

Suite Française, by Irène Némirovsky, translated by Sandra Smith, Alfred A. Knopf publisher, 2006

Irène Némirovsky had keen powers of observation and a wide understanding of human thought (à la Joseph Conrad in *Under Western Eyes*). She was 39 when the Nazis killed her. This book is about the WWII French retreat from the Germans and subsequent enemy occupation of France. It is graciously not written unfavorable to the Germans; their characters are full and sympathetic. Her daughter released this novel 60 years after it was written, not knowing that she possessed anything other than her mother's papers. Nevertheless, due to Némirovsky's untimely death the last parts are not finished.

One episode, of a priest conveying a group of boys to safety, reminded me of my time of teaching high school. "[. . .] All in vain. They didn't even seem to be listening; he realized that anything he said to them - encouragement, reprimands, information - would never sink in, for their souls were shut off, walled up, secret and silent." (Chapter 25 of Part 1, page 126)

Here's how a couple, back at their house after thinking they'd never return, is described: "The risen Lazarus must have experienced the same feeling of astonishment and quiet pride on seeing his sisters and the soup cooking on the fire: 'In spite of everything, we've come back, we're home,' they thought." (page 155)

Another character is developed in this context: "Important events - whether serious, happy or unfortunate - do not change a man's soul, they merely bring it into relief, just as a strong gust of wind reveals the true shape of a tree when it blows off all its leaves. Such events highlight what is hidden in the shadow; they nudge the spirit towards a place where it can flourish." And this character did not even have a good spirit. I think this is the nobility of Némirovsky, that she doesn't let her animosity come into her writing. As already mentioned, she could even be generous in her depiction of German characters.

So why she gave the Viscountess of Montmort such an unfortunate characterization, I don't know. She had her motivated by the important matters of what the Lord Jesus died for and His mission for her, yet she was ugly, hateful, and selfish. (Chapter 7 of Part 2, pages 222-226). The priest of Chapter 25, above, was presented very favorably, but Némirovsky was Catholic. Since she didn't have a redemptive message, "Jesus saves!" but rather a message that Christians are utterly odious, did she know her Saviour?

Némirovsky is skilled in the art of writing. Here is a garden (page 232):

"[. . .]

"But it was blossom time. Against a sky of pure and relentless blue - that deep but lustrous Sèvres blue seen on certain precious pieces of porcelain - floated branches that appeared to be covered in snow. The breath of wind that moved them was still chilly on this day in May; the flowers gently resisted, curling up with a kind of trembling grace and turning their pale stemens towards the ground. The sun shone through them,

revealing a pattern of interlacing, delicate blue veins, visible through the opaque petals; this added something alive to the flower's fragility, to the ethereal quality, something almost human, in the way that human can mean frailty and endurance both at the same time. The wind could ruffle them; they swayed there, dreamily; they seemed ready to fall but held fast to their slim strong branches - branches that had something silvery about them, like the trunk itself, which grew tall and straight, sleek and slender, tinged with greys and purples. Between the clusters of white flowers were long thin leaves; in the shade they looked a delicate green, covered in silvery down; in the sunlight they seemed pink.

[. . .] a red sign [. . .]

VERBOTEN [. . .]

KEEP OUT UNDER PENALTY OF DEATH [. . .]