Irony in Irène Némirovsky’s *Suite française*

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Born in Kiev, Ukraine, in 1903, Irène Némirovsky was the daughter of a successful Jewish banker, Léon Némirovsky and of Faiga. Fleeing the Bolshevik revolution in 1917, the family first settled in Finland, then in Paris, where Léon rebuilt his wealth. Like many rich Russians, the Némirovskys had great admiration for French culture. Irène had a French governess and spoke French from infancy. She also vacationed in France once a year.

She was twenty three when she married Michel Epstein, whose origins were Russian and Jewish like hers. His family belonged to the same social class than the Némirovsky’s and he was also professionally involved in the world of finances. Irène moved in with Michel in a comfortable apartment, where she would be able to commit to her favorite activity: writing. (Weiss 47)

Irène achieved literary success at a very early age. Her first novel, *David Golder*, published in 1929, was both a commercial and critical success and was adapted for the screen and the stage. It was followed by a steady succession of novels and short stories. In spite of her literary achievements, she had trouble publishing her work during the Nazi occupation of France, and in order to maintain her literary activities, she used pseudonyms. (Sarton 147)

According to Némirovsky’s notes, the project of *Suite française* began in 1940, when France was quickly defeated, then soon occupied by Germany. It was written in
the village of Issy-L’Èvêque, where she and her husband and their two daughters had settled after fleeing Paris. The title “Suite” française suggests a musical reference. According to the Webster’s unabridged dictionary, a “suite” can be, among various other meanings, “a modern instrumental composition in a number of movements.” In the notes which accompany the novel, Némirovsky stresses the importance of finding the right rhythm to link the different parts of the work:

All in all, make sure to have variety on one hand and harmony on the other. […] Pursuit—people in love—laughter, tears etc. It’s this type of rhythm I want to achieve. (351)

Suite française was supposed to comprise five volumes but the author only had the time to compose two of them. On July 13, 1942, French policemen, enforcing the German race laws, arrested Irène as a “stateless person of Jewish descent.” She was transported to Auschwitz, where she died of typhus on August 17. (Gray 1) Denise, her oldest daughter, then 13, saved the leather-bound notebook her mother had left behind but not until the late 1990’s did she examine its content. She discovered that instead of a diary or journal, she had written two complete novellas written in microscopic hand, no doubt to save scarce paper. Suite française was published in 2004 and was awarded the Prix Renaudot that same year. (Gray 9)

In Suite française the historical events only serve as background to a thorough examination of the human heart. The author wanted to examine in detail the reactions of a sample of French people from various social classes, to the German invasion. Again, from her notes:

The most important and most interesting thing here is the following: the historical, revolutionary facts etc. must be only lightly touched upon, while daily life, the emotional life and especially the comedy it provides must be described in detail. (357)
During the year 1941, she worked on the first volume, “Tempête en juin” (Storm in June). In it, she presents a bourgeois family, the Péricands, a pompous and hypocritical intellectual, Gabriel Corte, the president of a bank, Joseph Corbin, a man without any scruples, a family of peasants, the Labaries, and a middle class family, the Michauds, whose son has been injured in the war. All these characters have their own adventures when France is defeated. In contrast to “Tempête en juin”, the second part of *Suite française*, “Dolce” focuses on the population of a single French village and shows how the inhabitants adapt to the presence of German soldiers. She describes only three families: the viscount and viscountess of Monmort who thanks to their friendly relationships with the occupiers, manage very well in maintaining their lifestyle; the same Labarie family, who had sheltered the injured Jean-Marie Michaud from “Tempête en juin”, and who are suspicious of the Germans as they are of any foreigner; finally, Mrs. Angellier and her daughter-in-law, Lucile, an upper middle class pair whose son/husband is held prisoner in Germany and whose reaction to the occupiers is more complex. (Weiss 164-5) Incidentally, these two women had also sheltered the Michauds during their escape from Paris.

*Suite française* is far from being the portrayal of a unified country, as the Vichy propaganda might have liked. This novel presents a broken and divided country where the rich take advantage of the debacle at the expanse of the poor. The country Némirovsky describes in June 1940 is made of a few heroes (the priest Philippe Péricand or the soldier, Jean-Marie Michaud), more takers (the Péricand family, Corte, Corbin, the Montmorts), and many victims. However, at no point does she simplify: she depicts a society where cowardice as well as courage are present in all social strata. Although she
talks about collaboration and planned, in a third volume to express her deception toward the politics of Vichy, she never accuses Pétain of having betrayed his country, nor does she show sympathy for the movement of organized resistance, even the non communist resistance of Charles de Gaulle. One might be more surprised by the fact that in this story of defeat and occupation, Némirovsky does not present any Jewish character. In fact, the novel ends in the summer of 1941 without any reference to the status of the Jews, nor to the census of September 1940, both great sources of anxiety for her and her family, as her notes testify. (Weiss 166-71) This is even more surprising since in previous works, she had often explored the complexities of Jewish identity.

I will argue that Némirovsky used her status of outsider, of outcast, in order to magnify the mosaïque of French reactions to the occupation. The absence of Jewish protagonist in the novel, and Némirovsky’s silence toward the increasingly precarious situation of the Jews in France, allowed her to depict the events with apparent detachment: without any character mirroring the author’s situation, she could better attain the distance necessary to portray the French. In addition, the absence of Jewish protagonist in Suite française, an apparent omission which puzzles the reader when one knows the identity of its author and the circumstances in which she wrote the novel, also allows the author to infuse her narrative with irony and to offer an often subversive depiction of French society under the occupation. Némirovsky’s irony is similar to what D.C. Muecke has associated with “objectivity in the sense of a free critical detachment from, and fully conscious power over one’s own creation.” (9) Muecke writes:

[…] in the Romantic and post-Romantic period irony becomes the expression of an attitude to life or more accurately a way of organizing one’s response to and coming to terms with a world that seems to be fundamentally at odds with mankind. (ix)
In this light, the text can be viewed as an outlet, a refuge for the writer, as the world was slowly engulfing her.

As Muecke defines it, “irony is the act of saying something without really saying it.” (5) He continues further:

The more familiar kind of irony is Simple Irony, in which an apparently or ostensibly true statement, serious question, valid assumption, or legitimate expectation is corrected, invalidated, or frustrated by the ironist’s real meaning, by the true state of affairs, or by what actually happens. (23)

“What happens” in Némirovsky’s narration is French quick defeat to the German aggressor, the chaos as French populations, in particular the residents of Paris, flee the invaders and head South, and the cohabitation of the French with their occupiers. But in addition to these events, the narrator depicts an array of reactions, which often contrast and contradict the reader’s first impressions, and complicates the perception the reader may have had of French victimhood.

Némirovsky’s irony seems to focus primarily on the relationships between social classes, mostly, the arrogance, the materialism and bigotry of the upper middle class, or the bourgeoisie. She also describes the ease with which the occupiers “seduce” the French population and the resulting collaborationism. I will focus on the character of Madame Péricand to illustrate the first aspect, and that of the viscountess of Montmort to support the second.

Condescendence and arrogance color the relationships between the Péricands and those they consider inferior. In the second chapter, the omniscient narrator reveals the thoughts of Madame Péricand toward her maid, Madeleine, shortly after they have heard the news of France’s defeat on the radio:
Madeleine, the maid, was so beside herself with worry that she came right up to the doorway. To Madame Péricand, such a breach of the normal rules seemed a frightening indication of things to come. It was in just this manner that the different social classes all ended up on the top deck during a shipwreck. But working-class people were highly strung. “How they do get carried away,” Madame Péricand thought reproachfully. She was one of those middle-class women who generally trust the lower class. “They’re not so bad if you know how to deal with them,” she would say in the same condescending and slightly sad tone she used to talk of a caged animal. She was proud that she kept her servants for a long time. She insisted on looking after them when they were ill. When Madeleine had had a sore throat, Madame Péricand herself had prepared her gargle. Since she had no time to administer it during the day, she had waited until she got back from the theatre in the evening. Madeleine had woken up with a start and had only expressed her gratitude afterwards, and even then, rather coldly in Madame Péricand’s opinion. Well, that’s the lower class for you, never satisfied, and the more you go out of your way to help them, the more ungrateful and moody they are. But Madame Péricand expected no reward except from God. (7)

As we can see in this passage, Madame Péricand’s apparent benevolence and generosity toward her employees are contradicted and hence defeated by her condescension and complex of superiority toward the “lower classes”, and is motivated by her self-serving religious practice. The circumstances—the invasion of France by the German troops—give her character the opportunity to ponder upon her relationship to lower classes. The crisis the country is facing threatens the social stratification she has grown accustomed to: For Madame Péricand, the real threat is not the German invaders, but rather, a servant who might forget her place for a second.

Similarly, the contrast between Madame Péricand’s apparent generosity when all goes well, and her indifference for those in need, when times become more difficult, adds to her portrait:

After saying her prayers, Madame Péricand left the church. Once outside, she decided to restock her supply of biscuits, which had been greatly diminished by her lavish generosity. She went into a large grocer’s store. “We’ve got nothing left, Madame,” said the employee […]
She could see Jacqueline and Bernard on the doorstep of the café. Their hands were full of chocolate and sweets that they were giving out to everyone around them. Madame Péricand leapt towards them.

“Get back inside! What are you doing out here? I forbid you to touch the food. (47-8)

And Némirovsky conclude:

Christian charity, the compassion of centuries of civilization, fell from her like useless ornaments, revealing her bare, arid soul. (48)

The relationship Madame Péricand entertains with her father-in-law also deserves our attention as it reveals the same indifference and selfishness:

She cut the elderly Monsieur Péricand’s filet of sole into small strips […]

“We must show grandfather how much we love him, my darlings,” she instructed the children, looking at the old man with terrifying tenderness. (10)

The irony in the contrast between “terrifying” and “tenderness” is later explained:

In his later years, Monsieur Péricand had endowed various philanthropic projects, one of which was especially dear to his heart: the Penitent Children of the 16th Arrondissement, a venerable institution whose goal was to instill morals to delinquent minors. It was always understood that the elder Monsieur Péricand would leave a certain sum of money to this organization, but he had a rather irritating way of never revealing exactly how much. If he hadn’t enjoyed his meal, or if the children made too much noise, he would suddenly emerge from his stupor and say in a weak but clear voice, “I’m going to leave them five million.” A painful silence would follow. (10)

We thus find that Madame Péricand only shows tenderness for the old man, because she hopes to inherit his fortune. Later in the text, as the village in which they have found refuge is burning, the Péricand family has to flee, but not after Madame Péricand has taken the time to pack her belongings methodically, however:

Madame Péricand said to herself over and over again, “Thank you God!” Her jewellery and money were sewn into a suede pouch pinned inside her blouse and she could feel it against her chest as she ran. She’d had the presence of mind to grab her fur coat and the small overnight case full of the family silver, which she’d kept beside her bed. (100)
When they finally board a train to take them away from the war zone, and after once again verifying that she still has her jewelry and her money, she realizes that she has left the grandfather behind.

The depiction of the Péricand family, symbol of the French conservative, catholic upper middle class is echoed by many other protagonists. The character of the pretentious, selfish intellectual Corte, for example, displays similar flaws: he cares more about salvaging his precious manuscripts than about helping others to survive, especially when those are peasants and workers; he remains indifferent to the political events as for him, peace consists of drinking a martini with acquaintances of the same social milieu.

Némirovsky also depicts with a good dose of irony, the ease with which the French adapt to their occupiers. The first German soldiers to arrive in a French village where some of the protagonists have found refuge are described in a positive light:

> The villagers […] were stunned by the noise emerging from this wave of green uniforms, by the scent of these healthy men, their young flesh, and especially by the sound of this foreign language. […] Germans […] stroke the children as they went by. They threw open their arms, they sang, they laughed with the women. (93)

In “Dolce”, the second part of *Suite française*, in which Némirovsky analyses the relationships between the inhabitants of a village and the occupiers, much irony infuse her portrayal of the viscount and viscountess of Montmort. Madame de Montmort, in particular, presents interesting characteristics: she makes frequent references to Jesus Christ to support her decisions not to share the resources of her large domain with the local farmers, and she loses all inhibitions while composing a poem to the glory of Pétain for the local school children:

> O Mother! Let me see your sweet face above my little bed while the storm
rages outside. The sky darkens the earth, but a radiant dawn approaches. Smile, O kind Mother! See how your child is following the Maréchal who holds peace and happiness in his hands. Join me and all the children, all the mothers in France, to form a blissful circle around the venerable Wise One who restores hope in our hearts!”

Madame de Montmort spoke these words out loud and they echoed in the silent grounds. When inspiration took hold of her, she lost all control. (288)

The contrasting interactions between the viscount and viscountess of Montmort with on one hand, Benoît Labarie and on the other, with the Germans, also demonstrate the division between classes and the easy collaboration between the upper class and the occupiers. When Madame de Montmort catches Benoît Labarie stealing corn on her property, she treats him with fear and contempt. He explains to her that since the Montmorts refuse to share their resources, he had to recourse to theft to help a neighbor of his, a young mother whose husband is in captivity in Germany. Madame de Montmort says “tu” to him, rather than the formal and polite “vous” and when he escapes and she hears the footsteps of German soldiers, she says:

“Oh, I really hope they caught him. I really hope they’ve killed him,” […] “What a man! What a species! What vile people! That’s what Bolshevism is, exactly that. (292)

On the other hand, when Benoît accuses the Viscountess of sympathizing with the occupiers,

she stamped her foot angrily, wild with rage. Again that stupid slander! The Germans did invite them both to one of their hunts last winter, it was true. They had declined, but they couldn’t refuse to attend the dinner in the evening. Whether they liked it or not, they had to follow the government’s orders. And besides, these German officers were cultured men, after all!! What separates or unites people is not their language, their laws, their customs, their principles, but the way they hold their knife and fork. ((291)
As we can see, class, social status and material possessions matter more to the Montmorts
than humanity and loyalty to one’s countryman. As the events unfold around her,
Némirovsky depicts a divided country, eager to adapt to a new regime so that it can soon
resume a peaceful and uneventful way of life.

This depiction of a divided France, of a country where people do not hesitate to
denounce each other in order to satisfy the conquerors is, in a novel written in 1942, quite
a unique achievement. In France, such cynicism toward the years of occupation does not
come to the surface until at least twenty years after the liberation as the French had to
acquire the distance necessary to digest the trauma and come to terms with the
compromises the country had shamefully made.

Némirovsky’s situation was different from that of common French folks.
Culturally assimilated and successful in France as a writer, Irène Némirovsky found
herself alienated and ostracized as German forces occupied her adoptive country.
Because of her status of stateless Jew, and despite all her efforts to assimilate, she was the
outsider who had the distance necessary to attain objective irony. Thanks to her writing,
she turned the tables and managed to look at the French in the eyes, and to see that by
fear of losing their status and way of life, many chose to embrace collaboration. Her text
is subversive because its author, stripped of her rights and freedom, as Muecke writes,
“by comparison [s]he feels free”. (227) Muecke:

Though some ironists may be guilty of these charges, irony is properly
regarded as more an intellectual than a moral activity. That is to say, the
morality of irony, like the morality of science, philosophy, and art, is a
morality of intelligence. The ironist’s virtue is mental alertness and
agility. His business is to make life bearable for troglodytes, to keep open
house for ideas, and to go on asking questions. (247)
In *Suite française*, the French responsible of collaboration are not only under the control of Germany, they are enslaved in their arrogance, their materialism, their narrow-mindedness and their bigotry. Némirovsky does not teach us a lesson of moral but rather she challenges her reader to keep asking questions.

Works cited


