Teaching Contemporary French Literature: The Case of Cécile Wajsbrot

While research on contemporary French literature, the literature of the so-called “extrême contemporain”¹ becomes more and more accepted, teaching it remains a challenge. When you have not much time on your hand, because your students have only to attend a limited number of major courses on literature, what would you rather do? Introduce them to Molière, Balzac and Proust or discuss a novel written by Cécile Wajsbrot, a contemporary French writer whose name, however, sounds not exclusively French? From a distance, this seems like an unfair competition. However, if you dare to take a closer look, this is not a question of evaluation. Teaching means taking choices and whether we choose Wajsbrot over Proust does not affect the value neither of their work nor (necessarily) of our teaching. Still, the decision to teach a class on Cécile Wajsbrot may have an impact on the awareness of these choices, since we have to explain carefully why we think that the discussion of Wajsbrot’s work might help us to understand more about French literature. We have to show explicitly that her case allows us to ask important, paradigmatic questions.

The question I want to raise in my case study is how to deal with autobiography, or more precisely: How shall we deal with the work of an author whose writing does not call for an autobiographical reading? Cécile Wajsbrot, a contemporary French writer of novels, essays, features and radio-plays,² has always been very reluctant to accept the idea of her texts being read as autobiographical. This reluctance is crucial to our discussion, I think, because the first nearby grip we get on Jewish Literature as a paradigm of polyphonic writing beyond the national may very well be the writer’s biography. What I want to do in this contribution is to sketch a picture of the author that – on the one hand – takes into account her reluctance. On the other hand, I want to show that at least one aspect of her work can be inserted into our paradigm of Jewish Literature; and that this is possible not only despite the difficulties she seems to have with the autobiographical, but because of them.

¹ The notion “extrême contemporain” was forged by Michel Chaillou (1987) and has been developed more recently by Viart and Vercier (2005).
² Cf. The bibliography of her oeuvre (Huesmann 2017, 539 – 550).
Two years ago, when Wajsbrot was admitted to the Deutsche Akademie für Sprache und Dichtung.³ She chose an interesting key-concept for her introductory speech. She was referring to her family name and the difficulty for French people to pronounce it. When she was younger, she writes, she did not like to introduce herself to others, especially not on the telephone. Nevertheless, she did not want to change the sound of her name either, into something like “Wesbro” for example, like her mother used to, reducing the difficulty to the spelling by doing so. Of course, the misspelling of her name and the mispronouncing was only the symptom of something more essential. The real issue was about the question of belonging.


This self-introduction of a French writer to a German academy of language and literature is quite interesting for our purposes: the choice Wajsbrot made to address the “problem” of her name. It seems to me that she takes the viewpoint of her reader into consideration. As if her “Frenchness” was once more debatable:

³ Being admitted to this academy is remarkable, and she shares this honour with French writers like Jean Cocteau or writers in French like Paul Nizan, Philippe Jaccottet or Claude Vigée. Since 2019 she is also a member of the renowned Akademie der Künste at Berlin.

⁴ The “Vorstellungsrede” can be found on the website of the academy: https://www.deutsche-akademie.de/de/akademie/mitglieder/cecile-wajsbrot/selbstvorstellung. (24 September 2019)

[My translation: May I admit it? The problem within my name was the letter J, that is J as in ‘je’, ‘I’, or as in ‘jewish’. Should I write a novel without ‘J’ – just like Perec did once without ‘E’? All those years when I could not say my name, I surely had internalized the gaze of society looking at my provenance, at the history of destruction, and so I experienced the contradiction between the outer and the inner world, not being able to bridge it. ... Who was I? By stumbling over the pronunciation, I stumbled over the identity. And who knows if I hadn’t become a writer because I preferred to write my name instead of saying it. […] The first step is to say your own name – to accept it. To define yourself, to be different. And then comes the task – to mend the silence and what comes after, to start narrating.]
If for French eyes and ears, she was not “one of us”, especially in the seventies and still in the eighties, for German eyes and ears in 2017, she was, on the contrary, immediately recognizable as a writer who is dealing with the darkest part of “our” history.

It is not that I want to argue that Cécile Wajsbrot claims to be “French”. However, I am not so sure that she claims to be “Jewish” either. What I see in this text is a certain ambivalence when it comes to claim any identity. You cannot be a writer without the acceptance of who you are, without the acceptance of your name. Does this mean that your writing has to be in the name of your identity, that it has to be in the name of your “name”? The last paragraph of the quotation has an interesting structure: First, you have to learn how to say your own name. Then you can concentrate on your task. This task obviously raises the question of belonging. But it also raises the question of how to get there. Alternatively, let me put it like this: The task of narration goes far beyond the autobiographical writing; it is not contained in a name, at least not in one name.

Considering the key aspect of this book, and in order to exemplify how the autobiographical issue emerges from her actual work, I would like to focus on a nonfictional part of Wajsbrot’s writing. A recent example is Une autobiographie allemande, published in 2016 by Christian Bourgois Editeur. The small book is written à quatre main, because Cécile Wajsbrot wrote it together with Hélène Cixous.⁵ It is a dialogue from the distance, an exchange of letters between the two writers, stretched over a rather long period (the idea of writing to each other goes back to 2012, when Wajsbrot interviewed Cixous for the revue Sinn und Form).⁶ The title Une autobiographie allemande refers to Hélène Cixous in the first place. More precisely, it begins with referring to her mother’s life, Eve-Cixous, who was born in Osnabrück in 1910 and who died in 1999, leaving a large void in the life of her daughter. In a very sensitive way Cécile Wajsbrot asks Hélène Cixous to write about this void, to write about her mother and the members of her German family, whose surviving members are spread all over the world. Not all of them survived though and photographs in the book remember those who were deported to Theresienstadt and murdered in Auschwitz.

I would like to compare Wajsbrot’s gesture, at least in this part of the book, to the persona of a midwife. The careful way she approaches Hélène Cixous, the way she really “cares” for what is about to be remembered. Obviously – at least in those moments – she is not the one doing the labour of remembering, she is not the autobiographical centre of the book. However, she probably could not

⁶ Cf. Hélène Cixous and Cécile Wajsbrot 2016, 10–11.
have exercised this maieutic function if it was not for her own biography. Her grandfather was murdered in Auschwitz and her mother hardly escaped the Vel’ d’Hiv’ Roundup. So finally, the title of the book “Une autobiographie allemande” refers to a common set of experience. It is what both writers share to elucidate the still prevailing voids of twentieth century history. However, it seems to me that Cécile Wajsbrot needs the polyphonic structure of this text to go to the autobiographical heart of this experience. In order to commit to this task, to put her name on a book called “autobiography”, she has to create a situation of “belonging”, she has to be more than one.

Confronted with the dilemma whether to teach a class on a contemporary instead of a classical writer or how to integrate Jewish literature into our respective disciplines, we need questions rather than answers. When my students heard that Wajsbrot was a member of the German academy of language and literature (Deutsche Akademie für Sprache und Dichtung), they asked: But she is a French writer, isn’t she? Does she have more German than French readers? Is the German perception of her work different from the French perception? Why might that be? These questions, some of which are still waiting to be answered, eventually pointed to the problem of biographical information and how to deal with it. They initiated discussions about identity politics, about the correlation of témoignage and literature, about the art of belonging, allowing (not only) my students to exercise fundamental skills (not only) a literary scholar is supposed to have. Reading a novel written by Cécile Wajsbrot allowed all of us to engage with the purpose of literature beyond the national, the meaning of multilingualism within the realm of literature.

Bibliography


7 Cf. Cixous and Wajsbrot 2016, 16: “Il y eut, entre Cécile et moi, un pacte qui n’a jamais fait loi, suscité par l’amour de la littérature et ses corollaires: l’amour de l’autre, le goût vital de la mémoire et l’espoir.” [My translation: There have been, between Cécile and me, a pact that was never forced upon us, provoked by the love of literature and its corollaries: the love of the other, the vital taste of memory and hope.]


