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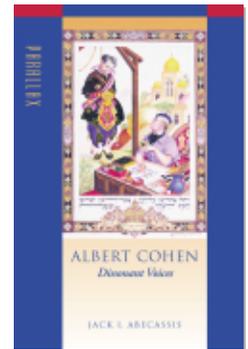
Albert Cohen

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## The Jewish Saint-Germain

*Joseph's dilemma is always between presence and absence, always confronted with this choice.*

*Shmuel Trigano, La Philosophie de la Loi*

As *Solal*, Cohen's first novel (1930), unfolds, its protagonist, Solal, engineers a meteoric rise in French political life, which culminates in his new status as the theoretician of the Socialist Party, deputy in the French National Assembly, and minister of labor, as well as an influential newspaper editor. Solal, in short, is at last the consummate insider. He is now married to Adrienne de Valdonne's niece, Aude, whose father, a French senator and government minister, greatly assists Solal's ascent to power. Distraught over Solal's abandonment of her and over his refined cruelty, Adrienne de Valdome—the woman who originally facilitated Solal's passage from Cephalonia to Europe and then his introduction into the inner circles of power in Switzerland and France—commits suicide by throwing herself in front of a train. Seemingly indifferent to the suicide of his mother/lover and liberator, the charismatic and very opportunistic Greek Jew leads a blissful life. The illusion of a stable and durable identity as a high-class European socialist seduces him no end.

But one does not become oneself *ex nihilo*. Past and present inevitably intersect, and Solal's European identity, so eagerly willed and constructed, quickly unravels. He will not be a Mediterranean Disraeli, as he painfully reminds himself in *Belle du Seigneur*: "She then suggested she read a biography of Disraeli to him. Oh no, not that sly [*rusé*] fellow, . . . who knew, he, how not to waste his life."\* This failure to become a Disraeli and Solal's acute awareness of it allow Cohen the novelist to masterfully weave competing nar-

\*Alors, elle proposa de lui lire une biographie de Disraeli. Ah non, pas ce rusé bonhomme, . . . et qui avait su ne pas gâcher sa vie, lui. (*BdS*, 776)

ratives of idiosyncratic narcissisms and phantasms into historical and theological paradoxes. In *Solal*, this tragic awareness still has a comic and hopeful tinge to it, which will completely disappear in *Mangeclous* and *Belle du Seigneur*. *Solal* still harbors the hope that a charismatic Jew may be able to negotiate multiple identities, exist in between inclusions and exclusions, and ascend and descend the ladder of identities, following his self-creative comic will, all while secretly and obliquely saving his people from perdition. *Solal* wants to be the invisible one who will make the presence of Israel possible. But the sudden bursting of Israel into his life makes this all but impossible.

Like Joseph, *Solal* keeps his worldly success secret from his kin. When his father and his uncle Saltiel finally visit him in Paris, he humiliates them by keeping them waiting in a shabby hotel. The old father and rabbi, Gamaliel, loses patience and decides to force the issue. Uninvited and dressed in traditional rabbinical garb, Gamaliel (accompanied by Saltiel) attends an elegant diplomatic reception at the Quai d'Orsay (the French foreign ministry), thereby calling into question his son's fictional new self. This irruption of the past into the present, of the Jew into the quintessential Gentiles' space (Quai d'Orsay, Palace of the League of Nations, elegant receptions and late-night parties), is a frequent nightmare scenario in Cohen's fiction and essays. *Solal's* reaction to Gamaliel's intrusion is violent (as it will be with his mother in *Le Livre de ma mère*): "[T]his man [Gamaliel] who, after making him look ridiculous and *shattering a painfully constructed life*, had the stupid audacity to smile. Mad with shame, he moved to strike. A sudden inspiration stopped him. His eyes blazed malignantly, and, gloating over the act, he slowly made the sign of the cross."<sup>\*</sup>

I cannot overstate the symbolic power of this act of apostasy. For a Jew, making the sign of the cross in front of one's father in public is an act even more spiteful than physically striking one's father in public. Gamaliel becomes so distraught that, once back at his hotel, he slashes his own eyes with a knife. In so doing, Gamaliel enacts upon his own flesh the symbolic erasure of the father that the son has carried out in gesture. Without his eyes, Gamaliel can no longer witness *Solal's* transgression, a sign of the father's symbolic impotence. The purpose of Gamaliel's life lies in the assurance of a Jewish transmission, assured (in this case) through the symbolic link between the father and son. *Solal* brutally severs this link to the past and transmission to the future, thus

<sup>\*</sup>[C]et homme qui, après être venu le ridiculiser, *briser une vie péniblement construite*, avait la stupide audace de sourire. Fou de honte, il s'approcha pour frapper. Mais une inspiration subite le fit s'arrêter. Les yeux ardents de malignité, il fit, lentement et avec délices, le signe de la croix. (*Solal*, 280; emphasis added)

castrating the father with a single sign of the cross. Gamaliel responds to this public castration by symbolically castrating himself by mutilating his eyes.<sup>1</sup>

But Solal quickly regains his lucidity. Perched at a window watching his humiliated father and uncle saunter away, the apostate realizes what he has done. “Yes, he understood everything now. When he leant out of the window last night, he had seen the two rejected old men walking in the snow, stumbling, supporting each other and walking away, the two despairing old men.”\* The high-perched window as a site of truth is a stock trope in philosophical discourse. It was from such a window that Descartes wondered whether the things with hats coming toward him were human or robots; and Pascal’s most radical articulation of “What is the Self?” occurred when, perceiving people from a high window, he was struck by the contingency (and ultimate narcissism) of all perception.<sup>2</sup> The high and wide angle permits the viewer to confront the strange familiarity of the other. The familiar becomes absurd, and existentially urgent in its phenomenal and ontological absurdity.

Once drawn out of the diplomatic circle where oriental, religious Jews are considered as the ultimate others, Solal realizes how true to themselves these “despairing old men,” those sad silhouettes now drifting away from him, but from whom he sprang, are. Solal does not, however, need a God to guarantee that these are not mere phantoms (Descartes); nor does he need to be reminded of the fragility of their contingency and of his own narcissism (Pascal)—origin and destiny are far more powerful impulses than feeble philosophical moves. The face-to-face encounter, paradoxically enough, does not yield imperative identification. Rather, distance and perspective allow father and uncle to exit Solal’s field of self-absorption (the diplomatic reception) and regain their status as kin: as origin and destiny. Standing at the high window, Solal cannot help but exit his narcissism and sadism and become perfectly lucid, as revealed in this interior monologue: “O my Sol, ours is a very ancient people; quite distinct from the Crusaders who are of the day before yesterday; a very pure, very holy, and very faithful people. Poor Solal, you had sold your soul. Kneel at Gamaliel’s feet and beg for his forgiveness!”† Again, the proximity-distance paradox stands out as a leitmotif in Cohen’s writings and transforms

\*Mais oui, il comprenait tout maintenant. Lorsqu’il s’était penché à la fenêtre hier soir, il avait vu les deux vieux renvoyés qui allaient sur la neige, trébuchaient, s’appuyaient l’un sur l’autre et allaient, les deux vieux désespérés (*Solal*, 282)

†Ô mon Sol, ce peuple est un peuple très ancien, autre chose que les Croisés qui sont d’avant-hier, un peuple très pur, très noble et très fidèle. Pauvre Solal, tu avais vendu ton âme. Aux pieds de Gamaliel et demande-lui pardon!” (*Solal*, 283)

the father-uncle figure into a necessary abstraction, thus producing this renewed allegiance. By abstraction, I simply mean that the paternal figures (father and uncle), or the Valorous in general, are not desired as real, concrete individuals in all their concrete “thereness,” but only as members of a community obsessed with the transmission of its culture, of its Book. Solal identifies with the Jews as a collective (“a very pure, very holy, and very faithful people”), that is, as historical and theological abstractions—as conveyors of a religion and culture that define him, bind him, and sacrifice his worldly and sexual desire—but never as individuals desired in a differentiated face-to-face encounter. Henceforth Solal’s ego bifurcates radically, as all his collective identification focuses on the Jews and his individual desire directs itself toward the Gentiles. Pulled between Rabbi Gamaliel and Aude de Maussane, Solal will vacillate between the two—a comic situation where clans with different codes of conduct clash in a confined space—the Château Saint-Germain.

Once Solal resurfaces from the depths of his self-absorption, his wife, apartment, routines, and political power—all the attributes of his “painfully constructed life”—seem absurd to him. Solal’s predicament throughout his novelistic life (1930–69) is represented well in this triple movement: the familiar becomes absurd; the desired is always in conflict with the symbolic (the father and all his surrogates); and therefore everything seems to be vanity—unworthy of life, but deserving a highly stylized death.

The arrival of the oriental Jewish father momentarily disrupts the equilibrium of his new life, and Solal perceives everything around him as a Kafkaesque nightmare: “How strange. An apartment. And this apartment belonged to him. Comic . . . armchairs. A little brush for the fireplace. He had things. . . . Funny. Want to laugh. . . . Solal, the ‘theoretician of the party.’”<sup>\*</sup> Solal’s laughter is tragic. It is the bleak negation of all desired venues. It is the expression of his contempt for all possible scenarios: the transmission of Judaism, so desired by the father, seems to him just as contemptuous and absurd as his fashionable apartment and pretentious political title, “theoretician of the party.”

But returning to his origins proves an impossible fantasy. Although born oriental and Jewish, Solal has also become a European: he is both a secular politician and the son of Rabbi Gamaliel, bearer of the father’s blessings and all the duties thereof. Solal’s “vanity of vanities” harangue against Aude and Europe thereby acquires a complex character. He does not reject Europa

<sup>\*</sup>Curieux. Un appartement. Et cet appartement lui appartenait. Comique. . . . Fauteuils. Petit balai pour la cheminée. Il avait des objets . . . Comique. Envie de rire. . . . Solal le “théoricien du parti.” (*Solal*, 281, 232)

(Aude) on its empirical merit, on the level of a face-to-face existence, for he indeed ardently desires Europa. He instead rejects the anti-Semitic foundation of this Europe—the belief that for Europe to exist, the Jews must be kept alive but remain contemptible, be present but hidden.<sup>3</sup> Upon seeing the Valorous who visit Solal at the Quai d'Orsay, Aude's father, a liberal socialist, directly suggests this desired disappearance of the Jews to Solal: "Scram, you and your tribe [*smalah*]."\* Aude has a more nuanced understanding of Solal's inner ambiguity: "All was vanity, except the Law of which he spoke, the hypocrite, eyes distraught and mouth open too wide."† The Law (of his father) renders odious the desired European. Each proposition in the father's bar mitzvah charge now haunts the son's interior monologue: "Marriage. Very well, marriage. And now he was locked in a cube with her. . . . There were bones and they both chewed. Tra-la-la, let us chew and brush our teeth conjugally. And he was, naturally, expected to feed her, to bring meats and grass and serve her. Later, perhaps, he might have to build a nest with his mouth, sit on it to warm up the little snakes, warble to amuse the female, and feed the little sharks with his beak."‡

Solal then slips out of this interior monologue (a nihilistic Manichean dualism between fallen matter and godly spirit, not a dominant feature of Jewish thinking) and ridicules Aude, going so far as to tell her that "music was intercourse and an abomination," which closely echoes Gamaliel's bar mitzvah curse: "Anathema on him who stops to look at a beautiful tree." It would be out of place here to discuss the problematic nature of these beliefs from the point of view of Torah-based Jewish thought.<sup>4</sup> But we can say in brief that the tension between the world as it is and its ontological foundation, managed by the norms of the Law, modulates relationships, whether human to divine, human to human, or human to things, but does not ontologically degrade matter and desire per se, and is therefore rarely nihilistic.<sup>5</sup>

Thus, instead of differentiating Jewish and Christian points of view (which Solal inverts), these outbursts suggest Solal's searing self-dissonance, if not outright hysteria, which Cohen underlines by focalizing Solal's actions through

\*"Vous allez déguerpir avec votre smalah." (*Solal*, 239)

†Tout était vanité, sauf la Loi dont il parlait, l'hypocrite, avec des yeux égarés et en ouvrant trop la bouche. (*Solal*, 286)

‡Mariage, bien mariage. Et maintenant il était enfermé dans un cube avec elle. . . . il y avait des os et ils mastiquaient tous les deux. Gai gai mastiquons et brossons-nous les dents conjugalement. Et naturellement, il était tenu de la nourrir, d'apporter des viandes et des herbages et de la saillir. Peut-être même que plus tard il devrait construire un nid avec sa bouche, s'asseoir dessus pour chauffer les petits serpents, gazouiller pour faire passer le temps à la femelle et nourrir les petits requins à la becquée. (*Solal*, 282)

Aude's interior monologue: "the hypocrite, eyes distraught and mouth open too wide." Solal cannot modulate intelligently; he can only swing violently from extreme to extreme: "[H]e could only express himself brilliantly under the impulse of passion."\* Here Solal is perverse on all accounts. Perverse when he humiliates his father. Perverse when he humiliates his wife. Narcissism exacts its toll. "[Solal] reveled in the unconscious treasons of which he accused her."† Within two pages, the young minister has deeply wounded his father and his wife, and events become even more comic when we learn that they are destined to share the same dwelling.

Cohen the novelist has found in the Château Saint-Germain the perfect chronotope (ratio of time-space projection) to convey Solal's *in-between* existence.<sup>6</sup> To satisfy the two dominant paternal figures, Gamaliel and de Mausane, the two mutually exclusive spheres must coexist in the symbolic space of the late medieval Château Saint-Germain. The day after he makes the sign of the cross in public, Solal drops to his knees and begs his father for forgiveness. Gamaliel accepts but commands Solal to "build a secret abode in [his] European one."‡ Solal obeys. Gamaliel understands that there is no returning to the ghetto of Cephalaria for Solal. This is why he demands of Solal the active exercise of conflicting identities. By day a visible political maverick, by night a ghost—Solal becomes the obedient son, reenacting the Sephardic nightmare of crypto-Jewish existence.

A château is a worldview reduced to its architectural expression. It represents a collective spirit, a collective discourse. Its ideological arrangement of space signifies a vision of the whole: the meaning of the past, the practices of the present, and the possibilities of the future. Châteaux, in particular, have a number of significant attributes. They dominate ("La Commanderie" is the name of our château), and their size—the invisible underground cellars and multiple compartments—makes them forbidding, hence their gothic potential, so richly exploited here. As symbolic representations, they are meaningful spaces where the visible gives way to the invisible, where hidden passages lead to secret worlds, where appearances often deceive.

In his initial description of the château, Solal twice underlines its religious significance, and hence the relationship between chronology and spatial arrangement in his "European abode." The Château Saint-Germain dates back to "the fifteenth century after Jesus Christ," he notes with precision, and then

\*[I] ne savait s'exprimer que génialement, sous la poussée de la passion. (*Solal*, 288)

†[Solal] se repaissait des trahisons inconscientes dont il l'accusait. (*Solal*, 286)

‡faire une demeure secrète dans [s]a demeure d'Europe. (*Solal*, 291)

sarcastically asks the reader, “Why do you dispose of so few centuries?”\* In this context, the sixteenth century can only be of the Christian calendar; no need, therefore, to underline it, unless this reference is the key to understanding the symbolic layout of the Château Saint-Germain. In other words, the chronological order of Judaism and Christianity is replicated in the vertical structure of the château: in the cellar below live the human relics of the period before Christ; above them lives Aude de Maussane, incarnation of the New Israel; and, between the old and new, between the “Before” and the “After,” Solal shuttles up and down.

Thus when he describes the château to Aude, Solal emphasizes that “even the ground that is below will belong to us,”† adding sarcastically: “The people of the Middle Ages have arranged everything very well.”‡ Unlike moderns, medieval Christians made no pretense of even the theoretical acceptability of non-Christians in the visible realm; thus, they separated Jews from Christians as a matter of law and fact, just as the Germans were about to undertake to do three years after the publication of this novel. As early as 1930, Cohen understood how the medieval and the modern would soon merge in the National Socialist state. Most anti-Jewish Nazi laws were merely a more systematic and efficient rendition of medieval Christian practices.<sup>7</sup> In this Jewish ghetto that Solal constructs for his kin within his “European abode,” Cohen locates and mines the most apt chronotope both for his existential identity struggle and, more important, for the fate of his people.

The motif of the underground cave or cellar recurs often in Cohen, and for profound reasons. First there is the obvious ontotheological dimension: the Jews have been superseded and remain blind to the (new) truth; their place remains in the ground, slithering along with the other blind insects. Medieval imagery makes frequent references to the blindness of the Jews.<sup>8</sup> In architectural and iconographical terms, the synagogue lies literally beneath the cathedral, as it is most famously represented in Chartres cathedral. And likewise, the living arrangement in Saint-Germain, where Christians live above and Jews below, stands for the ontological priority of Christians over Jews. The embarrassing relics are best kept below and out of sight.<sup>9</sup>

This ontotheological construct of the château also recalls the superego, ego, and id topology. “A biblical city swarms under His Excellency’s house,”§ just

\*“Pourquoi disposez-vous de si peu de siècles?” (*Solal*, 283)

†“même la terre qui est dessous nous appartiendra.” (*Solal*, 283)

‡“Les gens du Moyen Âge ont tout très bien arrangé.” (*Solal*, 291)

§Une ville biblique grouille sous la demeure de Son Excellence (*Solal*, 291)

as Judaism festers under the house of Christianity, like a disturbing unconscious, provoking fits of aggression, fascination, deep ambivalence. The Jews are an origin that resists supersession; an origin that is a crucial element of Christian identity, allowed to remain present but held in contempt.<sup>10</sup> “For the Jews of the cellar are not only the cultural unconscious of the West, they are also the most archaic layer of the personality of [Solal], who attempts without success to do away with it.”<sup>11</sup> But let us return to the Jewish Saint-Germain, a name revealing all: château, Saint-Germain, but also in the final analysis Jewish. All the codes collide here.<sup>12</sup>

In order to prepare his “European abode” for its dual existence Solal sends his wife away from Paris and has the château refurbished, particularly its underground. Once this is completed and Solal’s kin are settled in the underground (*souterrain*), Aude returns from Geneva to inhabit the upper part of the château with her husband, while Solal’s family and extended kin are hidden below in a cellar. But Solal is edgy, secretive, and paranoiac, and the already precarious existence of this Jewish-Gentile couple becomes strained. To conceal the living relics teeming below, Solal fires the staff, except for one maid. Every night he sounds a gong, after which no one is to move in the castle. Aude is confined to her room, and Solal takes a secret passageway leading underground, where his ancestry awaits him, as nightmares await a madman falling asleep. Every night Solal ascends and descends the ladder of prehistory and history (B.C./A.D.), struggling in the most self-dramatizing fashion to reconcile the impossible.

Yet Aude knows that something is afoot. She hears very strange sounds: “Cries or singing seemed to surge from the depths of the earth. Stumbling phrases, then rapid notes would rise sharply. Was she prey to hallucinations?”\* After a thorough search of the castle, she comes into Solal’s study and finds him asleep with a golden key in his hands. She understands at once that the golden key unlocks the passage to the forbidden part of the house. Unable to resist her curiosity, Aude descends for a quick first look and discovers the occupants of the underground. She returns upstairs and confronts Solal.

A comic exchange of fantasies follows. Solal and Aude share a vision of “biblical man” quite at variance with the reality of European Jews circa 1930. When she becomes conscious of the chants rising from the basement, Aude is eager to encounter these extraordinary relics of the “Old Testament”: “[T]he

\*Des cris ou des chants semblaient surgir des profondeurs de la terre. Des phrases butées puis des notes rapides qui s’élevaient avec acuité. Était-elle en proie à une hallucination? (*Solal*, 287)

wonderful world her beloved [Solal] had described. She advanced reverently toward the pure and warrior kingdom of the Old Testament. She advanced toward the prophets.”\* Solal never hides his Jewish origin and is thus never truly a “crypto-Jew.” But he constructs his own “biblical” legend concerning his sunny Cephalonian origins, never mind the one hundred generations of displacements and persecutions separating modern Jews from the last Hebrew “pure warriors and prophets.”

As a highly educated Genevan Protestant, Aude knows her “Old” and “New” Testaments and is a competent accomplice in Solal’s romantic self-invention. Although converging from opposite directions, they both traffic in similar fantasies. Aude sees her “Hebrew” kin as proto-Christians, while Solal interprets his mythic biblical heritage as a predisposition for a messianic vocation in Europe for which Aude is an important sexual and political vector: “We have given you the greatest wise man. And so many others. And me, among others. *And me later.*”† Aude thus imagines that she will encounter her own proto-Christian origins, just as one might rush to meet Achilles and Patroclus on the shores of Troy. Perhaps these “biblical” figures will resemble the rustic menagerie of Bethlehem in Christmas nativity scenes, exotic and festive Swiss chocolate figurines?

The climax of this black comedy occurs when Aude casually opens the Bible and reads from the Book of Ruth: “[Y]our people shall be my people, and your God my God” (Ruth 1: 16). Aude is eager to rediscover mythic origins that will be a bridge between her world and that of her husband; she identifies with Ruth the Moabite, and she is in that sense eager to convert to Judaism. But in interpreting Ruth’s eagerness as doctrinal in nature, Aude comically misreads the text. Indeed, nowhere does the Book of Ruth involve theological argument or assent, so foreign to pre-Hellenic Hebraic texts. Ruth, a poor widow, simply recognizes as superior—or simply as more expedient—the ways of her late husband and of her mother-in-law, whom she follows back to Judea from the desert kingdom of Edom. Aude’s theological reading of Ruth amounts to a droll inversion of the biblical text (a common feature of Cohen’s rhetoric); she understands the literal meaning of Scripture as theological allegory. On the very next page, Cohen highlights this reversal when Gamaliel asks Aude whether she is ready to convert to Judaism. She replies

\*[L]e monde merveilleux que son aimé lui avait décrit. Elle allait avec respect vers le royaume pur et guerrier de l’Ancien Testament. Elle allait vers les prophètes. (*Solal*, 291–92)

†Nous vous avons donné le plus grand sage. Et tant d’autres. Et moi, entre autres. *Moi de plus tard.* (*Solal*, 306; emphasis added)

that before deciding, she “wishes to be initiated into the Israelite doctrine”; to which he sarcastically replies: “Good. Go and share our people’s meal. Look at them. Afterward, you will let me know your decision.”\* In ordering Aude to share a meal and simply observe the others in all their (subterranean) materiality here and now, Gamaliel gives Aude a first lesson in Jewish “doctrine,” as well as a correct reading of the Book of Ruth.<sup>13</sup>

But let us return to Aude’s imminent descent underground, through which Cohen weaves together two classical chronotopes: that of the château-underground and that of the Dantesque descent to hell. Far from being completely deluded, Solal knows the painful yet comic incongruity that lies between Aude’s Calvinistic fantasies about “Old Testament” Hebrews, on the one hand, and modern Jews, on the other. Indeed, while she first views her new kin as sunny, Mediterranean “biblical men,” her image of them changes in the end to one of “insufferable losers” (*bonshommes impossibles*) and even “these worms” (*ces larves*).

Solal’s own initial description of the underground is chilling. “Where are you going?” Aude asks him. “Into the den,” he replies. “To the kingdom of the dead. To the land of the dreadful smile.”† Down below, Aude finds searing deformation instead of conformity with “biblical” fantasy. Every detail in her perception of the cellar and its inhabitants conforms to the blood-soaked monstrosity attributed to Jews in anti-Semitic hallucinations, be they crude libels or fine theological arguments.

The first level of the cellar leads Aude to the eczematic, lymphatic, fat, bewigged “women of Judea”: “To the right, set apart from the men by a railing, women sitting in profile. A Byzantine empress scratched away at her eczema. A lymphatic was showing her jewelry to a restless corpulence. An old woman wearing a wig gone brown was reading approvingly and shaking her chin.”‡

The next step in the descent leads to the menagerie composed of Judean women: “Misshapen [*avachies*] women breast-feeding their babies drew their teat[s] away. The frustrated infants whined.”§ The indefinite plural noun

\*“Bien. Allez partager le repas des nôtres. Regardez-les. Ensuite, vous me ferez connaître votre décision.” (*Solal*, 292)

†“—Et où allez-vous?” “—Dans l’antre. Au royaume des morts. Dans la contrée du sourire éfrayant.” (*Solal*, 289)

‡À droite, séparées des hommes par une balustrade, des femmes assises de profil. Une impératrice byzantine grattait son eczéma. Une lymphatique montrait des bijoux à une corpulence agitée. Une vieille à perruque roussie lisait en approuvant et remuait le menton. (*Solal*, 290)

§Des femmes avachies qui allaitaient leurs enfants écartèrent leur mamelle. Les nourrissons frustrés se plainquirent (*Solal*, 298)

“women” (*des femmes*) underscores their misshapen lack of differentiation; they breast-feed and then briskly pull (*écartèrent*) their nipples away from the suckling babes.

Third step in the descent into hell—blood: “A mother lulled a newly circumcised infant and took pride in the blood that ran along the thighs of the sturdy little chap. Girls of the tribe were congratulating the mother.”\* Here is a full account of the bloody ritual of the “old covenant”; the brutality of circumcision accentuated by the adjective “freshly” (*fraîchement*). The warm blood drips down the infant’s thighs, while the “girls” of the “tribe” congratulate the mother for the ritualistic mutilation. Each detail evokes age-old blood libels and deeply ingrained phobias. Jews remain underground because they still include sacrificial blood in their covenant,<sup>14</sup> whereas the Gentiles are exempted from the blood ritual by Pauline theology—and therefore remain ontologically above ground. Blood flows in ritual, as in history, because the blood of Jesus drips forever on the Jews, as per medieval Christian theology.<sup>15</sup> Thus we metaphorically descend from disease to animality and finally to blood rituals. In the end, these women are simply part of a misshapen “tribal” whole, writhing like worms in a tin can sloshing about with warm milk and blood, buried alive by a world that, subconsciously at least, wants them dead.

If the females are akin to animals, the males oscillate among the arrogant (Gamaliel), the burlesque (the Valorous), and the insane (the three “superior” brothers), and it is the Valorous who take the comic center stage. As described in Chapter 2, each of the Valorous embodies a distinct aspect of the ridiculous “shlumiels” (false advocate, inventor, miser, giant, peddler of apricot water). It is in the Saint-Germain underground where Cohen best deploys their double function as the conveyors of Solal’s repressed horrific contempt of them, as well as the projections of his own genuine joy in their subversive foolery, the perfect foil for his colossal narcissism, which, in their absence, he recreates for himself in his masochistic Purim rituals.

Confronted with Aude, the Valorous run the gamut of their repertoire. Satiel, who is the most mindful about saving appearances, leads Aude away from Rabbi Gamaliel, and presents her with an elaborate bouquet of flowers as “a tribute from a charmed uncle,” the kind gesture being accompanied by “([t]hree pointed smiles, one behind the other. Three bows”).† Aude accepts

\*Une mère berçait un nourrisson fraîchement circoncis et s’enorgueillissait du sang qui coulait sur les cuisses du petit vaillant. Des filles de la tribu congratulaient la mère. (*Solal*, 300)

†(Trois sourires en pointe, les uns derrière les autres. Trois courbettes.) (*Solal*, 293; parentheses in original)

graciously, but Saltiel promptly demands that she return the flowers “lest the bouquet should be damaged . . . I’ll keep them for you in my lap, and after dinner you can have them back, don’t you worry.”\* Then, seated next to her at dinner, he catalogues all his fantastic inventions, capped by his latest—“fan-powered sailing!” After dinner, Aude descends to yet a deeper underground chamber where the false advocate Mangeclous, the peddler of apricot water Salomon, the miser Mattathias, and the giant Michaël assail her with questions, offers, and performances. Mangeclous asks her about the functioning of French courts, all the while twiddling his nose hair and eating one greasy fritter after another. While scribbling clever sentences in a child’s notebook, Salomon asks Aude for her opinion of Napoleon. But, as usual, the miser Mattathias is the crassest and most direct of the lot:

Mattathias pushed [Salomon] aside and questioned Aude, looking at her suspiciously.

“I am told that the Banque de France has decreased its interest rate. Is that right? (She did not respond.) Never mind. I have a first-rate sapphire. For you, it will be the *Israélite* price.”†

No doubt there is much black humor in these mini-performances of the Valorous. These comic episodes provoke an underground laughter, reserved for those who possess nothing but verbal fantasy. The Valorous suffer from logorrhea, their sole point of phantasmagoric contact with the European world from which they are excluded. No doubt Solal dreads these debris of history, who weigh him down by the reminder of his origins, yet raise him up with their comic levity—heavy because they prevent his liberation from the island ghetto, light because he masochistically delights in their nonsensical banter. He almost seems to say, “You think I am so European—but look at my kin, my origin, and my self-destructive desire to regress to the scene from which I emerged and from which I cannot escape.” Solal repeatedly invites the Valorous to cities where they can only undermine his position in the Gentile world, as if he has a semi-conscious, macabre death drive to undo his “painfully constructed life.” In periodically inserting the Valorous into his life, he toys with the limits of his power—can he maintain himself despite the automatic dis-

\*“*s’abimera*. . . je vous le garderai sur mes genoux et après le dîner je vous le rendrai, soyez tranquille.” (*Solal*, 293)

†Mattathias l’écarta et interrogea Aude, l’œil méfiant.

On m’a rapporté que la Banque de France a diminué son taux d’escompte. Est-ce vrai? (Elle ne répondit pas.) Peu importe. J’ai un saphir premier choix. Pour vous, ce sera le prix israélite.” (*Solal*, 296)

grace they bring to him? The most sober of the Valorous, Saltiel, wonders why, with a view to seducing Aude into Judaism, Solal would invite the Valorous, who are after all, the inferior branch of the international Solal clan? The answer to this question will soon be obvious.

The higher or more accomplished branch of the Solal clan is composed mainly of three brothers: Nadab, a professor of psychology at the University of Berlin; Reuben, a banker and financial speculator; and Saul, a possessed rabbinical mystic. Like Solal, all three are touched by insanity and must negotiate a maddening double existence. Their “normal” lives (before coming to Saint-Germain) are consonant with their existence in the Parisian underground.

Their sister, Tsillah, a tall and vivacious young woman with a mad look in her eyes, lucidly explains their madness to Aude:

During the day, Nadab thinks and that is a geometrical coldness, the Stalactites wander in the darkness of truths, the gears turn but do not catch. At night, Nadab enters life. His frenzy detects, juxtaposes, compares, tallies with, moves about, groups, substitutes, speculates, and destroys illusory pride. During the day, Reuben, female fatty thick-blooded fecund dirty producer, calls the banks, the journalists, and the kings over the phone, he crushes, hoists himself up, cannot wait to live, persists, impassive, and swells. At night, he is pursued, cries, is afraid, fears being noticed, to take his revenge he spits, he would like to be proud, no longer smile or approve, fear distorts him, but this mud is incrustated with precious germs, he is pious and cowardly. During the day, Saul tames the Dogs of God, they become brisk and herd the sheep nations toward tomorrow and justice will be done, he rebels and hates evil, he has a hard face but his eyes flicker with tenderness. At night he smiles wearily, he loves, despises and knows that the Kingdom is proclaimed from this very day on, women understand him, a simpleton, he fits in with the children, light-hearted, his face soft, mischief sometimes draws a line across the left eye, it is the Lamb.\*

\*“Le jour, Nadab pense et c’est le froid géométrique, les stalactites se promènent dans le noir de vérité, les engrenages fonctionnent à vide. La nuit, Nadab entre dans la vie. Sa fureur décele, juxtapose, compare, recoupe, déplace, regroupe, substitue, spéculé et détruit des fiertés illusoire. Le jour, Reuben, femelle adipeux sang épais fécond sale producteur, téléphone aux banques, aux journalistes et aux rois, il écrase, se juche, pressé de vivre, s’obstine impassiblement et enfle. La nuit, il est poursuivi, pleure, a peur, craint qu’on ne le remarque, pour se venger il crache, il voudrait être fier, ne plus sourire ni approuver, la peur le décompose, mais cette boue est granulée de germes précieux, il est pieux et lâche. Le jour, Saül dresse les Chiens de Dieu qui deviennent vifs et conduisent les brebis nations vers demain et l’on fera justice, il se révolte et déteste le mal, il a une face dure mais ses yeux vacillent de tendresse. La nuit, il sourit avec lassitude, il aime, méprise et sait que le Royaume est proclamé dès aujourd’hui, les femmes le comprennent, un simple, il va avec les enfants, gai, son visage est doux, une malice raie parfois l’œil gauche, c’est l’Agneau.” (*Solal*, 302)

These three “superior” Solals are striking insofar as they are obviously splintering into multiple tropes of self-estrangement to the point of clinical psychosis. Daily, nightly, they ascend and descend the ladder, struggling to assemble during the day that which they dismantle at night. But these struggles—going up and down the ladder—create a dissonance without any resolution. Unlike Jacob’s ladder (Gen. 32: 23–33), to which all of these tropes implicitly refer, the outcome here is not life-affirming. They are just so many permutations of insanity. After the night-long struggle, these Jacobs do not become Isra-el (“one who struggles with God”), the patriarchs of nations. Morbid, circular, and endlessly repetitive, with budding delirium as the only effect, their struggles morph into the purely absurd—more like that of Sisyphus (morosely combined with Mau-pessant’s demented Horla) than like that of Jacob.

At night, each brother decomposes into his opposite. By day, Nadab the psychologist, is Greek, geometrical, transparent. At night, Greek rationality cedes to his “frenzy [which] detects, juxtaposes, compares, tallies, moves about, groups, substitutes, speculates, and destroys illusory pride.” This diurnal geometrical turn of mind refers to the nature of his scientific research, while his nocturnal forays into the ripples of Being, to perpetual interpretation at the margins of horrific history, refer to a heterogeneous Jewish turn of mind, more at home with a page of the Talmud (juxtaposition, displacement, substitution, speculation, destruction) than with a clear and distinct, rational page of Descartes. Reuben, the banker, spends his days acting as a predator, intimidating many alpha personalities in the world of business and finance, but at night, he is a tracked animal, paralyzed by fear and anxiety. Reuben and Solal are both powerful men, feared by their peers, yet once alone, their historical and ethnic memories remind them of just how fragile their power really is. Saul, the mystical rabbi, however, exhibits the greatest polarity: he is a Jew (Saul) by day and a Christian (Paul) by night. During the day, he frowns as he teaches the Law to “the Dogs of God,” future rabbis, presumably, who will conduct the Jewish people toward a tomorrow when justice will be done. (In Judaism, messianic tomorrows are what George Steiner calls “‘a counter-factual optative,’ a category of meaning never to be realized.”)<sup>16</sup> But at night, he smiles, because he believes that the Messiah has already come (either in Jesus or possibly in himself), and he despises the stubborn, blind Jews (“the Dogs”) who are mired in a culture of law and interpretation. At night, Saul converts to Paul: he knows that “[t]he Kingdom is proclaimed from this day.” He has already passed from the world of interpretation to the world of satisfaction.<sup>17</sup> The rabbi’s duality—diurnally Jewish, nocturnally Christian—actually inverts the pattern of daily

cycles observable throughout Cohen's fiction, where Judaism is assigned to nocturnal rituals, darkness and disguise, to the underground.

All these assents and descents are not sure-footed, but wobbly, flailing, spiraling maneuvers. In their daily practices, they become chaos unto themselves. Saltiel himself describes the three to Aude as "somewhat sick in the head." Once "en famille," that is in their nocturnal mode, their behavior betrays sheer madness: "The three brothers argued ferociously, seemed to want to fight, but then one of them would say a word in the ear of the other and all three would calm down."\* In the end, from Aude's point of view, the "superior" branch of the Solal clan is just as bestial as the tribal women, just as bizarre as the Valorous.

Aude's illusion is that Solal differs from his kin, that he is better at negotiating his psychosis than they are. But soon enough she realizes that he is so much like the "superior" three that his identity bleeds into theirs: "He was cheerful and passionate, as they were, bewitched. But was it he or one of the Three,"† Aude wonders, questioning her ability to distinguish her now passionate and gesticulating husband from the mad threesome.

Aude emerges into the château's visible zone distraught, all her literary and theological fantasies shattered. These creatures below are not cunning Rebecca, warriorlike Joshua, or majestic King David. Aude has the feeling of returning from "a medieval fair"; she is even sexually harassed by Reuben, while Solal remains passive. Reversing her generous Ruth-like gesture, she emphatically advises, "Sol, do not waste your life because of them. What do you have in common with these people? You are noble and handsome, unlike these worms. Beloved, send them away."‡ Solal himself refers to his persecuted kin as "the most magnificent dung [*fumier*]."§ When first asked where he disappears to every night, Solal already gives a zoological and psychiatric answer: he descends "[t]o the kingdom of the dead. To the land of the dreadful smile." Three key words now describe the underground and its occupants: lair/den (*antre*), dung (*fumier*) and worms (*larves*).<sup>18</sup>

Solal and Aude do not have such diverging perceptions of their guests, although each interprets them differently. Whereas Aude is horrified because she fails to understand their deformation, Solal is simultaneously repulsed by and attracted to them, qualifying Jews as "the most magnificent dung," for he

\*Les trois frères se disputaient férocement, semblaient vouloir se battre puis l'un disait un mot à l'oreille de l'autre et les trois s'apaisaient. (*Solal*, 302)

†Il était rieur et passionné, pareil à eux, envoûté. Mais était-ce lui ou un des Trois? (*Solal*, 300)

‡Sol, ne manque pas ta vie à cause d'eux. Qu'y a-t-il de commun entre toi et ces gens? Tu es noble et beau, tu n'es pas comme ces larves. Aimé, renvoie ces gens.' (*Solal*, 306; emphasis added)

§"le plus magnifique fumier." (*Solal*, 305)

properly deciphers the signs of these “emaciated ones wandering through the centuries.”\* Where Aude sees only repulsive vermin, Solal sees an excessive and yet sublime people. Cohen often employs the image of the possessed King David maniacally dancing in front of the sacred ark (2 Sam. 6: 14–15) to represent the poetic “madness” of the Jews: “The crazy old people that walks alone through the storm carrying its harp immortally sounding its delirium of grandeur and persecution across the black hurricane of the centuries.”†

Solal certainly hesitates. But unlike Aude, he cannot turn his back on these “emaciated ones wandering through the centuries”—he must wrestle with the demons on the ladder of history; he must be or become (which is not yet clear) this “Hebrew,” this *passeur* who spans multiple dissonant identities. He has no choice, for his destiny is inscribed in his name. Solal des Solal.

A strange logical tautology of a name: Solal des Solal, for subject and predicate mirror each other. This name contains a syntactic destiny; it is a hauntingly overdetermined name, underwriting an existence that remains anything but self-evident. The narrator of *Mangeclous* explains: “And love? Why no more women? What is the point since fate had caused him to be born Solal des Solal, a man without a first name? ‘A tradition in the noble family of the Solals, dear marquise. The firstborn is named Solal Solal. Impossible to make love without a first name.’”‡

It could be said that the whole drama of Solal des Solal lies in his overdetermined name, which endows him with a clear historical and mythical mission, linking him with the whole gamut of the Solals across the centuries and across continents, and deprives him of a much-coveted career as a European romantic lover, a modern individual pursuing his private interests and pleasures in secular society. Despite his name, Solal struggles to remain in the both-and logic, to carry the Solals and the Valorous with him wherever he goes, all while managing his Gentile women, vectors of his worldly ascent. The name, a verbal lure, seeks symbolically to dispense with the ambiguity with which Solal’s character is fraught.<sup>19</sup>

The protagonist must therefore also assume his destiny as the blessed son of the old Rabbi Gamaliel and servant to his people, which jeopardizes the

\*faméliques errants à travers les siècles (*Solal*, 306)

†Le vieux peuple fou qui marche seul dans la tempête portant sa harpe sonnante à travers le noir ouragan des siècles et immortellement son délire de grandeur et de persécution. (*Solal*, 305)

‡Et l’amour? Pourquoi plus de femmes? À quoi bon puisque le sort l’avait fait naître Solal des Solal, un homme sans prénom? “Une tradition dans la noble famille des Solal, chère marquise. Le premier-né s’appelle Solal Solal. Impossible de faire l’amour sans prénom.” (*Mangeclous*, 584)

blessing he has received from his new father, Monsieur de Maussane, and, of course, his erotic union with Aude. Solal des Solal, then, is not identical to Aude's husband, the intimate "Sol," and when she asks him, "What do you have in common with these people [*ces gens*]?" the answer must be a categorical "Everything!" Solal cannot simply dispense with his kin, the genitive predicate that mirrors his first name. "She could not guess the pain and the distress of this man, whose heart was too fervent to be able to choose between his wife, whom he loved, and his race, which he loved; who felt guilty toward the one and the other; who no longer had the strength to stand up to life, cruel as it is to those passionate about the absolute."<sup>\*</sup>

In 1930, only a sadomasochistic "vertical" juxtaposition of the oriental Jew and the European politician remains a conceptual possibility, as we see in this episode. To be in the world, the Solal of the château must clearly delineate himself from the Solal of the underground. Despite her desire to become a Swiss Ruth, Aude cannot be the joint that articulates the relationship between the two worlds—that much is all too clear: "Solal understood that it could not be otherwise."<sup>†</sup> Aude can only participate in the drama of Solal's ambivalence as the *elected victim* of her man, mirroring Solal's own status as the *elected victim* of Solal. It is worth noting that she is the only woman in Solal's career who escapes being destroyed by him (he drives the rest to suicide); she leaves Solal, marries her first love, Jacques, and raises the child she has conceived with Solal.

This perverse dynamic illuminates the surprising ending of the Saint-Germain episode. Forced by Aude to choose between her and "these worms," Solal's choice is dictated by his "original" blessing by Gamaliel and his overdetermined name. Yet he is unwilling to lose Aude. In his madness, he desires to obey the Law of the father downstairs and concurrently be the master of the Gentile woman upstairs: "With a bloody smile, he walked up to her, tore her dress and the other pieces of clothing. He admired the force and the thrust of this body. She went toward the bed, grabbed a blanket and covered up her nudity."<sup>‡</sup>

Aude struggles and shames him by appealing to his moral sense, but Solal will not let her go. Naked and isolated, she becomes captive in her own bedroom:

<sup>\*</sup>Elle ne pouvait pas deviner la douleur et le désarroi de cet homme qui avait le cœur trop ardent pour pouvoir choisir entre sa femme qu'il aimait et sa race qu'il aimait, qui se sentait coupable vis-à-vis de l'une et de l'autre, qui n'avait plus le courage de rentrer dans la vie, cruelle aux passionnés d'absolu. (*Solal*, 313)

<sup>†</sup>[Solal] comprenait qu'il ne pouvait en être autrement. (*Solal*, 362)

<sup>‡</sup>Avec un sourire sanguinolent, il s'approcha d'elle, déchira sa robe et les autres étoffes. Il admira la force et le jet de ce corps. Elle s'approcha du lit, arracha une couverture et recouvrit sa nudité. (*Solal*, 307)

So that you don't leave, he sniggered, we shall leave you in the state of simple nature and we shall imprison you. I'll come back to get you soon and we'll leave with the worms for Jerusalem. . . .

See you soon, dear lady Solal. Next week in Jerusalem. You married a worm. Too bad for you. A Jewess, my dear!\*

Being himself a captive of this château, Solal wants to shuttle between his captive father (and kin) and his captive wife. Obedient to his father, tyrannical toward his wife, Solal both obeys the Law of God *and* acts like Zeus—he rapes Europa, who may very well become another “misshapen” (*avachie*) woman, and therefore rejoins the animal pack on its way to Jerusalem.

The mention of Jerusalem in this diatribe recalls both the street hawker's discourse (“Go see if I am in Jerusalem”) and Albert's desire for his imaginary European lover, Viviane. In many ways, as we saw in Chapter 1, the Vivianes of the world (Adrienne, Aude, Ariane) are concurrently a philo-Semitic sanctuary and the object of a great deal of aggression and resentment, because resentment of the street hawker, or de Maussane, in this instance, is always in the end directed at the infantile imaginary companion, the philo-Semitic European woman.

This combination of masochism in Solal's relationship to his father and kin and sexual sadism toward all his lovers recurs often in Cohen's fiction, from his relationship to his mother (as we shall see in Chapter 4) to its use as a fully developed theme in *Belle du Seigneur*, where Ariane becomes the full-fledged blonde captive of her despotic oriental prince. A rape, the final scene of the Saint-Germain episode, therefore suggests an important permutation in Solal's dialectics of identity. Self-dramatizing, charismatic, and irresistible, yet psychologically narcissistic and sadistic, because he wants it all and now, Solal—this constellation of dissonant desire and repulsion—forms an important identity-phantasm in which he can be both an oriental Jew *and* in possession of Europa. This persona occupies an in-between fluid zone where Cephalonia and Europe can somehow be reconciled, where the son, ever so ambivalent, shuttles between father and lover, tormenting both and all the while disgracing himself to the very core of his being. All of Cohen's romantic fiction (*Solal*, *Belle du Seigneur*) traffics in desire, taboo—and, above all, disgrace. And while the dialectics of desire and taboo are all too generic, the particular form

\*“Pour que tu ne t'en ailles pas, ricana-t-il, nous te laisserons dans l'état de simple nature et nous t'emprisonnerons. Je reviendrai te chercher tout à l'heure et nous partirons avec les larves pour Jérusalem.” . . . “À bientôt, chère dame Solal. La semaine prochaine à Jérusalem. Tu as épousé une larve. Tant pis pour toi. Juive, mon amie!” (*Solal*, 307)

that the acute consciousness of disgrace takes in Cohen's work, is a specifically Jewish experience, lodged at the center of his fiction; a haunting and recurring nightmare that is inscribed in an acute historical consciousness aware of its own mythic potential that runs the gamut of saviors from Joseph to Jesus.

After the Saint-Germain episode, Solal's life is rent apart. His wife escapes her prison, he sends away his kin, literally burns millions of francs in the fireplace, loses his political standing, and becomes an itinerant vagabond. Meanwhile, Aude, now the mother of Solal's son, reclaims the Château Saint-Germain, which Solal bought with her money, and marries her first love, the aristocratic officer Jacques de Nonne. Solal then reappears, is rebuffed by Aude, tries to kidnap his son David, dies (in the original ending), and is then miraculously resurrected (in the second edition), proudly riding his white steed, confident of the future—"Solal rode and he gazed at the sun face-to-face."<sup>20</sup>

Yet throughout the tortuous ending of the novel, there still remains in the Château Saint-Germain a trace of origin, for many of the original subterranean inhabitants continue to live in the secret compartments down below long after Solal has gone and after Aude has returned to live there with her husband and son: "Out of the most secret crevices of the Commanderie, where they continued living in the expectation of a miracle, the five old men, the three brothers, other old men, a few beggars, a few illuminati, and a few women contemplated Solal prostrate"\*—for Saint-Germain will always have its Jewish cellar, will always also be Saint-Germain-the-Jew. Every château has its shadow; every identity its repressed origin.<sup>21</sup>

\*Sortis des plus secrètes demeures de la Commanderie, qu'ils avaient continué d'habiter dans l'attente d'un miracle, les cinq vieillards, les trois frères, d'autres vieillards, des gueux, des illuminés et des femmes contemplaient Solal étendu. (*Solal*, 359)