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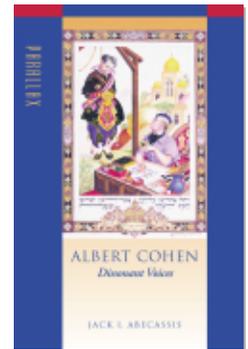
Albert Cohen

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Ambivalent, ambivalent are my sentiments!

Albert Cohen, Belle du Seigneur

The passage quoted just below opens a grotesque novella (chapter 54) placed exactly in the center of *Belle du Seigneur* (pp. 500 to 515 in the 1,000-page Pléiade edition). Up to this point in the novel, Solal, undersecretary-general of the League of Nations, has seduced Ariane, the wife of a lowly subordinate, and rather successfully managed another burlesque intrusion by the Valorous into his glamorous life in the penthouse of the Geneva Ritz Hotel and in the Palace of the League of Nations. The novel also contains hundreds of pages of highly comic and minute descriptions of the political inanity and subtle cruelty of the League of Nations' bureaucracy and the ridiculous mores and affectations of the Swiss bourgeoisie. But what takes place in chapter 54 has nothing to do with any character, place, or situation mentioned previously in the narrative; and, after this chapter, there will be no reference to it for another 360 pages, after which the importance of this episode becomes apparent, though in a very subtle way. Nothing, in short, would have prepared readers when they turn the page to chapter 54 and read the following introductory description:

Perched on a ladder with a lantern in one hand, the tiny creature examined herself in the mirror on the wall, made faces at her reflection, then rouged her lips, powdered her square face, smoothed her large soot-black eyebrows, licked her finger and with it wet her beauty spot, smiled to herself, finally climbed down, and ran toward the far end of the underground, along walls

oozing with dampness and bristling with long nails. When she reached the prone man, she struck an elegant pose with one hand on her hip and, smiling clever smiles, hummed a tune. He shuddered, sat up, leaned against a wall, and passed one hand over his blood-soaked forehead.*¹

Once again, as he has with the Valorous and Ariane, Solal has been playing Purim; this time, however, the identity-as-multiple-disguises game turns violent. While on a diplomatic mission, Solal strolls the streets of Berlin circa 1936 dressed in orthodox Jewish garb. Nazi youths beat him senseless, lacerate a swastika into his chest, and leave him for dead in the street. When Solal regains consciousness, he finds himself in a strange basement, where an articulate but neckless hunchback addresses him—the dwarf Rachel, most haunting of Cohen's characters. What follows in the next fifteen pages is a paroxysm of Cohen's tortured inner dissonance, a narrative that juxtaposes the historical tragedy of the Jewish people with the erotic madness of a repellant dwarf.

This episode is also tightly connected to the crucial last "Purim" dream in *Le Livre de ma mère* and to the expository logic of Ariane's introduction at the beginning of *Belle du Seigneur*. In other words, this Purim in Berlin episode is the fulcrum text in Albert Cohen's work, where the relationship among Louise Coen, Rachel Silberstein, and Ariane Cassandre Corisande d'Auble becomes apparent in all its psychotic dissonance.

In contrast to this Purim in *Belle du Seigneur*, the 1930 Château Saint-Germain episode in *Solal* is represented as a highly stylized dramatic allegory where religious and tribal origins comically clash with political and social ascendancy; where the Jewish subtext of all things Christian and modern finds its perfect architectural and temporal chronotope. With Solal's ultimate resurrection from death, the novel *Solal* leaves open the possibility of a positive historical outcome. But here in Berlin in 1936, this hope dies. Cohen's Berlin underground might be a chilling commentary on Kafka's observation: "There is abundant hope. But there is none for us." The pliability of identities that we have been following runs up against the brutal concreteness of history. Dread is now the absolute real, and there is no longer any room for figurative metamorphosis. Solal's space for identity maneuvers, so playfully portrayed in the

*Juchée sur une échelle et une lanterne à la main, la petite créature s'examina avec des mines dans le miroir pendu au mur, puis rougit ses lèvres, enfarina son visage carré, lissa ses gros sourcils charbonneux, lécha son index pour en humecter son grain de beauté, se sourit, descendit enfin et courut vers l'autre bout de la cave, le long des murs suintants, hérissés de longs clous. Arrivée devant l'homme étendu, elle se mit en posture gracieuse, un poing sur la hanche, fredonna avec des sourires spirituels. Il tressaillit, se souleva, s'adossa au mur, passa la main sur son front ensanglanté. (*BdS*, 500)

seriocomic scenes, slips away. Here in the Berlin basement, the metaphysical, historical, and sexual dimensions should at last morph into a cohesive conscious existence; here, at last, the tortured stranger should once and for all unambiguously embrace his estrangement. *But he does not.* Instead, we have another surprising dichotomy: the absolute assertion of Solal's public solidarity is juxtaposed to inner erotic repulsion.

In order to avoid Nazi persecution, Rachel and her family, the Silbersteins, have moved from the visible part of their Berlin home down into its hidden basement. For all intents and purposes, they have become invisible. Bereft of father and mother, Rachel lives with two uncles; the first is a pious man of learning, the second, a wealthy businessman ("uncle-in-majesty and uncle-in-business"). She also shares the basement with her sister, who is strikingly tall, erect, and beautiful, in contrast to Rachel, as well as altogether "brainless" (*sans cervelle*).

Through her basement window, the dwarf Rachel sees Solal, disguised as an orthodox Jew, beaten senseless by Nazi Brownshirts, and persuades her uncles to drag him into the basement. Her uncles having departed, Rachel puts on a bizarre seduction scene when Solal regains consciousness. The dire situation notwithstanding, the dwarf still pursues her matrimonial quest for "a great doctor." Solal's rescue turns into entrapment at the hands of a sexually predatory woman. He may be just the man Rachel is looking for; the man who can see beyond her repulsive physical deformations and love her for her intelligence and verve, or at least for her wealth. Thus unfold concurrently the drama of hiding from the Nazis and that of handling Rachel's marital and sexual fantasies. All these elements seem allegorical, but history, as we shall see below, collapses the symbolic into the all too real.

The subterranean space where this double drama unfolds resembles a cross among Kafkaesque allegory, Balzacian descriptive plethora (notably as in *La Peau du chagrin*), and Bergmanian *mise-en-scène* (the Jew's house in *Fanny and Alexander*). When Solal regains consciousness, he notices nails protruding from humid walls, as if there has been much tearing and weeping—they are "weeping walls" (*murs en pleurs*). Divining Solal's perplexity, Rachel explains: "Beautiful, our dark underground, full of nails, our underground! Nails everywhere! Big nails for big tribulations and small nails for small tribulations! They were put there by my uncle-in-business! Fingernails torn out, one nail! An ear sliced off, one nail! It's a pastime, a consolation! There are lots of them, maybe

a hundred! We shall count them together! It's just that you have got to entertain yourself, you have to forget!"*

The nails are there to wound and therefore to remind the underground's inhabitants of the reason for their hiding. Rachel insists that these nails were planted by the "uncle-in-business," grounded in the real, rather than by the "uncle-in-majesty," grounded in the symbolic. And the real must pragmatically inscribe onto flesh the physical truth, which no "majesty" can neutralize by abstraction. Rachel harkens to this ancient truth by reciting a prayer that seeks to explain—and why not outright justify!—all the pains undergone in the history of Israel, at present, most palpably, the swastika slashed onto Solal's chest by the Brownshirts and the omnipresence of the protruding nails. History cuts and bleeds: "Praise to thee, O lord who hath chosen us above all peoples to be the recipients of Thy Holy Law! And so, on every morning of mischief and every evening of despair, we say how joyful we are, how beautiful our lot and how pleasant our fate!"† To stud the walls with sharp nails is to remind the "uncle-in-majesty" that blood is real, that the symbolic difference of which Israel is the depositary extracts a high price. In so doing, the "uncle-in-business" resembles the captain in Kafka's *In the Penal Colony* who insists that for the law to hold true, the executing torture machine must continue churning, punishment and sacrifice must go on. But the dialectic between the two uncles, literally between prayers and nails, is also perverse: the nails, planted deliberately, are masochistic fetishes of the sensual and symbolic kind. Each nail has a specific function: this one is good at cutting ears, the other, good at tearing nails—and all are extremely efficient in reminding those who are "the receptacle of Thy Holy Law" to pay their tribute by the repeated "mischief of each morning" and "despair of each evening." The absurd price of election! In this underground engorged with Christian art, the nails also refer to the heavy studs that nailed Jesus to the cross, except that the victim here is, not a singular subject sacrificed "once and for all," but rather the sacrifice-in-potential of every Jew in each generation. The christological nails studding the Wailing

*Belle, notre cave sombre, pleine de clous, notre cave! Des clous partout! Les grands pour les grands malheurs et les petits pour les petits malheurs! C'est mon oncle de commerce qui les a plantés! Des ongles arrachés, un clou! Une oreille coupée, un clou! C'est un passe-temps, une consolation! Il y en a beaucoup, peut-être cent! Nous les compterons ensemble! Que veux-tu, il faut se divertir, il faut oublier! (*BdS*, 502)

†"Sois loué, Éternel qui nous as choisis entre tous les peuples pour dépositaires de Ta sainte Loi! C'est pourquoi, à chaque matin de malheur et à chaque soir d'angoisse, nous disons combien nous sommes heureux, combien notre part est belle et notre sort agréable!" (*BdS*, 502)

Wall (“weeping walls”) thus become the object of a perverse counting ritual: “We shall count them together,” Rachel promises Solal with some relish. Knowing the function of each nail, as well as the total number of nails, is a probing symbolic activity, correlating with the piercing of the difference between the human and the divine for which prayers strive. A single and definitive tally is not possible or sufficient. Prayer to God complements the counting of misery. Each nail stands for an event to be known and to be relived, which echoes the imperative of the Passover *Haggadah*: “In every generation each individual is bound to regard himself as if he had personally gone forth from Egypt.” Ritual is reiteration. Some reiterations are symbolic, bread for flesh, wine for blood. The nails, however, are cruel and bloody rituals of commemoration that have not yet had the “privilege” of slipping from the event to its symbol. Their sense is not “thrown together” (sym-bol) into a symbolic ritual (the Mass) but rather remains forever all too real in its historical *thereness*, which exacts blood for election—in this case, Solal’s blood for his Josephic election (phantasm). In Christianity, the stigmata of martyrs, inflicted by nails, constitute a historical phase limited in time. The stigmata inflicted on the Jews, however, are seemingly eternal.

But the nails also become objects of diversion, venues for forgetting. Again the perversity is layered. On the one hand, the nails constitute a macabre response to the consolatory prayers; they represent objects of deep knowledge and reexperience. On the other hand, however, they also aid the act of forgetting, because they themselves become objects of masochistic and sadistic desire! There is a certain pleasure to be drawn from counting the deeds and preserving the memory of martyrs. This almost sensual aspect of the nightmare (along with the “weeping” walls) is yet another ironic reiteration of iconographic Christian representations of the Passion, with all their inherent aesthetic and erotic ambiguities. The nails, beyond their obvious function in the real, assume their full symbolic weight as instruments of torture and secret delectation. They extend into lived reality the Passion images that hang on the walls of the plethoric underground.

Rachel’s father had dealt in art, antiques, and antiquities. When the family descended to the underground, they took their goods with them and continued dealing from the underground. This was a condition for survival, since the landlord kept quiet only as long as his desire for American dollars exceeded his hatred of the Jew. Fabrics, furniture, paintings, statues, and mummies gorge the dark underground. Silent and horrified, Solal follows Rachel on a guided tour of her father’s prized possessions. Besides being a depository of the Law

of Moses, the family functions as guardian of multiple symbolic objects (whence the mutually complementary nature of the two uncles); guardians of the very sacred objects of a culture that forced them into the grotto and therefore made them grotesque.

Like Raphael de Valentin in the beginning of *La Peau de chagrin*, Solal is stunned and numbed by what he sees:

Then she took him by the hand and they walked along the paintings hanging from the weeping walls, she holding the lantern up, naming the artists, and at each picture ordering him with a dig of her heel to admire. But when he stretched out his hand to lift the veil that covered the last painting, she started and grabbed him by the arm. "It's not allowed," she screamed, "You're not allowed to look at She with the Child! You could go to the stake for it!" Drawing him closer to her, she led him past the antique bric-à-brac, suits of armor, mounds of fabrics, ancient dresses, globes of the world, glassware, rugs and statues, making faces as she prattled on about them, giving their prices. All at once, she stopped in front of a tall iron statue, and scratched herself furiously.

"The German Virgin, the Virgin of Nuremberg!" she announced grandiloquently. "It's hollow, my dear!" . . . His mind reeling, she leading him on, periodically turning and leering at him, he walked past chests, armchairs, cabinets and grounded chandeliers, meekly following her while the clocks ticked at different times and while the wax figures smiled, watching over them in the dark. . . . and then raised her lantern over a sarcophagus where a mummy lay.

"Pharaoh too!" she said. "He destroyed us, to the very last one. They destroy us, and then they die!"*

Silent and shaken, Solal accompanies Rachel on her gory tour of the subterranean gallery. She first stops at the covered painting of "She with the Child." For Rachel, this is a taboo painting, a disturbing and threatening representa-

*Puis elle le prit par la main et ils allèrent le long des tableaux suspendus aux murs en pleurs, elle tenant haut la lanterne, nommant les peintres, et à chaque tableau lui ordonnant d'admirer, avec des coups de talon. Mais lorsqu'il avança la main pour soulever la voile qui recouvrait le dernier tableau, elle tressaillit, le saisit par le bras. "Défendu, cria-t-elle, défendu de regarder Celle avec l'Enfant! Danger de bûcher!" Le tirant à elle, elle le promena le long des vieilleries, armures, piles d'étoffes, robes anciennes, mappemondes, verreries, tapis, statues, les commentant avec des moues et en disant les prix. Soudain, elle s'arrêta devant une haute statue de fer, se gratta furieusement.

"La Vierge allemande, la Vierge de Nuremberg! annonça-t-elle avec grandiloquence. Elle est creuse, mon cher!" . . . La tête confuse, mené par elle qui parfois se retournait pour une œillade, il alla le long des coffres, des bergères, des bahuts et des lustres gisant à terre, docilement la suivant cependant que les pendules battaient à contretemps et que les mannequins de cire souriaient, les surveillant dans l'ombre. . . . puis elle approcha sa lanterne d'un sarcophage où reposait une momie.

"Pharaon aussi! dit-elle. Il nous a détruits jusqu'au dernier! Ils nous détruisent jusqu'au dernier et ensuite ils crèvent!" (*BdS*, 509–10)

tion, since she associates the Madonna and Child with autos-da-fé, recalling the long history of forced conversions at the foot of the stake. The veil covering the painting signifies the taboo; unveiling it would be an act of transgression. The painting is so tabooed that it becomes the painting of the unnameable (“she” [*celle*]), yet it is owned and trafficked in by those whom her son long ago supposedly superseded. We cannot overstress the irony here: the “superseded,” invisible and Auschwitz-bound, collect and preserve the prized totems of their executioners; totems that are for the most part images of their own ancestors.² And yet, the veiled painting is uncannily for Rachel the most desired of images. The painting of the Madonna and Child, after all, depicts a Jewish mother holding a circumcised Jewish infant, and Rachel desires nothing more than to hold in her hands a Jewish baby of her own, just like the Holy Mother.

The disquieting guide and her captive next come up to another figure of the virgin, an unveiled, tall iron statue—the German virgin of Nuremberg, hard yet hollow, unthreatening to Rachel because of its obvious foreignness. Its pointed hollowness is of little use to this woman, who desires marriage and fertility. Thus this statue could never become an object of identification and transference for her. No need therefore to veil it. In a more macabre tone, she explains that the iron virgin was in fact an instrument of torture: “It’s hollow, my dear! They used to lock us up inside and the long blades on the door would sink into the Jew!”*

Finally, the two stop before the mummy of a pharaoh, symbol of ancient persecutions. But this archaic Hitler is here reduced to the status of a collectible objet d’art, trafficked in by these same Hebrews he had wished to extinguish and who have outlived him and his culture by over twenty-five centuries. Although cadavers and exhumation are taboo objects in many cultures, the mummy, in a curious reversal, is the least disturbing object here. After all, his case was long ago decided, and at best he deserves a dismissive and triumphal comment. Standing above the preserved cadaver, Rachel comments on Pharaoh (and Hitler): “He destroyed us, to the very last one. They destroy us, and then they die!” Walking through this weeping grotto is akin to touring a museum of Jewish history, although the sanitized surroundings of a normative museum experience cede here to the uncannily grotesque.

This grotto is the stage where Rachel acts out her fantasies. Beyond the apparent chaos of these objets d’art, there is a clear narrative. Her deformation is itself a by-product of history, for, as we now learn, her body and conduct are

*“Elle est creuse, mon cher! Ils nous enfermaient dedans et les longs couteaux de la porte entraient dans le Juif!” (*BdS*, 509)

products of a concrete transmission of violence and resentment. In Rachel's body, the distinction between flesh and history disappears, and all attributes, both physical and psychological, flow from the same blood-stained source. Like Solal's mother, Rachel's mother was raped in a pogrom. It is not clear whether she was raped when she was already pregnant with Rachel or whether she became pregnant as a result of the rape. The latter makes more sense, since it explains the mother's overt hostility toward the fetus. Taking her revenge on this seed of rape implanted in her, the mother imprints her suffering upon the daughter, making her deformed and deranged.³ First, Rachel declares almost casually, as if it were a matter of archetypal fairytale mother-daughter conflict, "It's my mother who made me small to get revenge."^{*} But then the motives for the cruel vengeance are explained: "In Lodz, there was the pogrom when she was pregnant with me, and so she took her revenge, and I was born small."[†] Born of violence and blood, Rachel is not only misshapen physically but shows constant potential for violence in her language and gestures. From Solal's point of view, the dwarf Rachel will soon become a fearsome castrating vampire. (It is worth remembering here that this scenario of deformation through anti-Semitic violence repeats in almost identical terms the story of Solal's mother in *Solal*. Both Rachels bear the scars of their violation and subsequent insanity.)

Rachel bears, both in form and gesture, the traces of a collective history, transmitted through the hostile mother. The Berlin grotto forms a perfect setting for the enactment of this deformation because the subterranean bazaar is in itself the message, because memory is objects, thrown together. The pathological joins the macabre when Rachel shows Solal an ear floating in a jar. It is her mother's ear, sliced off by beasts screaming "*Heil* and the name of their German who barks! It's the authentically guaranteed [*garantie*] ear of my dear mother! I keep it ceremoniously in eau-de-vie [clear brandy]."[‡] Ironically, the ear is preserved in eau-de-vie, water-of-life—liquid of memory—which reasserts the presence of the hostile mother in every drop of blood in Rachel's veins. The narrator cannot resist a jab at Rachel's shopkeepers' language: it is the "guaranteed" ear of her mother, the way the provenance of a Persian rug might be guaranteed. If the mother took revenge on Rachel by deforming her,

^{*}"C'est ma mère qui m'a faite petite par vengeance!" (*BdS*, 506)

[†]"À Lodz, il y a eu le pogrome lorsqu'elle était enceinte de moi, et alors elle s'est vengée, et je suis née petite" (*BdS*, 511)

[‡]"*Heil* et le nom de leur Allemand qui aboie! L'oreille garantie de ma chère maman! Je la conserve cérémonieusement dans l'eau-de-vie" (*BdS*, 505–6)

Rachel returns the favor by making the violated and violating mother ever-present in the jar.

But this mutilated ear also points to a possible typological interpretation. “Suddenly, one of those with Jesus put his hand on his sword, drew it, and struck the slave of the high priest, cutting off his ear. Then Jesus said to him, ‘Put your sword back into its place; for all those who take the sword will perish by the sword’” (Matt. 26: 51–53). For Rachel, the mutilated ear is a totem of the history of continual suffering. For Jesus, on the other hand, the mutilated ear, or the violence it results from, is no longer relevant, since his messianic self-sacrifice shepherds humanity from history to utopia: “But how then would the scriptures be fulfilled, which say it must happen in this way?” (Matt. 26: 54).⁴ The recalcitrant Jews do not accept this theoretical utopia, and are for better or worse *in* history and *of* history. The suspended ear stands in opposition to the doll that Rachel’s sister carries in her arms, most likely a figurine of the Madonna and thus a utopian symbol of procreation without penetration, of sex without violence—of history without the sword. Rachel’s doll, on the other hand, is her mother’s bloody ear, suspended in the liquid of this “catastrophe of being a Jew.” The ear also recalls the symbolism of Purim, where cookies shaped like Haman’s ears are eaten by the festive Jews, thus consuming the body of their archenemy in an act of final triumph and vengeance, an act of macabre cannibalism, of which the mother’s ear suspended in the jar is a perverse echo.

The Vampire

This nightmarish promenade underground is so overwhelming for Solal that he refuses to speak; during the entire scene, he utters words to Rachel only three times: first, he ritually wishes her a good week (*bonne semaine*) when Rachel pretends that it is the Shabbath. Then, when she demands that he reveal his name, he responds, “Solal Solal,” and finally, toward the end of the chapter, once they are both masked and engaged in a Purim ritual, Solal tells her freely that she is beautiful. Otherwise, Solal is encased in silence, if not stupor. From the beginning, Solal perceives Rachel as a vampire. Throughout the scene, she makes explicit references to attacking, biting, and dismembering. “If the person is nice I pounce on him a bit to kiss him, but it’s mischievous cuddling,”* she says playfully, and then proclaims euphorically: “I’m

*“si la personne est sympathique je lui saute un peu dessus pour l’embrasser, mais c’est mutin câlin!” (*BdS*, 504)

so proud [to be Jewish] I could bite you!”* She then commands him: “Speak also in praise! Hurry up, or else I’ll bite!”† And she adds: “Dwarfs are very dangerous! And beware of their bite!”‡ and later, “[a]nd so I say that I like them ripe or else that I’ll bite you.”§ The vampire’s standards of mutilation worthy of note are so high that she dismisses Solal’s bleeding swastika stigmata as “‘marks, nothing really! Nothing worth a jar!’ (She held her nose . . .)”||

Ever perceptive and vigilant, Solal notes these blatant warnings and constantly remains on guard against a possible assault: “He stood back and let her walk ahead, realizing all of a sudden that if she stayed at his rear she would be tempted by the nape of his neck, would start screaming with fear, pounce at his neck, bite him perhaps.”# Solal is so terrified that he walks behind her, lest he also become an object in an exhibit suspended in a jar in this grotesque museum. Solal is obviously torn apart here, in a figurative sense this time. His persona, his main life-narrative, his political fantasy, is that of a Joseph-like savior of the Jewish people. For him, Rachel would then be a heroine of survival and dignity, potential subject of his political guile. He would like to identify with her for her sense of difference vis-à-vis the bloodthirsty “beasts” who march above. He would like to see through and beyond Rachel’s madness and ugliness, to forget the disfigurements, to suffer them with her, to pretend that only the eyes count: “Well, what do you think?” . . . “After all, only the eyes count! And don’t mock my hunchback! It’s a crown in my back”** When Rachel stands over the mummy in triumph, Solal shares with her the collective, tribal pride of having survived: “Saying nothing his head still throbbing, he smiled out of pride, became like her, [he] knew it.”†† In the abstract, the identification is full. But in the very next sentence, Rachel inspires disgust in Solal: “Suddenly, her damp little hand revolted him, but he did not dare brush it away, lest she retaliate.”‡‡ The Jew-to-Jew identification, or more precisely

*“J’ai envie de mordre tellement je suis fière!” (BdS, 510)

†“Dis aussi louange! Vite, sinon je mords!” (BdS, 505)

‡“Les naines sont terribles et gare à la morsure!” (BdS, 506)

§“Alors je dis que je les aime à point ou bien que je te mordrai” (BdS, 512)

||“mais des marques, c’est peu de chose! Rien pour un bocal!” (Elle se pinça les narines . . .) (BdS, 507)

#Il la laissa passer devant lui, sachant tout à coup que si elle restait derrière lui elle aurait la tentation de la nuque, se mettrait à hurler de peur, lui sauterait au cou, le mordrait peut-être. (BdS, 510–11)

**“Qu’en dis-tu?” . . . “Après tout, seuls les yeux comptent! Et ne te moque pas de ma bosse! Elle est une couronne dans mon dos!” (BdS, 509)

††Muet, le crâne en douleur, il souriait d’orgueil, devenait comme elle, le savait. (BdS, 510)

‡‡Soudain la petite main humide le dégoûta, mais il n’osa pas s’en détacher, craignant une lubie de représailles. (BdS, 510)

here, that of Jewish savior to Jewish victim, persists only so long as it remains abstract. The mirrors hanging all around the walls of the underground call Solal into total identification and transference with the Rachels of the world. The mirror is a calling and a reminder; a calling for the archetypal face-to-face encounter, as well as for the answerability to the call: "Here I am"—present with you in this mirror. "Take a look at yourself!" she cried in a wild frenzy, once more holding out her mirror to him. "That's what living outside can do to you, idiot! Now, down to the underground, Jew! You'll like it with me around."** But Solal recoils from this identification, from transferring his desire onto Rachel, from actual physical contact with her. Only the fear of Rachel's castrating vampirism deters him from fleeing at once. Juxtaposed here in the most concrete sense are the two fundamental drives in Solal: the first toward identification with his kin as a collective whole (note that Solal is dressed in Orthodox Jewish garb), the second toward aesthetic and libidinous desires for individuated Aryan women. The narrator, however, will now bring the two women together: "Then from the shadows she appeared, tall and marvelous of face, sovereign Virgin, living Jerusalem, beauty of Israel, hope in the night, a sweet mad creature with extinguished eyes, moving slowly on, an old doll in her arms, which she rocked and from time to time looked down upon."†

Rachel's sister is laconic in language and passive in nature; she is instead mute and blind. Is she, like her sister, an allegory for yet another permutation of Jewish madness or rather a thinly veiled allegory for a sister religion . . . Christianity? The latter seems more likely. All her features are symbolically laden with theological double entendres: she is a "sovereign virgin," the "living Jerusalem made flesh"—as opposed to the "ossified Jerusalem"—and she cuddles an old doll, most likely a representation of the Virgin Mary. Seeing this, Rachel explains, "She's wrong . . . she believes that it's the Law."‡ Rachel knows the Law but is deprived of a desirable body: "As for me, I am hunchbacked and yet I am a daughter of man!"§ Her sister mistakes an idol for God, but possesses a desirable body. Contemplating both sisters, Solal experiences

**"Regarde-toi!", cria-t-elle avec une farouche frénésie, et de nouveau elle lui tendit son miroir. 'Voilà ce que c'est de vivre dehors, écervelé! Dans la cave, Juif! Tu seras bien avec moi.'" (*BdS*, 511)

†Alors, sortie de l'ombre, elle apparut, haute et merveilleuse de visage, vierge souveraine, Jérusalem vivante, beauté d'Israël, espoir dans la nuit, douce folle aux yeux éteints, lentement allant, une ancienne poupée dans ses bras, la berçant et parfois sur elle se penchant. (*BdS*, 514)

‡"Elle s'est trompée . . . elle croit que c'est la Loi." (*BdS*, 514)

§"Moi j'ai une bosse, mais je suis fille humaine!" (*BdS*, 503)

attraction to and repulsion from each of them. Does Rachel's sister refer in fact to the blonde, Aryan, Christian Ariane, the real *Belle du Seigneur*?⁵ After all, this is a chapter central to a novel whose title is *Belle du Seigneur*. And titles are not gratuitous. Is Rachel the real *Belle du Seigneur*, not of the narcissistic and dissonant Solal-as-Seigneur, but of the real Seigneur? But the blind blonde quickly fades into the grotto and a dramatic *deus ex machina* will temporarily resolve Solal's ambivalence. It is time for the grotesque carnival!

Purim

As noted in Chapter 2, Purim (*La fête des Sorts* in Cohen) is the Jewish carnival. It contains all the elements typical of carnivals as described by Mikhail Bakhtin, but with an important difference. Whereas in all other cultures the carnival serves a homeostatic normative function (inversions of hierarchies and gender, temporary decrowning, etc.), in the Jewish context, it is also, if not principally, an annual reenactment of a survival narrative, a narrative of collective fate, first and foremost a ritualistic celebration of *Holocaust avoidance*. At least three times (Sarai, Joseph, Esther), the nation of Israel has avoided extinction thanks to the actions of seductive, charismatic court Jews. Purim simply reiterates in carnivalesque performance what these narratives signify in words.

But here in the Berlin underground circa 1936, this particular narrative-performance is exhausted. No Jewess is about to seduce Hitler into letting her people go. In Germany, the Jews will be burnt—fate(s) is not plural, not open to possibilities; here in Berlin, as Rachel asserts, fate has already been decided. The future will be a repetition of the past, and the present is just an agonizing wait for the seemingly inevitable: “They burnt us in the thirteenth century! They will burn us in the twentieth! There is no salvation for us, understand this, my dear! They love their nasty leader, the barking one with the moustache!”* Stripped of any redeeming historical value, this Purim act simply provides the carnivalesque scene for yet another of Solal's doublings, masqueradings, and desperate acts of reconciliation—all of which are impotent gestures en route to suicide. At the beginning of the nightmare, Solal is already in the customary Purim orthodox Jewish garb, which leads to his being beaten and then his convalescence in Rachel's grotto. Now, despite his being horrified and revolted by Rachel, he nevertheless finds a ritual narrative that will unite the two, thereby finally joining her desire and his. Such is the purpose of the

*“Ils nous ont brûlés au treizième siècle! Ils nous brûleront au vingtième siècle! Il n'y a pas de salut pour nous, sache-le, mon cher! Ils adorent leur méchant chef, l'aboyeur avec la moustache!” (*BdS*, 509–10)

Purim act here, and the text certifies that Purim functions as a *deus ex machina*. Solal and Rachel act in pure symbolic time, a carnivalesque suspension of historical time. Rachel invites Solal to play Shabbath for its holiness and later to play Purim for its historical irony—and this is in fact the first suggestion made by Rachel to which Solal freely assents. Solal’s prior actions and words were coerced by the vampire. Notice the predatory, castrating verbs in the two sentences, which immediately precede the explicit introduction of Purim: “She opened the sparkling door, with many mirrors, *shoved him in with both hands, forced him into the seat, climbed up* beside him, and in turn sat down. For pleasure *she swung* her little legs, [then] stopped suddenly and *motioned him to be quiet.*”*

Solal is terrorized by two things: first by the vampire dwarf, then by what takes place above the underground in the streets of Berlin, where the Nazi youth march to the martial beat of drums and trumpets, singing “Wenn Judenblut unter’m Messer spritzt” (When Jewish blood gushes from under the knife). Rachel and Solal hear and feel the pulsating presence of the blood-thirsty beasts above, as reality physically beats down upon the underground outcasts, as real-time Nazi history is closing in on the symbolic time of Shabbath and Purim. In these extreme circumstances, Purim truly constitutes this “temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order” that Bakhtin emphasizes—only, alas, on a much darker note.⁶

“Can you hear them outside? They are happy to march to music, the idiots. Whereas we in a royal coach! Oh, my beautiful underground, oh, high destiny, oh, dearest nails! Now will you please enjoy yourself? We have masks for the feast of Lots [Purim], masks bought before I was born! Imagine how young I must be! You want a good laugh? We have games for the feast of Lots! Look!” she cried in a vibrant voice, and, bending down, produced from under the seat a cardboard crown decorated with fake rubies and put it on her head. “On the feast of Lots, I have always been Queen Esther, I was thankful to my father’s delight! And for you, here, a false nose for you to rejoice! In what, do you know, ignorant? in the death of Haman, understand it! . . . Come on, put your false nose on!”

He obeyed and she clapped as he stroked the grotesque cardboard appendage, gloriously, he stroked it.†

*Elle ouvrit la portière étincelante de nombreux miroirs, *le poussa à deux mains, le força à s’asseoir* sur la banquette, *se hissa* auprès de lui, *s’assit* à son tour. D’aise, elle balançait ses petites jambes, *s’arrêta* soudain, *lui fit signe de se taire.* (*BdS*, 512; emphasis added)

†“Tu les entends dehors? Ils sont contents de marcher derrière une musique, les imbéciles! Tandis que nous, en carrosse royal! Ô ma cave belle, ô grand destin, ô clous chéris! Maintenant veux-tu être gai?”

In all carnivals, the mask allows temporary detachment from the real. In Rachel's case, it is a liberation from both her image in the mirror and Nazi time. The mask allows one to assume a more transitive identity or even to proceed to an ironic reversal of identities. We have already studied the extensive deployment of masks in Cohen's fiction, where they facilitate a comic transition from identity to identity; insider to outsider, beauty to ugliness and vice versa. Thus, the deformed dwarf Rachel becomes the seductive concubine Esther, and Solal, the charismatic seducer, wears the long, disgraceful nose of Haman. Once engaged in this decrowning and role reversal, with respect both to the Nazi beasts aboveground and to Rachel, Solal finally surrenders himself to his mask: "He stroked the grotesque cardboard appendage, gloriously, he stroked it." Solal then is finally at ease with Rachel. Not, however, as Solal and Rachel, the real individuated beings, but masked as the evil Haman and the gorgeous Esther. Only then can she entice him into accepting himself as a Jew with her and caress his grotesque appendage.

And so, holding each other by the hand, "queen and king of sad carnival" (*reine et roi de triste carnaval* [513]) looking toward the nail-studded walls of the underground and feeling the pulsating presence of the Nazi youth marching above, they mount a royal carriage to which are harnessed two old white horses. Not surprisingly, the door of the royal carriage is inlaid with many mirrors, lest Solal forget. The mirror forces vigilance! This is the precise moment when the narrator shifts the focalization of the narrative from a surreal, but detached, perspective to an emphatic point of view.

Seated beside him once more in the coach, in sober mood, Rachel the midget was plucking the strings of another guitar, from which she drew sad strains, and from time to time glanced at him shrewdly. Him, he watched her and felt pity, pity for this small deformed one with the large eyes, beautiful eyes of her people, pity for the crazed little one, heiress of age-old fears and the misshapen fruit of those fears, pity for this hump, and in his soul he revered the hump, hump of fears and sweats of fear, sweats through the ages and expectations of sorrow, sweats and anxieties of a hunted people, his

Nous avons des masques pour la fête des Sorts, des masques achetés avant ma naissance! Pense si je suis jeune! Veux-tu rire? Nous avons des jeux pour la fête des Sorts! Regarde!" cria-t-elle d'une voix vibrante, et elle se pencha, ramassa sous la banquette une couronne de carton, ornée de faux rubis, se la posa sur sa tête. "À la fête des Sorts, je faisais toujours la reine Esther, j'étais gracieuse, délice de mon père! Et pour toi, voilà, un faux nez pour te réjouir! Sais-tu de quoi, ignorant? De la mort d'Aman, apprends-le! . . . Allons, mets ton faux nez!"

Il obéit, et elle battit des mains tandis qu'il caressait le grotesque appendice de carton, glorieusement le caressait. (*BdS*, 512)

people and his love, the ancient people marked by genius, crowned with grief, with regal knowledge and disillusionment, his mad old king walking alone in the storm and bearing its Law, a harp resounding through the dark hurricane of the centuries, and immortally its madness for grandeur and persecution.*

As Solal detaches Rachel's deformity from its concrete reality in the world of individuated desire and understands her as an abstraction, a masked actor in a carnival, an allegory of the Jewish disfigurement resulting from millennia of persecutions, he finally unambiguously embraces his Jewish identity ("unflagging son of his people"). He identifies with Rachel the Jew and transfers onto her the pity that he also harbors for himself, because of this mutual "catastrophe of being a Jew." Another key narrative shift happens on this climactic page when the author's voice overtakes that of the narrator and refers directly to the "chant of *my* king David." Here again, as was the case with the Château Saint-Germain in *Solal*, we have a significant intersection of perspectives, where the discourses of author, narrator, and character are juxtaposed in a hybridized and dissonant narrative.

But if there is reconciliation here between Solal and Rachel, it is only on the abstract, collective level. Solal does not sit with Rachel in the carriage as a man would with a woman. Instead, they are united as brother and sister, siblings, and thus subject to a Father: "[T]hey sat holding hands in the ancient coach, he with his false nose, she with her cardboard crown, *brother and sister*, holding each other tightly by the hand, queen and king of some sad carnival. . . . And look the dwarf removed her crown and puts it on the head of *her brother* whose eyes were closed."† Their union is decidedly unerotic; what allows it to happen is the play-acting warranted by the carnival, warranted by the shift from "sister and brother" to "queen and king." The masks allow Solal to detach himself from his own narcissism, thus enabling him to overcome his

*De nouveau assise auprès de lui dans le carrosse, sérieuse, la naine Rachel promenait ses doigts sur une autre guitare, en tirait des mélancolies, avec parfois vers lui un regard perspicace. Lui, il la considérait et il avait pitié, pitié de cette petite difforme aux grands yeux, beaux yeux de son peuple, pitié de cette petite insensée, héritière de peurs séculaires, et de ces peurs le fruit contrefait, pitié de cette bosse, et en son âme il révérait cette bosse, bosse des peurs et des sueurs de peur, sueurs d'âge en âge et attentes de malheurs, sueurs et angoisses d'un peuple traqué, son peuple et son amour, le vieux peuple de génie, couronné de malheur, de royale science et de désenchantement, son vieux roi fou allant seul dans la tempête et portant sa Loi, harpe sonnante à travers le noir ouragan des siècles, et immortellement son délire de grandeur et de persécution. (*BdS*, 513)

†[I]ls se tinrent par la main dans l'antique carrosse, lui avec son faux nez, elle avec sa couronne de carton, *frère et sœur*, se tinrent fort par la main, reine et roi de triste carnaval. . . . Et voici, la naine ôta sa couronne et la posa sur la tête de *son frère* aux yeux clos (*BdS*, 513; emphasis added)

revulsion from Rachel as a woman, as a potential erotic object, and to participate with her in a collective carnivalesque reenactment of a ritual narrative. It is toward God the Father that their union is aimed and definitely not toward each other as desiring individuals.⁷

Once this gesture of sibling reconciliation is made and the deafening sound of the marching Nazi youth merges into the supplicating chant of the Jews praying in the nearby underground, Rachel crowns the wounded, bleeding Solal with her cardboard Esther-crown. Again, notice the ironical telescoping of all these archetypal figures: Solal as the wounded and bleeding Jesus of the Passion (same as at the end of *Solal*) and a feminine cardboard crown (of a “queen”) as a crown of thorns. Rachel then covers Solal’s shoulders with a blue-and-white prayer shawl (*talit*) and places the Torah in his hands. In other words, the bleeding evil Haman, whom we recognize by his long nose, is crowned like Jesus and is then covered by the *talit* and given the Torah to hold. And there, from the belly of the underground, after play-acting Purim with the dwarf Rachel, Solal, silently and majestically, hoists the Torah scrolls into the air. But the Torah is hoisted in the underground while above, in the streets, those who worship force parade in martial cadence. This gesture is at once majestic and impotent: majestic in its affirmation of the Law, impotent in its acknowledgment of hopelessness, for the miracle of Purim is not to be reenacted in Berlin. And Solal, the Mediterranean sun man, must now hide in the dark underground and participate in grotesque parodies with the dwarf Rachel, stalling for a time the inevitable banging on the door of the Brownshirts.

But here is the crux of the matter: this mocking scene, this Via Dolorosa writ large, this defiant parade in a royal carriage drawn by sickly horses, seated next to a woman one does not desire, while hoisting the Torah to a jeering crowd of Jew haters is the *core and often repeated montage* in Solal’s series of identity phantasms. This montage, for example, recalls in precise terms and tone the scenario that haunts Cohen’s dreams as he mourns his mother, Louise Coen. Only now, having understood all the mythological and historical dynamics (Joseph and Esther), as well as Cohen’s core ambivalence about his mission and his people—only now in the repetition of this scenario at the heart of *Belle du Seigneur*, can we appreciate in full the import of this nightmare crowning *Le Livre de ma mère*. This repetition is so striking that it warrants quoting in full:

Why did I take out of my pocket an enormous false cardboard nose? . . . Mom’s bizarre fur hat is now a crown, but of cardboard also, and a sick horse follows us. . . . An antique coach, golden and inlaid with small mir-

rors . . . behind the gentle tubercular horse that falls and stands up again and pulls the courtly carriage nodding wisely . . . the crowd that throws rotten eggs while my mother shows them the sacred rolls of the Ten Commandments . . . and I awake and I am terrified by my solitude.*

I have always suspected that the dwarf Rachel bears a relationship to Louise Coen (as is also the case with the wormlike mother named Rachel in *Solal*), that the visit to the Berlin Jews and to the dwarf is not unrelated to visits by Cohen, imaginary or real, desired or dreaded, to his parents, if not during the 1930s then perhaps during the early 1940s, when Marseille was under the Franco-German fascist boot.⁸ At any rate, the astonishing repetition of the identical Purim scenarios at the most painful moment in Cohen's autobiography-as-mourning and at the heart of *Belle du Seigneur* should clue us into a very fundamental dynamic in Cohen's works. But let us return to *Belle du Seigneur*.

Our Purim play now ends. Grotesque stage, baffling actors, macabre plot, and carnivalesque dénouement all merge into one horrific montage where the historical real subsumes textual desire for infinite metamorphic play; a montage where the sun (Solal) sets in the Berlin underground. Such is the power of this montage that brings Solal's successive metamorphoses of estrangement to a catastrophic end. In the end, comic relief can negotiate hard reality only partially; in the end, and especially in extreme situations, identity is either embraced by the subject or tattooed onto him by the Brownshirts; in the end, Berlin, 1936, puts an end to Solal's phantasm of *being of the Jews but otherwise*.

This face-to-face becomes a hand-in-hand, because the faces of both Solal and Rachel are turned toward God, ironically turned upward, from the underground toward the Nazi boots pounding above. In the hand-in-hand, Solal accepts Rachel's essence as a Jew, leaving aside the contingent factors of her deformity and homicidal insanity. As an individual, she becomes an abstraction: as kin-in-covenant, she occupies her rightful place beside him facing up toward the Lord, but, also, simultaneously facing up toward the marching

*Pourquoi ai-je sorti de ma poche un énorme faux nez de carton? . . . La bizarre toque de Maman est maintenant une couronne, mais de carton aussi, et un cheval malade nous suit. . . . Un antique carrosse, dédoré et incrusté de petits miroirs . . . derrière le doux cheval poitrinaire qui tombe et se relève et tire le carrosse de cour avec des hochements sages. . . . la foule nous lance des œufs pourris tandis que ma mère lui montre les rouleaux sacrés des Dix Commandements . . . et je me réveille et je m'épouvante de ma solitude. (*LM*, 748)

Brownshirts. The scene is modulated by Solal's revulsion, Rachel's vampirism and delirium and, most important, by their ritualistic reconciliation through the mask of Purim. The hand-in-hand mediated through the carnival allows their identities, foreign but finally not mutually exclusive, to unite in a carnivalesque affirmation of the Law in the most physical sense, that is, in the hoisting of the Torah scrolls. Thus they are engaged together in an activity that transcends erotic differences. To allow this reconciliation, a shift from the *eye* to the *hand* had to occur. To hold is less of an engagement than to gaze directly into someone's eyes. The eye-to-eye is a crucial moment in Hebrew Scripture: in the *panim el panim*, the full weight of *alterity* is upon us. And that eye-to-eye was impossible for Solal until the very end: "Ambivalent, ambivalent are my sentiments!" Rachel says, but echoed by Solal all along.

This Berlin underground signals the end of a cycle in Cohen's fiction, which began with his childhood fantasies about hiding with his imaginary playmate Viviane and now ends just before the Shoah. This last underground, full of pathos and devoid of comedy and irony, points to a certain poetic limit where the chronotope meets its concrete analog in the nightmare of the real. Cohen's text struggles with a poetic representation of this lived torment. In the Berlin underground, the textual utopia, a world of signs pointing toward infinite permutations, is defeated by historical necessity: the playfulness of multiple identities butts against the real pressure of history.⁹ Whereas the Château Saint-Germain drama in *Solal* ends in his Jesus-like resurrection, *Belle du Seigneur* ends in a double suicide. After the Berlin underground, the novel drifts toward the inevitable suicide, as the utopia of the text cedes to the dystopia of the historical and the textual tension among all these dissonant voices—the messianic, the erotic, the burlesque—finally comes to naught faced with the unthinkable.

Rachel and Ariane

Critics have asserted with reason that the episode of the Berlin underground is the counterpart of the Château Saint-Germain underground in the earlier novel *Solal*.¹⁰ But the Berlin underground has another, more pertinent and much more revealing counterpart, namely, the very first scene of *Belle du Seigneur* in which Solal endeavors to seduce Ariane through a series of burlesqueries. Solal fell in love with Ariane at first sight at a diplomatic reception. He begins to spy on her at the villa on the chic outskirts of Geneva where she

lives with her husband, Adrien Deume (a Class B bureaucrat at the League of Nations), and his parents. The first page of the novel contains a picaresque scene in which Solal rides his steed toward the villa, intending to win Ariane's heart and then carry her away on a horse. But first a moral experiment must be carried out to ascertain whether this woman is in fact the elected one or not, whether she is the one woman who will make his life worthwhile and thus allow him to cancel or at least postpone his suicide. This experiment consists in disguising himself as a hunchbacked old Hassidic Jew with a heavily accented, raspy voice, then breaking in through Ariane's bedroom window to catch her unawares—and finally attempting to seduce her as an old Jew representing the glory of Israel! And if she is seduced by the grotesque old man, she will then be worthy of election, of being the princess of humanity instead of a princess of baboonery. That is Solal's wager, the moral experiment to which Ariane is subjected.

This first scene of *Belle du Seigneur* is of interest to us because, despite what may appear as obvious differences, it mirrors the exact expository and ethical logic of the Berlin underground. In both episodes, Solal disguises himself three times and penetrates a woman's space, bringing about a grotesque seduction scene in which the mirror finally acts as the place of ultimate truth. Solal, for whom Purim's customs, masks, and self-dramatization constitute the fundamental phenomenology of his being, is first introduced in *Belle du Seigneur* as a Don Juan riding high in the saddle, stripped to the waist, "a towering seigneur with high boots" (*haut seigneur aux longues bottes* [7]), accompanied by a footman carrying a suitcase in one hand and leading a horse with the other. (This is also an exact reprise of Solal riding away on horseback in the last scene of the novel *Solal*.) So Don Juan is the first costume. Next, once in the house, he opens the suitcase and takes out his second costume—that of the Hassidic Jew, a "dilapidated old coat and a hat of moth-eaten fur, white beard" (*vieux manteau délabré et une toque de fourrure mitée* [8–9]). However, Solal still manages to include the honorific diplomatic necktie (*cravate de commandeur*) in his Hassidic costume, sign of his high political station, which is also his third disguise—that of Solal the "gros poisson," undersecretary-general of the League of Nations. Now, returning to the episode with Rachel, we recall that Solal arrives in Berlin as a diplomat (he often refers to his position as phony role-playing, Solal as the "under-buffoon general");¹¹ he then disguises himself as a Hassidic Jew who wanders the streets of Berlin, and finally, once he is in the underground, Rachel disguises Solal as the evil Haman. He is thus triply disguised in both scenes.

But the similarities go much deeper. Solal disguises himself and then breaks into the villa and attempts to seduce Ariane for the openly stated purpose of ascertaining whether she can morally and aesthetically overcome her repulsion from ugliness and yield to repulsive Israel in the guise of Solal in his Purim costume. Solal wants to know whether Ariane can become the Madonna who will absolve (*racheter*) the sins of men, which consist of the adoration of beauty, which is nothing else but adoration of power, and, ultimately, of the power to kill. Were she to yield to Solal in his hideous disguise, she would indeed become the elected one. She would then make life worthy of living. Should she succeed, Solal, who contemplates suicide from the first page, will indefinitely postpone killing himself, while should she fail, and therefore force the routine machinery of seduction, Ariane will only serve to postpone the inevitable suicide. Ariane “fails” her test; she throws a glass at Solal’s face. The seduction will therefore be banal and the suicide certain.

But flip this scene around and you have the precise logic of the Berlin underground. In Berlin, Solal is the “idiotic” Ariane who is horrified by Rachel’s ugliness and deformity; Solal experiences Ariane’s inability to desire the hunchback. In brief, Solal disgusts Ariane just as the dwarf Rachel disgusts Solal. Just like Ariane later on, Solal will need the pretext of Purim to surrender to Rachel in the underground carriage covered with mirrors. In Berlin, Solal is put to the test as Ariane was at the beginning of *Belle du Seigneur*. The Berlin episode is thus a nightmarish version of the picaresque parody of the first Geneva episode. The two are but a single montage with variable elements, in which identity and difference morph into opposites—but the same logic operates throughout.

On the formal level, both Ariane and Rachel are respectively narcissistic and masochistic doubles of Solal. This accounts for the fundamental differences between the two scenes, notwithstanding their formal symmetry. From his first encounter with Ariane, Solal drowns in her image, while Rachel repels him until the very last moment where, in a ceremonial carriage under the shadow of the Torah, and in costume for this sad Purim carnival, she becomes tolerable as a tribal abstraction, tolerable as a simulated sacramental name (Esther), tolerable in this incessant dialectic of calling and reminding. As for Ariane, she is loved for what she is on the most individuated level, Solal’s sensual double. With the vampire Rachel, Solal always fears being bitten and bled, while, from the first moment with Ariane, he desires to suck the marrow of her subjectivity, in which he sees a feminine version of himself. Upon entering Ariane’s bedroom window, he looks in the mirror at himself and sees

a man good-looking enough to make one vomit. A few pages later, Ariane looks in the mirror and sees “the most beautiful woman in the world” (*la plus belle femme du monde*).* No need here for the mediation of the Torah: subjective narcissism largely suffices. The identification in the mirror is complete, spontaneous . . . natural—and therefore, alas, the true one—or, at least, the consciously desired one. The very syntax of the passage describing their encounter shows how Solal spontaneously melts into Ariane, dives within himself. Note all the terms of equivalence; note how pronouns, markers of difference, slip into ontological identity, most obviously through the reiteration of “like me.”

That night at the Ritz, night of destiny, she appeared before me, appeared noble among the ignoble, frighteningly beautiful, she and I and no one else in this mob of ambitious social climbers [*réussisseurs*] . . . the two of us the only exiles, she alone like me, and like me unhappy and scorning and speaking to no one, a friend only to herself, and with the first beat of her eyelids I knew her. It was her, the unexpected and the expected, at once elected during this evening of destiny, elected with the first beat of her long curved eyelashes.†

And even more explicitly, repeating the myth of Narcissus:

Voluntarily banished like me, and she did not know that from behind the curtains I was watching her. Then, listen, she drew close to the mirror of the parlor, because she is obsessed with mirrors like me . . . and then . . . she drew close to the mirror and kissed her lips on the mirror. Our first kiss, my love. O my mad sister. Loved on the spot, my beloved on the spot by this kiss she gave to herself.‡

In her implied narcissism, Ariane already loves Solal, without knowing it.¹² In her narcissism, she is at once loved and condemned—victim, as it were, of Solal’s ambivalence about his very self. The struggle with Ariane, detailed *in fine*

*beau à vomir (*BdS*, 9); “[l]a plus belle femme du monde” (*BdS*, 34)

†“En ce soir du Ritz, soir de destin, elle m’est apparue, noble parmi les ignobles apparue, redoutable de beauté, elle et moi et nul autre en la cohue des réussisseurs . . . nous deux seuls exilés, elle seule comme moi, et comme moi triste et méprisante et ne parlant à personne, seule amie d’elle-même, et au premier battement de ses paupières je l’ai connue. C’était elle, l’inattendue et l’attendue, aussitôt élue en ce soir de destin, élue au premier battement de ses longs cils recourbés.” (*BdS*, 38)

‡Volontaire bannie comme moi, et elle ne savait pas que derrière les rideaux je la regardais. Alors, écoutez, elle s’est approchée de la glace du petit salon, car elle a la manie des glaces comme moi . . . et alors . . . elle s’est approchée de la glace et elle a baisé ses lèvres sur la glace. Notre premier baiser, mon amour. Ô ma sœur folle, aussitôt aimée, aussitôt mon aimée par ce baiser à elle-même donné. (*BdS*, 38–39)

for hundreds of pages, delineates intimate differences between Solal and Ariane, while the short and abrupt struggle with Rachel, on the contrary, locates an abstract grounding for identity and for political action—but that is it. Ariane is an erotic and narcissistic doubling phantasm—Rachel, a nightmarish one. And in the body of Solal, the two will be united, in a searing dissonance, the outcome of which can only be death.

Joseph the Pariah

In chapter 94, some 360 pages after the Berlin episode (chapter 54), we finally learn the details of what happened to Solal subsequent to his stay in the Silbersteins' underground in Berlin. Solal is here in deep meditation, delving into delirious streams of consciousness, commencing with the story of his political demise, while watching Ariane stitching hems that he deliberately undid in order to give her a purpose in life (*un but de vie* [872]):

but even so some day I'll confess to you [Ariane] perhaps all about the Silbersteins' cellar, I wanted to stay on with them but they asked me to save them so on the fourth day I left only to fail in each and every capital failed in London failed in Washington failed in the Council of their damned L of N when I asked the self-important clowns to take in my Germans Jews to divide them among themselves, they said my plan was utopian that if they took them all there would be an upsurge of anti-Semitism in the countries that accepted them in other words they threw them to their butchers because they loathe anti-Semitism for which I arraigned both them and their love-thy-neighbor cant O great Christ betrayed whereupon ructions and to put it simply I was turfed out as the Forbes woman put it ignominiously instant dismissal for conduct prejudicial to the interests of the League of Nations said the letter Old Cheyne wrote to me and then followed the decree rescinding my nationality on grounds of procedural irregularity*

*mais une fois tout de même je t'avouerai peut-être la cave Silberstein, je voulais rester longtemps avec eux mais ils m'ont demandé de les sauver alors je suis parti le quatrième jour j'ai échoué dans les capitales échoué à Londres échoué à Washington échoué devant le Conseil de leur Esdéeenne quand j'ai demandé aux importants bouffons d'accueillir mes Juifs allemands de se les répartir, ils ont dit que mon projet était utopique que si on les acceptait tous il y aurait une montée d'antisémitisme dans les pays d'accueil bref c'est par horreur de l'antisémitisme qu'ils les ont abandonnés à leurs bourreaux, alors je les ai mis en accusation eux et leur amour du prochain ô grand Christ trahi alors scandale et bref chassé ignominieusement comme a dit la Forbes renvoi sans préavis pour conduite préjudiciable aux intérêts de la Société des Nations a précisé la lettre du vieux Cheyne ensuite le décret annulant ma naturalisation pour cause d'irrégularités (*BdS*, 873)

Everything in the seemingly baroque plotline of *Belle du Seigneur* becomes at once historically and politically coherent, ironically through the most incoherent of literary devices—the stream of consciousness. Of course, from the beginning Solal knew that the League of Nations was a charade, a cynical bureaucracy serving its own interests, when not outright those of the colonial powers. But this pompous institution served his own purpose of escaping the ghetto of his kin and belonging to the Social, the coveted world of the European Gentiles (*en être*), and even his burning desire to exercise power, notwithstanding all of his protestations to the contrary. Succeed and lie low was the motto; wait for the “myself later on” (*moi de plus tard*), promised to us in the earlier novel *Solal*, to come forward and succor his kin. Having risen so far so fast, there was no one better qualified than he to assess the true nature of this institution, which explains in part why he is so distraught, even suicidal, from the very beginning of the novel. Although at the apex of his power, a true “under-buffoon general” of the world government of sorts, a true Joseph-like viceroy—viceroy, yes, but of the “house of memos” (*la maison du papier*)—his power was limited to palace intrigue and various other hierarchical babooneries, and never employed in effective diplomacy. In other words, he was bound to be a failed Joseph, his pharaohs being impotent golf-playing clowns, interested more in securing their retirements than in fashioning an effective role on the stage of world diplomacy.

But as soon as he steps out of bounds, as soon as he is transformed by his experience in the Berlin underground from a marginal, cagey, exquisite Jew, always performing a coy “high-wire act and without a safety net,”* as soon as he becomes categorical about the imperative necessity for the League of Nations to actually carry out its mission, he ceases to be a “trustworthy” court Jew and becomes an embarrassment to the cynical bureaucracy, a liability that must be immediately neutralized. He is then fired on the spot. He once again becomes an itinerant Jewish Greek immigrant in France, an illegal immigrant, a pariah, a leper, a stateless person (*apatride*), a “chemically pure Jew”—exactly where Cohen’s own estrangement had begun on that fateful day of his tenth birthday in 1905 when, walking away from the street hawker berating him with anti-Semitic libel and slurs, he first recognized the ineluctable fate awaiting him.

Now absolutely undesirable in Geneva, a social zero rather than the social alpha he had been, Solal proposes to Ariane that she leave her husband and accompany him to the south of France (Ariane is ignorant and will not be ap-

*[u]ne réussite sur corde raide et sans filet. (*BdS*, 846)

prised for months of the fact that she is no longer with the great Solal, under-secretary-general of the League of Nations, but only with a clever pariah who has to speculate in the stock market to finance his lavish lifestyle). In other words, the Berlin underground, which at first seems to be an entirely gratuitous macabre reverie in the unfolding of a seemingly romantic plot, in fact constitutes its linchpin—it articulates the entire logic of the narrative both historically and psychologically, a logic unrevealed for almost forty chapters.

Indeed, chapter 93, which depicts Solal's desperate final attempts to reestablish himself, and chapter 94, which contains his searing stream of consciousness as he watches the vainly stitching Ariane, constitute Cohen's most accomplished, and most maddening, almost psychotic, meditation on anti-Semitism and his own ambivalence about the "catastrophe of being a Jew." These two chapters are much more powerful in depicting this catastrophe than the long, cohesive autobiographical essay *Ô vous, frères humains*.

His dismissal from his high perch without prior notice throws Solal back to square one in his trajectory, reminding us yet again of the tone and themes of the autobiographic violent bar mitzvah at the hand of the street hawker in *Ô vous, frères humains* (see Chapter 1, "Bar Mitzvah II"). Again, he becomes the ten-year-old Albert, but this time a hunchbacked pariah with a solicitous and frightened smile, who walks the streets terrified to the core of his being by every obvious and more or less subtle sign of anti-Semitism, abounding on that fateful day of his Parisian promenade, Monday, September 10, 1936. Graffiti on walls proclaim "Mort aux Juifs" (Death to the Jews); more charitable ones only demand their suppression: "À bas les Juifs" (Down with the Jews). Every political conversation engaged in or overheard, whatever the milieu of the speakers, tails off with "It's the fault of the Jews." And in short: "Nothing but wishes of death for the Jews in these cities of love-thy-neighbor."* Solal is avid to reintegrate himself into the Social, and at the end of *Belle du Seigneur*, there is an exact reprise of the pivotal crowd scene that precipitated the violent bar mitzvah. He experiences a desperate desire to belong, not to be ontologically guilty, to commune with the others, however obliquely:

Streets and streets. Suddenly, two cars in a crash, a policeman writing an accident report, onlookers arguing about the incident. He listens, joins in, ashamed for falling so low, but it's a good feeling. A group is anonymous, it's not like an individual whom you try to decipher and who makes your blood run cold. Besides, it puts you in touch with the social. You are part of it, you

*Que de souhaits de mort aux Juifs dans ces villes de l'amour du prochain. (*BdS*, 852)

belong, you can say your peace, you can agree about the cause of the accident, you can smile at the others, you are all equal, you rub shoulders, you can criticize the driver who is to blame, you love one another.

The group breaks up. Goodbye love.*

The happiness of the crowd consists in witnessing the accident, the blood and the twisted metal, and then finding fault, assigning culpability—loving one another through the blood spilt and the designation of guilt, just like the crowd in Marseille in 1905 fraternizing through its hatred of the “kike.” Here, Solal, anonymous, just a passerby can participate in the passion of the crowd. Rather than always being designated as the guilty one, he can now, a member of the crowd, unstained by any universal condemnation, joyfully assign blame with the crowd, “love-thy-neighbor” through the passion of assigning fault, an ecstatically organic member of an accusatory crowd. Finally, he has a fleeting sensation of belonging.

Unable to commune with real Christians, except, as we have just seen, in the most fleeting and anonymous fashion, he buys himself some “Christian” comforters in the shape of chocolate truffles and takes them back to his private ghetto, his luxurious apartment at the Hotel George V.

Place de la Madeleine. A bakery. He goes in, buys six chocolate truffles. . . . Six truffles, gentlemen, there’ll be a crowd. Six friendly little Christians in the ghetto. . . . That’s it, go back to the hotel, get into bed, get into bed with himself, with his good friend Solal, and while away the time reading anti-Semitic obscenities and scoffing truffles. Oh yes, back in the ghetto is a whole suitcaseful of anti-Semitic obscenities, and suddenly in the night he gets out of bed, feverishly opens the case, and begins reading their obscenities standing up, avidly, continues through the night, goes on reading their obscenities, each one read with interest, a dead man’s interest. No, men are not good.†

*Rues et rues. Soudain, deux autos fracassées, un agent de police dressant un constat, des badauds discutant de l’accident. Il écoute, il se mêle à la discussion, honteux de sa déchéance, mais c’est bon. Un groupe est anonyme, n’est pas un individu qu’on devine et qui vous glace. Et puis, c’est du social. On en est, on appartient, on dit la sienne, on est d’accord sur la cause de l’accident, on se sourit, on est des égaux, on fraternise, on dit du mal du chauffeur responsable, on s’aime.

Le groupe se défait. Fini, l’amour. (*BdS*, 855)

†Place de la Madeleine. Une pâtisserie. Il entre, achète six truffes aux chocolat. . . . Six truffes, messieurs, on aura de la compagnie. Six petites amies chrétiennes au ghetto. . . . Oui, rentrer à l’hôtel, se coucher, se coucher avec lui, avec son ami Solal, et passer le temps en lisant des méchancetés anti-sémites tout en mangeant des truffes. Oui, au ghetto il y a une valise pleine de méchancetés anti-sémites, et tout à coup la nuit il sort de son lit, il ouvre vite la valise, et il se met à lire leurs méchancetés, debout, avec avidité, continue tout au long de la nuit, continue à lire leurs méchancetés, toutes lues avec intérêt, un intérêt de mort. Non, les hommes ne sont pas bons. (*BdS*, 862–63)

Solal (Cohen) is reliving down to the last detail the core trauma of the day of his tenth birthday, the day when he “was driven from human communion.”* This is the moment of memory relived, that is, of trauma reexperienced; the Cohenian moment of bitter-sweet herbs rudely regurgitated, the moment of thorns that draw blood once again, and not the Proustian moment of the sweet Madeleine, soaked in tea, sucked on softly, evoking lyrical reminiscences. No wonder then that it is on the place de la Madeleine, and not any other place, that Solal buys his Christian truffles, just after a series of images flowing straight out of the day of his banishment at the hands of the street hawker. Here, though, the somatic recovery of the sensation bears no trace of nostalgia, of a lost paradise: it is, in fact, hell regained. And, not being able to be with Christians, except anonymously and in passing, but loving them all the same, he will take them in the form of little truffles back to his ghetto, keep them as company for a while, arrange them on a table, have them watch him, pay him attention, keep him from his frightening solitude, keep him from just defenestrating himself—and then eat his companions out of boredom and despair, ultimate communion with those who wish him banishment or death. And in this chic five-star ghetto of a hotel room, he turns also to his ambulatory altar, not his promising *Israélite* altar in Marseille prior to his tenth birthday (an altar to the French Republic, with flags, statuettes, portraits of Corneille, Napoleon, and Hugo, before which he dreamed of becoming an army colonel), but a masochistic Jewish altar consisting of a collection of anti-Semitic tracts, carried in a suitcase—so many ways of declining and conjugating the street hawker’s diatribe, of spewing the hatred of the anti-Semites, the Drumonts, the Célines, the scribes of the popular daily *L’Antijuif* (The anti-Jew), with horror, but also not without a certain pleasure. Madeleine of bitter-sweet herbs, the chocolate he loves, but that hates him; the consumption of those he loves in front of a satanic altar composed of the Pantheon scribes of hate. A Proustian moment but poisoned. The mass of bitter herbs. A Passover seder with no deliverance from Egypt, but with self-crucifixion.

We also learn something astounding in these pages. The narrator refers to two “gaffes” committed by Solal and makes an astonishing revelation about one of them: “And then he’d made his blunder [*gaffe*] at the meeting of the Council of their League of Nations and had come a cropper. And the very next day he’d made an even more serious blunder [*gaffe*]: *he’d sent an anonymous letter dis-*

* . . . jour de mes dix ans, jour où je fus chassé de l’humaine communion. (*Ô vous*, 1119)

closing the irregularity in his naturalization papers.”^{*} One is struck first by the very use of the word *gaffe*, normally connoting an unintentional blooper or blunder that is regretted after the fact. But Solal’s intervention on behalf of German Jewry was intentional and repeated. Does he regret it now? Is it just a tactical regret for the “*gaffe*” of using the figure of Christ in his final pleas to the governing board? But the second use of “*gaffe*” is even more surprising. After the fateful meeting, we learn, Solal himself sent an anonymous letter to the French Interior Ministry informing it of an irregularity in his naturalization papers. He then promptly loses his French nationality, becomes undocumented, illegal, a refugee of sorts. This willed, highly intentional act of self-destruction, self-fashioning social death, could never be described as an unintentional “*gaffe*.” If anything, it is exactly the contrary. It is as if Solal desired his own total dissolution, not a partial one, limited to politics, but a final and decisive dissolution. “Call off the whole charade,” he seems to be saying, “let me lose it all, rank, nationality, and everything, so that I can at last become again a *chemically pure Jew*, stateless, nomadic. King of nothing instead of viceroy of the world.” Or as Cohen puts it himself: “Pariah forever and walled alive in love.”[†] Solal seems to either swallow the world or vomit it, with the beloved (Gentile) woman as a sanctuary phantasm of last refuge.

This willed self-destruction begs the question again. Is there pleasure for Solal in this self-induced dissolution? Does he “reduce” himself to a pariah as an act of pure masochism, regressing to the ten-year-old Albert’s earliest phantasm about hiding with Viviane in an underground cave, safe from all the evil lurking on the outside, where his secret identification lies not with, or exclusively with, his kin—for whom he sees himself always as a sacrificial lamb—but rather with the anti-Semites? In chapters 93 and 94, the definite summit of Cohen’s often repeated introspective *hara-kiri*, he wonders about it himself: “A born suspect. Will they turn him into an anti-Semite? Is he one already? Is his pride merely a cover for shame, loathing? Is he proud because there is nothing else he can be?”[‡]¹³

^{*}Et alors sa *gaffe* à la réunion du Conseil de leur Société des Nations, et il s’est cassé les reins. Et le lendemain, la *gaffe* plus terrible *d’avoir envoyé la lettre anonyme révélant l’irrégularité de sa naturalisation*. (*BdS*, 847; emphasis added)

[†][P]aria à jamais et muré vivant dans de l’amour. (*BdS*, 744)

[‡]Un suspect de naissance. Vont-ils faire de lui un antisémite? L’est-il déjà? Et sa fierté recouvre-t-elle une honte, une détestation? Fier, faute de mieux? (*BdS*, 857)

But nowhere can this question be better asked, and again with the same self-consciousness, than in chapter 94's first person stream of consciousness. First, Solal explains the details of his downfall, quoted above, and then he dives into a nightmarish vision of a visit by the Rosenfeld family, whom he has never really encountered, but which distills in its crassness all the Jewish stereotypes. Solal catalogs their awfulness in a dense six-page stream of consciousness that could rival any anti-Semitic caricature contained in his famous ambulatory altar, the essence of which could be paraphrased as follows: You invite Mr. Rosenfeld to your house; he comes too early with the whole family in tow: wife, son, daughters, grandmother. Rosenfeld is a Romanian Jew with a thick accent. Everything about him is crass; his manners, pushy. His children are prodigious. They speak so many languages and play so many instruments and would like to exercise such and such professions. They snoop in your medicine cabinets, compare medications, give you advice on constipation. They open your cabinets and Frigidaire and criticize your stock of provisions, insist on giving you the best recipes for salted cucumbers, gefilte fish, apple strudel, tzibbele, kugel, hashed liver; they show you how to drink tea correctly. They leaf through books in your library, dispute everything: if you prefer Racine to Corneille, they take the opposite view. They criticize your apartment, what you paid for it, its location; they wonder aloud whether you pay your taxes in full; they suggest an excellent surgeon, a professor they personally know, for an operation you might need, according to them; they declare your authentic personal effects fake; their daughters, gangly and silly, giggle awkwardly, eyeing you as a possible match, and so on and so forth.

And then Solal in the midst of this nightmare catches himself in midair (Cohen uses a comma to set the following reflection apart in a stream of consciousness), and wonders:

but why why have I told myself this ridiculous made-up tale that has no basis in reality why because I've never met any such crowd of grotesques nor have I ever been present at any such masquerade on the contrary it has always been among my Jewish brethren that I have encountered human beings with the noblest hearts and the most courteous manners, why so fascinated the minor eccentricities of the handful of Rosenfelds who do exist why did I exaggerate inflate give them such a free rein why did I join so willingly in the festivities oh yes it's because I'm unhappy that I said all those horrible things that aren't true its perhaps because I want to convince myself convince other people that I'm not a Jew like other Jews that I am an exceptional Jew to make it absolutely clear that I am different from those who

are reviled because I mock them to let it be known oh shame on me that I am not a very Jewish Jew and that it's quite all right for you [Ariane] to like me maybe there is in me some terrible wish to disown the greatest people on earth some terrible wish to be free of them*

Solal then switches to a torrid three-page defense of Jews as survivors of persecutions, deniers of nature, lovers of the Law, real princes of humanity. Yet he cannot but return to his original question: why does he take such obvious pleasure in deriding them, and in front of his beloved, Ariane? And here by way of an apology, Cohen has Solal make a terrible analogy, but a revealing one all the same: "If I exaggerated them [the Rosenfelds] and multiplied their little eccentricities it was perhaps for love of them and to enjoy the taste of them, just as a man who likes spices will sprinkle on enough to take the skin off his tongue, so that he gets the full benefit."† But the fine connoisseur, the true aficionado of spices, never indulges in such excess. The true aficionado savors the finesse, the accent, the rarity, the suggestion, the hinted contrasts in very small doses—and *never* the overdoses. The intoxicating, overwhelming pleasure of the overdose belongs to the domain of the insane, the drug addict, the suicidal—the masochist, to be precise here, who must overwhelm his senses, flagellate them, pierce them, incise them . . . to assuage his desire for punishment to the point of delirious self-mutilation, and not his desire for a sublime taste.

But beyond the bad analogy, Cohen returns to the explicit truth of his conscious *will*, his existential *inability* to unambiguously love Jews. His syntax is categorical: "*I want to love* everything in my people and even the large and lovely ridiculed noses of my people noses tormented by angst noses so keen in scenting danger and *I want to love* the bent backs of my people."‡¹⁴ Notice

*mais pourquoi pourquoi me suis-je raconté cette histoire fausse absurde sans aucun fondement dans la réalité pourquoi alors que je n'ai jamais rencontré pareille grotesque horde alors que je n'ai jamais assisté à une telle mascarade alors que c'est parmi mes frères juifs que j'ai rencontré les êtres les plus nobles de cœur et de manières, pourquoi les menus travers des quelques rares Rosenfeld de la réalité pourquoi les avoir grossis exagérés à plaisir pourquoi m'être comblé à ce festival oui c'est le malheur qui m'a fait dire ces horreurs pas vraies c'est peut-être pour croire faire croire que je ne suis pas un Juif comme les autres que je suis un Juif exceptionnel pour m'affirmer différent des honnis puisque je les moque pour faire croire ô honte sur moi que je suis un Juif pas juif et que tu peux m'aimer c'est peut-être un horrible vouloir caché de renier le plus grand peuple de la terre un horrible vouloir peut-être d'en sortir (*BdS*, 895)

†si j'ai grossi et multiplié leurs menus travers c'est peut-être par amour et pour en jouir davantage tel l'amateur d'épices qui en met beaucoup qui en met trop et à s'en emporter la bouche pour les savourer davantage (*BdS*, 899)

‡je veux tout aimer de mon peuple et même les chers grands nez moqués de mon peuple nez tourmentés par les angoisses nez flaireurs des dangers et je veux aimer les dos voûtés de mon peuple (*BdS*, 900)

that the accent is on the volition: “je veux + infinitive” carries in French a very strong (and impolite) volitional aspect, an act of pure *will* and in no way natural state of mind. Contrast this volitional syntax with the syntax employed when his stream of consciousness focalizes (again, after a long interval) on Ariane, his Gentile lover: “yes my love I love you more and more and silently I shout it to you while you quietly restitch the hems that I undid to give your life a brief purpose I worship you while you sew swallowing a little saliva as do all sewers intent on the task in hand I love the even rhythm of your breathing as you sew I love your serene and demur face as you sew.”* Solal does not *want to love* Ariane—he loves her *still*. It is a present love that continues from the past, projected into the future. It flows from the core of his being. Between Solal and Ariane, there is spontaneous interior fusion. Ariane is the Penelope to whom Odysseus returns as a matter of *natural* fact and not as a matter of moral, ethnic, or metaphysical *will*. The verbs relating to her do not need willful auxiliary modifiers; they just state that which is the case: subject, conjugated verb, present indicative. Period. Solal is able to love the Gentile naturally. But again this is a love of narcissistic ambivalence. He sees himself in Ariane and despises her snobbery, her femininity, and so forth. In the end, Solal cannot manage either world, either part of himself.

At the very moment here in chapters 93 and 94 where Solal suffers the consequences of his actions on behalf of the dwarf Rachel and her kin, you would expect that he would overcome his ambivalence, or at least “manage” it more constructively. But, no, he simply repeats yet again the same scenario of the Berlin underground. First, the repulsion from the dwarf Rachel (and here of the Rosenfelds) as real existential individuals and then, as a counterpoint, strong identification with these repulsive ones, never as individuals but as part of a collective for whom, he, Solal, their messiah, is responsible, and for whom he sacrifices himself. In both instances, Cohen repeats the same dialectic of repulsion, then reconciliation followed by a withdrawal. Yet with the dwarf Rachel, Purim functions as the occasion for an abstract eulogy for the nation of Israel, while at the end of the Rosenfeld nightmare here, Solal precisely and emphatically articulates his praise of Israel without the pretext of ritual. But at heart they are both exactly the same montage. Likewise, the *will* to love the

*oui mon amour je t'aime toujours plus et en moi-même je te le crie pendant que tu couds gentiment les ourlets que j'ai défaits pour te donner un intérêt à vivre je te chéris pendant que tu couds en aspirant un peu de salive comme les couseuses attentives je chéris ta respiration régulière pendant que tu couds je chéris ton visage paisible et modeste pendant que tu couds (*BdS*, 906)

Rosenfelds contrasted with the naturalness of his love for Ariane repeats the precise attraction-repulsion logic discussed above in comparing the similarities and inversions between the beginning of the novel and the Berlin underground. These scenes telescope into each other; the same logic, the same dynamics, replayed in so many registers. This is the identity impasse that Solal forever repeats, as a madman haunted by the repetition of the same symptoms, despite his conscious *will* to the contrary.

This chapter ends on the most dissonant note in Cohen's fiction. With the dwarf Rachel and the Rosenfelds, Cohen's ambivalence about Judaism could not be more pronounced. And if Cohen had stayed suspended there, suspended in an ambivalence bordering psychosis, the great novel *Belle du Seigneur* would have been ruined. The searing identity impasse can only be (fatally) bridged by another synthetic phantasm, in which Solal's antagonist, Ariane, is but an ideal projection of himself. Because of his failure to save his children (the people of Israel), Solal constitutes himself as an *Ariane who commits suicide because she is Jewish*, a suicide nevertheless officiated over by the deformed projection of himself, the weeping Rachel.