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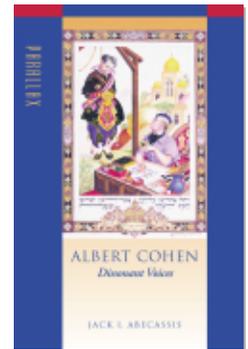
Albert Cohen

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Prologue: The Cohen Paradox

Here, in this room, he has the right to do what he wants, to speak Hebrew, to recite Ronsard to himself, to shout that he is a monster with two heads, a monster with two hearts, that he is everything of the Jewish nation, everything of the French nation. Here, all alone, he can wear the sublime silk of the synagogue over his shoulders and even, if he feels like it, apply the red, white, and blue sticker to his forehead. Here, hidden away and lonely, he will not see the distrustful looks of those he loves and who do not love him.

Albert Cohen, Belle du Seigneur

As one of the most renowned and yet critically unread authors of the French, Jewish, and Sephardic canons, Albert Cohen (1895–1981) presents a rare paradox in academia. The prestigious Bibliothèque de la Pléiade collection, the most visible sign of canonicity in the French print world, has recognized him by publishing an excellent two-volume compendium of his fiction and essays, and quality paperback editions of his works are sold in every well-stocked bookstore in France.¹ Cohen is read by the French-speaking public, and those who read him rarely remain indifferent to his baroque verve, his passion, and his unique style. Yet despite two illuminating biographies in French and a growing body of criticism by a handful of academics associated with the Atelier Albert Cohen and its series *Cahiers Albert Cohen*, wider scholarly interest remains negligible. This is especially the case in the English-speaking world, where only one of Cohen's works, *Book of My Mother*, is currently in print, and there is not a single critical monograph devoted exclusively to Cohen. This is particularly surprising given that Jewish studies and Holocaust studies have become serious components of twentieth-century French curricula in the United States. Why would an author whom Elaine Marks rightly characterizes as “one of the major French writers of the twentieth century who is Jewish by birth and whose narrators are never not conscious of their own Jewishness and the Jewishness, or relation to Jewishness, of most of the important characters in their fictional world” be all but absent from our curricula?²

This is the “Cohen paradox,” which from the start has motivated me to think about this author. Cohen is known, read, appreciated, but deemed too

disturbing for critical inquiry. Why, in fact, is there such a plethora of commentary on Louis-Ferdinand Céline, a great writer to be sure, but such a dearth of commentary about his contemporary Albert Cohen? The two disturb, but Cohen is—consciously or subconsciously—deemed more disturbing. Why? This is the question that I seek to answer in this book through a series of sustained readings of Cohen’s fiction and essays. These readings are an attempt at an uncompromising analysis of his dissonant and nightmarish version of the state of being a Jew, which Cohen himself labels a “catastrophe.” I take this core sentiment, which is both ironic and literal, as the main theme of Cohen’s work.³

To enter Cohen’s world is to face the multiple facets of recounting this catastrophe, which in Cohen is like a wound that does not heal, notwithstanding the occasional extravagantly colored bandages adorning it. Kafka recounts a variant of this catastrophe, yet his systematic usage of allegories and of parables, his sober style, and his focalization of the narrative from a single point of view allow the reader a hermeneutic space for multiple identifications and transferences.⁴ Does one need to think of the specifically Jewish metaphysical and historical predicament to understand *The Trial* or *In the Penal Colony*? Perhaps, but the abstract allegory permits many possible identifications, and oppressed and alienated readers of all creeds and nationalities can thus read themselves into these allegories. The figurative writ large opens that space. Cohen is stylistically precisely the opposite: the hell of being Jewish in early twentieth-century Europe is taken on directly, despite the astounding pains that his readers have taken to avoid seeing the obvious. His comic and baroque novels abound in multiple points of view, complex (and often half-hidden) plots, digressions, streams of consciousness, exuberant styles, constant flaunting of the French prose style, and even transgression of French syntax. Lost in the forest of Cohen’s writing, the reader may find it easy enough to forget what is at stake. Although readers may think that they are reading a satire on romantic delusion (as embodied, for example, in *Anna Karenina*), their unconscious knows the truth that they are reading a burlesque epic on the catastrophe of being Jewish in republican France.

Critics thus politely and even deferentially shy away from the task of evaluating Cohen—they may “love” his writing, but they exclude him from their professional conversation, and silence continues to surround his unpalatable description of the Jewish condition in Europe and the searing ambivalence contained in the Jewish response to this condition. For ideological and esthetic reasons, most of his republican/romantic readers persist in seeing primarily a

meditation on romantic love and its vicissitudes even where Cohen emphatically states the religious and political reasons for his hero's personal catastrophe (most explicitly in chapters 54, 93, and 94 of his epic and best-known novel, *Belle du Seigneur*).⁵ Not a single critic of *Belle du Seigneur* in the three years following its publication even mentions the key episode of the monumental novel, the episode of the dwarf Rachel hiding in her Berlin cellar in 1936. But this determination not to acknowledge the essential was hardly limited to the book's initial reception. A very recent French history of franco-phone literature summarizes *Belle du Seigneur* as follows:

The great theme of Cohen's novel is amorous passion, which is at once glorified and demystified, because it too is liable to weaken. With much satirical verve, the novel also portrays the milieu of international diplomacy in Geneva in the anti-Semitic Europe of the 1930s, all while playfully and derisively suggesting the emptiness and illusory nature of sentiments and ideologies. But the novel is dominated by the spectacular figure of Solal, the passionate, although lucid, seducer. The narrative wins us over with its powerful and baroque inspiration, is often lyrical, epic, tragic, but equally comical, even burlesque.⁶

Everything in this synopsis is true, but unfortunately the main plot of *Belle du Seigneur*—that of an ambivalent court Jew, undersecretary-general of the League of Nations, who tries to save his people from Nazi extermination, fails, and therefore commits suicide—has somehow dissolved into the sprawling text, and instead we have the vague allusion to “anti-Semitic Europe of the 1930s,” as if it were just an incidental element, a historical footnote. Is Cohen's Solal in the League of Nations of 1936 like Stendhal's Fabrice at Waterloo, or like Flaubert's Frédéric during the revolution of 1848, so absorbed in his own story (“amorous passion”) that he does not notice the horror around him? Is history meaningless to him? Is history just sound and fury dissociated from his narcissism? Obviously not! It is precisely against this interpretive tendency, which I see as a symptom of resistance to the meaning of Cohen's work, that I write this book.

At the risk of anticipating many of the arguments of this book, I'll state here, by way of contrast to the republican/romantic reading, the catastrophic Gospel according to Albert Cohen. Cohen's story is that of a boy who loved France but was violently expelled from her bosom; it is the story of how in the specific context of the interwar period, the biblical Josephic and Estheric political plots of salvation through charisma, seduction, and cunning are exhausted, once and for all, and become Purim carnivals of self-mocking, self-

hatred, and hopelessness; it is the story of searing ambivalence about the mother and unrelenting hostility toward the father. It is the story of that nightmarish equivocality where Jews are despised in the flesh but embraced in the abstract, where God is recognized and affirmed by a nonbeliever, where the flesh is condemned for its bestiality and forgetfulness of death yet celebrated in the most sensual way, where the state of Israel is fought for, but the French language remains the true ground of being; it is the universe where a rabbinical Don Juan seduces the feminine projection of himself, a Gentile woman, who also represents the absolute hostile other of his Jewish identity. And, finally, this historical, familial, and psychological nightmare ends in a double suicide—suicide being the theme that haunts Cohen’s successive narratives from 1930 to 1978. In other words, Cohen tells the story of the Jewish catastrophe in a specifically twentieth-century French context, from libel to appeasement to genocide (Dreyfus, Munich, Vichy), not simply in terms of historical narrative, but in terms of successive masochistic fantasies of a kind that no other novelist, in my opinion, has ever penned. The power of such a vision is obvious, and its capacity to disturb, to unhinge, and therefore to be resisted and repressed, is vastly underestimated.

Paradoxically, it is precisely this scriptural fauna of plots and styles, this exuberant strangeness of Cohen’s prose, that allows the reader, even the very sympathetic reader, to become so “lost” as to be unable to see what is clearly on the page: the Jewish catastrophe, the desire to struggle, the longing for death. Cohen is complicit in this obfuscation of the obvious, inasmuch as he himself couples categorical statements with sleight-of-hand concealments, not simply in the texts themselves but especially in his public commentary on them. But the careful reader is in the end pinned down to a reading of a specific catastrophe, and its representation is so disturbing and so dissonant that it constitutes, in my opinion, the root cause of the institutional resistance to the transmission of Cohen’s work.

Abraham Albert Cohen was born in 1895 on the Greek island of Corfu (Kérkíra), which had been a place of refuge for Spanish and Portuguese Jews since the sixteenth century. Cohen’s family was prominent in the community, his grandfather being its religious and civic leader. Cohen’s native language was a Judeo-Venetian dialect, a language that he continued speaking with his parents throughout his life and that underlies his strangely oriental French. After centuries of relative calm, as the euphemism goes, the late nineteenth century was not kinder to the Sephardim in Corfu than it was to their Ashkenazi

brethren in eastern Europe. Blood libels preceded the threat of violent pogroms, which then precipitated communal disintegration and emigration. (Later, during World War II, the entire remaining Jewish population of Corfu was decimated by the Nazis, one of the few Sephardic communities to perish en masse during the Holocaust.) In 1900, the Co[h]en family immigrated to Marseille,⁷ where his parents toiled away in a modest shop selling eggs, while the five-year-old Albert attended a Catholic convent kindergarten, then a state elementary school, and finally the lycée Thierry (with his lifelong friend Marcel Pagnol). The Dreyfus Affair was in its waning phase, but the anti-Semitic virulence in the streets did not spare the young Albert Cohen, who was traumatized for life by the experience of being publicly harassed by a street hawker. During World War I, he studied law and literature in Geneva, rubbing elbows with that city's restless community of foreign students, who ranged from Bolsheviks to Socialists to Zionists. In 1919, he married Elisabeth Brocher, the daughter of a Calvinist pastor, and became a Swiss citizen. He seized on the occasion to alter his last name: Coen became Cohen, making the name even more Hebrew, just as the immigrant became a citizen. In 1921, he published a collection of lyrical poems entitled *Paroles juives* (Jewish Words) to reveal to his wife the verve, vitality, and sensuality of biblical Israel, as opposed to both Calvinism and exilic Judaism, and, more important, perhaps, to affirm his own Jewish identity vis-à-vis (and despite) his Gentile wife. Their only child, Myriam Judith, was born in 1921.

The next year, a relative promised Cohen a paid internship as an apprentice lawyer in Egypt. He traveled there alone, leaving his wife and one-year-old daughter in Switzerland. But Cohen was never actually paid for his internship, and the entire Egyptian episode was a miserable experience for him, except for a chance encounter that dates the beginning of his vocation as a novelist. Walking down the street in Cairo, he saw displayed in a bookstore window Marcel Proust's *À l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs*, the 1919 winner of the Prix Goncourt (the French equivalent of the Pulitzer Prize). He entered the store, picked up the book, began reading, and was transfixed for hours (a store clerk offered the penniless intern a chair to sit on). Later, in 1924, Cohen would teach a summer course on Proust at the University of Geneva.

Cohen's career as a professional Jewish and Zionist activist commenced in Paris in 1925, when Chaim Weizmann, head of the World Zionist Congress, conferred on him the responsibility of establishing, directing, and editing a major cultural review to promote Zionist ideas in the francophone world. Thus was born *La Revue juive* (published by the *Nouvelle Revue française*),

whose editorial board included many Jewish notables, among them Sigmund Freud and Albert Einstein. The review was successful in its initial year, but soon disintegrated because of Cohen's difficulty in collaborating with other Zionist representatives in Paris and Geneva. This personal discord seems to have been a permanent feature of Cohen's intermittent work for Jewish and Zionist organizations from 1925 until the end of World War II.⁸ In 1926, Cohen obtained a post in the diplomatic section of the International Labor Organization, and he thereafter was concurrently a writer, diplomat, and activist. This triple career ended only in 1951, when he retired from his official functions and devoted himself exclusively to writing.

Cohen's first novel, *Solal* (1930), is remarkable for its Dionysian energy, its breathtaking style, and its emblematic plot. It tells the story of a charismatic Joseph-like figure named Solal, who, born on the Greek island of Cephalonia (also one of the Ionian Islands, like Corfu), ascends to political power in France by means of bravery, cunning, and seduction, but whose career (and life, in the first edition) are destroyed when his Sephardic family encroaches on his secular Parisian life, thereby ending his forgetfulness of his origin and destiny.⁹ All of Cohen's subsequent works of fiction focus on the adventures of the great European diplomat Solal and his Gentile women, and on Solal's clownish Sephardic kin, whom he calls the Valorous (also the title of a later work, *Les Valeureux*). The function of the Valorous is both to serve as Solal's ethnic and historical id, and, most important in the plots, to remind Solal that he must be true to his full name (Solal des Solal or, alternatively, Solal Solal), that his life and his name form a tautology from which he cannot escape. Whenever the two worlds collide, disaster occurs. *Solal* was a major literary achievement, garnering wide critical acclaim and meriting immediate translation into English and German. The success won Cohen a long-term contract and stipend from Gallimard, the most important French publishing house both then and now.

His next work, the one-act play *Ézéchiél* (Ezekiel), was staged at the Odéon theater in 1931 and won the first prize in the Comœdia competition. Two years later, the Comédie-Française gave ten performances. *Ézéchiél* tells the story of a Greek Sephardic banker (Solal's father), a grotesque combination of Shylock and Molière's Harpagon incarnating each and every anti-Semitic stereotype, while at the same time claiming to represent the eternal spirit of the Jews. The play sparked heated controversy, especially among Jews (even Cohen's closest friends criticized the play for its alleged display of anti-Semitic self-hatred), and when Gallimard published the final version in 1956, the reprobation of the Jewish community continued unabated.

In 1938, Cohen published *Mangeclous* (Naileater), a burlesque novel focusing on the adventures of Solal and the Valorous. Cohen's original authorial intent was different. Since 1935, he had intended to publish a single novel, entitled *Belle du Seigneur*, or alternatively (and very significantly) "La Geste des Juifs" (The epic of the Jews), that would defy all genre conventions by juxtaposing in one narrative most of the established modes of expression, whether of Rabelais, Proust, or Joyce.¹⁰ By 1938, Cohen already had a complete draft of *Belle du Seigneur*, but he was not entirely satisfied with it. Gallimard insisted on publishing something, however, and to satisfy his contractual obligations, *Mangeclous* was thus extracted from the sprawling manuscript. The novel's blatantly disjointed form, along with the unfortunate timing of its publication, on the eve of World War II, explains its lukewarm critical reception.

With the war imminent and a clear sense of urgency, Cohen returned to his diplomatic career as spokesman for a number of Jewish and Zionist organizations. He launched a feverish campaign in 1939–40 for the creation of a substantial Jewish Foreign Legion that would be trained by the French Army and fight at its side. Cohen was rather successful in his negotiations with the higher echelons of the French Army, but the project was vetoed by Quai d'Orsay (the French Foreign Office) and by the British Foreign Office, both representing colonial powers in the Near East and both hostile toward any organized Jewish armed force, which they perceived as the precursor of a future Jewish army in Palestine. (Ironically, this was exactly what happened with the British "Jewish Brigade" that fought in the middle and later stages of World War II). Cohen's prewar effort thus failed. The phony war (*drôle de guerre*) soon commenced, followed by the debacle of the French and British Armies in May–June 1940.

Fleeing the invading German armies and accompanied by his daughter and his second wife, Marianne Goss (his first wife had died of lymphatic cancer in 1924), Cohen escaped from France in June 1940 to London, where he continued his career as writer, diplomat, and activist. In his haste to abandon his Paris apartment on the rue du Cherche Midi, he left behind all his manuscripts, including the first complete version of *Belle du Seigneur*; these were saved, along with the furniture, only by the good graces of the Swiss legation, and stored safely in its diplomatic cellars. In London from 1940 to 1947, Cohen published early versions of his major essays about his mother (who died in 1943 in German-occupied Marseille) and about the traumatic anti-Semitic street incidents he had experienced in Marseille in 1905, as well as various wartime articles, mainly in *La France libre*. He was also very active on the diplomatic front, first serving as diplomatic liaison between the Jewish Agency

for Palestine and the Allies, and then, from 1944 to 1947, at the summit of his legal and diplomatic career, working as legal counselor for the London-based Intergovernmental Committee for Refugees. There he wrote *The Refugee Travel Title* (1946), which he considered his most important work, either diplomatic or literary, and which subsequently became the basis for the definitive *International Conventions Relative to the Status of Refugees of the 28th of July 1951*.¹¹

Albert Cohen and Marianne Goss officially divorced in 1947, having been separated since 1946, and he pursued his diplomatic career in Geneva until 1951. Cohen returned to literature in 1954 with the autobiographical essay *Le Livre de ma mère* (*Book of My Mother*), and a revised version of his play *Ézéchiel*, published in 1956. *Le Livre de ma mère* was an instant hit and reestablished Cohen in the French literary world. *Ézéchiel*, however, suffered the same reprobation as in 1933. In the middle 1950s, having married Bella Berkowich, his literary secretary, Cohen commenced an isolated, reclusive existence, punctuated by three surgeries and bouts of depression.¹² During this period of isolation, melancholy, and sickness, he and Bella produced four drafts of his monumental novel *Belle du Seigneur*, and in 1967, he submitted a 1,400-page manuscript of it to his publisher, which was rejected “as is” by the Gallimard editors, who judged it to be stylistically incoherent, technically unmanageable, and literarily unpalatable. Cohen then reconfigured the novel by deleting five hundred pages of seriocomic, Rabelaisian material, and the relatively streamlined *Belle du Seigneur* as we know it today was subsequently published. For this novel he received the Grand Prix du roman de l’Académie française and immediate critical and popular acclaim. After 1968, Cohen became an odd literary celebrity, often sought out for interviews, which he seems to have relished, the most famous of which is the one-hour interview in his apartment for the weekly literary television program *Apostrophes* with Bernard Pivot.¹³ These interviews were mostly regrettable: Cohen allowed the interviewer to frame his work in erroneous ways, permitting his “Stendhalization” and “Don Juanization” (Pivot spent an inordinate amount of the *Apostrophes* interview inquiring with great titillation about the ten “moves” of seduction). In other interviews, perhaps under the influence of medication, Cohen proffered perplexing statements, especially about other authors.¹⁴ The deleted fragments of *Belle du Seigneur* were subsequently published in 1969 as *Les Valeureux* (The valorous), a separate, stand-alone novel, which concludes the saga of Solal. In 1971, he published *Ô vous, frères humains* (O you, human brothers), an autobiographical essay about a traumatic anti-Semitic incident he suffered as a child. *Carnets 1978* (Notebooks 1978), a dark and lyrical meditation on mortality and suffer-

ing, is a monologue addressed by Cohen to an absent God, whom Cohen sees as the projection of the Jewish prophetic temperament onto the infinite—the delirious cogitations of a man nearing death, but already present in *Solal* forty-eight years earlier. There is an astounding unity to all of Cohen's writings.

Before his death in 1981, Cohen insisted that many thousands of manuscript pages and all his correspondence be destroyed.¹⁵ I suspect that he feared that he might suffer at the hands of others the fate that Proust had suffered at his own. We know that in 1925, Cohen asked Robert Proust (Marcel's older brother) to see the author's archives. And what a disappointment it was! Cohen was sickened by Proust's letters to the princesse de Noailles, and he was henceforth unable to read *À la recherche du temps perdu* without feeling contempt for an author whose personal correspondence was filled with flattery and nonsense.¹⁶ I surmise that he feared the same fate for his own literary posterity—feared that some of his papers that revealed his own foibles might fall into the hands of merciless readers and discredit his work. It would consequently be safer, he felt, to burn the papers and leave the published work to stand exclusively on its own merits, sheltered from traces left behind of the feebleness of an ego enmeshed in what he called the "baboonery" of "the Social," which is always the very petri dish of stupidity. Another reason for burning the manuscripts was that Cohen had created an aristocratic and erotic creation myth according to which his published works were the fruit of spontaneous oral dictation to a loving woman, the Seigneur dictating to his Belle. And while it is true that he dictated much of his work, the myriad manuscripts would surely have revealed a much more belabored writing process. Nothing would have displeased Cohen more than a careful genetic reconstruction of his texts. He was too invested in his own myth.

The foregoing literary chronology underscores an essential thematic and stylistic synchrony in all of Cohen's writings. Albert Cohen recognized this synchrony, and he was fond of saying that he simply masticated (*ressassait*) his own "cud," that is, he endlessly repeated the same (dissonant) montage, only in different keys, scales, and tonalities. The history of the creation of his monumental novel *Belle du Seigneur* bears this out. In fact, the only published novel that adheres to Cohen's original manuscript intent is *Solal*, which best represents his aesthetic choice to juxtapose the dissonant genres of the romantic and the seriocomic in a single text. In other words, *Mangeclous*, *Belle du Seigneur*, and *Les Valeureux* should be read as one novel, the prototype of which, *in petito*, is *Solal*.

It is impossible today to recover “La Geste des Juifs,” the baroque *roman fleuve* that Cohen initially intended, from *Belle du Seigneur*. And, as noted above, Cohen went out of his way to make sure that we would not even be tempted to try. But when reading these texts, one should nevertheless remember the artificiality of their truncated state. This is why I study the dialogical relationship, the astonishing intratextuality, among Cohen’s seriocomic novels, (anti)-romantic novels, and autobiographical essays. The same characters—Solal, the Valorous—appear in all four novels, and Cohen seems to assume the reader’s familiarity with the unfolding saga at hand. The fifty-year-long dialogue between Solal and Mangeclous, between the competing fantasies of Jew and Gentile, Don Juan and Jeremiah, the Orient and the Occident, insiders and outsiders, is key to any hermeneutics of Cohen’s œuvre as a whole. It is all too tempting to read Cohen only through the narrative of *Belle du Seigneur* or only through those of *Mangeclous* and *Les Valeureux*, without seeing their tight dialogical relationship, whatever their aesthetic incongruity.¹⁷ The two most seemingly disparate novels begin in the same manner. Solal contemplates killing himself in *Belle du Seigneur*; likewise *Les Valeureux* opens with Mangeclous deciding that that day is to be his last day, that he is going to finally commit suicide, since he has no prospect of becoming a great man, and that a huge, Rabelaisian meal is therefore called for. Mangeclous does not kill himself but eventually returns to his birthplace, Cephalonia—a return trip that, as the play *Ézéchiel* strongly suggests, is for Solal worse than death.

Even across genre boundaries, Cohen traffics in almost identical fantasies—words, phrases, and images float from one genre to the other; entire fragments transit from his essays, such as *Le Livre de ma mère*, *Ô vous, frères humains*, and *Carnets 1978*, to his fiction, and vice versa. In *Belle du Seigneur*, Uncle Saltiel, who wants his nephew Solal to marry a Jewess, places a page-long personal ad that reads exactly like the rambling account of the qualities most desirable in a Jewish wife that Cohen attributes to his mother in *Le Livre de ma mère*.¹⁸ Furthermore, many of the metacritical digressions, apostrophes, and mini-essays in Cohen’s works of fiction bear a close resemblance to his actual biographical essays. And the essays clearly contain nascent fictional or fictionalized episodes. This is why the whole question of knowing whether the fictional Solal stands for Albert Cohen, which Cohen categorically denied, is beside the point.¹⁹ If anything, Solal, together with the Valorous and the maternal figure, represents *in toto* a collage of Cohen’s repeated ghoulish and clownish identity fantasies.

The intention of this book is to study in all its facets the representation that Cohen gives of the “catastrophe of being Jewish,” which is the most difficult—and therefore the most repellent—thematic thread in Albert Cohen’s literary creation. In a sequence of chapters that range in theme from early trauma to mythic and historical fantasies to mourning and finally to suicide, I cut along the rawest nerves that run through Cohen’s work. It may be objected that this suicidal scheme is common enough, especially in introspective novels.²⁰ True, but my interest lies precisely in what makes Cohen’s suicidal schemes emblematic of a collective experience that transcends personal psychology. Too often the critical tendency has been to accept Solal’s suicide as the result of disenchantment with romantic love, a view that Cohen did not discourage, because he remains obtuse or even misleading as to the meaning of those suicides to the very end. This view is partially valid, but terribly misleading. Whereas the final double suicide in *Belle du Seigneur* has sometimes been interpreted as a Jewish variation on the theme of *Tristan and Isolde*, I see it as a direct response to the “catastrophe of being Jewish” in the specific circumstances of the 1930s.²¹ In my view, Solal commits suicide because he is a failed Joseph and a failed Esther, and not because he is a failed Don Juan or a miserable Julien Sorel. The scheme of the erotic suicide is simply an intertextual Trojan Horse, which transports a specifically Jewish nightmare into the French *cit  des belles lettres*. The relevant historical intertext of Cohen’s morbidity is more likely to be found in the biographies of Theodor Lessing, Rudolph Loewenstein, and Sander Gilman’s self-executing Jews than in *Madame Bovary* and *Anna Karenina*.²² Solal’s suicide is his personal holocaust—and there is no way of understanding *Belle du Seigneur* unless the fate of European Jewry during the Holocaust is both the background and heart of the novel, its partially invisible center of gravity.²³

Cohen’s dissonant baroque aesthetics are also crucial for my argument. His fiction is akin to the carnival of Purim (a general parody of being, or humorous masochistic exercise, that exilic Judaism developed as a survival mechanism) writ large, expressed through the constant play of doubling and concealment. The mythical overlay, the confrontation of a personal journey and concrete historical context (pregnant with the impending catastrophe in those years between the wars), and the baroque performative expressiveness clearly set Cohen’s carnivalesque epic novels apart from similar narratives of introspection and make his suicidal schema worthy of close study. In a sense, I am retelling the legend of Albert Cohen in my own manner—trying to account for his spectacular masochistic dissonance.²⁴

Sketched thus, Albert Cohen's diplomatic and literary lives, and the motifs of his writings, do not square with the evident reluctance to include him in our cultural heritage, and being included in my view only occurs if an author is not only read (and Cohen is) but also written about, studied in classrooms and graduate seminars, and becomes, in short, part of a living conversation. The musical metaphor of "dissonance" in the title of this book asks the reader to adopt a dynamic mode of thought when approaching this paradox—with respect both to the logic of Cohen's texts and the effect that they have on readers. Dissonance in music refers to the tension in a chord that must, but does not, resolve itself by notes returning to a certain (resting) scale. Inversely, musical consonance refers to rest and resolution, in other words, harmony.²⁵ Every text contains dynamics of tension and resolution, but what is particular to Cohen are both the specific character of his dissonance and its effect on readers. Every familiar note (say Tristan and Isolde or Don Juan or even Zionist hopes) descends to another key without harmonic resolution, not even in death. That is the repetitive procedure.

Cohen speaks through the juxtaposition of a number of incongruent voices. In Chapter 6, for example, I show how in *Belle du Seigneur*, the protagonist Solal is concurrently a Don Juan who seduces women serially and a Jeremiah who denounces the valorization of all markers of hierarchical physical difference, such as beauty and strength, as a symptom of zoological regression from the human to the animal. Furthermore, in seducing Ariane, his feminized Aryan double, Solal seems to assert that Judaism stands for the massive transvaluation of all pagan values, that is, the victory of the Law over nature, of the human over the animal. And yet Solal does not practice the Law, does not believe in God (the source of the Law), and shuns the company of Jews whenever possible. Historically, this predicament, this systematic masochism, reminds us of the metaphysical and existential double binds of European assimilated Judaism.²⁶ But Solal's hysterical anti-nature jeremiads also run counter to his own Zionism, which is itself a complete transvaluation of traditional Jewish values in that it advocates a return to nature, beauty, and strength, and a turning away from traditional forms of subservience to the Law.²⁷

Furthermore, Solal's metaphysical rants contain strong misogynistic overtones, stemming from both the Don Juan and the Jeremiah dimensions, and I suspect these also play a large part in the institutional reticence about Albert Cohen.²⁸ In Cohen's fiction, the romantic European woman adores the alpha baboon—and is therefore contemptible, just as contemptible, I may add, as

the object of her desire, the baboon. The Jewish woman (read, the mother), on the other hand, stands in opposition to the Aryan lover in that she values the Law over nature. On the face of it, this seems to be the logic of the manifest plot of *Belle du Seigneur*. Yet a close reading of what Ariane actually says in her multiple streams of consciousness renders this argument meaningless. Ariane in fact hates male baboons and yearns for exactly the same feminine paradise as that described in *Le Livre de ma mère*, where Cohen fantasizes about becoming an old woman living with her sister—who is also, incidentally, Cohen's mother. I argue that the character of Solal is a hybrid of Don Juan, Jeremiah, and a feminized son, caught in his own web of historical, metaphysical, and psychoanalytical dissonances, tensions that can only be resolved in suicide—the double suicide of the empirical self (Solal) and its poeticized feminine phantasm (Ariane). In other words, the protean formula of *Belle du Seigneur*, as indeed of all of Cohen's fiction, is *the self-fashioning of death with the other who is at heart the same*.

Finally, writing about a foreign author who is virtually unknown to the English-speaking public presents expository problems that a critic of Flaubert or Proust does not face. Most readers of this book have little or no familiarity with Cohen's texts. Wherever it seemed appropriate, I have therefore included plot summaries and brief biographical details based on the critical apparatus of the Pléiade edition of *Belle du Seigneur* and Jean Blot's and Gérard Valbert's biographies of Cohen.²⁹ To facilitate further research and study of Cohen, a bibliography of his published writings and comprehensive listings of biographical studies of him and of studies of his works are provided preceding the general bibliography. I have tried to make the book as readable as possible by giving translations of passages cited from Cohen's writings, or sometimes quotations from David Coward's translation of *Belle du Seigneur*, in the body of the text, with the original French given below in the footnotes. I have also avoided using untranslated French terms. By building my study of "Cohen" from the ground up, as it were, I aim to familiarize the reader with Cohen's idiom: his mythopoetic vernacular, linguistic ticks, repetitions, and obsessive echoes of core scenes. I have striven throughout to minimize critical jargon and scholarly clutter and to adopt a vocabulary peculiar to Cohen (e.g., "the Social," "belonging" [*en être*], "baboonery"). All the same, this book is very much indebted to the existing scholarly works on Cohen, to psychoanalytical concepts (especially those of Melanie Klein and Daniel Sibony), to the Bakhtinian poetics of the novel, to narratology (especially Dorit Cohn's work

on the stream of consciousness and Peter Brooks's understanding of plots and metaphors), and to the intellectual history of Judaism, especially the concept of the Marrano,³⁰ the crypto-Jew. In writing this book, I had in mind A. B. Yehoshua's monumental novel *Mr. Mani*, which is a modernist rewriting of the book of *Genesis*, haunted by transgression, insanity, and suicides. Most important, however, I finally got a bearing on the figure of Solal—or was rescued from a “Stendhalian” vision of Solal—through the reading of Thomas Mann's series of four novels on the theme of Joseph and his brothers (1934–44). Mann's expansive treatment of the story of the patriarch Jacob, his wives, sons, and eventually, Joseph in Egypt—all written as an allegory of the predicament of modern Judaism—allowed me to begin to understand the Solal identity montage in all its mythic and historical dimensions and therefore begin to make the necessary connections among the seemingly highly disparate elements of Cohen's works. Mann taught me how to begin to read Cohen.