and to call it an antisemitic stereotype is simplistic and wrongheaded. One needs to show some interpretive respect, before making such accusations. A good case in point is the journalist Ruth Franklin's review of the English translation of *David Golder* in the *New Republic*³. She calls the book « appalling » a « racist travesty of a novel », based entirely on the anti-Jewish stereotype of the unscrupulous, money-grubbing Jew. In my opinion, such a reading lacks critical responsibility, since Franklin doesn't bother to take into account the considerable aspects of the novel that don't fit her own quite prejudiced reading. If we're going to really discuss

Némirovsky and the « Jewish question » we need to do it with a lot more attention to detail — that was the argument of the paper I presented at the South Texas College of Law (STCL) meeting in Georgetown last March⁴.

RJG : Critics also condemn Némirovsky for cultivating friendships with right wing antisemitic literary figures and for publishing in antisemitic reviews like *Gringoire* throughout the 1930s. They criticize Némirovsky and her husband, Michel Epstein, for maintaining friendly relations with occupying German officers following the French defeat. Most egregious, in the view of those who accuse her, is the fact that Némirovsky wrote a letter to Pétain in September 1940 requesting favorable treatment for herself and her family and distinguishing between « honorable foreigners » in France like herself, and other « undesirable » immigrants. All of this, says Ruth Franklin (who bases her knowledge of Némirovsky's life as well as some of her judgments on Jonathan Weiss's biography⁵), constitutes « the nasty truth about a new literary heroine. »

SRS : Yes, she calls Némirovsky a self-hating Jew. It's pretty easy to tar someone with that brush, and of course it makes one feel good to be a *non*-self-hating Jew! The life of secular Jews like Némirovsky's family during the 1930's in Europe was something hard for a comfortable American Jew to imagine, today: the desire to be a « good citizen » like everyone else, and the rising tide of vicious antisemitisms that made you realize you would never be « like the others ». Obviously, many such Jews wished they could be anything but Jewish! Does that give us the right to condemn them? Némirovsky wrote beautifully, in several novels, about precisely this desire on the part of assimilated Jews — a desire she considered quite tragic, because in fact one couldn't stop being Jewish, she concluded, no matter how hard one tried. Even conversion didn't do it, as her own life demonstrates (she and her family converted to Catholicism in 1939, far too late for it to make any difference as far as the Nazis were concerned). As for the wartime, try to imagine what it was like for « foreign » Jews like Némirovsky and her husband to live under German occupation. He lost his job in the bank where he worked, and she supported the family by her writings. After they moved to Issy, her husband, who spoke German well, did befriend a German officer — in *Suite française*, you recall, the French villagers find it impossible not to like some individual Germans. The officer wrote the Epsteins a « letter of recommendation » before heading to the East! For all the good it did... And yes, Némirovsky did have some right-wing friends among writers and editors, some of whom helped her by publishing her work under an alias after the Vichy government banned Jews from publishing (1941). And again, yes, she did write to Pétain in 1940, after the first anti-Jewish law, trying desperately to claim that she and her family were « different » and should be exempted. Not that that did any good either, of course:

she still had to wear the yellow star in 1942, and she was deported just like any « poor Jewish immigrant. » Anyone who knows anything about World War II and the Holocaust will want to think for a moment before throwing the first stone.

RJG : One tends to forget that many writers in the interwar years indulged in anti-Jewish (and other racial and religious) stereotypes in their works, and have not suffered for their use. The case of Ernest Hemingway in *The Sun Also Rises* comes readily to mind. This is not of course to excuse these offensive slurs, but it is to suggest that Némirovsky's life and works are very complicated on this issue, and one should not dismiss a work which I consider to be a true masterpiece on these grounds. For me the more interesting question is the *ambitiousness* and *richness* of *Suite française* in comparison to Némirovsky's other works. What accounts for this? While some critics charge Némirovsky with being « dangerously indifferent to politics » (Franklin, p. 41) given the accomplishment of *Suite française*, one cannot accuse her of being « indifferent to History » in any way, shape, or form.

SRS : I agree. The astonishing thing about this book is that she had such a clear-sighted view of what was happening, at the very time it was happening — as I wrote in my *Boston Globe* review, it was as if Tolstoy had written *War and Peace* a year after Napoleon invaded Russia, instead of half a century later! She saw with ironic clarity, for example, that the bourgeois who were bemoaning their fate in the *exode* of June 1940 and cursing the German invaders would soon be back in Paris, entertaining German officers in their salons. She also saw that when the Germans occupied a village for a prolonged time, inevitably some friendly contacts would be made — she observed this first-hand in Issy-l'Évêque. Her novel strikes a contemporary reader as a kind of miracle, *because* she understood so much about the very history that was crushing her — and that prevented her, incidentally, from finishing it. Who knows, she could have produced the very first comprehensive novel about France during the « années noires » if she had lived past 1942. Incidentally, she did write a couple of other novels with historical ambitions — for example, *Les biens de ce monde* (written in 1940-41, published in 1947), which tells the story of a family of « braves bourgeois de province » from before World War I to the outbreak of World War II. It has an even broader historical sweep than *Suite française*, though it lacks the high drama of the Occupation. I think the outbreak of the war really « jogged » her historical awareness, and also drove her to write like a fiend — she wrote *Les biens de ce monde* overlapping with *Suite française*!

RJG : Let's not forget that already in 1933 Némirovsky published an excellent novel about terrorism and assassination in Russia, *L'affaire Courilof*, that shows a remarkable understanding of the mind and motivation of the political assassin.

Now let's talk about Littell's book.

Praised by many critics as a literary masterpiece of the highest order, a work comparable in scope and depth to *War and Peace* and to Vassily Grossman's *Life and Fate*, Littell's *Les Bienveillantes* has also been lauded by a distinguished historian like Pierre Nora, as a work that significantly revises French understanding of the full dimensions of World War II. Given its subject matter as well as its approach, *Les Bienveillantes* has also sparked a great deal of criticism. Apart from hostile reviews in the press, shortly after its publication a work co-authored by the historian Édouard Husson and the philosopher Michel Terestchenko entitled *Les Complaisantes* condemned the novel as an immoral hoax (« canular ») and a literary and historical trash bin that had achieved notoriety simply due to the perverse tastes and scandal-mongering of the Parisian literary world.

SRS : The book was published in Italy in 2007 and in Germany in early 2008, and provoked huge and furious debates there as well. I'm sure the same will happen in the U.S., where publication is scheduled for 2009. It sold almost a million copies in France, and will undoubtedly do very well in the States too. It's a phenomenon that cannot be denied, whether one loves it or hates it.

RJG : In my opinion, in *Les Bienveillantes* Littell is caught between at least two imperatives. On the one hand, he has written an historically grounded and largely accurate account of Hitler's war in the East, the conceptualization and implementation of the Final Solution, and the destruction of Berlin. All of this is recounted through the eyes of a « bourreau », a former SS officer, Max Aue, the novel's narrator. At frequent intervals in the novel, Aue expresses his own horror at the crimes he and his fellow Nazis are committing, as you pointed out in your plenary talk at the 2007 TCFS conference⁶.

SRS : In my talk, I called Aue a paradoxical « moral » witness to Nazi atrocities — paradoxical, because he is part of the very system whose workings he analyzes in pitiless detail. I find that a truly original invention on Littell's part, to make a willingly participating Nazi officer function as a reliable witness to the Holocaust — one who is, furthermore, privy to information that only the very highest members of the SS possessed, about the killings in the east, the precise workings of the extermination camps, and so on. Aue is completely unbelievable as a character in realist fiction, as many negative critics pointed out. But for me, his (totally fictional) ability to be « everywhere » and to report on all those things in detail is a strength of the novel, not a weakness.

RJG : At the same time, in the novel's famous opening chapter, entitled *Toccata*, Aue informs the reader that his « frères humains » under the right circumstances

are capable of the same crimes, and are merely lucky not to live in a time when such crimes were part of human reality. So in a nutshell, Aue argues that there is nothing *exceptional* about Nazis, only Nazism. In effect, we are all, at least potentially, Christopher Browning's *Ordinary Men*.

SRS : Yes, that's a theme that recurs throughout the book. The Nazis' ability to kill other human beings on a mass scale, whether by shooting thousands of naked civilians at close quarters or by gassing them — in effect, treating them as if they were less than animals — was not « inhuman » Aue keeps insisting; it was perhaps « all too human » to borrow a phrase from Nietzsche. As you know, Littell spent some time working for NGO's in Chechnya and Bosnia in the 1990's, so he had an opportunity at first hand to see what human beings are capable of — okay, it wasn't the Holocaust, but the mass killing of people who were treated as subhuman « others » did not stop with the Nazis. Alas.

RJG : On the other hand (apart from his historical ambitions), Littell seems intent on writing a literary masterpiece, inspired in its most basic configuration by Aeschylus's *Oresteia*, but also influenced by the author's love of Bataille, Blanchot and others. (These include, interestingly, Edgar Rice Burroughs, the creator of Tarzan and the author of early fantasy/science fiction works, such as the « Martian Series » from which Aue draws imaginary social models for a Nazi utopia that he presents, unsuccessfully, to his superiors). The result is a novel that aspires to tragedy, and in epic proportions. But along the way, it throws in, among other things, a detective story, in which two detectives/« furies ». Weser and Clemens, pursue Aue (after he murders his mother and step-father) all the way to the destruction of Berlin at the end of the novel. It also focuses in graphic detail on Aue's homosexuality, his sadomasochistic tendencies, and his incestuous obsession with his twin sister Una.

SRS : Well, that's of course the « problem » in the novel, the one I too came up against in my essay: what is the relation between Aue's lurid personal history — incest, closeted homosexuality, and most spectacular of all, his double murder, accomplished as in a dream, for he doesn't *remember* it at all, and never « owns » that act — what is the relation of all that to his status as a reliable witness of the Holocaust? I've struggled with the question, and there is no simple answer to it. One friend suggested to me that his « perversion » marks Aue as different from other Nazis, and thus may be the very thing that allows him to take a certain distance from the system — as I put it, he is both within the system and looking at it critically, with cold detachment. I suggest in my essay that maybe the *Oresteia*'s role is to evoke problems of guilt and responsibility. In Greek tragedy, as Littell has noted, what matters is the act, not the motives (or even the ignorance)

behind it. Oedipus is guilty and takes responsibility for his actions, even though he didn't know « what he was doing » when he killed his father and married his mother. In a similar vein, I conclude, anyone who participated in the Nazi program of extermination must be considered responsible, even if he had « qualms » or was a « moral witness » like Aue. Whatever the case, it's interesting that Littell himself considers the Oresteia plot absolutely essential to the novel. He said in an interview that he felt he finally « had » the novel when he thought of the Oresteia as the background plot, or the major intertext if you will — it's worth mentioning that there are other intertexts as well, including Musil's *The Man Without Qualities*, whose hero also has an incestuous passion for his twin sister.

RJG : For me, unfortunately, the novel doesn't work. Other than possibly establishing his « difference » from his fellow Nazis, Aue's sadomasochism, his sexual proclivities, and even his « morality » (which does not prevent him from going on a murderous and seemingly arbitrary rampage at the end of the novel) ultimately do little more than distract from admittedly powerful historical representations of the battle of Stalingrad, the implementation of the Final Solution, the destruction of Berlin, etc. And on this latter score, that of its representations of history, the novel has weaknesses as well. Henry Rousso has written recently that Littell's historical research for the novel does not take into account important recent work on the war, and therefore does not include new insights and understanding of this work. Moreover, some of the famous political and ideological discussions included in *Les bienveillantes*, as for example Aue's discussions with the captured Russian officer comparing Communism and Nazism, are platitudinous and lack the richness and scope of the exchanges over this comparison at the time of the publication of *Le Livre noir du communisme* in France in 1997. But finally, for me the novel fails because Aue himself is ultimately not coherent as a character and, frankly, not particularly interesting.

SRS : There's no quarreling with taste, as they say! I personally was fascinated when I read the novel, and admired tremendously Littell's ability to make use of considerable historical research and to create compelling intellectual dialogues. Aue's conversations with various other intellectuals, including some historical figures like Eduard Wirths, the chief doctor at Auschwitz, reminded me of Malraux at his best, since as a reader I found these exchanges both intellectually challenging and totally believable. The fact that they're not full historical disquisitions such as a historian would write doesn't bother me — it's already impressive that they're as good and as well informed as they are. This is a novel, after all! Incidentally, Claude Lanzmann, who generally dislikes the novel, stated in his *Nouvel Observateur* article soon after the book came out that it is impressive in its reliable account of history — in fact, Lanzmann said, only he and Raul Hilberg (who was still alive at the time) could appreciate just how historically accurate

Littell's book is! But to get back to the question of taste, I too found certain chapters less successful than others — for example, the chapter toward the end when Aue spends weeks by himself in his sister's empty castle, indulging in all kinds of anguished, transgressive masturbatory fantasies, struck me as a not very persuasive pastiche of Bataille. But Richard Millet, who edited the book at Gallimard (and who is a well-known novelist himself), cited that particular chapter as his personal favorite! Isn't it nice that readers don't all respond in the same way to a work of literature?

RJG : I certainly agree with you about your less-than-favorable opinion of the chapter entitled *Air* which seems unnecessary and self-indulgent and, as you say, a not very persuasive pastiche of Bataille. But here again, for me, this brings us back to the larger problems of the novel itself. Littell seems to want to put a little of everything into the novel: Greek tragedy, detective novel, pastiche, historical epic, and meditation and especially dialogue on the meaning of History. On this last score, I'm not sure I agree with you that Littell is up to « Malraux at his best ». I find the conversations between the protagonists of *L'Espoir*, for example, to be much more convincing, thought-provoking, and authentic. But one could argue that at the time of the writing of *L'Espoir*, such philosophical/historical dialogues were much fresher, much more innovative in French literature...

The other problem suggested by *Air*, and certainly its placement in the novel and Aue's account of himself and of his experiences, is that it shows that, as a character, as a *human being*, Aue seems not to have developed or to have learned much, if anything, from his experiences. If we go back to *Toccata* which, by the way, I think is wonderfully written, Aue's assessment of his own life seems to have taught him nothing, even many years after the fact, other than that all of us, under the right circumstances, are capable of being Nazis. Historically, of course, Littell is accurate in his depiction of Aue in that real-life Nazis and *bourreaux* like Eichmann, Barbie, and in France, Paul Touvier seemed to learn nothing at all from the horrors in which they participated. But that doesn't mean that the *fictional* exploration of figures like this needs simply to demonstrate this, and not probe a little deeper. And by « probing » I don't mean simply cataloguing the character's perversions in lurid detail. On this score, I've always been an admirer of Brian Moore's fictional depiction of Touvier in the novel *The Statement*, because here Moore explores his character's deviousness, dishonesty, cruelty, as well as his exploitation of others in a way which shows that these qualities are *exceptional* in their extremity and yet at the same time *all-too-human* in their recognizability, their *banality*.

SRS : You're probably right, Aue is not a well-rounded character, not really a character at all, in some ways. Despite his inner demons and his sexual fantasies

and longings, he doesn't have a true interiority, the kind of developing self that great characters in realist fiction possess. And you know, I think our little disagreement about the book (a friendly one, as always!) is a good place to end our dialogue — for it confirms just how « exceptionally » thought-provoking and debate-provoking *Les Bienveillantes* has been, and not only in France.

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NOTES

¹ *The Boston Globe*, April 30, 2006 and November 4, 2007.

² In her essay on Némirovsky in *The New Republic* to be discussed shortly, Ruth Franklin states that without the dramatic story of the writing of the novel and of Némirovsky's death, *Suite française* would probably not have been published in the US. After all she asks, « How large is the American market for *minor literary classics* (emphasis mine) in translation? » (p. 38)

³ « Scandale Française », *The New Republic*, January 30, 2008, p. 38-43.

⁴ « Irène Némirovsky and the 'Jewish Question' » presented in the panel on « Limits and French-Jewish Thought », March 7, 2008.

⁵ Weiss, *Irène Némirovsky: Her Life and Works*, Stanford, Stanford U.P., 2007. A more detailed and less judgmental biography also appeared in 2007 : Olivier Philipponnat & Patrick Lienhardt, *La vie d' Irène Némirovsky* (Paris, Grasset/ Denoël, 2007).

⁶ « When the Perpetrator becomes the Witness: Reflections on Jonathan Littell's *Les Bienveillantes* » plenary talk at Twentieth and Twenty-First Century French Studies annual conference Texas A&M University, March 2007. Forthcoming in *New German Critique*, January 2009.