

Uri Eisenzweig, *Naissance littéraire du fascisme*, Paris, Seuil, 2013.

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Uri Eisenzweig is a professor of French and Comparative Literature at Rutgers University. He has written on the existentialists, on the *fin-de-siècle* crime novel, and on the Jewish imagination. Most notably, he is the author of *Fictions de l'anarchisme*, published with Bourgois in 2001. The aim of this earlier work was to explore the connection between the wave of terror bombings in Paris in 1892-94, the anarchist rejection of the concept of representation, and symbolist aesthetics, especially pertaining to the portrayal of human motivation. At the outset¹, the author announced that the project in its entirety would consist of a trilogy: *Naissance littéraire du fascisme* represents its second installment (with a third yet to come, on the birth of political Zionism).

Despite a certain difference in style and tone between the two works (more theoretical and cross-referenced in the former, more discursive and conversational in the latter case), the main thrust of the argument is similar, so that they are recognizably part of the same intellectual endeavor. The central claim is that it is possible to shed new light on certain striking events in French *fin-de-siècle* politics by juxtaposing them to coeval literary reflections on emplotment, narrative, and identity. Hence, in a way one may think of the work's methodology as a literary studies response to the linguistic turn in the historiography of political thought: while contextualist scholars of the Cambridge school, for instance, focused on the real-life political stakes of philosophical debates in order to account for specific rhetorical strategies, Eisenzweig attempts to show how a certain type of literary imagination oriented the understanding of political circumstances.

Naissance littéraire du fascisme is perhaps a slightly misleading title: although Eisenzweig ultimately claims that the literary sensibility he identifies forms the root of what will become a proto-fascist mentality, the focus of the book is squarely on the Affaire Dreyfus, and specifically on the anti-Semitism that permeated the anti-Dreyfusard camp. Formally, the work is organized in three chapters, each of which deals with a major literary personality: Maurice Barrès, Bernard Lazare, and Octave Mirbeau. In truth, the strength of the argument relies for the most part on the contrast between Barrès and Lazare, with Mirbeau's position

¹ Eisenzweig, Uri, *Fictions de l'anarchisme*, Paris, Bourgois, 2001, p. 9 n2.

more marginal, not so much a synthesis of the two other positions as a confirmation of interpretive claims advanced previously.

Eisenzweig's starting point is the moment he sees as the key development in the Affaire: the revelation, in late 1897, of evidence conclusively identifying Ferdinand Esterhazy as responsible for the espionage for which Dreyfus was convicted, thus exonerating the Jewish captain. This event provokes a curiously symmetrical reaction. The anarchist Lazare, who had been the first to argue publicly for Dreyfus' innocence, essentially ceases his public engagement in the case. Barrès, meanwhile, who had remained surprisingly aloof on the matter, to the point that a young Léon Blum still hoped to sway him to the Dreyfusard cause, chooses this moment to invest himself fully in the controversy, becoming the main spokesperson for anti-Dreyfusisme.

For Eisenzweig, the explanation of these two reactions to the major plot turn in the Affaire is similar: a declared hostility to “narrative [*le récit*] as a privileged form of truth” (62). The same aesthetic stance, however, has opposite practical implications. Barrès is taken as the prototypical example of the formulation of an organic vision of national identity, hostile both to universalism and individualism (7): the ideological origin of the ‘fascism’ of the book's title, in a (recognized) line of filiation from the classic Sternhell interpretation². Eisenzweig's analysis of the 1897 novel *Les Déracinés* seeks to establish how Barrès effectively subverts the traditional Balzac-derived model of a narrative driven by actors who are motivated by their socio-economic conditions and aspirations. In its place, Barrès conceives of an organic identity, essentially non-narrative, derived from the relation with the soil, which determines individual destinies (mainly by condemning the rootless, the *déracinés*, to wither). While changeless, timeless adherence to tradition and loyalty to past generations is positively valued, the dynamic perturbation, the unwelcome agent of change is identified, within the novel, with the Jews as an essentially foreign, mobile, displaced force, a veritable narrative generator.

Eisenzweig sees this same logic at work in Barrès' engagement in the Affaire, thereby reversing the traditional reading of *Les Déracinés* through Barrès' subsequent politics by claiming that in fact the novel *caused them* (59). The entire discursive strategy Barrès employs

² Sternhell, Zeev, *La Droite révolutionnaire: les origines françaises du fascisme*, Paris, Seuil, 1976, and especially Sternhell et al., *Birth of Fascist Ideology: from Cultural Rebellion to Political Revolution*, Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 1994.

in the anti-Dreyfusard campaign seeks to minimize the importance of the plot turn represented by the discovery of the proof of Esterhazy's guiltiness. Dreyfus' individual fate is presented as irrelevant, politically beside the point: what matters is a redefinition of the notion of treason, based on the organic vision of national identity. Eisenzweig thus interprets some of Barrès' famous anti-Dreyfusard pronouncements ("That Dreyfus is capable of treason, I conclude from his race:" 68) as a new form of anti-Semitism, transcending the bounds of traditional religious polemics: Jews are necessarily external to the national community, since this is understood as an organic unity, hence their treacherousness is not an act subject to proof, but a perennial fact, a consequence of their existential condition.

The same mechanism operates in the opposite direction in the case of Bernard Lazare. His resistance to the naturalist form of narrative is based on his (politico-aesthetic) anarchist convictions, that is, on his refusal of all representation, or narrative authority. For him, however, the source of this narrative risk lies, not in the figure of the Jew, as with Barrès, but in anti-Semitism itself (123), as the mythopoeic machine par excellence, the most perfected example of conspiracy theory. Eisenzweig shows, through a reading of the pamphlet *Une erreur judiciaire. La vérité sur l'affaire Dreyfus* of 1896 (thus before the unmasking of Esterhazy), that Lazare's exoneration strategy rested entirely on the attempt to deny the charges and highlight the inconsistencies of the official version, in no way trying to impose an alternative assemblage of the facts, a different narrative. This strategy, however, is no longer possible once Esterhazy becomes available as an alternative protagonist for the treason story. Faced with the prospect of legitimating a new type of narrative, that of the soon-to-be-victorious Dreyfusards, Lazare finds it more consistent with his principles, so Eisenzweig argues, to choose silence. This reduction to practical impotence, it is further claimed, is indicative of a broader flaw with traditional French anarchism, in its refusal to contemplate the legitimacy of any political representation, and thus of any organization with a view to collective action (117-9). Thus, the birth of Dreyfusism is also the death knell of anarchism.

The book closes with an analysis of Mirbeau's novel, *Journal d'une femme de chambre* (1900). In its structure, the same absence of narrative development is found as in Barrès and Lazare, deriving, however, from the protagonist's socio-economic status as a maid, rather than from an organic identity or an ideological stance. Again, the dynamic, narrative-generating element is anti-Semitism, as embodied by the character of Joseph the gardener, the eventual husband

of the protagonist. Eisenzweig further institutes a parallel between her characteristics and Dreyfus': the exteriority of the gaze, the lack of roots, the wanderings, the fundamental question of identity. In a final flourish, all these formal elements are shown to have been in place in an earlier version of the novel, from 1891-2, from which anti-Semitic references were basically absent: the implication is that all the formal elements were present in the aesthetic culture of the time for the crisis to which anti-Semitism (and organic nationalism) would give a name (161).

What are we to make of Eisenzweig's thesis? The hypothesis of a literary genesis of ideology is certainly a fascinating one, giving a novel perspective to our understanding of those seminal transformations of modern politics, ostensibly irrational phenomena such as the 'propaganda of the deed' through terrorist bombing campaigns or mass mobilization on the scapegoating agenda of anti-Semitism. Experts of the Affaire may wish to quibble with the historical reconstruction the Author offers of the synchronous engagement of Barrès and disengagement of Lazare. Alternative motives, such as Barrès' habitual craving for media exposure (38) or Lazare's more specifically political (anti-statist) commitments are given short shrift (112-3). In general, the definition of traditional French anarchism as being essentially concerned with a resistance to any type of social representation (as opposed to a critique of authority and the State) is simply stated in the text (91), for its sustained demonstration had already been undertaken in *Fictions de l'anarchisme*³. In conclusion, this volume contributes a welcome broadening of perspective to the debate on the intellectual genesis of the fascist worldview.

³ Part I, chap. 2, esp. p. 83 ff.