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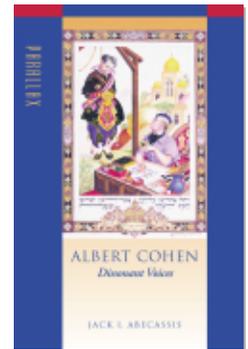
Albert Cohen

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Identity Montage, or Solal as an Estheric Joseph

For I am and am not just because I am I.

Thomas Mann, Joseph the Provider

*Joseph . . . is the experience and the problematic of Israel to assemble
itself, form a people, construct its multiplicity and give it sense.*

Shmuel Trigano, La Philosophie de la Loi

We have seen two bar mitzvah stigmata branded onto Solal. His symbolic difference, by way of the father, includes him in the Jewish covenant, while his violent difference, by way of the street hawker, excludes him from what Cohen calls “the Social.”¹ In between these two primary traumas lay his initiations to desire, first with the autobiographical (but imaginary) Viviane and then with the fictional Adrienne de Valdonne, wife of the French consul in Cephalonia, with whom the sixteen-year-old Solal escapes to Europe. To become the persona he wishes to be, Solal must escape and then refashion himself as a charismatic figure: “The smooth sea separated Solal from the beautiful foreign lives. The island now discovered was stupid with beauty.”* Each dislocation—within traditional Judaism and eventually within European modernity—is linked to a highly symbolic geographical space: Judaism festers in the Ionian island ghetto, while modernity, including virulent anti-Semitism, flourishes in Paris and Geneva. On the surface, Solal’s trajectory resembles the typical itinerary of any ambitious romantic hero. But Solal is no ordinary Balzacian country chap intent on conquering the city by means of erotic exploits and manipulations. Solal’s narrative differs essentially from that of a Rastignac or a Julien Sorel. Beneath the romantic veneer, Cohen conceals a mythic dimension, underwritten by Scripture, rendered intelligible when read against a well-defined historical tradition whose roots are much deeper than classicism and romanticism or, for that matter, Greco-Roman typology. Solal’s “lost illusions”

*La mer lisse séparait Solal des belles vies étrangères. L’île, découverte maintenant, était stupide de beauté. (*Solal*, 91)

are completely different in nature; they connect the deeply ingrained historical self-consciousness of a community whose history goes back three thousand years.

This displacement in geography and in identity is defined in opposition to the father, the anti-Semite, and the seductive European woman. Their interaction results in multiple dissonant juxtapositions, in existential parataxis that is in dire need of mythic coordination. This mythic “coordination” does not eliminate conflict, but does provide an epic trajectory from traumas to domination . . . to dissolution.

Too often, in the desire to demonstrate Cohen’s “Frenchness” and “French-worthiness,” discussions of intertextuality, influence, and inspiration have centered on analogies with classical myths and romantic and modern novelists.² Interestingly, Cohen’s own complicity in this romantic reading of his work. In many ways, as the following chapters will show, the misreading is programmed into the rhetorical strategies that the author deploys. Furthermore, once he attained fame and notoriety after the publication of *Belle du Seigneur*, Cohen allowed the romantic reading to go unchallenged, or, rather, unqualified. Perhaps he was basking at last in the comfort of *en être*, having made it, in the French literary world and mass media and did not wish to compromise it with a much-needed . . . yes, but there is more here than a passionate love story!³ But, in my view, Stendhal or Proust remains secondary in Cohen’s work to the biblical romances of Joseph and Esther. All the analogies with Stendhal and Proust collapse as soon as one tries to tie together Solal’s individual romantic dimension with his political, historical, and indeed messianic dimensions. After all, Cohen’s first publication, *Paroles juives*, is explicitly biblical in inspiration; and his last book, *Notebooks 1978*, deals with his desperate struggle with and against Yahweh, the quintessential Jewish experience (Isra-el means “struggle with God”). In between these two dates, the question of being Jewish in modern, secular European settings, while being fully conscious of the horrors that are either about to take place or have taken place, remains urgently omnipresent. Although barely mentioned, the Shoah is the black hole that sucks in all of Cohen’s narratives.⁴

This argument implies the existence of a mythical narrative that authorizes an authentic Jewish existence for an epic modern hero. Gérard Valbert, Jean Blot, and others correctly view Cohen as the first fully “Jewish” French novelist.⁵ My intention is to show exactly how Albert Cohen is that Jewish author in terms of his own self-conscious placement within biblical narratives and the political logic of exilic Judaism operating in the historical context of early

twentieth-century France. I contend that the Solal saga—which, as we have seen, Cohen originally intended to title “La Geste des Juifs” (The epic of the Jews)—is quintessentially a Hebrew-Jewish or even Sephardic hybrid, masterfully adapted to the genre of the modern novel. Throughout the saga, Solal retraces the paths of archetypal biblical personages (including its main protagonist, Yahweh); he is contradictory, incongruent, ontologically alienated from himself, from kin, and from strangers. More specifically, he represents the phantasms of the seductive Jew, a fine *trafiquateur* of identities sojourning among disparate communities, being both an insider and an outsider in a perilous world. In short, Solal practices the art of seduction in the service of providence. Solal is essentially the heir of Joseph, although with the temperament of Esther, and maybe even of the matriarch Sarai.

To cover the entire spectrum of biblical matrix narratives in Cohen’s poetry, fiction, and essays (e.g., the metaphysics of death) would derail our discussion of the charismatic, sexually seductive identity-phantasm of Solal. Our topic is solely the narratives that authorize Solal’s initial posttraumatic displacement from Cephalonia to Geneva and his relative concealment of his Jewish kin once in political power, which results in a series of theatrical existential and identity crises, the subject of the following three chapters.

I shall start with the prototypical story of Sarai in Egypt, because it is both the first in the genre and the blueprint. I shall then point out the parallels between the story of Joseph in Egypt and the story of Solal in Geneva. Next, the Book of Esther combines motifs of concealment and sexuality from the Sarai and Joseph narratives and serves as the basis of the carnival of Purim, a prominent chronotope in Cohen’s baroque fiction.

In a recent study of Marrano (crypto-Jewish) culture, Shmuel Trigano shows that Joseph and Esther became “the symbols and the archetypes of their faith [because of] the fundamental gesture of their faith: the fracture of the existential unity of the inside and outside.”⁶ Furthermore, the narratives of Sarai, Joseph, and Esther show that Marranism, as an existential condition, may not necessarily be of medieval or early modern vintage, but rather integral to the logic of exilic Judaism. If the Solal character represents the collage of a quintessentially Jewish identity-phantasm, it is here in the biblical roots of this identity, and in the almost theatrical *habitus* that history has inscribed upon the Jews, that the core elements of Cohen’s particular montage should be located. In the guise of a synthetic (and highly comic) conclusion to this chapter, I shall analyze a scene from the novel *Mangeclous* where Cohen masterfully combines the structure of the most dramatic scene in the story of Joseph with

the carnivalesque phenomenology of Purim, thus creating an idiosyncratic hybrid of biblical allusion, contemporary satire, and personal nightmare, the signature of his style.

Sarai's Concealment and Conceit

The story of Sarai in Egypt provides the earliest example of beauty and sexuality as a means of survival, told with frankness and economy, and devoid of any theological varnish.

And it happened as he drew near to the border of Egypt that he said to Sarai his wife, "Look, I know you are a beautiful woman, and so when the Egyptians see you and say, 'She's his wife,' they will kill me while you they will let live. Say, please, that you are my sister, so that it will go well with me on your count and I shall stay alive because of you." And it happened when Abram came into Egypt that the Egyptians saw the woman was very beautiful. And Pharaoh's courtiers saw her and praised her to Pharaoh, and the woman was taken into Pharaoh's house. And it went well with Abram on her count, and he had sheep and cattle and donkeys and male and female slaves and she-asses and camels. (Gen. 12: 11-16)⁷

This is the "J" layer of Genesis: direct and pragmatic.⁸ Pure unsentimental realism. The founder of Judaism asks his wife to become a courtesan so that he can survive and prosper. From its inception, then, the house of Abraham owes its very survival to deliberate concealment, adultery, and prostitution. A hard initial lesson is thus learned: outside the Promised Land, the survival of the Hebrews will depend at times on the seductive powers of a borderline Hebrew, or "a court Jew or Jewess," often operating through concealment. We can say of Sarai's comic heroism what Trigano says about Esther's choice: "It is because she becomes an abstraction to herself, 'does not sacrifice herself,' that Israel is saved. . . . Her abnegation is the principle of the plenitude of Israel."⁹

Abram profits immensely from his access to Pharaoh's court, and at the end of his stay in Egypt, he returns to the Promised Land a very rich man. Hence Sarai's beauty stands between not only survival and perdition but also penury and abundance. Gamaliel himself, when faced with Solal's de facto assimilation into the fabric of French society, chooses to sanction it, provided the wayward son creates a place—concealed and even subterranean, if need be—for his kin. Like Abram, when faced with a concrete set of choices, Gamaliel is pragmatic, interested more in ends than in means. He knows that survival is paramount, death final and pointless. "I shall stay alive because of you" and

“And it went well with Abram on her count”—that is, “I survive because of your transgression; and in your transgression, I am with you, knowing that because of it, I shall live to see tomorrow.”

One can only imagine the comedy of Abram periodically visiting his stunning “sister” in Pharaoh’s harem, which closely parallels Mordecai loitering around Ahasuerus’s palace in hope of catching a glimpse of Esther, his cousin/daughter, now wife of a Gentile king. But this grotesque farce—a husband visiting his wife in a courtly harem—allows Isaac to be born, and thus the individual Abram becomes Abraham the father of nations, and, likewise, Sarai becomes Sarah. In the flow of this Hebrew invention called providential history, all is permitted in the name of survival.¹⁰ At one point, when Solal suffers a particular calamitous reversal of fortune, he self-consciously assumes Abram’s perspective: “Unhappy, he was unhappy but he lived, he lived, and it was today that he lived and he went toward a miracle and he was a miracle.”* Reversal, cunning, and providence comprise the cadence of this seminal sexual and political intrigue, and are repeated with much amplification with Joseph and Esther and to a lesser degree with Tamar and Ruth. These narratives are highly comic, relying on dissimulation, deception, and play as their main theme and device. Providence, at least in Genesis, is a comedy.¹¹

Joseph the Savior

Ah, it's the wife of the one who is my grandchild in the country of the Franks and like Joseph in power and brilliance?

Albert Cohen, Solal†

The Joseph novella in Genesis (37–50) is one of the great narrative masterpieces in world literature and is the clear intertext of Cohen’s Solal saga. Joseph is the first son of Jacob and his beloved wife Rachel. His beauty, charisma, and intellect make him his father’s favorite, and he dreams of becoming superior to his kin—that they all, including his father and mother, will prostrate themselves at his feet. Jealous of their father’s esteem for Joseph and fearful that the latter’s dreams of dominance, which he describes quite vividly to them, may come to pass, Joseph’s brothers, as dimwitted as they are wicked, contemplate

*Malheureux, il était malheureux mais il vivait, il vivait, et c’était aujourd’hui qu’il vivait et il allait vers un miracle et il était un miracle. (*Solal*, 241)

†“Ah, c’est la femme de celui qui est mon petit-fils en pays des Francs et pareil à Joseph quant à la puissance et l’éclat?” (*Solal*, 298)

killing him, but compromise by selling him as a slave and telling Jacob that he was killed by a wild beast. Joseph is purchased by passing traders and then becomes the head steward of Potiphar, captain of Pharaoh's guard. Potiphar's wife covets Joseph and, when rebuffed, she falsely accuses him of seduction. Joseph finds himself in jail, where he correctly interprets the dreams of both Pharaoh's own butler and his baker.

Two years later, Pharaoh is haunted by two persistent dreams, neither of which his courtiers manage to interpret to his satisfaction. Joseph is summoned from jail. His interpretation immediately rings true, and he quickly becomes Pharaoh's vizier. Joseph anticipates future risk of drought and famine, and through wise planning and financial acumen, he enables Egypt to survive and Pharaoh to prosper greatly. Twenty-one years pass; Joseph does not send word to his kin; yet Jacob mourns his absence daily.

In the second year of the famine, Jacob, who still resides in Canaan, sends all his sons except for Benjamin to buy food in Egypt, where Joseph immediately recognizes them. They, however, do not recognize the seventeen-year-old shepherd they sold as a slave in the garb and persona of the second most important man of Egypt. Thus the third major deception of the story occurs when, without revealing his identity, Joseph accuses his brothers of being spies and orders them to bring Benjamin (his younger full brother) down to Egypt. Benjamin accompanies his brothers on their next trip, but as Benjamin prepares to leave Egypt, Joseph has one of his servants place a silver cup in Benjamin's pouch; Joseph's servant pursues the twelve brothers and accuses Benjamin of stealing the cup, because Joseph wishes to keep Benjamin at his side. Judah finally makes an eloquent speech on behalf of Benjamin and the brothers. Joseph is so moved that he lifts his Egyptian mask and finally reveals his identity. At last, Jacob with his clan of seventy goes down to Egypt, safe from starvation and possible extinction. Unfortunately, tragedy strikes when Pharaoh dies, and the new sun king does not know Joseph. Thus the Hebrews fall into slavery for the first time.

Albert Cohen does not simply graft this gripping narrative to a modern setting in the abstract way in which James Joyce transposes *The Odyssey* into *Ulysses* or through the expansive psychology and anthropology with which Thomas Mann mines the Joseph novella. Reading the Solal saga, the reader does not immediately recognize the parallels with Joseph for three possible reasons: In the first place, the Joseph narrative is so ubiquitous that it is uncritically and perhaps even subconsciously taken for granted. Secondly, Cohen bypasses the explicit dream motifs and transposes the sibling rivalry motifs into

the lifelong play between an elected only child (Solal) and a band of hapless relatives (the Valorous) in lieu of brothers. Finally, Cohen inverts many Josephic traits. Solal's sexual recklessness inverts Joseph's prudence as the means of attaining political power. Nevertheless, from the first line of *Solal* (1930) to the last line of *Les Valeureux* (1969), Solal's trajectory constitutes a performance of the Josephic principle writ large, down to its exhaustion and violent decanting—of which the Shoah is the most resounding proof. Under Cohen's pen, Joseph's dreams become nightmares.

Both Joseph and Solal are their fathers' favorites. Both are beautiful men. Both hold themselves superior to their kin. Joseph's first two dreams reveal his megalomania: "And, look, we were binding sheaves in the field, and, look, my sheaf arose and actually stood up, and, look, your sheaves drew round and bowed to my sheaf" (Gen. 37: 7). His second dream goes further: "[L]ook, the sun and the moon and eleven stars were bowing to me" (Gen. 37: 9). All are to bow down to Joseph, including his brothers and father. The adolescent Solal also daydreams: "Solal had taken his place [in the synagogue] in the chair reserved for descendants of Aaron. He contemplated his future. When he was grown up, he would throw money at the heads of the wretches and he would give a car made of gold to his Adrienne."* And later, "He rose, his eyes brilliant, suddenly certain that he would always be victorious."† At twenty, Solal promises himself, "He would see [his father] again only if famous."‡ In short, unconditional superiority will be the precondition to Solal's reconciliation with his father.

This sense of superiority, or outright Josephic megalomania, translates into a quasi-messianic predestination that people perceive in Solal even in his younger years. An aged Christian clairvoyant asserts: "[T]he child bears the sign."§ A rigorous legal mind, hardly prone to mysticism, Rabbi Gamaliel wonders nevertheless while gazing at the stars whether "his son was the Expected one."|| And when, penniless and aimless, Solal errs with the old Roboam on the roads of Europe, the mystically inspired Roboam "quivered with admiration as he listened to his young relative dream in Hebrew. Could He be the one?"#¹²

*Solal avait pris place dans le fauteuil réservé aux descendants d'Aaron. Il songeait à sa vie de plus tard. Quand il serait grand, il lancerait l'argent à la tête des ignobles et il offrirait une voiture en or à son Adrienne. (*Solal*, 116)

†Il se leva, les yeux brillants, sûr tout à coup qu'il serait toujours vainqueur. (*Solal*, 120)

‡Il ne le [son père] reverrait qu'illustre. (*Solal*, 145)

§[L]'enfant porte le signe (*Solal*, 114)

||son fils était l'Attendu (*Solal*, 135)

#frissonnait d'admiration en écoutant son jeune parent rêver en hébreu. Serait-ce Lui? (*Solal*, 147)

Clearly, both Joseph and Solal are variants of the divine-child archetype. For Joseph, matters are clear: his mother Rachel is Jacob's beautiful and favorite wife. Jacob knows that aristocracy of true election flows in Joseph's veins, while the other half-brothers—sons of Leah and her servant Bilhah—are born of contingency and expediency. Their inferiority is borne out at every step (with the possible exception of Judah) in their intermittent wickedness and permanent mediocrity. Joseph, on the other hand, recognizes his innate superiority, because he was born of Jacob's beloved Rachel. Solal presents another inversion of this canonical narrative. He sees himself as a divine child, but he views his mother, whose name is also Rachel, as repulsive and anxiety-ridden—the very opposite of Jacob's majestic Rachel. Thus, throughout his life, the megalomaniac divine child searches for a substitute mother to redeem the sinfulness (sexual desire) of all women and to crown him king. (Precisely as the dwarf Rachel does in the very last paragraph of *Belle du Seigneur*.) In a very intimate psychological sense, the Josephic narrative here provides the most apt juxtaposition to Solal's messianic and erotic drives.

His messianic vocation allows Solal to overcome the trauma of the double bar mitzvahs, of symbolic and violent stigmata. It also affords him great license, a teleological alibi for all manner of egomaniacal mischief; the messianic is a perfect vector for a transfer (“carrying across”) of identities. From the messianic imaginary, Solal needs a transcendence of locality and tribe, a geographic and ethnic passport out of the island ghetto, a perfect excuse for apostasy, adultery, robbery, kidnapping, and theft. It is all done for the sake of this “Me later on” (*Moi de plus tard*).¹³

Joseph and Solal become grand bureaucrats, although by different means. Joseph rises principally by resisting adultery, interpreting dreams, and governing effectively. Put in modern terms, Joseph leverages his ability to anticipate rare events (a seven-year bounty followed by a seven-year drought) to great political and financial advantage. Solal's meteoric rise results from his unbound, almost Davidic energy and resourcefulness, bordering on recklessness: he breaks up marriages, joyfully humiliates his cuckolds, and, except for Aude, drives all his lovers (Adrienne, Isolde, Ariane) to suicide. Solal employs recklessness where Joseph relies on prudence. Where Joseph resists temptation largely on prudential and pragmatic grounds, Solal seduces Aude, his benefactor's daughter, who is already engaged to her childhood sweetheart, for the sake of sheer provocation.¹⁴ Solal nevertheless possesses Joseph's skill of making himself indispensable to his benefactor, Aude de Maussane's uncle, a powerful French senator. The parallels are self-evident:

And the Lord was with Joseph and he was a successful man, and he was in the house of his Egyptian master. And his master saw that the Lord was with him, and all that he did the Lord made succeed in his hand, and Joseph found favor in his eyes and he ministered to him, and he put him in charge of his house, and all that he had he placed in his hands. And it happened from the time he put him in charge of his house that the Lord blessed the Egyptian's house for Joseph's sake and the Lord's blessing was on all that he had in house and field. (Gen. 39: 2-5)

Yes, [Solal] knew how to work, and within six months Maussane had grown in influence and wealth. Vanity of vanities. . . . Life was not unpleasant. The journalists, the banks, and all the useless trembling of people who would die tomorrow. . . . His father. And yes, his father was an old man with a beard, he was not the Eternal. . . . In truth, Maussane could no longer do without this young boy, whom he loved.*¹⁵

Yet the real drama of this narrative occurs not when Joseph or Solal rises to power but rather in their attempts, once in power, to reconcile the conflicting demands of a foreign court and ancestral kin. Solal does not have brothers but instead a band of relatives from the Greek Jewish ghetto of Cephalonia—the Valorous—who shadow him throughout his saga. Joseph's brothers are portrayed as mean-spirited simpletons, while the Valorous are fools, but of a more kindhearted variety. They represent in Cohen's fiction what Judith Kauffmann terms the "marginal grotesque."¹⁶ Solal invites them to most settings of his successes, so that their embarrassing presence can undo his carefully constructed, but tenuous, position. Socially and politically, they represent a death drive with which Solal simply toys as he totters between his life-affirming messianic phantasms and his self-destructive drives of regressing to the womb, where ends equal beginnings: "How I crave sometimes to return to this ghetto, to live among rabbis who are like women with beards, to live there this loving life, impassioned, full of vain reasoning [*ergoteuse*], a bit destitute [*nègre*] and insane."† Like a masochist who delights in almost losing it all, Solal repeatedly inflicts the Valorous on himself, only to send them away with remorse and resignation. This is his obsessive *Fort! Da!* game of "having my worldly

*Oui, [Solal] avait su travailler, et en six mois Maussane avait grandi en influence et en argent. Vanité des vanités. . . . La vie n'était pas désagréable. Les journalistes, les banques et tout le tremblement inutile des gens qui mourront demain. . . . Son père. Eh bien oui, son père c'était un vieux avec une barbe, ce n'était pas l'Éternel. . . . En réalité, Maussane ne pouvait plus se passer de ce garçon qu'il aimait. (*Solal*, 172-73)

†Parfois, comme je voudrais retourner dans ce ghetto, y vivre entouré de rabbins qui sont comme des femmes à barbe, y vivre cette vie aimante, passionnée, ergoteuse, un peu nègre et folle. (*LM*, 738-39)

position and . . . almost losing it.”¹⁷ They also function as a repository of grotesque humor that deconstructs the pristine surface of European bourgeois mores just as Jacob’s sons’ faith in their ancestral God, despite their obvious personal limitations, foiled Egypt’s Religion of the Dead. To the heroic and romantic narrative of seduction and power, they juxtapose their carnivalesque presence, forever decrowning Solal of his self-dramatizing delusions. They are, therefore, absolutely integral to Cohen’s baroque poetic vision of Solal’s self-dramatization.

The Valorous, however, are merely surrogates, substitutes—foils against which the true conflict unfolds. True psychological drama takes place between fathers and sons. The burlesque fools are just witnesses, vectors for action, thematic and stylistic arabesque. I would say of the Solal saga what Harold Bloom says of the Joseph story:

[J’s] central interest in this story is the relation between Joseph and Jacob rather than that between Joseph and his brothers. The brothers, after all, are not an elite, except for the hapless Judah; they are instead the ancestors of the unruly horde in the Wilderness. Joseph and Jacob are the elite, the natural aristocrats with whom the Davidic-Solomonic J sympathizes most readily.¹⁸

This holds true too of the tortuous relationship between Solal and Gamaliel, as witnessed at the bar mitzvah. And when, disobeying his father, Solal runs away with Adrienne de Valdonne, wanders across the continent, and eventually becomes a political maverick—his father remains forever in his mind, always representing to Solal the symbolic, a calling-reminding of origin (Israel) and destiny (Savior of Israel). Yet Gamaliel’s predicament is much bleaker than Jacob’s. Whereas Joseph presents Jacob to Pharaoh at the palace, Solal cannot invite his father, the oriental rabbi, to the Quai d’Orsay or the Palace of the League of Nations in Geneva. When Gamaliel encounters de Maussane in Paris, he is violently humiliated, both by de Maussane himself (Solal’s adopted father) and by Solal (see next chapter). Even when reconciled with his father, Solal can only keep the old rabbi hidden in a Paris basement or, as in *Mangelous*, in a suburban house, tucked away from the Judeophobic world.¹⁹

But beyond the psychological subtleties of the comic megalomania, jealousy, betrayal, concealment, and reconciliation, the “Josephic principle” is more political than psychological. The father-son drama points clearly in that direction, as Bloom has correctly suggested: “Joseph’s only agon is the aesthetic enterprise of precisely how and when he will gather his father and brothers in to him so as to become their worldly savior.”²⁰ For Shmuel Trigano, the Joseph

story is emblematic of a persistent political principle in the history of Israel: “Joseph—as his name testifies (‘that which adds’)—is the experience and the problematic of Israel to assemble itself, to form a people, to construct its multiplicity and give it a sense.”²¹

The paradox of Joseph resides in his name: he adds, but remains absent; he acts, but remains invisible. Trigano terms this political motif the *augment*, the “leavening.” Absent and in retreat vis-à-vis his kin, Joseph is the invisible leavening that guarantees that the bread will rise. “In the absence,” Trigano writes, “there remains a surplus that escaped the counting, and [this absence] will become the pivot of salvation at the heart of a generalized loss.”²² Thomas Mann, in his multivolume *Joseph and His Brothers* (which is perhaps the best commentary ever written on Joseph) has Jacob say to Joseph: “You are the set-apart, severed from your stem, you are and shall be no stem.”²³ For Joseph is the severed branch that allows the very survival of the tribal “tree.” He is the sacrifice that saves; the *pars pro toto* upon which everything hinges. Later, Mann adds to this penetrating observation: “Joseph was the one set apart, at once lifted up and withdrawn. He was severed from the tribe and was not to be a tribe.”²⁴ Joseph will not be a head of one of the twelve tribes (but his first two sons will), yet the very existence of Jacob’s descendants was made possible by his active absence. A clear progression exists in the logic of the *augment*: Sarai saves Abram; Joseph saves a clan of seventy; Esther saves a whole people in exile. In the context of Cohen’s narrative, we must ask, will Solal, the undersecretary-general of the League of Nations, save millions in Europe?

A Joseph-like figure is, of necessity, concealed but active, pagan in appearance, Hebrew in destiny. He must cultivate a careful duality, forever surveying the ratio between the visible and the invisible, perfecting the duality of being and appearance.²⁵ It is easy to see that the whole psychology of the “Marrano,” the crypto-Jew, is present at the very inception of Hebrew Scripture, a permanent background trace emanating from the earliest Hebrew experience, and is therefore not limited to a secondary trait or symptom of exilic Judaism. Regardless of how well Joseph seems to be integrated into the Egyptian elite, he remains the son of Jacob, and his fidelity to his father’s God makes Joseph ontologically hostile to paganism. Joseph, then, is not simply another Syrian Semite who succeeds in Pharaoh’s palace. Outwardly a good pagan, Joseph knows that sooner or later he will reunite with Jacob and accomplish his role in the history of Jacob, which becomes the history of Israel. Thus family romance merges into an allegory of exemplary historical existence for the Hebrews—these *passeurs*, forever estranged from their hosts and enemies.

It is therefore not surprising that peninsular Sephardic Jews should essentially transform the figure and story of Joseph (and Esther) into a central and sustaining narrative, symbolically sanctioning an outward Christian appearance and an inward faith in Yahweh. Joseph's role as a major motif for Jewish existence in the Diaspora has an extensive history that predates the year 1391, when the Jews of Spain first became undesirable. In a book describing the different Josephs of the Jews, Muslims, and Christians of medieval Spain, Michael McGaha affirms: "The author(s) of the account in Genesis seem to have viewed it primarily as the wonderful story of a heroic ancestor who embodied the virtues most highly esteemed by the Jews. For later generations of Diaspora Jews the story would take on even greater importance, since it described how a Jew triumphed over adversity and became spectacularly successful in a non-Jewish society, yet always retained his loyalty to his people and used his position of power to help them."²⁶ Peninsular Jews adopted the Joseph story to fit their needs, as against the more restrictive readings of rabbinical Judaism, but the Sephardic license with the scriptural Joseph coincided rather better with the original Hebrew reality than the more defensive rabbinical commentaries would let on. The rabbinical interpretations would have had to be defensive and ambivalent, since Joseph and Esther as exemplary figures sanction many transgressions of the Law. These marginal but pivotal figures become in fact a necessary counterweight to the Law, to the authority of the rabbis, and to the figure of the father.

There will thus be a visible Israel, Rabbi Gamaliel, and an invisible Israel, Solal. The proper name "Solal" is an ironic inversion: it clearly refers to the sun, to light, to power, and yet the bearer of the solar name labors in the hallways of diplomacy, the invisible "cut-off stem" that shines upon the visible stem, the father. Although superficially at odds, father and son mutually ensure the survival of Israel. Visible Israel obeys the Law, interprets the Torah, and remains within the confines of its voluntary or involuntary ghetto. Invisible Israel transgresses the Law, appears worldly, but remains obliquely true to the one God and loyal to His people. The two Israels are complementary, mutually dependent. Once Gamaliel understands Solal's position, he does not demand that his son return to the ghetto, but rather encourages him to continue leading a double life, just as Jacob recognized that Joseph, besides being his son, was also an Egyptian and thus essentially different. We can see at once why such a narrative should thus profoundly appeal to successive generations of crypto-Jews, down to the discreet and assimilated French *Israélite*.

The political, historical, and tribal dimensions of the Joseph story point toward Cohen's main narrative plot, that of the estranged son who, because he is so ambivalent about his kin, struggles with the idea of gathering them to him and thereby saving them. Cohen's plot succeeds in representing power and politics just prior to the Shoah from a Jewish point of view, using the most archaic Hebrew texts as leitmotifs in a complex modernist montage.

We wish to read the Joseph story as a triumphant U-shaped comedy (stasis, crisis, stasis), because it satisfies our desire to recognize this narrative masterpiece, emblem of the history of the Hebrews, as life-affirming.²⁷ But the Joseph story as told in Genesis and the beginning of Exodus also alludes to the exilic Jewish nightmare of being constantly suspected or accused of occult knowledge, conspiratorial intent, and disloyal conduct.

From these charges, the whole delusional montage culminating in the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, for example, is easily derived. Joseph rises to power through his ability to see what is evident to no one else in the whole of Egypt. "[Pharaoh] sent and called in all the soothsayers of Egypt and all its wise men, and Pharaoh recounted to them his dreams, but none could solve them for Pharaoh" (Gen. 41: 8). Joseph's epistemic singularity propels him toward power and wealth, yet the origin and nature of this empowering knowledge remain shrouded in "alchemical, occult, cabalistic" mystery, to use the classic language of Judeophobes.

In the strict sense of the word, Joseph could be seen as "disloyal," since Pharaoh's good is not an end in itself, but a contingent means to guarantee the survival of Israel. Joseph's ambiguity about Egypt per se is overdetermined by his historical memory, the memory of the monotheistic difference that his father represents and that he must somehow preserve, even though outwardly he leads the life of a pagan. His destiny is therefore neither individual nor national but tribal, bound to the promise Yahweh made to Jacob. He will never cease to be the son, the son of Jacob, and therefore the servant of Jacob's God:

And Joseph said to his brothers, "Come close to me, pray," and they came close, and he said, "I am Joseph your brother whom you sold into Egypt. And now, do not be pained and do not be incensed with yourselves that you sold me down here, because for sustenance God has sent me before you. Two years now there has been famine in the heart of the land, and there are yet five years without plowing and harvest. And God has sent me before you to make you a remnant on earth and to preserve life, for you to be a great surviving group. And so it is not you who sent me here but God, and he has

made me father to Pharaoh and lord to all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt. (Gen. 45: 4–8)

Joseph is categorical: I am who I am for your sake—not for my sake or for Pharaoh’s; my lordly situation and Pharaoh’s added wealth are just coincidental to the main plot, which is centered on Jacob. Can Joseph concurrently be Jacob’s faithful son and Pharaoh’s trusted vizier? Might he be suspected of double allegiance? Can Israel’s salvation always be consistent with Egyptian interests? Can we say with Hitler and Stalin that the Jew is by definition a “cosmopolitan”? Or in today’s thinly veiled anti-Semitic language—very current in Europe and in particular in France—the Jew is a conspiratorial “globalist” and/or a bellicose “settler” or a “neoconservative”? This question still hovers over each and every successful man or woman of Jewish origin. It is a particularly pertinent question here, since the street hawker claims that, by definition, a Jew cannot be a Frenchman. His allegiance will never coincide perfectly with French interests, whatever they may be. The whole logic of the Dreyfus Affair implicitly hinges on this proposition. In 1905, when Cohen’s dream of being a Frenchman comes to a traumatic end, the question hovering in the air of Marseille is not “Who is a Jew?” but rather “Who is a Frenchman?” In *Belle du Seigneur*, set in 1936, the bourgeois ladies knitting and chatting politely in the hotel lobby sing the same tune: The Jews sow trouble, are disloyal, and are responsible for the coming war. And they conclude, “Really, better Hitler than [Léon] Blum.”*

Scripture is surprisingly explicit about Joseph’s economic exploits. During the initial seven years of abundance, Joseph advises Pharaoh to buy and safely store substantial amounts of grain so that when the prophesied drought and famine arrive, Pharaoh will save his people from starvation by selling grain to them. First, the people purchase grain with gold and silver. As time wears on and the drought continues unabated, Joseph exchanges grain for ownership of land:

And Joseph took possession of all the farmland of Egypt for Pharaoh, for each Egyptian sold his field, as the famine was harsh upon them, and the land became Pharaoh’s. And the people he moved town by town, from one end of the border of Egypt to the other. . . . And Joseph said to the people, “Look, I have taken possession of you this day, with your farmland, for Pharaoh. Here is seed for you, and sow the land. And when the harvests come, you shall give a fifth to Pharaoh.” . . . And they said, “You have kept us alive! May we find favor in the eyes of our lord, in being Pharaoh’s

*Vraiment, plutôt Hitler que Blum. (*BdS*, 739)

slaves." And Joseph made it a fixed law, to this very day, over the farmland of Egypt, that Pharaoh should have a fifth. (Gen. 47: 20–26)

Through occult wizardry—predicting rare events and leveraging this knowledge into economic power—Joseph helps Pharaoh to enslave the Egyptians and enrich his kin. (Strictly speaking, the Egyptians do not become slaves but rather tenants of Pharaoh's lands.) In response, Egypt enslaves Joseph's kin: "Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. He said to his people, 'Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we. Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, or they will increase and, in the event of war, join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land.'" This is not *Mein Kampf*'s paranoid delirium but Exodus 1: 8–10! This same motif (among so many others) is reworked into the mouth of the wicked viceroy Haman in the Book of Esther, who tells the king of Persia: "There is a certain people scattered and separated among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom; their laws are different from those of every other people, and they do not keep the king's laws, so that it is not appropriate for the king to tolerate them" (Est. 3: 8).

This theme of the occult, auriferous Jew in Cohen's fiction has aroused the ire of many critics. Repeatedly, Cohen places his protagonists in repulsive Shylockian positions, perhaps nowhere more so than in his play *Ézéchiël*, where a rich Jewish banker loses his beloved son (Solal) but is soon enough consoled and returns to concupiscent speculation and procreation.²⁸ Solal's own financial acumen is clearly a clownish parody of Joseph's stately and providential gravitas. Time and again, Solal speculates in the stock market, accumulates thousand dollar bills, and then burns them contemptuously in the fireplace. And while most people in the 1930s wallow in financial ruin, "starved" (like the Egyptians) by the decade-long depression, Solal earns 40 million francs in a single episode in *Solal*, which he then theatrically gives away to the staff of the Ritz Hotel, to the Valorous, to eastern European Jewish hobos. Each of these Josephic triumphs turns to ashes in Cohen's novels.

The Joseph story is clearly the dominant, overarching motif embedded in Solal's epic, for both characters are in a permanent state of estrangement, torn and double, at home in neither Canaan nor Egypt. Living in two worlds simultaneously, the discourse of Joseph and Solal is always a symptom of their "in-betweenness"; they must be in a constant state of displacement for—as borderline figures passing repeatedly from Canaan to Egypt, Cephalonia to Geneva—their identity can never be stable. Thomas Mann, a Christian,

understood that Joseph represents the richest allegory for the modern Jew. And perhaps I would have never sufficiently appreciated Solal's Joseph-like existence but for my study of Mann. It is not by accident that Mann explores the subject in four rich volumes, the period of composition of which roughly coincides with the rise and fall of the Third Reich. In one enigmatic formulation, he captures the existential drama of Joseph and of his heir Solal: "For I am and am not just because I am I."²⁹

Our Patron, Saint Esther

The Joseph story thematically and textually parallels the Book of Esther so closely that it often serves as the basis for many of the plays composed for Esther's feast of Purim.³⁰ Esther fuses Sarai's sexual transgression with Joseph's political charisma, and her story is recounted with even more frankness, because the text implies the transgression of many more taboos. Esther is, after all, already a Jewess living under the Law, whereas Sarai and Joseph were Hebrews with a far more flexible identity. Esther's self-conscious playfulness represents a canonically enshrined principle of political and existential action, the traces of which—the masquerades, gambling, hierarchical inversions, and grotesque play—define the rite of Purim and, furthermore, allude to aesthetic principles that Cohen adopts, either explicitly, as in *Belle du Seigneur*, or implicitly, in his consistent usage of masquerades and buffoonery. Similarly, Esther's regal beauty and femininity are relevant for an understanding of Solal's complex gender identity, examined in chapter 6. If the Joseph story anchors the political narrative of exilic Judaism, the Book of Esther grounds the particular modalities of the practice of survival in the foreigner's land. As the following sexual and political *Thousand and One Nights* Arabian fairy tale demonstrates, Esther is indeed the matrix narrative at the heart of Solal's tragicomic performance of his dissonant identity-phantasm.

The story takes place subsequent to the Hebrews' first exile (570 B.C.E.). The Persian King Ahasuerus kills his wife Vashti because she refuses to appear (naked?) before the drunken king and his court. In search of a replacement, the most beautiful virgins in the empire, including a young maiden named Hadassah, are gathered in the palace harem. On the advice of her older cousin Mordecai, she hides her Jewish origins and calls herself Esther, a Persian name from the root *str*, "to conceal," but also possibly from *sthara*, Persian name for the sun, the star par excellence.³¹ After undergoing a year-long preparation, each concubine is afforded one night with Ahasuerus: "When Esther was

taken to King Ahasuerus in his royal palace. . . . the king loved Esther more than all the other women; of all the virgins she won his favor and devotion, so that he set the royal crown on her head and made her queen” (Est. 2: 16–17). Haman, a wicked and influential courtier, detests Esther’s cousin Mordecai because the latter will bow only before Yahweh and never before a courtier. His pride deeply wounded, Haman persuades the hapless Ahasuerus to decree the annihilation of all Jewish men, women, and children in all the provinces of the Persian empire. Astrologers draw lots and the propitious date of the 14th of Adar (in the Jewish calendar) is chosen for the royally decreed genocide. Secretly, Mordecai informs Esther, entreating her to intervene on behalf of her people. At first the queen hesitates. Then, after a three-day fast, she cleverly tricks Haman into disgrace and finally reveals her religious origin. Haman is executed and the king, unable to break a standing royal decree, allows the Jews the right of self-defense, which they employ vigorously, killing many of their enemies, including all of Haman’s children. Mordecai replaces Haman as vizier, and seeks “the good of his people and intercede[s] for the welfare of all his descendants” (Est. 10: 3). Thus, in commemoration of Esther’s propitious action, the carnival of Purim (Lots, *La fête des Sorts* in Cohen’s texts) is celebrated annually on the 14th and 15th of Adar.³²

This carnival is explicitly theatrical. Every year survival is reenacted, not through the celebration of divine intervention, as is decidedly the case with the Passover Haggadah, but through the usage of the mask and of gambling (fate), both explicitly forbidden by canonical Jewish Law. Here is a description of traditional eighteenth-century Sephardic Purim activities: “At nightfall began the masquerade shows. . . . A week earlier, several groups got together to pick and arrange the program, which included plays, songs, speeches. Then after the holiday meal these groups, wearing masks, visited several houses where they performed certain excerpts of their repertoire, one dressed as Ahasueros, another as Haman, another as Mordechai, another as Esther.”³³

Whereas the performance ritual of the Passover Seder retells the wonders of God’s direct intervention in history, the Purim performance ritual refers to the intervention of humans in history without any miracles or divine assistance, and is celebrated by reading the Book of Esther and, more important, by the performance of a carnival. Purim is, at its origin, a performance by masked actors, all too human, who transgress taboos to save the nation. In the playfulness of these *jugadores de Purim*, the masquerade thus becomes a performative principle enshrined in historical memory, an important secular correlative to the pious principle of the Passover Haggadah.

With Esther, the principle of leavening [*augment*] becomes much more explicit and purposefully self-conscious. Salvation does not come from an active God who intervenes in history as in the manner of the Exodus from Egypt, but rather from the resourcefulness of a Jewish woman married to a Gentile king. The crypto-Jewish body of Esther, like the crypto-Abramic body of Sarai, constitutes the battlefield of collective survival or destruction. Esther plays the part of the ultimate insider and outsider, figure of estrangement and salvation, encrusted in palace deceit, sex, and politics. The beautiful queen is the “leavening”—invisible Israel—that renders the survival of visible Israel possible. Yahweh is all but absent from the episodes of Sarai in Pharaoh’s harem, Joseph in Egypt, and most conspicuously from the Book of Esther—the only book in the Hebrew Bible where Yahweh (or alternatively Elohim) is not mentioned even once. Absent from the Book of Esther are also explicit references to prayers, worship, sacrifice, the Law, and the covenant.

In a contemporary analysis of Purim, the writer Adam Gopnik recounts how, ignorant apparently of all things Jewish (apart from jokes and bagels), he was asked to be Purimspieler at a Jewish museum ball. And so he finally reads the Book of Esther and becomes perplexed as to the meaning of the story. Wishing to relieve his anxiety, he visits Rabbi Schorsch, chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York. The rabbi’s explanation deserves full quotation:

[The Book of Esther] is a spoof, a burlesque, really . . . Mordecai is a classic Jew of the Diaspora, not just exiled but entirely assimilated—a court Jew, really. It’s a book for court Jews. Why doesn’t he bow to Haman? Well, it might be because of his Judaism. But I think we have to assume that he’s jealous—he expects to be made first minister and then isn’t. Have you noticed the most interesting thing about the book? . . . It’s the only book in the Bible where God is never mentioned. . . . This is the book for the Jews of the city, the world. After all, we wonder—what does Esther eat? It sure isn’t kosher. But she does good anyway. The worldliness and the absurdity are tied together—the writer obviously knows that the King is a bit of an idiot—but the point is that good can rise from it in any case. Esther acts righteously and saves her people, and we need not worry, too much, about what kind of Jew she was before, or even after. She stays married to the Gentile King, remember. This is the godless, comic book of Jews in the city, and how they struggle to do the righteous thing.³⁴

Gopnik’s reaction to the rabbi’s interpretation is conclusive: “I was stunned. This was, as they say, the story of my life. A funny book about court Jews . . .

I had been assigned to burlesque it, when the text was pre-burlesqued, as jeans might be pre-shrunk.” This burlesque Book might in fact be the only biblical text that makes sense to a contemporary non-orthodox Jew; it is a biblical text he can assimilate into his own real life instead of the opposite, the usual calling to adapt one’s fallen life to the ideal of a text. In short, the Esther story represents the world of urban Western Solals—a world of the dim remembrance of the Law without God and the ambivalent allegiance to a tribe without land.

Nowhere else does Scripture so programmatically split the exterior and interior as in the Esther story. Blending together the guile of a romantic heroine, the politics of Jewish survival, and the historical basis for a ritual carnival rich in baroque devices, the Book of Esther constitutes *the* text of predilection for Cohen: survival hinges on doubling and concealment, masquerade and buffooneries—all underwritten by historical necessity. Inherent in the Book of Esther are the tense dissonances of Cohen’s fiction, characterized by acute historical consciousness, family romance, protean charisma, and hypersensuality as the vector to power. For formal and historical reasons, Purim underwrites the *performative* principle of Cohen’s picaresque Sephardic novel, which at times may seem unhinged, but, like Purim, always remains in memoriam—that is, lodged deep in a historical and existential Jewish consciousness that has become a Marrano-like habitus inscribed in bodily gestures, the farcical and tragic fabric of daily life.³⁵

Nevertheless, the Book of Esther is particularly disturbing in that what was exceptional in earlier narratives here becomes the norm, if not altogether a canonized principle. That Abram and Sarai, facing imminent danger, should conceal their married status may seem prudent. That, due to violent sibling jealousy, Joseph should become an Egyptian seems at least fortuitous. But that Hadassah, under no impending danger, presents herself (or is presented by Mordecai) under an assumed name in the harem of a Gentile king marks a new threshold in the Jewish romance of survival. Concealment advances (or regresses) from an opportune and temporary device, to an enduring phenomenology of being. Armand Abécassis writes:

[T]his manner of representing oneself behind a mask is characteristic of the Jew, that is, of the Hebrew in exile. It is impossible in the Holy Land, where everybody knows the origin of its inhabitants. The time of the Torah is one of revelation, the time of Purim, time of Judaism, is one of occultation. All the religious feasts of Israel celebrate the dazzling manifestation of the divine, except for Purim, feast of exile par excellence, of a new historical time marked by the absence [of the divine].³⁶

That Purim should play such a crucial role in Cohen's work is hardly coincidental. The name has its root in *pur*, "lot," or, in this context, the casting of lots. Fate can be lethal, but it also can be outflanked by cunning dissimulation at times.³⁷ Esther therefore becomes the divine "saint" and Purim the most meaningful holiday for Marranos from 1391 until the end of the eighteenth century. Like Esther, the Marranos had to dissimulate themselves, to publicly break Jewish religious taboos, all the while remembering their ancestral religion, rituals, and mental habits. Their lot (*pur*) was that of wearing masks everywhere and at all times, preferring the wearing of masks to exile or death. They could not, of course, celebrate Purim openly, with its all-too-detectable carnivalesque masking, playacting, and revelry, but would instead observe the queen's fast, commemorating her three-day fast prior to her pleading with Ahasuerus. For those who had to appear Christian while remaining internally Jewish, Esther is ideally suited for identification and transference of affect. Her prayer in the Septuagint mirrors their very condition: "You know my necessity—that I abhor the sign of my proud position, which is upon my head on days when I appear in public. I abhor it like a filthy rag, and I do not wear it on days when I am at leisure" (Esther, Apocrypha, 14: 16). Cecil Roth is categorical on this point: "The fast [of Esther] . . . attracted the Marranos in an especial degree; and in the Inquisitional records it has an importance second to no other day in the Marrano calendar."³⁸

But, as has already been suggested in regard to Joseph, it would be a mistake to think of the Marranos in a restrictive historical chronology, roughly from 1391 to Napoleon. A public Jewish author and Zionist activist, Cohen himself remains, throughout his life, unambiguous as to his public identity. Nor is the fictional Solal ever strictly speaking "crypto," in the sense of one who hides his Jewish origins, although he literally hides his family. Yet his whole dissonant psychology is nevertheless Marrano. When Solal hits bottom, destitute and almost homeless, he goes job hunting with this searing interior monologue: "It's my fault if I don't find any work. When I ask for work, this stupid pride. I parade a slew of Hebrew first names that I invent, if I'm speaking to Christians. Or I say with pride that I'm married to a Christian, if I'm speaking with Jews."^{*}

In a sweeping delimitation of the psychological patterns inherent in Marranism, Yirmiyahu Yovel lists the following characteristics: "a this-worldly dis-

^{*}C'est ma faute si je ne trouve pas de travail. Quand je vais demander du travail, cette fierté stupide. Je leur défile des prénoms hébraïques que j'invente, si je parle à des chrétiens. Ou je dis avec orgueil que j'ai épousé une chrétienne, si je parle à des Juifs. (*Solal*, 318)

position; a split religious identity; a metaphysical skepticism; a quest for alternative salvation through methods that oppose the official doctrine; an opposition between the inner and outer life, and a tendency toward dual language and equivocation.”³⁹ Solal displays all these attributes: living opulently, he is clearly this-worldly; he hesitates between Judaism and Christianity (overtly in *Solal*); in contrast to his father Gamaliel, the orthodox rabbi, he is an atheist; he is always self-consciously split between Cephalonia and Europe; and he continually displays the rhetorical art of inhabiting multiple languages and practices (universal and ethnic, diplomatic and coarse, seductive and abrasive, and so forth).

To be a modern, secular, politically “assimilated” Jew (an *Israélite*), is to be in a de facto Marrano-like condition.⁴⁰ The modern Jew-cum-Marrano is almost by definition nothing but the limit case of a this-worldly, skeptical, antinomian modern person. Is it a coincidence that this “modern person” was in part invented by Michel de Montaigne, that descendent of Iberian Marranos, who published the first volume of his *Essais* on the exact date of Purim, March 1, 1580, or the 14th of Adar 5340 in the Jewish calendar?⁴¹ No wonder that the “libidinal, cosmopolitan, atheist” modern, so hated by the anti-moderns of all shades and strides, is perennially assimilated to the figure of the secularized Jew. (The opposite is also true. Voltaire, the greatest cosmopolitan man of the Enlightenment, was casually anti-Semitic and rabidly anti-Judaic in the most profound sense. For the Jews, traditional or secular, visible or concealed, the room for maneuver in any case remains tight.)⁴²

There is one additional correlation among Scripture, Cohen’s fiction, and his biography that warrants special commentary, since it so perfectly matches the Joseph-Esther identity-phansm. Even after her victory over Haman, we recall that Esther cannot reverse the royal decree allowing the massacre of the Jews throughout the Persian empire. She does, however, win for the Jews the right of vigorous self-defense. The invisible spine of the novel *Belle du Seigneur*, obliquely explained by the narrator long after the fact, concerns Solal’s fall from grace in 1936 as the undersecretary-general of the League of Nations. Subsequent to a nightmarish hiding in the Berlin underground with terrified Jews, the well-trusted diplomat—trusted not to “embarrass” his superiors, trusted to be a “good court Jew,” not too pushy with his narrow ethnic concerns—publicly demands urgent action to save German Jewry. His superiors are dismayed by his “inappropriate” audacity and immediately dismiss him “without notice for conduct prejudicial to the interests of the League of

Nations.”* All else in the novel, and chiefly the suicide by Eros, or suicide by Ariane, is a consequence of Solal’s failure at Joseph(ing) and Esther(ing) his way into history. As for the biographical level, just prior to the outbreak of World War II, as a Zionist diplomat negotiating on behalf of Chaim Weizmann and the World Jewish Congress, Albert Cohen deployed all his ingenuity to organize a substantial International Jewish Legion within the French Army.⁴³ In essence, Cohen as a Zionist diplomat simply wanted to give the Jews of Europe what Esther and Mordecai gave those of the Persian empire—the means of self-defense. But he failed.⁴⁴

Although always stigmatized by this historical failure, the novels remain true to the performative principles of the Josephic-Estheric montage. This Marrano aesthetic points toward another dissonance in Cohen. As a novelist, his world is defined by the phenomenology of the mask. As a Zionist activist and diplomat, he strives for a time where, for the Jews, masks will have their *necessary* place only on the 14th day of Adar. The Solal saga operates (at least in the initial deployment of each narrative) as a series of fairy tales, performed with all the rhetorical and dramatic devices that have defined an important strand in modern sensibility since *La Celestina*, *Les Essais*, and *Don Quixote*. By way of illustration of the Josephic-Estheric montage hypothesis, I shall turn next to the central scene in the novel *Mangeclous* and show how it masterfully combines the most dramatic scene from the Joseph story with the most effective performance principle from the Book of Esther to create its own pre-Shoah masquerade.

A Joseph Purim Play in Geneva

And Joseph came into the house, and they brought him the tribute that was in their hand, into the house, and they bowed down to him to the ground. And he asked how they were, and he said, “Is all well with your aged father of whom you spoke? Is he still alive?” And they said, “All is well with your servant, our father. He is still alive.” And they did obeisance and bowed down. And he raised his eyes and saw Benjamin his brother, his mother’s son, and he said, “Is this your youngest brother of whom you spoke to me?” And he said, “God be gracious to you, my son.” And Joseph hurried out, for his feelings for his brother overwhelmed him and he wanted to weep, and he went into the chamber and wept there. And he bathed his face and came out and held himself in check and said, “Serve bread.” (Gen. 43: 26–31)

*sans préavis pour conduite préjudiciable aux intérêts de la Société des Nations (*BdS*, 873)

[*Jacob's blessing*] Blessings, blessings on Joseph's head, and in your name shall they sun themselves who come from you. Songs shall stream far and wide singing the story of your life, ever anew, for after all it was a sacred play and you suffered and could forgive. So I too forgive you that you made me suffer. And God forgive us all!

Thomas Mann, *Joseph the Provider*⁴⁵

In 1938 Cohen hastily published *Mangeclous* by cutting and pasting fragments from the first rough draft of the 3,500-page *Belle du Seigneur* manuscript. The novel begins when Solal anonymously sends his Uncle Saltiel a bank check for 300,000 drachmas, accompanied by a strangely coded thirty-line cryptogram, which ends in:

404 + 4 - 4 - 4 + 4
303 000 000 francs
204 + 200 = 100 + 50!
151 500 000 francs
444
(*Mangeclous*, 385)

After much collective effort, the Valorous finally decipher the code correctly as an invitation to a mysterious midnight meeting with Solal in a Geneva cemetery. At the end of *Solal*, subsequent to a calamitous visit from his clan (the subject of Chapter 3), Solal has lost his social and political position, as well as his wife and child, and has become an itinerant messianic figure. In *Mangeclous*, he has arisen from his ashes to become the undersecretary-general of the League of Nations in Geneva. And, like Joseph, he makes no effort to inform his family and clan of his meteoric ascent. For six years, no one in Cephalonia has heard from Solal. It is now time, Solal thinks, for a reunion with the Valorous.

Before proceeding we must, finally, introduce the cast of our Purim play, the celebrated French Valorous: Mangeclous, Saltiel, Mattathias, Michaël, and Salomon. They are part of the junior branch of the Solal clan (the senior branch is apparently operating in central Europe and England). After five centuries of wandering in France, they settled in Cephalonia at the end of the eighteenth century, keeping their French “current” by reading aloud among themselves the books of Villon, Rabelais, Montaigne, and Corneille, “so as not to lose the habit of the ‘elegant turns of phrase.’”^{*} Needless to say, their French is archaic and colorful—a logorrhea of bombastic and pathetic nonsense, in-

^{*}pour ne pas perdre l'habitude des “tournures élégantes.” (*Mangeclous*, 390)

terspersed with surprising insights.⁴⁶ They remain patriotic French citizens; Mangeclous and Michaël serve in the French Army.

Mangeclous, the false advocate. Given Mangeclous's importance in Cohen's fiction, I shall introduce him by quoting in full his business card, found at the beginning of *Solal*:

Carte de visite de Maître Pinhas Solal
 Des Solal originaires de France Bénie
 Mais en Exil depuis des Siècles Hélas
 A Céphalonie Ile grecque en Mer Ionienne
 Citoyen Français Papiers en Règle
 Surnommé Parole d'Honneur
 Dit Mangeclous Professeur Très
 Emérite de Droit Avocat Habile
 Docteur en droit et médecine non diplômé
 Rédige des Contrats Excellents
 Et des Conventions Empoisonnées
 Que Tu ne peux plus T'en Sortir!
 Appelé aussi le Compliqueur de
 Procès Qui un jour fit mettre en
 Prison une Porte de Bois On Le Trouve
 Assis sur les Marches des Divers
 Tribunaux entre Six et Onze heures du
 Matin le plus grand Jurisconsulte de
 Céphalonie homme Honnête Les versements
 En espèces sont Préférés Pour les
 Ignorants on Donne l'explication de
 L'expression élégante Espèces veut Dire
 Argent Mais on accepte Aussi la Nourriture
 On le trouve chez Lui la nuit Et il Se
 Charge d'autres Affaires Il aurait Pu
 Etre Diplômé s'Il avait Daigné Mais il
 N'a pas daigné Ne pas détruire La Carte
 Qui a coûté Extrêmement d'Or et d'Argent⁴⁷

Calling Card of Master Pinhas Solal
 Of the Solals originally from France the Blessed
 But in Exile for centuries now, Alas
 In Cephalonia Greek Island in the Ionian Sea
 French Citizen Proper Documents

Named Word of Honor
Said Mangeclous Professor Very
Emeritus of Law Able Advocate
Doctor in law and medicine without diplomas
Drafts Excellent contracts
And Poisoned Conventions
That You could never Get Out of!
Also called the Complicator of
Trials Who one day had a Wooden Door
put in prison He can be Found
Seated on the Steps of Diverse
Tribunals between Six and Eleven o'clock
in the morning the greatest jurist of
Cephalonia an Honest man Payments
in cash are Preferred for the
Ignorant one Gives the explanation of
the elegant expression Cash means
Money But one accepts Also Food
He can be found in His house at night And He
Takes on other Affairs He Could have been
holder of diplomas if He had Deigned But he
did not deign Do not destroy The Card
Which cost a Great Deal in Gold and Silver.

Michael Weingrad succinctly sums up Mangeclous as “an outrageously self-involved, ever-scheming, ever-inventing, money-and-fame-obsessed ne’er-do-well with a long list of dubious titles and doubtful professions with which to impress the naïve populace of Cephalonia and get rich. He is a combination of Shylock and Falstaff, with a good deal of the Marx Brothers thrown in, and though he manifests most every human failing, it is possible to have, through sheer force of personality, a vitality we might call Shakespearean, or Rabelaisian, or even biblical, this irrepressible character delights [the reader].”⁴⁸

Saltiel, the inventor. Second in command, he plays an especially important role as the surrogate for Rabbi Gamaliel, Solal’s father. Saltiel is a little old man who is “boastful and useless” (*Solal*, 392). An admirer of Napoleon, he always wears a frock coat, with a flower in the buttonhole. Saltiel’s brain is forever simmering with useless inventions, such as “a fan-powered sailboat” (*Solal*, 293). And, like all of the Valorous, he is perpetually penniless. Ridiculous and touching with his naïve probity, Saltiel is the most endearing of the Valorous, a char-

acter whose function is to substitute for the severe father and to speak the words of Cohen's autobiographical mother, albeit in a slightly transposed manner.

Mattathias, the miser. The former head of a "maritime enterprise" consisting of about a hundred kids fishing with single lines, whom he paid with the currency of marbles, matches, and pencils, this man is so stingy that "when he borrowed ground coffee, he dried it in the sun after having used it and returned it the next day to the obliging neighbors, making them believe that it was new coffee."^{*}

Michaël, the giant. A large physical specimen and guardian of the synagogue, he is the courageous strongman of the bunch; he engages in multiple seductions of Jewesses, Greeks, and tourists and helps the adolescent Solal in all of his nocturnal gallant activities, including his final escape with the wife of the French consul.

Salomon, the peddler of apricot water. In contrast to Michaël, this member of the Valorous is plump and short and makes a living peddling syrupy drinks from an ambulatory stand that he pushes and pulls all day long in the sinuous alleys of the island ghetto. He is dimwitted but goodhearted, and when he is not daydreaming about winning the national lottery, he is always eager to engage in the next Valorous adventure.

And so on the appointed night, the Valorous are waiting for Solal at the cemetery, but Solal, unable to overcome his revulsion from these "grotesque men," whom he has himself invited, remains hidden in the back seat of a taxi.⁴⁹ The Valorous continue to search for Solal in Geneva. And Mangeclous, overcome by his perennial diplomatic ambitions, decides to play a trick on the Valorous by faking a telegram from Chaim Weizmann, head of the World Zionist Congress in Jerusalem, which supposedly empowers Saltiel and his Valorous to negotiate the size of the future Jewish state with the undersecretary-general of the League of Nations, without knowing that that this "viceroy of the world" is their very own nephew—just as Joseph's brothers did not recognize their kin hidden beneath the cloak of an Egyptian viceroy.

Thus, by the time the Valorous enter the Palace of the League of Nations in Geneva, they are already willy-nilly actors in a farce within a farce: in Solal's farce, which has brought them to Geneva in the first place and then in Mange-

^{*}lorsqu'il empruntait du café moulu, il le séchait au soleil après s'en être servi et qu'il le rendait le lendemain aux obligeants voisins en leur faisant croire que c'était du café neuf. (*Mangeclous*, 393)

clous's farce once they are in Geneva. Saltiel believes that the destiny of Israel hangs in the balance, and that they must dress appropriately for the solemn, if not fateful, occasion. Each of the clowns therefore assembles a diplomatic garb of sorts and they enter the Palace: "Salomon as a tennis champion, Mattathias as a cod fisherman, Mangeclous as a civilized African king, Michaël as a comic opera policeman, and Saltiel, inexpressible in his courteous gravity."* They come dressed for a costume ball or a Purim festival and will not be disappointed.

Solal peeks at his kin through a hole in the door. He knew that sooner or later, they would reappear in his life. They are, after all the willed and willing toys in his own deadly *Fort! Da!* game: "now I am undersecretary-general, now I am not." Seeing them in their Purim costumes (which they take for real diplomatic attire), he decides to lock them up in the waiting room, so that for a while longer at least, these clowns will be "for the moment unable to do any harm."† He then orders his chauffeur to take him to a carnival shop, where he quickly selects a costume of his own, that of a gravely wounded monster. Meanwhile, the Valorous realize that they have been locked in and become increasingly anxious. But suddenly, the door opens and a hideous monster appears:

On the threshold of the door stood an undersecretary-general in a black dressing gown and black gloves, lacking a human face. On his shoulders rested a white ball of dressing bandages, which hid his face and hair. He wore a pair of dark sunglasses, and a russet-red beard sprouted from between the bands of gauze. He was really a very ugly and dreadful undersecretary-general.‡

Just as the Valorous's ridiculous diplomatic costumes reveal their utter remoteness from the European social scene, Solal's costume illustrates his own ambivalence: a wounded monster is the perfect metaphor for him. He is clad in black, his face partly hidden by bandages and a rusty beard, his voice husky and strained, his speech slurred, and his eyes hidden behind dark sunglasses. Sadistically toying with the Valorous, he becomes a monster, but a wounded monster cutting into his own flesh, his own kin, visibly tortured and delighted by sadistic and masochistic ambivalence.

So heavily disguised is Solal that the Valorous have no hope of recognizing

*Salomon en champion de tennis, Mattathias en pêcheur de morues, Mangeclous en roi nègre civilisé, Michaël en gendarme d'opérette et Saltiel, inexprimable de courtoise gravité. (*Mangeclous*, 553)

†l'impossibilité momentanée de nuire (*Mangeclous*, 553)

‡Sur le seuil de la porte, un sous-secrétaire général en robe de chambre noire et gants noirs, privé de face humaine. Sur ses épaules reposait une boule blanche faite de bandes à pansements qui cachaient son visage et ses cheveux. Il portait des lunettes noires et une barbe rousse coulait hors des bandes de gaze. C'était un sous-secrétaire général vraiment très laid et très terrible. (*Mangeclous*, 557)

their lost kinsman in this Joseph disguised as the evil Haman. The Jewish boy from Cephalonia, disguised as the undersecretary-general (he calls himself “le sous-bouffon général”), disguised in turn as a monster-*cum*-diplomat, can now terrify these odious beloveds, this detritus from an earlier life, with impunity. Everything is thus in place for a sham misrecognition and cruel humor, followed by reconciliation, which is itself then short-circuited. The Mediterranean simpletons are so gullible that they actually imagine that a diplomat might appear as grotesque as this slurring monster. Is it not a Haman who is standing at the door? Have they not been trained to outmaneuver such a monster on each and every Purim? Is not each of them a potential Mordecai? But in fact they are closer to being Joseph’s hapless and dimwitted brothers than the cunning courtier Mordecai. The scene is set; actors in costume are in place—and the plot of this farce within a farce within a farce unfolds.

The sight of this disfigured monster stupefies the Valorous, who bow before this “divinity with a head of gauze” (*divinité à tête de gaze*) and prove too frightened to respond to his question regarding the purpose of their visit. At last, Saltiel presents the *machine humaine* (this is how the Valorous perceive the monster) with the phony letter of introduction. The monster asks Saltiel to introduce his colleagues, as if he did not already know them intimately. Then, imitating Judah’s eloquent speech in front of the “masked” Joseph (Gen. 44: 18–33), Saltiel makes an impassioned plea for Israel, which is worth citing:

“Back when Geneva was no more than a putrid marsh . . . with a few huts rising at its borders around which men ran naked, alas, catching game with their teeth, a superb city rose from the Orient, majestic and crowned, and peopled by myriad children of God, who waved palm fronds in the air and read the Commandments that God has sent down to man so that he may truly become human.” . . . “This city was named Jerusalem, capital of the kingdom of Israel!” . . . “In short, your excellency, this nation is about to be reconstituted. She has honored me by naming me her tourist guide, and this honor I bear entirely myself.”*

Upon hearing this plea for the archaic aristocracy of Israel, which is another variation of the theme of his father’s bar mitzvah charge, the “sous-chef du monde”

*“À l’époque où Genève n’était qu’un marais putride . . . au bord duquel s’élevaient quelques huttes autour desquelles des hommes hélas nus attrapaient du gibier avec leurs dents, une ville superbe s’étendait en Orient, majestueuse et couronnée, et peuplée d’une multitude d’enfants de Dieu qui agitaient des palmes et lisaient les Commandements que Dieu a envoyés à l’homme pour qu’il devienne homme.” . . . “Cette ville . . . avait nom Jérusalem, capitale du royaume d’Israël!” . . . “Bref, Excellence, cette nation est à la veille d’être reconstituée. Elle m’a fait l’honneur de me nommer son cicérone et cet honneur je reporte tout entier sur moi-même!” (*Mangeclous*, 558–59)

(all these bombastic epitaphs occur in the text) momentarily breaks down and makes the unexpected gesture of taking Saltiel's hand and kissing it (still without revealing himself), just as "Judah's speech has its effect on Joseph who can no longer control himself and at long last reveals his identity to his brothers."⁵⁰

What a hopeful sign! Saltiel, the hapless dreamer, overcomes Haman's resistance! But at the sight of this apparent victory, Mangeclous, consumed with envy of Saltiel's apparent success, interrupts this touching scene, proves impatient and therefore allows the *machine humaine* to recover from his momentary compassionate lapse and resume his role. Mangeclous explains to the terrible "divinity with a head of gauze" that the area of land in Palestine offered to the Jews by the British is insufficient and, although unable to quote the precise percentage of the English offer, he nonetheless declares that the League of Nations should double it. To egg Mangeclous on (he has quickly recovered from compassion and has become sadistic again), Solal feigns reluctance and states that one must also think of the Arab natives. To this Mattathias, always at hand where bargaining is concerned, responds:

- "Make an offer," Mattathias said.
- "Ten perferent [Solal slurs] more than England."
- Mangeclous raised his arms heavenward.
- "Highness, you must be kidding!" he cried.*

Their haggling parodies the comic scene in Genesis where Abraham bargains with God over the number of people to be saved from Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 22: 27–33). To everyone's amazement the "civilized African king" (Mangeclous) offers to bribe the "Sous-chef de l'univers" with a suitcase full of cash. Quite aside from wanting to save the Jews, Mangeclous is sincerely convinced that if the plea succeeds, he will be appointed prime minister of the new state, and, like Sancho Panza, will at last rise to the regal status of a corrupt judge, living off bribes and stuffing himself with delicacies from dawn to dusk.

Bemused, the monster allows Mangeclous to discuss the matter with him for a while. He then takes the Weizmann telegram, counts the words, turns toward the grotesque "Complicator of trials" and abruptly calls him a crook ("vous êtes une crapule"). Solal orders the other four Valorous to exit the room and confronts Mangeclous, who quickly admits to the forgery of the telegram.

*—"Faites une offre" dit Mattathias.
—Dif pour fent [*sic*] de plus que l'Angleterre."
Mangeclous leva les bras au ciel.
—"Altesse, vous voulez rire!" s'écria-t-il. (*Mangeclous*, 560)

Mangeclous only regrets the pomp, bribery, and the food he will be missing now that he will no longer be elevated from *shmettle shnorrrer* (ghetto bum) to prime minister:

And what a prime minister I would have been, Highness! What inventions! What prosperity for my people and for myself! What a navy and what bribes! And, finally rich with billions, what food, and how my bottomless soul would have satisfied itself passionately with glorious little sesame fritters, dispatched each day for me from Cephalonia by Jacob Without Handkerchief, who is the only pastry chef in the world good enough to make them! O sublime fritters that instill such enthusiasm in my heart, O deliciously disgusting little fritters, filled to the very core as they are with syrup.*

This plethoric logorrhea of delusional regrets continues over six pages. Yet the “viceroy of the world” persists throughout in his cruel indifference. This grotesque Mangeclous incarnates and gives (ample) voice to Solal’s origins, his cultural id, as it were. No wonder, then, that the novel *Mangeclous* is dedicated TO MY FATHER. Solal’s ambivalence holds him in place; even disguised as a freakish monster, he remains as frozen as he was in the back of the taxi when he intently gazed at the Valorous, unable to force himself to step out and greet his guests.

At this point, Mangeclous expresses regret over the pain that this latest debacle will inflict on Saltiel, who, he notes sadly, is already suffering terribly from the loss of his nephew, a man named Solal, whom the Valorous are desperately trying to locate. Up to now, the similarities with the Joseph story have been obvious, yet somewhat oblique, but here they become textual and warrant a fuller examination. Jacob’s reaction to the loss of Joseph mirrors Saltiel’s reaction to that of Solal: “And Jacob rent his clothes and put sackcloth round his waist and mourned for his son many days. And all his sons and all his daughters rose to console him and he refused to be consoled and he said, ‘Rather I will go down to my son in Sheol mourning,’ and his father bewailed him” (Gen. 37: 34–35). Here is Mangeclous explaining Saltiel’s grief at the loss of Solal:

The poor man, he doesn’t speak to me about anything other than his nephew whom he lost and wants to find. . . .

*Et quel Premier ministre j’aurais été, Altesse! Quelles inventions! Quelle prospérité pour mon peuple et pour moi-même! Quelle flotte et quels pots-de-vin! Et, étant riche enfin à milliards, quelles nourritures et comme mon âme sans fond se serait rassasiée amoureusement de glorieux petits beignets au sésame, expédiés chaque jour pour moi de Céphalonie par Jacob Sans Mouchoir qui est le seul pâtisier du monde à bien les réussir! Ô sublimes beignets dont mon cœur est fervent, ô petits beignets délicieusement dégoûtants tant ils sont bourrés de sirop jusqu’à l’âme interne! (*Mangeclous*, 564)

. . . Oh, poor Saltiel, if only you could see him at our feasts eating all alone with a plate for his nephew Solal before him, a plate on which he places the choicest morsels! And against the pitcher there is a photograph of his nephew! Ah, highness, if you had known the former Saltiel, sharp and such a liar that it was a pleasure, with an invention always resting on his lips like a flower. While now, highness, ever since he lost his nephew, he's such a pale figure of a man! This broken man no longer utters anything but the truth, and as a result his days are numbered!*

It is clear that we are again at an inflection point. Solal is called upon to affirm once again the perennial "Here I am" and will no longer be able to hide behind his masks. He will have to reunite, however fleetingly and incompletely, with the despised beloved. The still silent Solal "made a sign to the grotesque that he should rejoin his kin [*ses pareils*]."† Alone and despondent, in the lucidity of an interior monologue Solal finds the perfect metaphor for his relationship to his kin: "The Jews were his mistresses and his adulteries."‡

The reader is now ready for a genuine reconciliation scene, prominent in Genesis, but absent in *Mangeclous*. The triumphant scene of reconciliation is seen from Saltiel's point of view, and is therefore discredited, somewhere, both for the narrator and the reader, between the amusing and the abject. The narrator's ambivalence cannot quite find the correct third-person perspective for this narrative climax. The banquet scene, in which all participants reunite, does take place, but again with one important reversal. Unlike Joseph, Solal will not break bread with his brethren: "Lord Solal, will you not honor us by sharing our modest meal?" asked Salomon. . . . Solal replied that he was not hungry, but that he would keep them company. He seemed numb, only half alive."§

Even in this scene of reticent recognition and reconciliation, there is contiguity between Solal and the Valorous but no transfer of affect. Instead of eating *with* the Valorous, he looks *at* them eating, as in the midnight scene where

*Le pauvre, il ne me parle que de son neveu qu'il a perdu et qu'il veut retrouver. . . .

. . . Oh pauvre Saltiel si vous pouviez le voir aux fêtes manger tout seul avec, devant lui, une assiette pour son neveu Solal, assiette sur laquelle il met les meilleurs morceaux! Et contre la carafe il y a la photographie de son neveu! Ah, Altesse, si vous aviez connu le Saltiel d'autrefois, vif et si menteur que c'était plaisir, toujours une invention à la bouche comme une fleur. Tandis que maintenant, Altesse, depuis qu'il a perdu son neveu c'est un individu pâle! Cet homme désemparé ne profère plus que des paroles véridiques et par conséquent ses jours sont comptés! (*Mangeclous*, 568)

†fit signe au grotesque d'aller rejoindre ses pareils (*Mangeclous*, 569)

‡Les Juifs étaient ses maîtresses et ses adultères. (*Mangeclous*, 569)

§"Seigneur Solal, ne nous ferez-vous pas le plaisir de partager notre modeste repas?" demanda Salomon. . . . Solal dit qu'il n'avait pas faim mais qu'il leur tiendrait compagnie. Il paraissait engourdi, vivant à demi seulement. (*Mangeclous*, 596)

he just gazed at them frozen by his shame and shame of shame. Now, once the masks have been removed, in the immediate presence of the Valorous, Solal not only stands apart but seems “numb, only half alive.” This is not exactly the classical comic closure that we would expect to a very tense farce! After this scene, Solal bestows much money on the Valorous in the half-articulated hope that they will never return, unless, of course, he chooses to play his deadly *Fort! Da!* game, in which case they just become actors in his sadomasochistic theater.

In contrast to the narratives of Joseph and Esther, the present flux of synecdoches and metonymies (encoded letters, faked letters, fried sesame honey doughnuts, masks, and costumes) never coagulates into that perfectly articulated metaphor of the banquet: the breaking and ingesting of bread face-to-face. In the absence of such a banquet, the ritual of reconciliation in bread and wine (the mass of reconciliation), the sequence of events remains suspended in midair. The narrative is thus short-circuited, truncated. At most, Solal can be obliquely contiguous vis-à-vis his brethren, but a real metaphorical transaction, in Peter Brooks’s model of narrative, never occurs.⁵¹

Consequently, “Purim in Geneva,” the central scene in *Mangeclous*, is a scene “whose tenuous readability depends directly on its intertextual support.”⁵² It must be read thematically (through the theme of the “leavening”) and phenomenologically (through the chronotope of the mask) against the Joseph and Esther narratives. Without reference to this intertextuality, it reads as a bizarre, pathological joke, and ignores the essential intertextual force at work beneath the surface: the problem of gathering a people, constituting one nation from a multitude, all the while being doubled, concealed, and masked—and, in a thoroughly modern fashion, wishing to remain individuated. In Genesis and the Book of Esther, these are successful transactions, and we can therefore see them as the reaffirmation of the basic logic of Genesis, “[the] reaffirmation of the divine purpose to bring about good in the face of evil, life in the midst of death. So good continues to be wrought.”⁵³ Yet, in Cohen, this providential perspective is self-consciously decanted of meaning. The comedy of dissimulation and (temporary) salvation of the biblical intertext becomes monstrous dissonance in *Mangeclous*. Cohen does not repeat and amplify the matrix narrative. Rather, he empties it of all its historico-political potency (the logic of the *augment*) and shows the phenomenology of the mask to be the most alienating of existences when imposed as a permanent state—so alienating that only the poetically grotesque can represent it. On the eve of the Holocaust, Cohen is a genius when it comes to adopting the Mannian dictum for the modern Jew: *For I am and am not just because I am I.*