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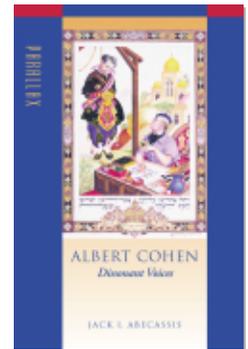
Albert Cohen

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## *Foreword: Reading Cohen Today*

Since we have come to the end of what Eric Hobsbawm called the “short” twentieth century, we should now be able to view it and its artistic productions more objectively.

As a consequence, some widely held opinions may have to be revised, particularly as regards French literature. It is not obvious, however, that the intellectual establishment in France—never amenable to criticism—is ready to reassess the literary heritage of the twentieth century. Asking whether Marcel Proust was really the most prominent French writer of the century, suggesting that André Malraux was better as an essayist than as a novelist, questioning Louis-Ferdinand Céline’s importance, or doubting that René Char was indeed the philosophically inspiring poet that so many complacent commentators have described, such questions amount to blasphemy. And yet they still will need to be addressed some day.

In the same vein, sooner or later we need to ask why some outstanding works are still excluded from the canon. Why, for instance, are Marcel Aymé’s and Raymond Queneau’s fascinating novels, Jacques Audiberti’s and Jean Vauthier’s baroque plays, and Michel Butor’s and Yves Bonnefoy’s beautiful essays on painting so little read, and even so little known, in French universities—which, we have to admit, have never been quick to adapt to cultural change?

If and when they do respond, I am confident that Albert Cohen’s reputation will be among the first to benefit from such a necessary reevaluation. For no writer, in fact, has been so consistently undervalued over the past fifty years. And even if I believe, with Jack Abecassis and others, that Cohen was one of the most outstanding writers of the twentieth century, this conviction is still far from being widespread.

Cohen never belonged to the French Academy. When he was not involved in his administrative professional life (which was no less productive than his literary output, since he was, for instance, the author of the Inter-Governmental Agreement on Refugee Travel Documents of October 1946), he preferred to live a secluded, rather secretive life. He did not like expressing his

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opinions in popular newspapers. He never tried to become a “public” intellectual. As a consequence, his death in 1981 did not occasion the kind of public tribute the French usually accord well-known men of letters. A small square in a deserted area of the 15th arrondissement of Paris has been named after him, but not a major street in the French capital. And although his publisher, Gallimard, has brought out his main works in two volumes in the prestigious Pléiade series (1993–94), they have received little critical attention since they appeared.

Cohen is not the kind of historical figure liked by the media. Nor has he formed the basis for a wave of scholarly research. He has few fans. Even though they are available in paperback editions, his major works are too long and too full of blatant eroticism to be read by adolescent readers. Avant-garde critics sometimes look condescendingly at his masterpiece, *Belle du Seigneur*: “this is just another naturalist novel,” they say, before returning to their preferred field of investigation, the so-called *nouveau roman*. But although I do not dispute that in many ways the *nouveau roman* had a tremendous impact in its time, I doubt whether it could ever generate the kind of rich, complex, deeply disturbing emotions that any book by Cohen is bound to provoke.

It is not only French intellectuals who are at fault here. American champions of Francophone literature could easily incorporate Cohen into their canon, yet they seem no more interested in him than their French counterparts. Such discrimination is all the more puzzling, since this Swiss citizen who was born in 1895 into a Sephardic Jewish family on the Greek island of Corfu certainly can lay claim to a place among French-speaking writers, just as surely as can Aimé Césaire and Léopold Sédar Senghor, to name but two.

French was not even Cohen’s mother tongue: when he arrived in France for the first time, at the age of five, he spoke only a Judeo-Venetian dialect (because his birthplace, Corfu, had been occupied by the Venetians when his Spanish Jewish ancestors, expelled from their country in 1492, arrived there). This meant that, for him—as, more recently, for people like Milan Kundera and Andreï Makhine—it was no easy thing to achieve fluency in the language of Molière and Hugo, where the issue is not simply facility, but mastery of the style that distinguishes a great French writer. It symbolizes a bold conquest, a victory won after a long and passionate struggle. Yet both the struggle and the conquest still await proper recognition.

One problem with Cohen may lie in the fact that he did not come from a “colonial” or “postcolonial” background (although Corfu was a British protectorate from 1815 to 1864). He was primarily a European. And he was, to be

more precise, a European Jew. That said, have we found the key to the enigma? Should Cohen's marginal position within the French literary field be attributed simply to anti-Semitism?

As Jack Abecassis shows in the present book, the reality is, of course, much more complex. Proust too was a Jew, as was Nathalie Sarraute. So also were Henri Bergson, and Raymond Aron, and Claude Lévi-Strauss. Yet none of them has for that reason been excluded from the pantheon of great literary or intellectual stars, to which Cohen has so far not been admitted.

Cohen's problem must therefore be of a different order. Without anticipating Abecassis's analysis, which is as brilliant and convincing as it is minutely elaborated, I would like to sum up, in my own words, what I regard as one of his most striking theses.

Let's put it this way: the French establishment's reluctance to regard Cohen's work with the same degree of empathy that it accords Proust arises mainly from the fact that Jewish identity is not a central issue in Proust's work, although it is never absent, whereas most of Cohen's work revolves explicitly around the question of Jewish identity.

Moreover, Cohen never leaves the reader in doubt on this issue. The problem of Jewish identity is always related by him to the fact that the European Jews have to live in a predominantly Christian world, a non-Jewish world that rejects the Jewish law and that may at times show itself to be deeply anti-Jewish—as it happened in Europe from the time of the Dreyfus Affair to the Holocaust, that is to say, during most of Cohen's own lifetime.

Proust, like the vast majority of French "Israelites" (as they used to be called) a century ago, was a so-called assimilated Jew and never questioned the "duty" of assimilation, which the French Revolution had imposed on the Jews. On the contrary, for Cohen—as for the many Sephardic Jews who arrived in France in the 1950 and 1960s fleeing the newly independent North African countries—assimilation was neither obvious nor obviously necessary. For people whose ancestors had not directly shared French history, and who viewed themselves as immigrants in France, assimilation was just an option: an option that some accepted and others rejected, or that the same person might be prone—like Cohen—to accept at times and reject at others, depending on several factors, including the level of French anti-Semitism he encountered at any given moment.

Unfortunately, because of the time in which he lived, Cohen was never able to feel completely at ease in that French Christian world. And, unlike other, more introverted or more cautious Jews, he declined to hide his discomfort.

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He wrote rather extensively on what he called ironically “the catastrophe of being Jewish” (let us note that “catastrophe” is the standard translation of the Hebrew word *Shoah*, which is the word the most commonly used in Europe, as well as in Israel, to refer to the Holocaust). He might even be said to have been the first writer to give that catastrophe a metaphysical, epic dimension. And this is probably why the French Christian world, which never fully accepted him as a citizen when he was alive, still has difficulties accepting him as a writer now that he is dead. It is not only that anti-Semites do not like to be called anti-Semites. It is a much deeper issue involving the “clash” of religions which over the past two thousand years has never ceased to be at the core of the tense Jewish-Christian relationship.

I do not think that in saying so I am overestimating the importance of the religious issue in literary matters. Nobody can seriously doubt that religion and theology (including atheism, which in the end is also theological) played a significant role in French literature and philosophy at all times, including the twentieth century. This is self-explanatory in the case of Paul Claudel, Georges Bataille, André Gide, or Samuel Beckett. It is less explicit in the case of Sartre and Queneau, for instance: yet the last book published by Sartre (with the help of Benny Lévy, alias Pierre Victor) was a book on his own spiritual experiences; and it would not be difficult to show through a close reading of Queneau’s novels that they illustrate an ongoing discussion of the validity of Gnosticism, the religious doctrine that most attracted him.

This is why, returning to Cohen, we should not be surprised by the fact that many of his works involve a dialectical argument on the comparative merits and drawbacks of Judaism and Christianity—an opposition embodied in his novels by the character of Solal, on the one side, and his blonde, aristocratic, non-Jewish mistresses (Ariane, Aude, et al.), on the other.

Yet once again we should try to delve beneath the surface. Yes, Cohen supported Judaism; but never unconditionally or unreservedly. In fact, few Jewish writers have been on occasion so critical of certain aspects of Judaism. Cohen, as Jack I. Abecassis says, had a double identity: he was both Jewish and secular, occidental and oriental, masculine and feminine. He was able to identify with Solal as well as with Ariane. And this was, in a sense, his existential drama. A drama that echoes, in a way, that of the Christianized Spanish and Portuguese Jews called Marranos.

Besides, Judaism and Christianity were not only, for him, the names of two distinct religious traditions. They also had an anthropological or cultural significance. He used to view them—not without reason—as two altogether dif-

ferent “ways of making the world” and inhabiting it. From that point of view, Cohen’s “Jewishness”—and, more precisely, his Sephardic Jewishness, well rooted in the history of his native island—includes cultural features that continue to be at odds, even today, with the Christian worldview.

One of those features is the radiant acceptance of everything that lies under the sun, be it good or evil, as necessary to the whole order of the universe. This kind of Mediterranean outlook, as one might say, allowed Cohen to recognize the central place of sexuality in our lives without feeling ashamed or guilty about it. It also helped him understand, in a psychoanalytical mode, the unconscious mechanisms (narcissism, sadomasochism . . . ) at work in what the Surrealists used to call *amour fou*—an understanding that, in turn, explains his critical views on love, faithfulness, and marriage.

Another feature that is equally linked to the male-dominated cultures of Cohen’s Mediterranean background is his pessimistic (and sometimes derogatory) conception of his female characters. In fact, it is hard to deny that Cohen’s women remain, in too many cases, cultural stereotypes and, at times, very simplistic ones. Cohen was not a big supporter of feminine emancipation. Even his fans must admit it.

Needless to say, these are two more reasons why his fictional work does not much appeal to Christian French readers, and equally disturbs American readers who perceive his indisputable “machismo” as the highest form of political incorrectness.

This will change, and Cohen’s “machismo” will have to be put into historical perspective—that is at least what we can hope for. Yet it will take some time. And it will take still more time, I am afraid, for Cohen’s preoccupation with the Jewish identity issue to be accepted as a normal reaction to a predominantly hostile environment.

This, in fact, will be especially difficult in France, a country where, sadly enough, anti-Semitism, after being subject to almost unanimous censorship in the aftermath of the Holocaust, started resurfacing in the years following the Six-Day War (1967) under the guise of “anti-Zionism.”

Officially, anti-Zionism pretends to have nothing to do with anti-Semitism. We now know—as Martin Luther King Jr. was the first to say—that such a claim is simply untenable. Denying the Jewish people—and them alone—the right to have their own state is a typically anti-Semitic discrimination. Yet although it has been at times sharply criticized, anti-Zionism is not ebbing at all. It is in fact—at least in France—a rising tide, especially since the so-called Second Intifada began in Israel.

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As for Cohen, who was the editor-in-chief of the prestigious *La Revue juive* in Paris before World War II, he never hid his sympathy for Zionism. Yet, his own Zionism was more vocal in the 1920s and the 1930s, on the eve of the war, than it was after the birth of the Israeli state. Actually, he never visited that state. And he chose to spend his last days in Geneva rather than in Jerusalem.

I nevertheless doubt whether the complexity, not to say the strong ambivalence, of his relationship to the so-called Jewish question is fully understood in France. And, as I have said, I doubt this situation is bound to change in the very near future.

This is why I can only rejoice that an American scholar like Jack Abecassis teaches us to read Cohen as he has to be read: as a brilliant, provocative—and sometimes disturbing—witness to the catastrophe that the twentieth century was for European Jews.

Christian Delacampagne