



PROJECT MUSE®

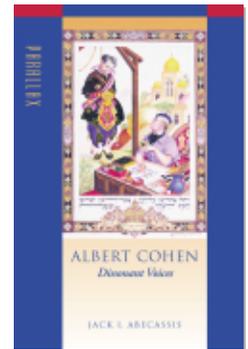
Albert Cohen

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

Albert Cohen: Dissonant Voices.

Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005.

Project MUSE., <https://muse.jhu.edu/>.



➔ For additional information about this book

<https://muse.jhu.edu/book/60339>

Access provided at 22 Sep 2019 09:26 GMT with no institutional affiliation



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.

The Double Bar Mitzvah

The essential is to be identical to your name, to incarnate it.

Daniel Sibony, Perversions

[The]Father . . . has this obsession of forcing the son to sacrifice.

Daniel Sibony, Psychanalyse et Judaïsme

The Jewish adolescent rite of passage, or bar (“to be worthy of”) mitzvah (“commandment”), signifies individuation vis-à-vis parents and integration into a community. Cohen presents two distinct bar mitzvahs—the first, in *Solal*, is a bar mitzvah ceremony during which the father explicitly commands his son, Solal, to estrange himself from all communities except the Jewish community. This demand for communitarian and metaphysical insularity also reminds Solal that, since the destruction of the Temple, Jews have existed outside of history. The second, metaphorical bar mitzvah occurs in *Ô vous, frères humains*, an autobiographical narrative that recounts an adolescent rite of passage in 1905 when the ten-year-old Albert Cohen was subjected to violent anti-Semitic aggression. Here, for the first time, Cohen comes to perceive himself, irremediably, as a perennial universal pariah, not an *Israélite* citizen of the French Republic. (The *Israélite* is an assimilated person of Jewish origin, whereas the *Juif* [Jew] is an unassimilated Jew.)¹ An anti-Semitic street hawker (*camelot*) delivers a message essentially like the one dictated by the father in *Solal*: you are fundamentally different, quintessentially foreign; your place in history is one of permanent exile. Good society in which people are at ease with themselves is forever inaccessible to you. Even when successful in the Social, yours will always be a high-wire act. The street hawker’s message is the X-ray negative of the image transmitted by the father: while the father insists on insularity from the inside, the anti-Semite imposes exclusion from the outside—both exclude Solal from Europe, the one community to which he really

wants to belong. Cohen thus remains suspended between the Jewish ghetto and the Gentile European city, with no return and no definite departure.

Bar Mitzvah I: Metaphysical Calling-Reminding

In the first part of *Solal*, the thirteen-year-old protagonist, Solal des Solal, celebrates his bar mitzvah. After the Shabbath synagogue service, his father, Rabbi Gamaliel, gives the bar mitzvah charge. Gamaliel plays a pivotal role in the *Solal / Belle du Seigneur* saga, for he is simultaneously the biological father of Solal, the rabbi and patriarch of the Jewish community in Cephalonia, and a renowned expert in Halakah (Jewish Law). He embodies authority and the transmission of the Law. Even so, his bar mitzvah charge simply stuns those present, who had expected a cheerful, hortatory bar mitzvah charge but instead hear a bleak theological diatribe, a lashing of sorts with the spears of the Law. Gamaliel targets his son exclusively, the audience is merely the backdrop: face-to-face, the patriarch summons his son to utter and thereby affirm the Abrahamic and Mosaic *Here I am*.

Solal is no ordinary adolescent. The strength and beauty of his body and the brilliance of his mind mark him as singular—and Gamaliel knows it. At night while looking at the stars, the great rabbi often wonders whether his son is the *L'Attendu* (the Expected), that is, the Messiah, and others, as we shall later see, have the same premonition.² So, instead of clichés about the passage from childhood to adulthood, this charge—the affirmation that the father demands from the son—concerns the passage from nature to anti-nature, from history to insularity. Solal is summoned literally to forego what is *at hand* for what is *in memory*. Gamaliel's charge represents what Daniel Sibony calls a calling-reminding (*appel-rappel*) of the father to the son, although here it is a particularly brutal example. The violent charge is a traumatic experience, because it marks the opening of a rift between father and son, pitting the son's concrete exogenous desire against the father's abstract yet brutal demand for fidelity to difference, memory, and location.

The scene is dramatic. Posed majestically under a radiant blue Mediterranean sky, in a courtyard infused with the perfume of citrus trees and jasmine, Gamaliel admonishes Solal to accord his conduct and desire to the strictest version of priestly Judaism by learning to inhabit this abyss between nature and the Law. Gamaliel's charge represents an intransigent priestly vision of Judaism, a strain of Judaism that is insular and impermeable to all foreign

intrusion, and, above all, resistant to the romantic ambitions already in an advanced state of gestation in Solal's charismatic and erotic imagination:

Act justly without hope of reward, so that the people may reap glory. (Pause.) Despise woman and what they call beauty. They are two fangs of the serpent. Anathema on him who stops to look at a beautiful tree. (Pause.) Charity is the pleasure of feminine peoples; the charitable savors the exhalations of his goodness; in his heart of hearts he proclaims himself righteous; charity is vanity and love of your neighbor is of impure origin. The poor man has a legal right of ownership to part of your property. (Pause.) Later, do not be repelled by our deformity. We are the monsters of humanity, for we have declared war on nature.*

This diatribe must be read carefully, for these propositions reverberate throughout the *Solal / Belle du Seigneur* saga, and at the least expected, and most dissonant, moments. I read this discourse as an early metaphysical trauma, the symptoms of which resurface time and again in Cohen's writings.

The punctuation conveys a paratactic rhythm, suspended with clearly marked parenthetical indications "(Pause.)" of silence. Like a stone sinking to the bottom of a deep well, each proposition is given the silent time to reach the bottom and settle. The propositions are delivered in cadence, juxtaposed, with the exception of the last one; they are not reasoned or even coordinated as a series of logical propositions. This is the cadence of the Law, laid down like the Tablets of Moses—oracular words beyond articulated reason. Gamaliel's speech contains five principal propositions:

1. "Act justly without hope of reward, so that the people may reap glory. (Pause.)" Justice is decoupled from individual destiny. Justice benefits and thereby glorifies the people, not only the individuals who act justly. Dutiful action does not allow for individual compensation—there is no hope of personal glory, distinction, individuation, or realization of narcissistic desire. The ego is abstracted; only the community stands, the only goal of which is glory gained through obedience to the Law.

*"Sans espoir de récompense agis avec justice afin que le peuple soit glorifié. (Pause.) Méprise la femme et ce qu'ils appellent beauté. Ce sont deux crochets du serpent. Anathème à qui s'arrête pour regarder un bel arbre. (Pause.) La charité est le plaisir des peuples féminins; le charitable savoure les fumées de sa bonté; en son âme secrète, il se proclame supérieur; la charité est une vanité et l'amour du prochain vient des parties impures. Le pauvre a droit légal de propriété sur une partie de ton bien. (Pause.) Plus tard, ne sois pas rebuté par notre difformité. Nous sommes le monstre d'humanité; car nous avons déclaré combat à la nature." (*Solal*, 111)

2. “Despise woman and what they call beauty. They are two fangs of the serpent.” Decant the sexual difference of all aesthetic value in favor of the human-divine difference. The religious life probes the presence of the divine in that difference between the world as-it-is and that which gives it meaning; it “manages” this tension by obeying the Law, and, above all, studies its texts. The sensual life, where sexual difference is essential, creates its own value, through adoration of beauty and attention to minutiae. According to Gamaliel, the two differences are mutually exclusive. Woman is the source of perdition. The pronoun “they” (*ils*) is important. It does not refer to those assembled, but to those besieging the ghetto community: the Greeks and, above all, the Europeans, pagan adulators of “beauty.” The references to the serpent and its two fangs (woman, beauty) obviously echo Genesis 3, but in a curious way. Gamaliel exhibits an unusually Augustinian reading of the Fall, since Jewish thought does not accord the narrative of Adam and Eve the ontological import attributed to it in Christianity.³ Curiously, though, Solal repeats the father’s anti-feminine diatribe, especially at moments of erotic seduction and/or disintegration, moments when he is seemingly the farthest from the calling-reminding represented by the father. When Solal, for example, harpoons his wife Aude with his spite against the feminine, he transposes the father’s bar mitzvah charge without changing the slightest nuance:

Imbecile, he articulated. You idiot, I paid you the royal tribute of being sincere and disarmed. You have seen me on my knees, me! How right I was always to despise women! Before I was born I detested the servile creatures, who worship the fist, the intonation, and the fame. I loathe my memories of my intra-uterine life. So, what you needed was virile silence, and the virile ice, which you little satin idiots are always dying to break. ‘Rat-a-tat, beautiful knight, strong and silent, may I come in?’ Imbecile! All this time I have been trying to escape the machinery [of the masculine]. I tried not to treat you as a woman. I honored you.*

3. “Anathema on him who stops to look at a beautiful tree. (Pause.)” This dictum refers to a famous passage from *The Ethics of the Fathers* [Pirke

*Imbécile! articula-t-il. Ô idiot, je t’ai fait ce royal hommage d’être sincère et désarmé. Tu m’as vu à genoux, moi! Le mépris que j’ai toujours éprouvé pour la femme, comme il était juste. Avant ma naissance, je détestais ces créatures de servage qui adorent le poing, l’intonation et le renom. Quel sale souvenir j’ai gardé de ma vie intra-utérine. Donc ce qu’il te fallait, c’était le silence viril et la glace virile que les petites folles de satin meurent d’envie de rompre. “Toc toc toc, beau chevalier énergique et silencieux, puis-je entrer?” Imbécile! Tous ces temps, je n’ai pas voulu faire de la machinerie. Je n’ai pas voulu te traiter en femme. Je t’ai honorée. (*Solal*, 326)

Avot], a compendium of ethical principles authored by some sixty sages between 300 B.C.E. and 200 C.E., which actually reads: “R. Jacob said, He who is walking by the way and studying, and breaks off his study and says, How fine is that tree, how fine is that fallow, him the Scripture regards as if he had forfeited his life.”⁴ Where Rabbi Gamaliel’s proposition seems to apply to all persons in all circumstances, in the original context, this prohibition and anathema are much more circumscribed, applying exclusively to a person who is in the midst of studying the Torah. Perhaps the most surprising of the propositions, this decree almost places Rabbi Gamaliel in Gnostic heresy, where all matter is fallen and only the immaterial spirit is divine. This proposition blatantly contradicts the “And it was good!” declaration at the end of each day of creation in Genesis, which we shall find echoed in *Solal*: “And God rejoices in his creature.”* Theology aside, it is imperative here to note the radical estrangement that the Law of the father imposes on the son—not merely estrangement from the feminine, but from everything material and beautiful. Everything is disinvested except for the study of the Torah and the survival of the community. Ironically, these Gnostic-sounding propositions could not be in greater dissonance with the seductive physical backdrop: a sunny Greek island and blue sea; the aroma of trees and flowers permeating everything—including the son’s nascent libido.

4. “Charity is the pleasure of feminine peoples; the charitable savors the exhalations of his goodness; in his heart of hearts he proclaims himself righteous; charity is vanity and love of your neighbor is of impure origin. The poor man has a legal right of ownership to part of your property. (Pause.)” Again, the good does not come from individual judgment or choice, but instead from respect for rights and duties placed above any and all intersubjective dynamics. Again, the ego is circumvented, for whatever pleasure it may derive from charitable acts is condemned as feminine narcissism. The masculine is all Law. It does not depend on the vagaries of desire for gratitude, the philanthropist’s secret sadism. The masculine gives because of the Law, not because of natural categories such as pity or pride. The poor have a right to a portion of your goods, and when you give them whatever is rightfully theirs, do not bask in the aura of self-congratulating *caritas*. Draw justice from subjective desire and place it in collective obligation, well beyond the vagaries of the will. “Love of your neighbor is of impure origin”: The Law does not summon you to love your neighbor, but to

*Et Dieu se réjouissait de sa créature. (*Solal*, 193)

respect him or her. After all, the fifth commandment of Moses reads: “Respect [*Chabed*] your father and mother”—as opposed to “Love your father and mother.”⁵ Likewise, the essence of Judaism according to Hillel—“Don’t do unto others what you do not want done to yourself”—does not necessarily imply any notion of love, but rather a utilitarian concept of cooperative mutuality. Gamaliel again criticizes the utopian ambient Christian theology in which love supposedly eclipses the Law. One of Cohen-the-novelist’s voices often echoes Gamaliel’s critique, especially in his acerbic satire of high-minded charitable charades: “Versailles, Trianon Palace. Charity ball of the Ladies of the Bloody Cross. On the chests of heavy gunner generals the crosses of Saint John and Saint Peter.”*

5. “Later, do not be repelled by our deformity. We are the monsters of humanity, for we have declared war on nature.” This is the only proposition that contains within it an argument. Read backward, the logical chain unfolds: Jews have declared war on nature and messianic utopias, and they have thus become monstrous to pagans and Christians. This metaphysical monstrosity has physically deformed the Jews, as Cohen would explain in an extensive and searing stream of consciousness at the end of *Belle du Seigneur*.⁶ Although he himself is beautiful, the godlike Solal should learn to interpret correctly, and therefore not be repelled by, his kin’s repulsiveness. Cohen’s readers will at this point recognize the conceptual origin of his carnivalesque and physically grotesque protagonists: Mangeclous; the band of deformed but ever so entertaining relatives known as the Valorous; Solal’s mother; Jérémie; and, above all, the dwarf Rachel. I know of no other Jewish fictional author who exorcises these misshapen demons, whether they are real, self-generated, or an interiorization of the Gentile’s hostile gaze, or a combination of all three. Be that as it may, this last proposition in the father’s diatribe may germinate and eventually mutate, but its seed will remain a constant programmatic desire in Cohen’s writings: to “show the glory of Israel to those who saw only Jews”†—while Cohen remains, at least in the fictional character of Solal, extremely ambivalent about his repulsion from and outright desire for this “monstrosity.” Time and again, Solal willingly fabricates situations where he attempts not to be “repelled by our deformity” and repeatedly falls short of embracing this “deformity.” Much of the fictional and conceptual drama of Cohen’s writ-

*Versailles. Trianon-Palace. Bal de bienfaisance des Dames de la Croix Sanglante. Aux poitrines des généraux d’artillerie lourde les croix de saint Jean et de saint Pierre. (*Solal*, 213)

†dire la beauté d’Israël à qui ne voyait que les Juifs (*Solal*, 291)

ing derives its power from this attraction to and repulsion from Jews. Solal, at least, always falls short of obeying Gamaliel's commands, yet he remains forever mindful of them.

Many of these propositions may seem strange to those familiar with the Hebrew Bible. For example, contrary to Gamaliel's admonitions, the affirmation of the inherent goodness of creation is categorical, although God is caught in the drama of either blessing or scattering, creating or destroying, an in-between dynamic notably absent from Gamaliel's monological dogmatism, which tends to resemble Gnosticism more than Judaism.⁷ But the link between greatness and beauty, if not necessarily causal and categorical, as in the Greek sense of *kalon k'agathon* (good and noble conduct), is nevertheless an important and persistent feature of Hebrew and Jewish greatness, as in the cases of Sarah, Joseph, King David (supposedly God's favorite), and Queen Esther.

But I suspect that the real etiology of Gamaliel's rigidity also reflects concrete historical realities. In part, at least, his theology is a symptom of a long history of exile, exclusion, and violence—and therefore intellectual deformation, which explains Cohen's corrective intent in *Paroles juives* (1921) to excavate and recover from the ruins of exilic Judaism a form of positive and sensual Hebraism (but even here he is unable to suppress his aggressiveness):

Endormie
Sur ta bouche entrouverte
Sur tes lèvres fendues de fièvre
J'écraserai les filles lourdes de la vigne.

Comme l'esclave à genoux je laverai la blessure.
Et je baiserais ta lassitude royale
Ô Sulamite.⁸

Asleep
On your but slightly parted lips
On your lips cracked with fever
I shall crush the heavy daughters of the vine.

Like a slave on his knees I shall cleanse your wound.
And I shall kiss your regal weariness
O Shulamite.

In these early poems, he expresses a desire to escape from both Gamaliel's rigid rabbinical posture and the equally misanthropic Pauline and Augustinian anthropology. In rejecting both, he desires to "show the glory of Israel to those who saw only Jews," exhibiting the Zionist will to excavate the Hebrew

beneath the Jew. This Jewish-Hebrew fault line, along with his budding European identity, gives rise to Solal's own particular dissonant identity montage. But, as Alain Schaffner correctly asserts, these straightforward "Solalic" poems represent the "Cohen before Cohen," that is, the Albert Cohen before he adopted a much more Pauline anthropology, which always undermines the excavation of the Hebrew beneath the Jew and therefore circles back to a moribund conception of Judaism.⁹

In saying "No!" to his father's charge, Solal resists (self-)sacrifice to the father's Law and the imperative slavery to memory. The father wants to sacrifice his son to the Law and to the exilic community. But Solal is no Isaac; he is more of a Joseph; he does desire at times to serve his kin, but always reticently, at arm's length. To reach this position in the outside world (the courts of Pharaoh or Ahasuerus, or the League of Nations in Geneva), the father must be eclipsed. Joseph's luck was to have lost his father, at least for a long while. That is not to say that Solal rejects the father's Law or the memory of kin outright, merely that he entertains a very ambiguous relationship to them, oscillating between fidelity and rejection, attraction and repulsion. This dissonance will mark Solal's fictional career; he will violate all the "Thou shall not(s)" of the father, all the while holding on to the father's Law in some perverse, fannatical fashion.

Why dissonance? Because each and every point of the father's Law estranges Solal from the secular European world he so desires; and, later on, each advance into this coveted European Social remains always precarious in nature. The Law estranges him from the world; the world estranges him from the Law; when he is with the one, he opposes to it the other, and vice versa—but no resolution to this conflict is ever offered, except for the perpetual repetition in all minor and major keys of the dissonant chord, culminating in suicide.

Alongside rabbinical training, Gamaliel allows his son a secular French education. The French high school is a gateway to the outside, a bridge to the mainland. Among other things, French literature teaches Solal about romance, about an erotic ideal notably absent from the Cephalonian ghetto, where all the Jewish women are distinctly unerotic. By the time of his bar mitzvah, Solal is erotically obsessed with the island's French consul's twenty-four-year-old wife, Adrienne de Valdonne. Romance is a form of religion, a binding to a feminine seductive ideal.¹⁰ In fact, every aspect of Gamaliel's charge opposes Western romance. Whereas the severe rabbi is hostile to feminine beauty, spontaneous emotional impulses, and highly mannered rituals of desire and

coitus, romance prizes these indulgences above all else. An extreme, but reasoned, formula: romance represents the reintroduction of the pagan, while the rabbi represents priestly monotheism bordering on Gnosticism and xenophobia. Solal, Adrienne, Gamaliel (and all their various permutations in Cohen's fiction) henceforth form an agonistic triangle. The Mediterranean sun-boy desires the Aryan; a desire rebuffed by the lawful patriarch, Gamaliel: "Adrienne de Valdonne. Why did she want to see the rabbi? What did this goddess and that ill-natured man they called the 'Rabbi of the Mediterranean' and the 'Light of Exile' have in common?"* Add to this mix the specific historical backdrop of the Dreyfus Affair and the drama is complete. The aristocratic Adrienne is by definition anti-Semitic and anti-Dreyfusard. When she invites the rabbi to a charity reception, he politely but firmly refuses on account of Dreyfus. But for the thirteen-year-old Solal, Dreyfus is of no consequence: "Solal decided that he would go to the reception. This Blum should not have been an officer in the first place!"†¹¹ Rather than vibrate with the verb of the father, Solal resonates with desire for the blonde anti-Semite.

The estrangement accomplished, Solal's most familiar surroundings suddenly seem repulsive and absurd: "Solal . . . rose and went out. He could no longer bear his uncle's bare feet and the snoring of Salomon stretched on his guitar. And it was for this race that he had had many a fight with Christian schoolfellows at the French high school who made his life a misery and laughed at his beauty, which they envied. Why was he a Jew? Why was he so unfortunate?"‡ At thirteen, Solal already wonders about the catastrophe of being Jewish; his fantasy then and there, which reoccurs throughout his fictional life, is to shed his origin as a snake sheds its skin.

And nothing enables you to shed your identity better than adopting a new origin altogether, acquiring an Aryan substitute mother, whom you (actually) seduce and make love to. Solal viscerally abhors his biological mother, Rachel, and adores his erotic mother, Adrienne de Valdonne. "Solal then analyzed his mother trait by trait. Rachel's eyes, in her broad sandy face, had the gleam of cleaved coal. Why did he feel repelled by this woman, who watched him with

*Adrienne de Valdonne. Pourquoi voulait-elle voir le rabbin? Qu'y avait-il de commun entre cette déesse et ce méchant homme qu'ils appelaient le "Rabbin de la Méditerranée" ou la "Lumière de l'Exil"? (*Solal*, 109)

†Solal décida qu'il irait à la réception. Ce Blum n'avait qu'à ne pas être officier! (*Solal*, 115)

‡Solal . . . se leva et sortit. Il ne pouvait plus supporter le pied déchaussé de son oncle et les ronflements de Salomon gisant sur sa guitare. Et c'était pour cette race qu'il s'était battu plusieurs fois au lycée français contre ses condisciples chrétiens qui lui faisaient la vie dure et se moquaient de sa beauté qu'ils convoitaient. Pourquoi était-il juif? Pourquoi ce malheur? (*Solal*, 123)

such odious clairvoyance?”* What could possibly cause Solal to abhor his own mother? She bears the marks of a tortured and tormenting history on her body—the horror is inscribed on her, in her, it hovers around her terrified gaze.

At the age of ten, he was still innocent, eager, kind; but bitterness and relentlessness had come the day of the Jewish massacre. The disarrayed skirts of murdered women; children’s brains in the streams; gaping bellies. He smiles wearily, knowledge in his eyes. And his mother who had been afraid ever since; her odious prudence, that ignoble acceptance of misfortune. Would he too become one of the persecuted? His mother would certainly die mad.†¹²

The mother’s body bears the trace of this violent massacre, and Solal dreads her precisely for that reason. Every time he looks at her, he sees her hysteria and wonders whether this curse also represents his own destiny: “Would he too become one of the persecuted?” Solal does not want his mother’s past to be his future—he does not want to carry forward her terror and hysteria. In resisting the mother’s gaze, he seeks to break this chain of symptoms, this transmission of horror from generation to generation: again—“Would he too become one of the persecuted?” The answer is a resounding No! The mother’s body points toward insularity and terror, while the lover’s body points toward conquest and joyfulness. Solal has the illusion of making choices, but his “choice” between Rachel and the Aryan is always undone by the father’s word, stubbornly pursuing him.¹³

Prior to this massacre, Solal bathed in innocence; he was not estranged and hostile to his kin. But at age ten, Solal witnessed horror: death, pillage, and perhaps the rape of his own mother (“the disarrayed skirts”). Thus the “catastrophe of being a Jew” becomes primary in his consciousness and provides the impetus for the rejection of the father’s bar mitzvah charge, which is simply the theological correlative to the mother’s “ignoble acceptance of misfortune”—a negative metaphysics for a terrifying existence. Solal resists the necessity of assuming the transmission of this physical violence and metaphysical estrangement. If there is an urgent necessity in Cohen’s writing, it can be

*Ensuite, Solal détailla sa mère. Dans la large face de sable, les yeux de Rachel lançaient l’éclat du charbon taillé. Pourquoi avait-il de la répulsion pour cette femme qui le considérait avec une odieuse clairvoyance? (*Solal*, 109)

†À dix ans, il était encore si pur, si émerveillé, si bon; mais l’amertume et l’inquiétude étaient venues le jour du massacre de Juifs. Jupes soulevées des femmes assassinées; cerveaux d’enfants dans les ruisseaux; ventres troués. Il sourit avec fatigue et une science dans le regard. Et sa mère qui avait toujours peur depuis ce temps-là; sa prudence odieuse; cette habitude ignoble du malheur. Plus tard, serait-il un traqué lui aussi? Sa mère mourrait folle certainement. (*Solal*, 123)

located in this oscillating acceptance and rejection of Diaspora, Jewish calling-reminding. Sibony's definition of a symptom captures the dynamics of the palpable and repetitive urgency in Cohen: "A symptom is a repetitive montage, it signals what does not pass, what is repeated, it replaces this repetition. Analysis liberates us from *belonging* to the symptom."¹⁴ The fracture between Jew and Gentile, mother and lover, Asia and Europe forms the contours of Cohen's novelistic terrain, the resistance to the parent's desire to continue the intergenerational transmission of symptoms. Cohen obsessively revisits this scene in his autobiographical essays and in his novels, unable to resolve it once and for all. In a sense, he belongs to this symptom, or at least to his ambivalence about it.

Bar Mitzvah II: Violent Calling-Reminding

The "symptom" of hysterical deformation, the radioactive traces of which fall into all of Cohen's fiction, has a real biographical origin. Cohen alludes to it in an essay in 1945, "Le Jour de mes dix ans" (My tenth birthday), and again, most notably, in 1971, in his book-length autobiographical essay *Ô vous, frères humains*, where he returns to his own origin-as-violence—origin of estrangement, scene of his own personal pogrom, and his own figurative rape—and expands it greatly.

The event itself was a rather commonplace one. Toward the end of the Dreyfus Affair in 1905, the ten-year-old Albert Cohen was verbally harassed in the streets of Marseille. Such scenes occurred across the whole of France during that period, as they still occur in France at the moment of writing these lines, a century after Cohen's baptism into Judaism.¹⁵ This aggression marked Cohen for life, for it stripped him of the illusion he had entertained about his relationship to France. In one swift stroke, the aspirant French boy became a guilty Jew, bar mitzvah-ed onto hate, worthy of the commandment of . . . assuming his priestly name, COHEN, and all the misery that such a name promised an immigrant Jew in 1905 France. But to assume the name in the most symbolic sense of Cohen (priest) meant permanent estrangement from the Gallic fantasy of becoming like the others—a French citizen, an *Israélite*, and perhaps even, as in the young boy's daydreams, a colonel in the French army. In early twentieth-century France, a Cohen could hardly be an unsuspected citizen, let alone a trusted officer. The child was not yet aware of the horror of exclusion and suspicion—or, more accurately, he did all he could not to be aware of it, because all around him the walls were scribbled with slo-

gans such as “Mort aux Juifs” (Death to the Jews). It was the street hawker who forced the boy literally to see the writing on the wall.

Before describing the event, a word about this ten-year-old Albert Cohen, this “French boy” who will soon be expelled from the bosom of his beloved Gallic homeland. Albert was, in fact, never a happily integrated French boy. This expulsion at the hands of the street hawker was not so much a fall from paradise as a fall from hope, the sudden deflation of a phantasm. A poor immigrant child whose French squeezed through his thick accent, Albert was always alone and aloof, with only his mother for best friend, his favorite hide-out being the small apartment above the egg and oil shop where his parents scraped together a meager existence working fourteen hours a day.

When he arrived in France at the age of five in 1900, he only spoke Judeo-Venetian. Albert learned his French in a Catholic convent. He and the good sisters shared a strong mutual affection, and they taught him not only French but also good manners: how to walk with dignity, hold oneself erect, and be self-possessed. The nuns were his second feminine conquest, his mother being the first, “I was paradoxically the favorite of the gentle Catholic sisters.”* But alas, even with them, reticence hangs in the air, for the nuns recognize Albert’s beauty, ability, and natural finesse, but regret nevertheless his exclusion from possible salvation: “Yes, the Mother Superior . . . would sigh looking at my black locks and murmur from time to time ‘what a pity,’ thus alluding to my Jewish origin.”† This sense of difference and exclusion continued in public school due to his accent, religion, and strange mannerisms. Yet the ten-year-old Albert still found himself enraptured with France—its traditions, its inclusive republican ideology, and, above all, its language. While imaginary, this inclusion always flowed richly with possibilities. Albert imagined himself primarily as French: his chief ambition was to become a colonel—Colonel Abraham Albert Cohen!

Albert’s imaginary attachment to France grew so strong that he secretly assembled an altar to the Republic. Carefully enclosed in his closet, he hid

an altar of repose, a patriotic crib, a sort of reliquary of all the glories of France surrounded by small candles, fragments of mirrors, chips of marble, shards of colored glass and nice shapes that I had made with tinfoil. The relics were portraits of La Fontaine, of Corneille, of Racine, of Napoleon, of Victor Hugo, of Lamartine, of Pasteur . . . I loved France, I despised the

*J’étais paradoxalement le préféré des douces sœurs catholiques. (*LM*, 714)

†Oui, la mère supérieure . . . soupirait en regardant mes boucles noires et murmurait parfois ‘Comme c’est dommage’, faisant ainsi allusion à mon origine juive. (*LM*, 714)

Prussians, I was revanchist and jingoist, and I loved Joan of Arc. France was in me, it was my passion.*

in the evening, before lying down in my small bed, I double-locked the door to my room, I took the key of the sacred cupboard . . . and opened the holy of holies. I lit the small candles on the shelf that I called the pantheon of France, and, down on my knees . . . I lifted my soul toward the lofty France that I so loved.†

The little boy literally constructed a totemic representation to serve his imaginary inclusion in the Republic: the altar with its many candles no doubt mirrored Catholic altars seen at the convent; the French pictures and figurines certainly derived from the iconography of the republican school; the reference to the “holy of holies” recalls the Jewish synagogue. But at the heart of this sacred altar lay the French language: images of Corneille, Molière, Hugo—icons of French literature, his first (and only) home in France. The mature writer Albert Cohen later affirms that the French language constitutes his only true homeland: “[France] you gave me your language, the highest flower in the human crown, your language, which is mine and the country of my soul, your language that is also for me a homeland.”‡¹⁶ The French language lies pregnant with possibilities, especially this “crazy desire to belong,”§ that is, to belong to the language, not just in performance but in a heroic sense to the quasi-missionary republican ideology of universal and secular culture (*civilisation*). The figurative bar mitzvah that follows thus takes on multiple meanings: it is not just expulsion from *a* community, as it could have been for a Polish Jew at around that time (as Romain Gary explains so convincingly),¹⁷ but expulsion from *the* secular and inclusive linguistic, cultural, and political ideal that was embraced so universally by the Jewish community in France—and indeed across the world.¹⁸

*un reposoir, une crèche patriotique, une sorte de reliquaire des gloires de la France qu’entouraient de petites bougies, des fragments de miroir, des billes d’agate, des bouts de verre coloré et de mignonnes coupes que j’avais fabriquées avec du papier d’étain. Les reliques étaient des portraits de La Fontaine, de Corneille, de Racine, de Molière, de Napoléon, de Victor Hugo, de Lamartine, de Pasteur. . . . J’aimais la France, je détestais les Prussiens, j’étais revanchard et cocardier, et j’adorais Jeanne d’Arc. La France était à moi, était mon affaire. (*Ô vous*, 1062)

†le soir, avant d’aller me coucher dans mon petit lit, je fermais à double tour la porte de ma chambre, je prenais la clef de l’armoire sacrée . . . et j’ouvrais le saint des saints. J’allumais les petites bougies du rayon que j’appelais le panthéon de la France et, à genoux . . . je faisais monter mon âme vers la haute France que j’aimais. (*Ô vous*, 1063)

‡tu m’as donné ta langue, haut fleuron de l’humaine couronne, ta langue qui est mienne et pays de mon âme, ta langue qui m’est aussi une patrie. (*Ô vous*, 1065)

§fou désir d’en être (*Ô vous*, 1063)

This civic-literary ideal, the republican Marianne, has its erotic corollary in the daydream fantasy of Albert's first fictional heroine, "Viviane, my true love, which began at the start of my ninth year and lasted until the day of the street hawker. Afterward, I no longer had the heart to see my Viviane again, because I knew that she could not henceforth love me, that I was spiteful and vile, bad like the scabies."* Loving Viviane proves no less a delusion than believing himself to be French, for—just like his Frenchness—she is pure fiction. Both imaginary objects of desire operate almost at the same infantile level as a result of either overinvestment in transitional objects or invention of imaginary companions: "When the clock sounded ten, Viviane wished me goodnight, allowed me to kiss her hand, and we swore to love each other for the rest of our lives."† If we are to take Cohen at his word and believe that he had really imagined Vivianne at age ten as he portrayed her in 1971, then he had already at the age of ten invented the matrix plot for his romantic novels: an outsider momentarily forgets or surmounts his exogenous position, seduces a feminine insider (Vivianne, Adrienne, Aude, Ariane), and constructs, either with or around her, a utopian erotic zone impervious to the hostile world; this utopia collapses, and both must disappear. Thus, in one permutation of the stories he invents, after a devastating earthquake, Albert hides out in an Ali Baba-like cave with the fictional Viviane, where the two then lead a life of utter bliss, protected from all outside incursions.

And so, on the day of his tenth birthday, August 16, 1905, at 3:05 in the afternoon precisely, Albert is returning home from summer school. On his way, he is drawn toward a street hawker (*camelot*), who, with great verbal agility, sings the praises of a universal stain remover (*détacheur universel*) displayed for sale in his stall. But Albert's facial features betray his ethnic origin, and the street hawker turns on him and aggressively apostrophizes him. Albert internalizes each term, repeating it often, conjugating it in the rest of the book in all its possible permutations.

"You there, you are a Yid, aren't you?" said the blond street hawker with the thin mustache whom I had gone to listen to with faith and tenderness on leaving school, "you are a dirty Yid, aren't you? I can see it from your snout, you don't eat pork, do you? no, I suppose pigs don't eat each other, you are

*Viviane, mon grand amour qui commença au début de ma neuvième année et qui dura jusqu'au jour du camelot. Après, je n'eus plus le cœur de revoir ma Viviane car je sus désormais qu'elle ne pouvait pas m'aimer, que j'étais un méchant et un vilain, mauvais comme la gale. (*Ô vous*, 1065)

†Lorsque la pendule sonnait dix heures, Viviane me souhaitait une bonne nuit, me tendait sa main à baiser, et nous nous jurions de nous aimer toute la vie. (*Ô vous*, 1067)

miserly, aren't you? I can see it from your snout, you guzzle gold, don't you? love it more than candy, don't you? you're not quite French, are you? I can see it from your face, you are a dirty Jew, aren't you? a dirty Jew, right? your father is into international finance, no doubt? [Did you] come to eat the bread that belongs to the French, I suppose? ladies and gentlemen, may I introduce you to a crony of Dreyfus, a little thoroughbred kike, a guaranteed member of the brotherhood of clippers, cut it down where it matters, I recognize them from the first move, I have an American eye, and we hate Jews here, they're a filthy race, a bunch of spies working for Germany, look at Dreyfus, they are all traitors, they are all rotten bastards, putrid like a scab, bloodsuckers of the poor world, rolling in gold and smoking large cigars while the rest of us tighten our belts, isn't it so, ladies and gentlemen? you can slip by, we've seen enough of you, you don't belong here, this is not your country, you have no business being here, off you go, clear out and keep your eye to the ground a little while, get the hell out of here go to Jerusalem and see if I'm there."

. . . A few minutes earlier I had walked up to the street hawker's table with a childish smile, now I left with that of a hunchback.*

There is no need to explain at length the content of this classic compendium of anti-Semitic libels. Our interest rather resides in Albert's perspective. The hawker speaks exquisite French with succulent, flowing, and natural verve, which is the very ideal that the child adopted, and thus the hate exuding forth from this speaker violently excludes Albert from the community of French speakers, their Republic, and their erotic ideals. Mastery of the French language is the *sine qua non* for seducing both Marianne and Viviane. For him, henceforth, the French language still remains *the* poetic medium, but it disaggregates as an integrative instrument and is no longer associated with the "Israélite" political and cultural

*"Toi, tu es un Youpin, hein?" me dit le blond camelot aux fines moustaches que j'étais allé écouter avec foi et tendresse à la sortie du lycée, "tu es un sale Youpin, hein? je vois ça à ta gueule, tu manges pas du cochon, hein? vu que les cochons se mangent pas entre eux, tu es avare, hein? je vois ça à ta gueule, tu bouffes les louis d'or, hein? tu aimes mieux ça que les bonbons, hein? tu es encore un Français à la manque, hein? je vois ça à ta gueule, tu es un sale Juif, hein? un sale Juif, hein? ton père est de la finance internationale, hein? tu viens manger le pain des Français, hein? messieurs dames, je vous présente un copain à Dreyfus, un petit Youtre pur sang, garanti de la confrérie du séateur, raccourci où il le faut, je les reconnais du premier coup, j'ai l'œil américain, moi, eh ben nous on aime pas les Juifs par ici, c'est une sale race, c'est tous des espions vendus à l'Allemagne, voyez Dreyfus, c'est tous des traîtres, c'est tous des salauds, sont mauvais comme la gale, des sangsues du pauvre monde, ça roule sur l'or et ça fume des gros cigares pendant que nous on se met la ceinture, pas vrai, messieurs dames? tu peux filer, on t'a assez vu, tu es pas chez toi ici, c'est pas ton pays ici, tu as rien à faire chez nous, allez, file, débarrasse voir un peu le plancher, va un peu voir à Jérusalem si j'y suis." (*Ô vous*, 1052)

Quelques minutes auparavant, je m'étais avancé vers la table du camelot avec un sourire d'enfant et je parlais maintenant avec un sourire de bossu. (*ibid.*, 1053)

ideals of assimilation into the Republic. This event transforms Albert, worshiper of all things French. While he was once a child who harbored certain fantasies, he now becomes forever disillusioned, forever excluded, “expelled and condemned to remain foreign.”* The event—bar mitzvah by the anti-Semite—precipitates his coming into awareness of his irremediable foreignness, and when the ten-year-old child finally retreats from the assault, he immediately becomes another person, in fact, *the* ultimate other—the hunchback with the frightened and solicitous smile who will haunt him for the rest of his life in the shape of the nightmarish fictional characters Jérémie and the dwarf Rachel:

And I left, an eternal minority, my back suddenly bent and the usual apologetic smile, I left, forever banished from the human family, bloodsucker of the poor world and putrid like a scab, I left, the laughter of the satisfied majority upon me, good men who loved [one another] by hating together, inanely communing in a common enemy, the stranger, I left, keeping my smile, my dreadful trembling smile, my smile of shame.†

The text abounds with metaphors. The street hawker sells a universal destainer, capable of removing all stains from fabrics, and yet he stains the child. A universal destainer may wash away all sins, except for those of the murderers of the Savior and traitors to the Fatherland. But the child desires to bask in the semi-religious aura of the street hawker’s open air performance, for he resembles a magical priest officiating over his altarlike display; the destainer itself stands for a magical totem; the jovial spectators recall the ecstasy of collective communion—and, above all, there is the use of the “sacred” French language. Albert wants to commune with the crowd and the priest, and so he tries to purchase the destainer, but they do not accept his symbolic transaction, do not admit him into the destined society, justified by faith and patriotism. Albert Cohen rightly affirms in *Ô vous, frères humains* that without the street hawkers, that is, the Camelots du Roi and the *Action française*, there would have been no Auschwitz, to which I would add that, without the mocking crowd communing with the street hawker, there would have been no Vichy France.

The next link in the metaphorical chain occurs when, frightened and disoriented by the incident, Albert runs to the train station, and locks himself up

*expulsé et condamné à rester étranger (*Ô vous*, 1063)

†Et je suis parti, éternelle minorité, le dos soudain courbé et avec une habitude de sourire sur la lèvre, je suis parti, à jamais banni de la famille humaine, sangsue du pauvre monde et mauvais comme la gale, je suis parti sous les rires de la majorité satisfaite, braves gens qui s’aimaient de détester ensemble, niaisement communiant en un ennemi commun, l’étranger, je suis parti, gardant mon sourire, affreux sourire tremblé, sourire de la honte. (*Ô vous*, 1053)

in the bathroom, soiled as he must be by his religion, for by definition he cannot be destained. He tries to flush his stained self down the toilet but cannot; he thinks of leaving but cannot. There in the bathroom of the Marseille train station, the child first thinks of this “sinfulness of being born,” or, more precisely, the sin of being born Jewish, and thus, this potential candidate for citizenship in the Republic becomes instead a Jewish drifter who contemplates death, who would like to flush himself down the toilet. Soiled, humiliated, and impotent, he goes home to cry with his parents, themselves bewildered, absolutely frightened by what has happened and capable of no succor. Albert becomes suicidal, viewing his only prospects as those of a drifter who runs from train station to train station. He thus wishes his father would kill him—“Yes, father was good, he would kill me”^{*}—so that he would not suffer the fate of being that eternally stained being, destined to a life of fear, humiliation, and wandering. In chronological terms, this is the first instance of his desire to die, to flush himself down the toilet, a leitmotif in the whole œuvre.¹⁹

The street hawker transforms the child’s self-perception. The signifier “Jew” (*Juif*) forever haunts the little Albert and later on the mature Albert Cohen

Ever since the day of the street hawker, I have not been able to read a newspaper without immediately locating the word that says what I am, immediately, at first sight. And I even locate the words that resemble this terrible word [*Juif*] that is at once agonizing and beautiful, I immediately locate June [*juin*] and soot [*suif*]; in English, I immediately locate *few*, *dew*, *jewel*. Enough.†

Cohen is marked for life by this violent redescription of himself as the stained, the ontologically unassimilated, undestainable other—the “kike,” “pariah,” “financier who rolls in gold,” and so forth. All language is henceforth filtered through this paranoia, the feeling of always being on trial, and from that day on language will always be *suspect*, a potential source of aggression. Moreover, on his tenth birthday, Albert Cohen becomes a masochist who takes secret delight in searching for arbitrary combinations of phonemes so that he may once again relive the street hawker trauma.²⁰

In *Ô vous, frères humains*, Cohen seeks to catalogue every bit of anti-Semitic

^{*}Oui, Papa était bon, il me tuerait. (*Ô vous*, 1099)

†Depuis ce jour du camelot, je n’ai pas pu prendre un journal sans immédiatement repérer le mot qui dit ce que je suis, immédiatement, du premier coup d’œil. Et je repère même les mots qui ressemblent au terrible mot douloureux et beau, je repère immédiatement juin et suif et, en anglais, je repère immédiatement *few*, *dew*, *jewel*. Assez. (*Ô vous*, 1064)

invective and ruminate upon the absurdity of each, but this hardly liberates him from their grip, from being the prisoner of the symptoms that this trauma elicits in him. Here, knowing leads not to overcoming but only to ruminating, to further exploration of a festering wound, whose blood and pus nourish the successive texts, all responses to the event, but responses-*cum*-symptoms of reliving (and relieving) the trauma without ever “resolving” it. Hence, like the father’s bar mitzvah charge on the metaphysical level (but they are of one cloth, really), the street hawker’s discourse leaves its traces in all of Cohen’s work whenever the questions of belonging and exclusion surface; it stains all his characters poetic, fictional, and autobiographical, from *Paroles juives* to *Ô vous, frères humains*; from the grotesque of the play *Ézéchiël* and the novel *Mangeclous* to the sublime lyricism of the Solal motif from 1930 in *Solal* to the mature Solal protagonist of the 1960s. And nowhere can this autobiographical “pariahization” be seen articulated more clearly than toward the end of *Belle du Seigneur*, when Solal’s illusions of assimilation and success come to yet another catastrophic conclusion. He reads a negative comment in a magazine and notes with obvious satisfaction and relief that the object of derision “is not Jew, it’s only June.”* Wherever he goes in Paris that fateful day, Monday, September 10, 1936, he perceives the hatred of the Jew. Just as on the day of his tenth birthday in Marseille, in 1905, he reads “Death to Jews” scribbled on public walls, and he notes with some relief that another bit of graffiti shows some mercy, because it only reads “Down with the Jews.” Down (*à bas*) is better than dead. Tired, incapable of withstanding more assaults, he returns to his room at the hotel George V, his “chic ghetto,” where he locks himself in his lonely sanctuary, only to continue yet again harping on his horror and curious delight at the words of the street hawker, whatever his latest metamorphosis.

In this sense, striving to make up for the dumbfounded silence of the ten-year-old, Cohen’s writings constitute a permanent response to the street hawker. Cohen’s “golden quill” compensates for the words he lacked on that fateful day. More precisely, Cohen’s texts compensate in the pure act of responding, but this responding does not overcome the trauma—it only turns the textual magma of the street hawker’s harangue into a lifelong response. At least the silence of the ten-year-old Albert is overcome, if not his wounds. Eva Miernowska is right to affirm that Cohen’s writing exists in tight dialogical re-

*n’est pas juif, c’est seulement juin. (*BdS*, 852)

lationship with anti-Semitic invectives.²¹ No doubt that this is Cohen's signature dialogical experience, and the aspect of Cohen's work that seems the most obvious, but that is the most consistently overlooked by readers and critics alike.

And thus the street hawker sends Albert back home, back to his private world, encased in a cocoon of words that are forever organically decoupled from their genuine Gallic culture. While this was in large part the case even before the street hawker episode, once the incident has occurred, Albert cannot even return to his hopes of possible integration, back to his symbolic sanctuaries: the private worship at the republican altar, the veneration of military officers admired in the streets, the erotic fantasies about Viviane. Isolated he will be; in language he will live—but the narratives underpinning this language must change. Cohen must locate new narratives to replace those of Corneille, Stendhal, and Hugo that he had hoped to appropriate. He will henceforth be *hors chapelle*, outside the chapel of the Republic, although physically present within it. (To this day Albert Cohen remains in the same limbo.) The post-Israélite Cohen would find his narratives elsewhere: in certain biblical "moves" (the subject of the next chapter) and in a baroque aesthetics of the novel that is as far removed as one could be from tight, elegant, classical French aesthetics. But no one escapes initial desire, and, however different these new narratives are in content and mode, they remain dialogically tethered to the original longing to become a Frenchman and the bitterness of being expelled from the Social, the one word Cohen uses throughout his work to signify Gentile European culture. If Cohen is forced to write a "Sephardic" French, then he can at least mercilessly parody French style and aesthetics, which is a way of remaining within it by taking the *via negativa*. But this was not his first choice, and to the end, he partly regrets his "outsider's" position: "There was my love for France and my crazy desire to belong. There was an absurd and sacred enthusiasm that I am not ashamed of and will never abandon. For, beneath what I look like, I am still that child."* No doubt this self-conscious estrangement from France is one of the main reasons why Albert Cohen is still an outsider to the French canon—and to this extent, the street hawker's success was considerable, for he made Albert's assimilation impossible. Referring to the street hawker trauma, Cohen told Gérard Valbert,

*Il y avait mon amour pour la France et mon fou désir d'en être. Il y avait un enthousiasme absurde et sacré dont je n'ai pas honte et qui ne m'abandonnera jamais. Car, sous mes airs, je suis resté cet enfant (*Ô vous*, 1063)

“It’s a story that happened to me and that says everything.”²² This is doubtless one of Cohen’s most incisive insights into his own psyche and writing.

Cohen’s narratives, all his successive baroque montages—Solal, Mangeclous, Ézéchiél, Jérémie, the lucid narrator who intervenes—would, ultimately, be determined neither by the father’s metaphysics nor by the anti-Semite’s invective, but rather by the necessity of operating between them, and, when necessary, beyond them. Cohen would operate in between the father, the street hawker, and Viviane, and also in between fantasies of secular pre-eminence and tribal marginality. He “fabricates” bridge narratives in order to create a narrative space of his own, yet always orbiting around a dialogue with the father’s Law and the omnipresent anti-Semite; always in a dialogical relationship with the two catastrophic bar mitzvahs.