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Norman Simms, *Alfred Dreyfus: Man, Milieu, Mentality, and Midrash*. Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2012. Pp.300. ISBN-10:1936235390 / ISBN-13: 978-1936235391. (Hardcover) \$US49.50.

Norman Simms's bizarre treatise on Alfred Dreyfus and the traumatic affair that bears his name aims to "shatter literary and scholarly conventions" in order for "justice in the Jewish sense" (one of many vague Jewish concepts) to be served (79). In *Alfred Dreyfus: Man, Milieu, Mentality and Midrash*, Simms draws from an impressive array of historical, philosophical, literary, scientific, archival, and religious tools to explicate Dreyfus's story, one he claims has been told in "thousands of books" (22, 36). He finds that previous scholarship on Dreyfus refers to the wrongly accused captain as but a "symbol or cipher," and fails to take into account Dreyfus's inner world—a world which itself reflects the great "epistemological change" that Simms argues took place across Europe at the time (14). He further laments the way scholars have placed Dreyfus's Jewishness, and the Jewishness of the affair, on the margins (e.g., 20, 33). Simms works to foreground the Jewishness of the man and the events surrounding his life by "midrashing" the notebooks and letters Dreyfus composed during his imprisonment.

Unfortunately, these lofty and even admirable goals elude Simms at every turn. His complaints about earlier scholarship on the Dreyfus Affair are mostly empty as he exaggerates both the number of important works on the affair and their treatment of the subject. His bibliography is extensive, but the text and footnotes failed to point me to which of the "thousands of books" on Dreyfus so onerously downplayed the antisemitism behind his false accusation. Simms may wish to circumvent scholarly conventions such as footnotes, but the forcefulness of his argument about scholarship on Dreyfus falls flat when he leaves out any clear citations of who these offenders are. Next, Simms's efforts to treat Dreyfus "the man" and not Dreyfus as pure symbol likewise deteriorate when the book's language is replete with symbolic and poetic gestures and confusing digressions—such as a several-page piece on Simms's memory of where he was and how he felt upon hearing about the 9/11 attacks (64-68). When Simms compares Dreyfus to the captured Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit, he undermines his own efforts to see Dreyfus as man and not metaphor (21). Reading the book, I felt I learned more about Simms-the-man than Dreyfus-the-man.

Finally, Simms's theoretical innovation, the notion of "midrashing the text," also works against his stated goals. In Simms's words,

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“*Midrash* is at once an analytical tool we can use to discuss the Dreyfus Affair and the people involved in it, as well as an epistemological stratagem used by Jews, consciously or not, to survive in a non-Jewish and often anti-Jewish world” (33). While others have used “midrash” as a theoretical/interpretive tool, it remains unclear how “midrashing” works as a survival strategy for Jews in an antisemitic world. I never got a sense of how the process functions. Instead, I felt that Simms was all too liberally applying biblical, rabbinic, Kabbalistic, liturgical, and even Yiddish terminology to a historical person and event without making the case for their relevance—either historical or theoretical—to Dreyfus’s story. The Jewish language Simms employs only seems to work if we accept that “consciously or not” Jews are always engaging with particular Jewish thought processes or ways of being that take into account everything from the Bible through the Holocaust, Kabbalistic thought, contemporary Israel, and American-Jewish Yiddishisms. To call this approach essentialist would be an understatement.

A little informal research on Simms helps explain his essentialist position. A onetime protestor against the Vietnam War, Simms is now a regular contributor to the neo-conservative web journal *FamilySecurityMatters.org*. His politics do not automatically delegitimise his scholarship, but they may explain why he hesitates to engage openly with other scholars whom he labels on the site as “leftwing commentators.” His essays on the website show him to be deeply concerned with threats to Israel’s safety, a dishonest media, what he sees as the sorry state of “post-modern” academia, and especially widespread antisemitism. Such concerns may explain why it was so important for Simms to underscore the antisemitism of the Dreyfus Affair and insist that previous scholarship sidelines it—though he fails to say exactly *which* scholars marginalise this key element of the story.

Simms wants to liberate Alfred Dreyfus from being a mere allegory for our times, but forgets that histories are always written from the present and always reflect the contexts in which they’re composed. Simms is not free of this historian’s curse: his impulse to spotlight French antisemitism reflects Simms’s own fears about rising antisemitism in the post-9/11 world. His urge to imbue Dreyfus and his family with a variety of Jewishness that the captain himself may have denied, hints at Simms’ own vision of a fundamental Jewish epistemology and his challenge to postmodernist scholarship.

Sadly, Simms’s confusing project undercuts his main goal—to

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focus on Dreyfus the man. His digressions into Jewish, French, German, and other philosophies and literatures kept me from seeing an intimate portrait of the wrongly accused captain. Even more regrettable, Norman Simms overshadows Alfred Dreyfus both in the book and in this review.

On a final note, Simms's consistent use of forecasting phrases like "as we shall show" and "as shall become clear later" diminishes the immediacy of his argument and demonstrates a lack of organisational clarity. Some clarity, in fact, may have rescued *Alfred Dreyfus: Man, Milieu, Mentality and Midrash* from its illegibility. I should hope an editor or publisher will insist on clarity before the next two volumes in this series on Dreyfus go to press.

Shaina Hammerman

Norman Simms, *In The Context of His Times: Alfred Dreyfus as Lover, Intellectual, Poet, and Jew*. Boston: Academic Studies Press, Reference Library of Jewish Intellectual History, 2013. Pp. 350. ISBN-10: 1618112368; ISBN-13: 978-1618112361 (Hardcover) \$US54.45.

This is a remarkable, stimulating and indeed paradigmatic book. Don't be put off by the heavy title, the untidy book cover and the sometimes tortuous writing style. The work is well worth reading and utterly absorbing.

The author is a Jewish academic who was born and educated in the United States and lived most of his life in New Zealand. Unlike most of us, he has resisted the easy option of choosing conventional standards and positions. It might have made him pay a heavy price, but he has not allowed himself to be the mere product of a ready-made mould. He is who he is. That is an *Imitatio Dei*, since God's self-description of Himself in Exodus 3:14 is *Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh*, "I am who I am".

Apart from developing and defending his own position in relation to a sheaf of intellectual issues – including "text and counter-text"/"text and anti-text"/"text and non-text"/"text and un-text" – Simms does not limit himself to academic analysis but engages in conversation, dialogue and debate with his readers. Hence a passage which he calls "A Dialogic Interruption" beginning on page 167 and involving "You" (the reader) and "Me" (the author) in blunt argument about whether