In the wake of World War One, French Jewish writers and poets, including Aimé Pallière, André Spire, and Edmond Fleg, articulated a new, cultural definition of what it meant to be a Jew. They imagined Judaism to be a cultural fact akin to ethnicity, arguing that what tied the Jewish people together was their shared history and traditions. By defining Jewish identity in such a way, they also challenged the popular, if rigid, conceptualization of French identity exclusively in terms of national identity. One could, in this formulation, as Nadia Malinovich has argued, be both French and Jewish.¹ One could experience “a double consciousness” as W.E.B. Du Bois claimed in 1903.²

This essay focuses on the writing and activism of one of the most important figures of this French Jewish awakening, Edmond Fleg, whose personal evolution exemplifies some key themes of his age. Fleg abandoned his family’s Jewish religious practices as a young man but was later compelled to reconsider, and ultimately embrace, his Jewish roots in response to the antisemitism unleashed by the Dreyfus Affair. Best known as a writer, poet, and playwright, much of Fleg’s literary oeuvre is steeped in Jewish and Christian biblical history, liturgy, and legend.³ In his exploration of

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³ In the 1920s, cultural Judaism was increasingly visible on the French street: various books were published, including Fleg’s *Pourquoi Je suis juif* and Spire’s *Quelques juifs et demi-juifs*; a performance of Tchirikoff’s *Les Juifs* was given at George Pitoeff’s Vieux-Colombier Theatre; and, on the Grands Boulevards, films were screened with Jewish themes. There was a large appetite among Jews and non-Jews alike for publications and performances on Jewish themes. For the “Jewish awakening” see Catherine Nicault, ed., “Le ‘Reveil Juif’ des années vingt,” *Archives Juives: Revue d’histoire des Juifs de France*, No. 39 (2006). For an
religious texts, Fleg reached for the most universal interpretations and made his complex understanding of nationalism, national identity, and universalism legible in his writing, whether fiction, travelogue, or memoir. His universalism found voice, however, not only in his writings but also in his actions: a founding member of the Société l’Amitié judéo-chrétienne, Fleg was also the president of the Eclaireurs Israelites Français, a Jewish youth movement that emerged in the 1920s, defined by a defiantly pluralistic Judaism that could even include non-Jews. It was earlier, though, during the Dreyfus Affair, when ideas of national identity were becoming the domain of right-wing ideologues and hardening into rigid unitary beliefs about blood and soil roots, that Fleg’s more flexible and even pluralistic concept of national belonging stood out for its acceptance of the possibility of multiple attachments. As part of this notion of Jewishness, many writers consciously linked themselves to a pacifist, internationalist postwar politics aimed at fostering friendship among all peoples; some even suggested that Jews were historically positioned to spearhead such an initiative, reworking the traditional notion of “chosenness.”

1. The Dreyfus Affair

In the last years of the nineteenth century, Edmond Fleg was a student at the prestigious École Normale Supérieure in Paris. According to the writer and Catholic intellectual Jacques Madaule in his introduction to a compilation of Fleg’s correspondence from the period, Fleg was a “triumph of assimilation.” He had rejected the Judaism of his childhood and was even drawn to what he saw as the austere beauty and solemnity of Catholicism. Although on the rise in Russia and then in Germany, for most French Jews a new racial form of antisemitism was remote. Nor was Jewish confidence shaken by the success of Édouard Drumont’s caustic antisemitic polemic, insightful discussion of Jewish writers and their writing including Edmond Fleg in 1920s Paris, see Catherine Fhima, “Au Coeur de la ‘renaissance juive’ des années 1920: literature et judéité,” Archives Juives, No. 39 (2006): 29–45; Malinovich, French and Jewish.

4 Ruth Harris makes the point more broadly, arguing “many French citizens will continue to face the problem of living comfortably with multiple identities. This tension is one of the many aspects of French political culture that were strengthened, and in some measure created, by the Dreyfus Affair.” Ruth Harris, Dreyfus, Politics, Emotion, and the Scandal of the Century (New York: Metropolitan Books/Henry Holt and Company, 2010), 385.