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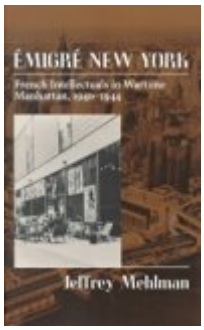

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Hypocrisy, Honor, and the Dilemmas of Emigration

Jeffrey Mehlman calls *Emigre New York* a "speculative memoir:" it is an attempt to confront a past that both is and is not his own. The past is a revealing moment in the history of the French intellectual and literary culture whose charms and lures have inspired much of Mehlman's career (by now long and distinguished) as a critic. During World War II, a stellar cast of French figures (accompanied by many more lesser-known folk) lived, worked, plotted, and argued in Manhattan, leaving traces that could still be discerned in the New York where Mehlman grew up after the War. The notable French figures on whose lives and writing he concentrates include Denis de Rougemont, Simone Weil, George Steiner (born in Vienna, but living in Paris with his family until the outbreak of the War, and a student at the Lycee Francais in New York), Louis Rougier, Antoine de Saint-Exupery, Saint-John Perse (Alexis Leger), and Claude Levi-Strauss. Others, such as Andre Breton, make smaller appearances. Mehlman deals with each of his major subjects in separate but concise and well-focused chapters, all based on things they wrote and did while living in New York, but he places these activities in the larger context of each person's career, as well as inside the mesh of issues and debates that linked and divided the French exiles from each other. One of the book's strengths is the unusual interest of many of the texts and arguments Mehlman chooses to focus on, and it is magnified by his perceptiveness and intelligence as a reader. There is much to learn from this book, and much to be grateful for in it, even if one ends up not wholly satisfied with the kind of closure-or lack of it-the author gives to his material.

Another way to describe *Emigre New York* would be as a critical meditation on the moral ambiguities engendered by war and defeat, on the alternatives between resistance and collaboration, commitment and hesitation, conviction and self-questioning. French emigres faced these issues in the context created by the armistice of 1940, the creation of the Vichy regime, and the opposition to it organized and led by Charles de Gaulle. But they approached them by way of an

intellectual heritage that pre-dated the war, a heritage that was rich in materials for moral and political reflection, but also in some ways poorly constituted, or even perversely unfit, to confront the nature of Nazism and its horrors. These two coordinates provide the book with its implicit lines of organization, linking the individual discussions (or at least the best of them) to each other.

Like most people today, the majority of French emigres during the 1940s hardly hesitated to give their loyalty to de Gaulle and the free France for which he stood, rejecting the Vichy government as defeatist or traitorous. However morally obvious such a stance seems to us now, there were political and diplomatic grounds for questioning it at the time. The United States maintained relations with Vichy, for reasons close to those put forward by the philosopher Jean Wahl at a Mount Holyoke colloquium in 1942. Although Wahl was himself anti-Vichy, he refused to brand Petain as a traitor, arguing that it was far from unreasonable to think, as the Marshall had, that England was about to succumb to the Germans in the summer of 1940 and that attempting to set up an independent French government in North Africa might have led the Germans to follow and overpower it there, liquidating the last shred of French independence and making impossible the Mediterranean strategy on which the allies would later rely. The person who developed these arguments with most determination in the 1940s was Louis Rougier, a Tocquevillian liberal philosopher and friend of Walter Lippmann. Rougier was moved by an additional consideration, one it was difficult for the all-out opponents of Vichy to address, namely the damaging effect of the allied food blockade on the French population. As Mehlman notes, "The issue was a thorny one: to send food to occupied France was arguably to fuel the Nazi war effort. But to contribute to the mass starvation or severe malnutrition of France, it was countered, was ultimately to further the demographic ends of Hitler's War" (3). Rougier's effort to get the allies to lift the blockade took the form of an attempt to conclude a secret "gentlemen's agreement" with Churchill in London, according to which Petain would promise not to cede either France's still undefeated fleet or her colonial bases to the Germans, in preparation for an eventual participation in action against Hitler, in return for which the British would relax the blockade and cease their BBC attacks on Petain. Just what transpired in Rougier's meeting with Churchill became a matter for much contention after the war, but Mehlman offers evidence that his account was accurate, treats him sympathetically (pointing out that while he maintained good relations with Petain he was always at odds with Laval), and describes him as "the lonely French voice of what I am inclined to call principled Petainism in wartime New York" (132).

Lest it seem that some greater sympathy for Vichy or its policies lurks behind this judgment, it is worthwhile citing the general reckoning Mehlman gives for what he calls "the Rougier-Petain model." That model entailed an extraordinary ethical dilemma: in the strictest sense, French national honor could be maintained only insofar as French hypocrisy (the feint of collaboration) could be affirmed. In short, the French, in the postwar world, could be viewed as honorable only to the extent that they could be viewed as hypocritical. Such was the thesis of Petain's double jeu. It was a staggering burden, from beneath which the French are still extricating themselves. (128) But the opposite, Gaullist model had its own moral and practical weaknesses, among them a prideful overestimation of the degree and importance of French independence, and a refusal to recognize what had really happened to the French. These features of Gaullism were pithily highlighted by Antoine de Saint-Exupery when he countered de Gaulle's famous declaration "We have lost a battle, we have not lost the war" with the more honest "Tell the truth, general. We lost the war; our allies will win it" (147). Mehlman has these considerations in mind when he concludes

his defense of Rougier by remarking that "the frontal, binary opposition between 'resistance' and 'collaboration' was no more than the impotent (because illusory) idealist misreading of a configuration that unsettled the distinction between the two."

Rougier's differences with most of his compatriots about Petain and de Gaulle were compounded by the support most exiles gave to the food blockade (while many lived very comfortably in Manhattan), and he did not hesitate to describe them contemptuously as "counterfeiter of patriotism...the obesities of Fifth Avenue...parvenus of the defeat." He refused to join their organizations, and his stand against them led his application to teach at the Ecole Libre (the French university-in-exile at the New School) to be rejected, the first step in what turned out to be the end of a promising academic career. He saw himself as subjected to punishment for a difference of opinion that he was willing to debate publicly but others refused to discuss, and tellingly pointed to the limits the "free" French set to freedom of thought and discussion. It may be that there was more stubbornness and self-righteousness in this stance than Mehlman wishes to see, but even if that is so, we need to remember that Rougier was very far from being a fascist or a sympathizer, and the political correctness demanded from him, although perhaps understandable in a time of life-and-death conflict, was hardly essential among the emigres. Mehlman notes that the politicization of the Ecole Libre would lead to much trouble there before the war ended.

The moral ambiguities of wartime commitments, like those evidenced in Rougier's case, were the subject of more general probing by other exiles. Among these was Denis de Rougemont, who condemned fascism, but simultaneously saw it as part of a complex of Western attitudes and values in which democracy also took part. Rougemont traced many problems of modern life to the Western aspiration to achieve perfection, even divinity, in the present, an attitude he traced to the medieval Cathars and troubadours he had written about in *Love in the Western World*. Hitler found a more powerful form for this aspiration by setting Volk and Fuhrer as its objects, but the democracies also evidenced it in their divinization of private life. While in New York, Rougemont developed some contemporary implications of these ideas in *The Devil's Share*, published in 1942, a book that was at once a critique of fascism and of its democratic opponents, in particular of his American hosts. Like Reinhold Niebuhr and Jacques Maritain, Rougemont thought modern democracy, particularly in its American form, morally superficial and weak because it had no belief in evil and particularly no willingness to recognize evil inside itself. In this perspective, Hitler appeared to him as a kind of emissary of Satan, not because he was himself evil (to be sure, he was), but because he encouraged his enemies to see him as the very incarnation of evil, and thus to deny the existence of evil in themselves, to repudiate the continuity between their moral anarchy and his debasement. *The Devil's Share* was thus an attack on liberal pieties, especially as they were encouraged by the wartime situation.

Rougemont's critique of the moral complacency of the democracies shared some ground with what was in many ways an opposite moral stance, Simone Weil's tortuous ethical absolutism, which condemned every connection between spirit and power as a fall into total corruption. Weil was even less sympathetic to modern democracy than de Rougemont, but her reasons were ones that made her celebrate rather than condemn spiritualist stances like Catharism. The latter stood up for the unconditional, Manichean distinction between good and evil, an opposition that the Jews were the first to confuse when they identified God with the worldly well-being of their own state and people. It was this poisonous alloy of goodness and worldly power that the Jews had passed onto the Catholic Church, from which it had found its way into modern political ideologies. Not the least

of these was Nazism, whose "false mystique" was rooted in the example of the very people Hitler was seeking to exterminate-Weil's own people. Her complex passion to distance herself from her own origins nurtured many features of her character, including the heroic but self-destructive identification with the malnourished French that led to her death by starvation in England following her departure from New York, and the celebration of the Dionysian "Hamites," whom she regarded as the victims of Semitic persecution and whose modern incarnation she saw in the black evangelicals of Harlem, visiting their churches and celebrating their joyful goodness against Jewish corruption in a way that makes Mehlman ask whether she was not "New York's first Afrocentric anti-Semite."

Mehlman's chapters on Rougemont and Weil contain some of the best and most interesting material in his book. He fully earns his claim that the latter's New York doings show "the devastating meshing of what is best and worst in her thought" (100). I admit, however, that I end up puzzled about just what he thinks of Rougemont's critique of democracy. At one point, he quotes with approval Meyer Shapiro's review of a book by Rougemont's old friend and colleague from the College de Sociologie, Roger Caillois, and suggests that Shapiro's critique of the one might be applied to the other, in that both of them give too much weight to "the psychological, the mythical, the vestigial, and metaphoric" in history, in line with a cultural elitism that makes them both overly willing to portray democracy as "the seed of fascism" (72-73). Later, however, Mehlman rejects Lionel Trilling's protestation that Rougemont "is one of those whom the word tragedy charms too much," a person with a sense for the drama of the moral life but not for its pain, who loses track of the moral issues at stake in real life because he sees them too much in aesthetic terms. Mehlman calls Trilling's critique "perfidious," which may mean only that it turns Rougemont's own terms against him, but I suspect it means more, since Mehlman seems troubled that Trilling's resistance to Rougemont rested partly on his seeing "the dandyish Baudelaire [as]...the tutelary presence hovering over Rougemont's book" (83). I do not think I can be accused of an insufficient regard for Baudelaire, but I fail to see why Trilling's critique of Rougemont should be less well received than Shapiro's. Perhaps the struggle against Nazism nurtured a certain self-satisfaction and moral complacency in the countries that stood against Hitler, but recognizing those faults does not require exaggerating the commonalities between democracy and fascism on behalf of an overly metaphysical and aestheticized politics. The potential for falling into tyranny is not unique to democracy, and allowing an imaginative but doubtful metaphysics of evil to shape the understanding of how political regimes relate to each other opens the way to many questionable judgments. It is hard to know where Mehlman stands on such issues, because he never directly addresses or develops the connections between the political questions raised by a case like Rougier's, and the philosophical meditations of de Rougement and Weil.

Instead of a conclusion, *Emigre New York* ends with a kind of allegory, the story of the ocean liner Normandie, commandeered for use as a troop ship after the American entry into the war, but severely damaged by a mysterious fire while tied up on Manhattan's west side, and eventually scuttled in New Jersey. The story is affecting enough, but it seems to me a less satisfying conclusion than some attempt to sum up and elucidate the issues the book raises would have been. I am not sure whether Mehlman's choice of this ending stems from an impulse similar to the ones that feed a few other unsatisfying features of the book. One of these is the (to be sure imaginative and thought-provoking) treatment of Levi-Strauss. I find persuasive neither the idea that the anthropologist's campaign for preserving the distinctiveness of cultures was tied up with fights within the Ecole Libre about the separateness of French cul-

ture from the American milieu where it had temporarily found a home, nor the notion that the universalist side of structuralism drew from what Levi-Strauss shared with the surrealists, while its particularist (and in Mehlman's questionable view, racist) side derived somehow from the theorization of diacritical distinctiveness found in Roman Jakobson's linguistics. Similarly, the analogy he proposes between the 1940s emigres and those of the 1790s, both presented as "'aristocrats,' the privileged subjects or citizens of an ancien regime, in sudden flight from a catastrophic 'revolution'" (3) is far more confusing than enlightening. Fortunately, this notion is not much developed (but then why include it?). I could add one or two more hesitations, mostly having to do with Mehlman's occasional Lacanianism, but it seems more appropriate to conclude by stating again that this is an admirable and original book from which there is much to learn.

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