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## Jewish Destiny in the Novels of Albert Cohen

### Abstract

The unity of Cohen's novels is due to their common theme of Jewish destiny. This is traced in the lives of the Valeureux and of Solal. The Valeureux are caricatures of the Jew, and demonstrate that Jewish identity and destiny are imposed by others. Their lives are precarious because Jews are always persecuted, a message also conveyed by other persecuted characters and by Cohen's direct interventions. But the Valeureux cling to their Jewishness and exalt their religion because it teaches the need to tame man's instincts. Solal seeks success in Gentile society, but learns it is a cruel society that exploits man's instincts. He is sickened by the hypocrisy of this society, by its frivolity and by the realisation that death makes all ambition pointless. Unable to escape his Jewish background, he defends Jewish victims of Hitler, and is ostracised. He now encounters the same fate as other Jews and becomes a victim of anti-Semitism. He finally commits suicide. Neither the Valeureux nor Solal have the solution to anti-Semitism, which Cohen sees only in the State of Israel. But, while seeing Israel as the solution, Cohen is interested mainly in Jews like the Valeureux, who have preserved the Jewish identity for centuries.

### Keywords

anti-Semitism, Jewish identity, Swiss literature, Albert Cohen, Solal, Mangeclous, Jewishness

## JEWISH DESTINY IN THE NOVELS OF ALBERT COHEN

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Albert Cohen's novels have always been highly praised by critics, one of whom refers to him as "le plus grand écrivain juif de langue française."<sup>1</sup> Others have compared him to Swift, Voltaire, Diderot, Rabelais, Proust, Cervantes, Joyce and Lowry, and his novels to the Song of Songs.<sup>2</sup> The epic nature of his works has also been pointed out, and this has inevitably led to comparisons to Homer and Virgil.<sup>3</sup> The admiration of these critics seems to have been shared by at least one literary jury, for, in 1968, the French Academy awarded its Grand Prix du Roman to Cohen's novel *Belle du Seigneur*.

Yet, for all this critical acclaim, no attempt has been made to view Cohen's novels as a whole. Perhaps the very range of comparisons quoted above indicates the reason for this. While praising Cohen's work, critics have obviously been overwhelmed by the breadth of its conception and by the difficulty of placing it within a recognized literary tradition. There is, however, a unity of conception and theme, and it is hoped that this essay, by focusing attention on the theme underlying the novels, may be a first step towards an overall view of his work.<sup>4</sup>

Cohen is a Jewish writer, and, in the words of Albert Memmi, "To be a Jewish writer is, of necessity, to express the Jewish fate."<sup>5</sup> Although Cohen, like such contemporaries as Malraux and Camus, examines in his novels certain aspects of the human condition, it is on the fate of the Jewish people that he concentrates, on the difficulties faced by Jews in a hostile world. He does this by interweaving the story of an individual Jew and description of a group of Jews. The best way to show how he traces the destiny of

a whole people through the interaction of an individual and a group is first of all to summarize the novels.

*Solal* (1930) introduces us to the Solal clan, a group of Sephardic Jews living on the Greek island of Cephalonia. Cohen shows us mainly the younger branch of the family, commonly called "Les Valeureux de France" because their ancestors came to the island from France in the eighteenth century, and passed on a tradition of fierce attachment to the land which, in 1791, made Jews citizens with all the rights of citizens. The present members of the family maintain their French nationality, and speak with sensuous pleasure a slightly archaic French. We are also introduced to Solal, the eldest son of the Rabbi Gamaliel, destined in the normal order of things to succeed his father as head of the Solal clan and spiritual leader of the Jews of Cephalonia and surrounding islands. But Solal prefers to break from family and religion. He seduces the wife of the French Consul and flees with her to Italy. He is parted from her, spends years wandering around Europe, then settles in France. He begins to rise in society, using, like Eugène de Rastignac before him, his attraction for women. He rediscovers the Consul's wife, who has him made secretary to a powerful Senator. He speculates successfully on the Bourse, founds a newspaper, marries the Senator's daughter, and becomes a government minister. At the end of the novel, his career and marriage seem ruined because his wife cannot accept his strange family.

In *Mangeclous* (1938), Cohen continues his portrait of the Valeureux: of Saltiel, the head of the group, and Solal's uncle; of Matthatias, the wealthy miser whose eyes are always fixed on the ground, searching for money others may have dropped; of Michael, the muscular Don Juan and synagogue guard; and of Salomon, the timid butt of everybody's ill-humour, but goodness incarnate. But most of all, we see Mangeclous, a Rabelaisian creation with the appetite of a Gargantua and the cunning of a Panurge. He and the other Valeureux set out for Switzerland on the receipt of a mysterious message from Geneva, accompanied by a generous cheque. They have deciphered the message as a summons from Solal, who is now an important man again, Under-Secretary General

at the League of Nations. (We are never told, however, how he has risen to this position.) In Geneva, the Valeureux amaze the inhabitants by their dress and behaviour, and complicate life for Solal.

*Belle du Seigneur* (1968) is set mainly in Geneva and takes up the story of Solal and of his love for Ariane Deume, wife of a minor official at the League of Nations. Solal, sickened by lack of concern at the League over the persecution of Jews in Germany, denounces nations which refuse entry to Jewish refugees. He is dismissed from his post and wanders around Europe with Ariane. Their love grows cold and their lives empty, and they commit suicide. We also glimpse the Valeureux, who visit Solal in Geneva, but it is in *Les Valeureux* (1969) that they come to the fore again. This novel, although published after *Belle du Seigneur*, was originally part of it, and comes before it in the logic of the series. It describes how the Valeureux once again visit Solal in Geneva, and their travels in Italy and England. It also shows us some more of Mangeclous's wild schemes, such as the one to set up a university in his own home (where the most popular course is on the art of seduction). We also hear some of his most fantastic tales, like the one told to a wide-eyed and joyous ancient (who pays him for what he hears) that he has converted the King of England to Judaism and has personally circumcised him in the House of Lords.

There is much humour, and even some wild comedy in these novels, most of it provided by the Valeureux. They are deliberately presented as caricatures of the "typical" Jew: obsessed with money, mean, dirty and cowardly.<sup>6</sup> (When, for example, a lioness escapes from the zoo, they hide for days, convinced it is the prelude to a pogrom, and this time later becomes known as "Les Jours Noirs de la Lionnesse".)<sup>7</sup> It is significant that Cohen, himself a Jew, should have chosen to depict the Valeureux this way, especially at a time when the Nazis were proclaiming and adding to this stereotype. What in fact he is doing is depicting the most important facet of the Jewish destiny: the image which is forced on them by Gentile society.

Cohen, like Sartre, believes that Jews undergo a destiny, which is imposed on them. Part of this destiny is their image as "typical"

Jews, an image which, in time, they seem spontaneously to accept. But with this image goes the whole gamut of persecution, cruelty and indignity. Cohen sees this persecution as the continual fate of Jews throughout history. Yet, although Solal and the Valeureux make reference on several occasions to this persecution, Cohen does not generally depict it directly. His novels are not the long catalogue of woe passed from generation to generation which we find in Schwarz-Barts' *Le Dernier des Justes*, nor does he fill his pages with the horrendous descriptions of Nazi extermination camps that Elie Wiesel puts in *La Nuit* and Jean-François Steiner in *Treblinka*. But we should not be blinded by the antics of his characters, the comedy of the situations he depicts and the beauty of the life he describes on a lovely Greek island. Behind what Simone de Beauvoir calls the "folklore" aspect of his works,<sup>8</sup> there is always a feeling of uneasiness and insecurity, the awareness that Jews have always been persecuted.

Cohen's technique is very effective. One can grow numb after repeated descriptions of horrors, even those in *La Nuit* and *Le Dernier des Justes*. In Cohen's novels, we are not bludgeoned with such horrors; we are simply reminded at intervals that the joy in life displayed by the Valeureux is infinitely precarious, that death and untold cruelty always threaten them simply because they are Jews. Our pleasure in their antics is suddenly destroyed when they begin to talk fearfully of pogroms in Russia, of the Dreyfus affair, and of the need Christians have always felt to extort money from Jews to finance their wars. Although we laugh at the naivety of the Valeureux when they write long meandering letters to the Pope, the British Prime Minister, the Queen of England and even to Hitler, setting forth their plans to put the world to rights, we know that it is the chronic insecurity of the Jew in Gentile society which motivates them. They are afflicted by that very malaise which Albert Memmi in *Portrait d'un Juif* describes as being the permanent lot of the Jew.

To underline his message further, Cohen introduces among his comic characters certain victims of anti-Semitism, wandering and persecuted individuals like Mossinsohn in *Mangeclous*, a minor employee at the League of Nations, despised by the other employees because he is stateless, has no powerful protector, and can therefore be paid less and dismissed at any time. Then there is Jérémie

in *Mangeclous* and *Ezéchiél*,<sup>9</sup> a tattered, pathetic figure with a battered suitcase, the remains of a pair of handcuffs still on one wrist, a sock containing a few coins around his neck, and the servile smile of the eternally persecuted refugee with no passport and no home.

Cohen even intervenes directly sometimes to draw our attention to the persecution of Jews. In the midst of his description of Jérémie, for example, he laments: "O sourire servile, seule défense du pauvre Jérémie. O mes Juifs, pauvres mites de la terre qu'on déteste et écrase si facilement entre deux mains battantes."<sup>10</sup> Elsewhere, he interrupts his story to exclaim: "Soudain me hantent les horreurs allemandes" and to talk of his family, murdered at Auschwitz.<sup>11</sup> Some passages, put in the mouth of his characters, are really an intervention on Cohen's part because they are so directly addressed to the reader. There is, for instance, the long lament spoken in *Belle du Seigneur* by a Jewish girl whom Solal meets in Berlin, an endless list of the catastrophes of Jewish history from the Pharaohs to Hitler.

Some Jews accept the persecution and the identity imposed on them, and these are represented in Cohen's novels by Jérémie. Almost like the Justes in Schwarz-Bart's novel, he has come to see himself as a sacrificial victim: "Oui, les hommes étaient comme les gouttes de la pluie sur les fenêtres. Cette goutte allait à gauche puis soudain à droite. C'était son destin. Eh bien, lui, Jérémie, depuis cinquante ans, il était une goutte qui allait toujours du côté de la catastrophe."<sup>12</sup> In his opinion, the suffering of the Jews is the sign that they are the Chosen People. They are "choisis pour douleur, rois par douleur."<sup>13</sup>

Cohen, however, like Memmi, believes that, although Jewish identity is mainly imposed, it is not entirely negative. The Valeureux may have accepted a caricature-like identity, but they are far from being the willing victims of persecution. They love life with a mixture of mystical and sensual pleasure. Salomon, for example, looks up at the sky, and: "Le ciel de fine porcelaine turquoise lui parut si beau et de si pures clartés souriaient qu'il mordit sa petite lèvre pour ne pas pleurer."<sup>14</sup> He clings to life, and, in front of Napoleon's tomb, declares that he prefers his life as a humble Jew to being a glorious but dead emperor. Far from accepting Jérémie's view of God as a vengeful deity, the Valeureux see Him as the



Creator of all that is beautiful, and believe He loves His People, and all men. Mangeclous watches a bird: "Et soudain, dans une foudroyante illumination, tournoyante et craquante, Mangeclous comprit que Dieu aimait chaque être en particulier d'un amour absolu, qu'il aimait spécialement cet oiseau et spécialement le ridicule homme de rien nommé Mangeclous."<sup>15</sup>

It is true that Mangeclous sometimes regrets his Jewish birth, for he is convinced that, had he been English, he would be at least Viceroy of India, "et non paltoquet juif mangeant beaucoup pour se consoler de n'être rien."<sup>16</sup> But such moments are rare, and it is more like Mangeclous when he exclaims: "Ah! Quel bonheur d'être moi-même!"<sup>17</sup> By saying this, he is rejoicing not only in his personal identity, but in his identity as a Jew. The rest of the Valeureux, although their admiration of France and England shows the regret of the weak contemplating the great of the world, are also proud to be Jews.

The Valeureux cling especially to their religion, and they have only scorn for those who abandon it, for "tous ces transfuges [qui] mangeaient du porc, se réjouissaient de connaître des préfets et parlaient de Céphalonie avec condescendance."<sup>18</sup> It is precisely the religion of the Jews which illustrates how a positive aspect of their identity is reinforced by the image imposed on them. Cohen obviously sees Judaism as a positive force, but his novels also show that, as Memmi puts it: "Religion is certainly the most notable and the most effective defense institution of the Jew."<sup>19</sup> One could even argue that Judaism has only survived because Jews have been forced to embrace it in the face of persecution. Indeed, Cohen believes the Jews as a people have survived mainly because of the identity imposed on them by persecution, which has, in Mangeclous's words, served to "nous maintenir en bonne forme israéliite."<sup>20</sup> It is thanks to the ghetto that they have maintained their identity, and thanks to the pogrom that they have kept their religion. Intervening directly to comment on Saltiel's regrets that so many Jews are abandoning their Jewishness, Cohen says: "Et d'ailleurs le chancelier Hitler se chargeait depuis quelque temps de ressusciter l'âme d'Israël."<sup>21</sup> Persecution, Solal maintains in *Belle du Seigneur*, has made Jews turn away from the temporal and from the temptations of worldly glory, to embrace the eternal and to wait patiently for the Messiah. Consequently, they have



risen above history and survived many great nations which achieved only temporal glory.

Solal believes that the greatest achievement of his people is their religion, and, above all the Law. Gentile society, and especially Hitler's Germany, he argues, is based on strength and the right of the strongest to impose himself. Judaism, however, tries to tame this animal side of man's nature; the Law humanises him and teaches him to love and respect his fellow men. No wonder, he concludes, that "les Allemands, peuple de nature, aient toujours détesté Israël, peuple d'ant nature."<sup>22</sup> One could again argue that the Jews have embraced a religion of love and tried to teach the need to tame nature precisely because the rest of the world has always been so cruel to them. Cohen affirms, however, that the Jewish refusal to give in to animal instincts should be a reason for pride. In *Solal*, the hero's father tells him, on the day of his circumcision: "Plus tard, ne sois pas rebuté par notre difformité. Nous sommes le monstre d'humanité; car nous avons déclaré combat à la nature."<sup>23</sup>

Whether it provides protection or not, there is something admirable in the way Jews have preserved their religion. There is also something which defies logic in this adherence to a religion which is often the cause of persecution. This is presumably why Cohen refers to "cette obéissance à la Loi que rien ne justifie et ne sanctionne que notre volonté folle et sans espoir et sans rétribution."<sup>24</sup> Jérémie blames all his misfortunes on his religion, yet he clings to it, and the only explanation he can give, in his broken French, is: "Pourquoi jé vis? . . . Pour faire les commandements dé religion."<sup>25</sup>

But not all Jews have been content to cling to their religion and accept their lot. Many have abandoned their people and their religion, and sought success in Gentile society. Throughout Cohen's novels there are references to talented individuals who have succeeded in the outside world: Einstein, Freud, Rothschild, Lord Beaconsfield and others. The Valeureux, while remaining within their own community, admire such men, and, although they regret that Solal has abandoned his religion, they are proud when he succeeds in the Gentile world.

Unfortunately, Solal learns that such success has its drawbacks. He abandons a society based on love and respect for one where

success depends on strength and the power to impose oneself. He learns at the League of Nations that the officials who succeed are the ones who are strongest. (Hence the inoffensive Mossinshon gets nowhere.) Behind the "civilised" veneer is a battle for survival; behind the servile smiles of subordinates is the will to oust their superior and take his place. On an international level (since Solal does, after all, work at the League of Nations), this results in respect for powerful nations like Germany, which is quite willing to impose itself on weaker neighbours.

All that is really respected in "civilised" society, according to Solal, is strength, and that, in the long run, amounts to the power to hurt, or even to kill others.<sup>26</sup> He is particularly annoyed, therefore, at the hypocrisy of masking respect for strength behind praise of honesty, generosity and other such qualities. Even more annoying are the cultural pretensions of "polite" society. He says to his mistress: "Votre respect de la culture, apanage de la caste des puissants, n'est en fin de compte, et au plus profond, que respect du pouvoir de tuer, respect secret, inconnu de vous-même."<sup>27</sup> The rich and powerful despise the likes of the Valeureux as vulgar, yet the latter have a much more spontaneous enjoyment of life and a more humane attitude to other men. The rich also despise the poor, ostensibly because the poor are barbarians, but really because they cannot afford the luxury of culture. Solal's acquaintances have only contempt for men like Louis Bouvard, a 71 year-old unemployed man who throws himself in Lake Geneva without even admiring the beauty of the Lake first, "Car les pauvres sont vulgaires, ne s'intéressent pas à la beauté, à ce qui élève l'âme, bien différents en vérité de la reine Marie de Roumanie qui dans ses mémoires a béni la faculté que Dieu, paraît-il, lui a donné 'de ressentir profondément la beauté des choses et de s'en réjouir.'" <sup>28</sup>

Solal's success is undermined in his own eyes by his awareness of the hypocrisy all around him, and by his uncomfortable ability to see the vanity of the ambitious politicians and diplomats among whom he shines. He is always conscious of the essential frivolity of the glittering society he frequents. In passages which remind one of Drieu La Rochelle in *Gilles* and *L'Homme couvert de femmes* (ironically, in view of Drieu's anti-Semitism), Cohen depicts the empty, unsatisfying existence of cocktail parties and snobbery

led by the pompous nonentities of the League of Nations. He shows us the imbeciles who run the world's affairs, men like the head of the political section, "un crétin solennel d'une cinquantaine d'années, parfumé et monoclé,"<sup>29</sup> who is less interested in his responsibilities than in finding a tax haven in Geneva. He takes us into the offices of the sumptuous Palais des Nations, where career diplomats are more concerned with placating powerful nations than in protecting weak ones, and where the answer to international aggression is to set up a commission.

The futility of the League of Nations and of the lives of its officials is summed up in Cohen's brilliant description of one day in the life of a minor official, Adrian Deume, whom we see sitting in his office sharpening pencils, correcting the grammar of memoranda, walking around the corridors looking busy, taking the elevator up and down to pass the time of day, going out for coffee, wondering how to while away the time, and planning to invite his superiors to dinner in order to impress them. This is all expressed in a lengthy interior monologue which centres obsessively on his petty ambitions, his jealousy of his colleagues, his boredom and his anger at not being promoted. At one point, he even calculates that he earns about ten times as much as Mozart did, and this consoles him somewhat for his lack of promotions. Ironically, he works in the Mandate Section, and one of the dossiers he is too "busy" to deal with concerns Palestine. And all the while, set against his petty concerns, are echoes of the fate of Jews in Germany.

Little wonder that Solal finds it difficult to take the League of Nations and his role in it seriously, and that he refers to himself as "sous-secrétaire générale de la Société des Nations, un lamentable important de la ruche bourdonnante et sans miel."<sup>30</sup> His state of mind is made worse because he realises the futility of himself and all those around him in the face of death. Cohen's characters are filled with love of life; but, mingled with it, is an acute awareness of death. His work, like that of so many modern French writers, is dominated by death, and he has called himself "le désobligeant spécialiste de la mort."<sup>31</sup> It is when writing in this vein, that he changes perspective, and looks beyond the fate of a people to encompass the whole of humanity. At such moments, as well as being a brilliant commentator on the epic theme of Jewish destiny,

he suddenly falls in line with such great contemporaries as Malraux, Camus and Céline.

Death haunts Cohen's novels. Even as he describes the love of Solal and Ariane, he reminds us that the servant who tidies their room is soon to die. All his characters, whatever their situation in life, whatever their successes, fear death. Ariane is terrified when, in church, the congregation sings of death. Mangeclous halts his antics from time to time, sobered and trembling when he realises: "Il n'était qu'un des humains qui se succédaient depuis des milliers d'années, un humain qui mourrait bientôt. Et dans les milliers d'années qui suivraient sa mort, nul ne songerait à lui, nul ne saurait qu'il avait existé et en vérité il n'aurait jamais existé."<sup>32</sup> Adrien turns his thoughts from promotion and almost sees the futility of life when the inevitability of death occurs to him. But most of all it is Solal who meditates on death, on how it levels all men and makes ambition pointless. "Frères humains, toi et moi," he informs Adrien, "promis à la mort, bientôt allongés sous la terre, toi et moi, sages et parallèles!"<sup>33</sup>

Solal's career is doubly precarious: because he is a Jew and therefore a potential victim of Gentile society, and because he is a man, and a certain victim of death. Behind each living man, Cohen discerns a corpse, and he describes Adrien (in terms reminiscent of Céline's description of men as "de la pourriture en suspens")<sup>34</sup> as a "futur cadavre."<sup>35</sup> He depicts fashionable society at its game of social advancement, then points out that: "C'est à ces misères que passent leur temps ces malheureux qui vont si vite crever et pourrir, sous terre puants."<sup>36</sup>

Solal's solution is to turn to sexual adventures. His success with women, which had once been his stepping-stone to social advancement, now becomes a refuge. His frenzied chase after women is an attempt to blind himself to the futility of life, a kind of Pascalian *divertissement*. Analysing Don Juan's motives, Solal tells us a great deal about his own when he says Don Juan is seeking "divertissement pour oublier la mort."<sup>37</sup> But this tactic fails, for his sexual adventures tend to remind him of death. Like many before him, he is struck by the similarity between dying and the act of love. As he makes love to Ariane, he realises that she must die some day, and his thoughts turn to the cemetery "où dorment les anciens amants et leurs amantes."<sup>38</sup>

Because of such thoughts, the act of sex becomes meaningless to Solal. Indeed, he begins to see it as positively ridiculous. He is especially disturbed by the physical basis of sexual attraction, since beauty fades and death finally destroys it. Yet, he believes, it is sufficient for a man to be the right height and have all his teeth for a woman to love him. He is filled with shame as he thinks of all the women who have loved him for his physical beauty: “Honte de devoir leur amour à ma beauté, mon écœurante beauté qui fait battre les paupières des chéries.”<sup>39</sup>

His love affairs also fail to distract him from his other uncomfortable obsession: the importance of brute strength in Western society. He is convinced that what women adore above all else in men is their strength, their power to hurt others. He exclaims: “Force, force, elles n’ont que ce mot à la bouche. Force, qu’est ce en fin de compte sinon le vieux pouvoir d’assommer le copain préhistorique au coin de la forêt vierge d’il y a cent mille ans?”<sup>40</sup> He believes that his wife, Aude, finally left him because he stopped trying to be important in society (i.e. stopped affirming his strength, his will to dominate others). Viewed in this light, the cultural pretensions of women in “polite” society seem ludicrously hypocritical. Women love “cultural” talk from men because only men with a certain position in society can afford it, and it is therefore a sign of power: “Il dit qu’il aime Kafka. Alors, l’idiote est ravie. Elle croit que c’est parce qu’il est bien intellectuellement. En réalité, c’est parce qu’il est bien socialement.”<sup>41</sup>

Even the hallowed conventions surrounding romantic love in Western society are, Cohen says, mere masks to hide the importance of physical beauty and strength. They also serve to hide the less lovely aspects of man’s physical nature. The Valeureux, unaccustomed to Western ways, observe these conventions in amazement, and act as a chorus commenting on them. Mangeclous especially cannot understand why, since it is man’s physical side which is the basis of love, it is considered necessary to hide that the body has its unlovely functions. In his lecture on the art of seduction, he poses an interesting question: what would have happened if, when Vronsky met Anna Karenina, he had suddenly been stricken by diarrhoea? He goes on to paint a hilarious picture of Anna pouring forth her passion while Vronsky, in despair, asks her to leave the room while he creates “poetry” for her. While she



is out of the room, Vronsky, afraid she may hear the water closet, has to use his hat. All the while, he plays the piano to hide the noises. At this moment, in rushes Anna's husband. Would Anna still love and defend Vronsky in these circumstances, Mangeclous asks?

This lecture amounts to another attack on Western mores. Mangeclous's acceptance of his fat, ugly wife and her bowel problems is presented as being much saner than the antics of "polite" society. Cohen depicts Jews as much more aware of the true nature of man (which is, presumably, why the Law tries to tame this nature, rather than hiding it behind hypocritical conventions). Jews as he shows them are not shocked by human nature, nor by man's physical needs. Solal contrasts the Western obsession for beautiful women with the Jewish custom of shaving a woman's head and covering it with a wig when she marries. Westerners find this grotesque, but Jews see beyond the outward appearances. "Mais une Juive à perruque ne perd jamais son prestige, car elle s'est mise sur un plan où les misères physiques ne peuvent plus découvrer," he concludes.<sup>42</sup>

Even Solal's affair with Ariane, which promises to be different, and which is movingly described in its initial stages, fails because Solal sees through her cultural pretensions. Like his marriage to Aude, it is also destroyed because he is Jewish. He is never able to cut himself off completely from his background, and he maintains contact with the Valeureux. At first, they are primarily an embarrassment, and their arrival on the scene shortly before his marriage almost prevents it from taking place at all. The Senator, his future father-in-law, cannot tolerate the idea of having such grotesque relatives, so he dismisses Solal from his employment and tells him to forget his daughter. Even Aude, although she insists on marrying Solal, can never feel at home with his family. She makes a great effort to accept them when her husband houses them and several other members of the Solal clan in their chateau, but she fails, and the marriage breaks up.

Solal's first reaction to the threat posed by his family is to repudiate them publicly and to throw his father and uncle out of his house. He finds, however, that the bonds tying him to them are too strong, and he begs his father's forgiveness. Even after the destruction of his marriage he cannot forget them. He is drawn

towards his people, and especially towards a God and a religion in which he cannot believe, but which he reveres as the very essence of the Jews.<sup>43</sup> Memories of his childhood, of the synagogue and of the Passover Feast sweep over him at intervals. Quietly, almost furtively, he affirms his Jewishness: he welcomes (albeit with apprehension) the Valeureux to Geneva; he cares for his half-blind father in a villa near Geneva; he kisses the hand of Jérémie, who stands tongue-tied in his presence. Even the opening scene of *Belle du Seigneur*, where he disguises himself as a "typical" Jew, or a later scene where, in a Paris hotel, he wears a false nose and a prayer shawl, are ways of affirming he is a Jew.

When he finally speaks out in defense of Jewish refugees, he is dismissed from his post and ostracised by polite society. He then irrevocably cuts himself off from the Gentile world by denouncing anonymously an irregularity in his own naturalisation papers. His French nationality is withdrawn, and he becomes quite literally what French anti-Semites of the day called a "sans patrie." He and Ariane now begin a life of wandering, and, although it is a leisurely and comfortable wandering spent in luxury hotels and villas, it mirrors, in a rather distorted way, the fate of the Jewish people. Solal has, by his own acts, placed himself back within the mainstream of Jewish destiny. But this happens not entirely by choice, for society, by its anti-Semitism, also forces on him a destiny he had tried to escape. Even for a man of Solal's talent, escape from this destiny is never certain.

He now assumes the servile smile of the weak, the same smile he had once seen on the faces of subordinates. Both he and Ariane begin to long for the company of others, for that society which used to sicken Solal. They feel a deep need for what Cohen calls "le social," and Solal even envies the soldiers, workmen and other passers-by he sees in Paris because they at least commune with one another. In Geneva, he strikes up a conversation with an old man, claims to be a Swiss Consul, and charms him with his patriotic talk. He even begins to read Saint-Simon, the writer *par excellence* of "le social."

But Solal is not allowed to commune, for he is everywhere confronted by anti-Semitism. An old man with whom he tries to start a conversation suddenly talks with hatred of the Jews; on walls and in newspapers he reads anti-Semitic slogans; in con-



versations overheard in cafés he catches anti-Jewish remarks. Unable to find a place in this society, Solal's need for "le social" cannot be satisfied by a return to his origins either. His success has cut him off from his Jewish background, and he could never return a failure. The only solution he and Ariane can find to their dilemma is suicide.

Solal's life shows the danger for the Jew in trying to be assimilated by Gentile society. Even the ghetto is better than this, for it at least provides survival for the group. Solal has a son, but he will be brought up in a Gentile family and will forget or deny his Jewishness. The Valeureux, however, survive in their children, and it is no doubt awareness of this fact which leads to Mangelous's delight in his two sons, a caricature of the traditionally strong family affection of Jews. (Ezéchiel, in the play of that name, also underlines the importance of survival through children. When he loses his son, he decides to remarry and produce another, who will be a great leader, perhaps even the Messiah.)

Obviously, this does not mean Cohen holds up the ghetto as an ideal. If Jews have survived in the ghetto, it is because they have had no choice. This is a "solution" imposed on them. In fact, neither the ghetto Jew nor the Jew like Solal provides the real solution, for both are the object of anti-Semitism. For Cohen, the only answer is Israel, and he would agree with Memmi that: "If Israel did not exist it would have to be created. If Israel should disappear it would have to be recreated. For Israel alone can put an end to the negativity of the Jew and liberate his positivity."<sup>44</sup>

Throughout the novels, the Valeureux dream of a day when Jews will have their own land. Although they admire England, France and even Germany, this admiration is mixed with envy and with the realisation that Jews can never escape a destiny forced on them if they do not have their own land. Only then will the stereotyped Jew, the money-loving and cowardly being, regain his dignity. As Saltiel puts it: "Mais quand nous aurons notre Etat, sois tranquille, nous cracherons sur l'argent, et dans nos villages il n'y aura plus d'argent, tout sera gratuit. Et ce sera un exemple pour la terre entière et une réponse à nos calomnieurs."<sup>45</sup>

Writing years later, when this dream had been realised, Cohen interrupts a lament for the dead of Auschwitz, to rejoice that a new Jew, prepared to fight for his freedom, had been born in

Israel: "Mais dans ces yeux d'angoisse, une joie soudaine, joie de mes frères libres à Jérusalem, joie de mon peuple fier, libre à jamais en Israël. Allelulia!"<sup>46</sup> But before this new Jewish face could be shown to the world, Jews had to abandon the Valeureux's quiet contentment in the Law and its ability to tame the worst in man, and had to be prepared to fight, kill and meet hate with hate. Cohen never shows us in his novels, as does Elie Wiesel in *L'Aube* and Manès Sperber in *Qu'une larme dans l'océan*, the struggle of a people to become warriors. The closest we get to this is a reference by Solal to a people who will one day be "calmes, fiers et beaux et de noble prestance et hardis guerriers s'il le faut."<sup>47</sup> One cannot, however, imagine any of Cohen's characters saying, as does the hero of *L'Aube*: "Mon peuple n'a jamais su haïr. Sa tragédie, au cours des siècles, s'explique par le manque de haine dont il fit preuve à l'égard de ceux qui tentèrent de l'exterminer, de ceux qui, souvent, réussirent à l'humilier. Notre seule chance, à présent... c'est d'apprendre l'art et la nécessité de la haine."<sup>48</sup>

An immense historical and psychological gap separates Wiesel's heroes from Cohen's, a gap explicable only by Auschwitz, Belsen and the other Nazi camps. Cohen, however, writes of the pre-Auschwitz Jew. Although he acknowledges the vital role of Israel in the liberation of the Jew, he is interested mainly in the life of the Valeureux. They are, he admits, "une espèce qui s'éteint,"<sup>49</sup> precisely because there is an Israel, but he dedicates *Les Valeureux* to them, and insists that he reveres them. They have no place in the new Jewish state, and when, in *Solal*, the Valeureux try to found a community in Palestine, they are soon driven out. Yet the very fact that they tried shows that they had a role to play in the creation of Israel. It was people like them who kept the religion and identity of the Jews alive for centuries, and from whom came the eventual founders of Israel. They ensured the survival of the Jews, and were, therefore, more valuable than gifted individuals like Solal.

The Valeureux are figures of fun to outsiders, but they achieve a certain dignity in their sense of common destiny and in their resistance to time. Their kind have outlasted great nations and many persecutors. Solal sees England spreading its Empire and language throughout the world, and his own people scattered and speaking many tongues. Yet Jews are older than any such

upstart nation, are "un peuple très ancien, autre chose que les Croisés qui sont d'avant-hier."<sup>50</sup> Solal himself, who begins life as a poor vagabond, descendant of a despised race, is yet more ancient and noble in ancestry than his wife's family, who boastfully trace their line back to Henri de Navarre. He points out that Assyrians, Egyptians, Babylonians and Romans have all disappeared, but Rosenfeld, the typical Jew, still lives. There is a symbolic scene in *Les Valeureux*, where Saltiel, during a stay in Rome, stands before Titus's Arch, and addresses the Roman general: "O Titus, destructeur de Jérusalem, j'ai tenu à venir te dire deux mots et à t'informer que tes vaincus se portent bien! A propos, ô vainqueur des Juifs, qu'est donc devenu ton puissant empire?"<sup>51</sup>

The great service which Jews like the Valeureux have provided is simply to have survived. Cohen's saga of Jewish destiny ends on a clear note of hope as he celebrates the liberation of the Jew by Israel. But while it looks forward in hope, it also looks backward in gratitude to those who have made Israel possible. What he writes about *Les Valeureux* could apply to the whole saga: "ce livre sera mon adieu à une espèce qui s'éteint et dont j'ai voulu laisser une trace après moi."<sup>52</sup> His novels stand, as it were, at the crossroads, at the very centre of the epic of Jewish destiny.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> "...the greatest French speaking Jewish writer." Anon., "Albert Cohen: Grand Prix du Roman de l'Académie française," *Les Nouvelles Littéraires* (14 nov. 1968), 8.

<sup>2</sup> Pierre-Henri Simon, "De Solal aux Valeureux. L'œuvre d'Albert Cohen," *Le Monde* [*Hebdomadaire*] (29 janv. - 14 fév., 1970), 13; François Nourissier, "Belle du Seigneur par Albert Cohen," *Les Nouvelles Littéraires* (12 sept. 1968), 2; Hubert Nyssen, "La saga des Solal," *Synthèses* (sept.-oct. 1968), 66-70; Gabrielle Rolin, "Un Seigneur de verre," *Les Nouvelles Littéraires* (24 oct. 1968), 3.

<sup>3</sup> Lucille Bourquelot, "Albert Cohen et la geste des Solal," *Etudes* (avril 1970), 622-625; Jean Blot, "Albert Cohen," *NRF*, 32 (déc. 1968), 794-798; Emile Noulet, "Albert Cohen. Solal," in *Alphabet critique 1924-1964*, Tome 1<sup>er</sup> (Brussels: Presses Universitaires de Bruxelles, 1964), pp. 343-346.

<sup>4</sup> I have concentrated in this essay on Cohen's novels, as they illustrate the unity of his work most clearly. He has, however, written other works which are built on the same theme.

All the novels mentioned here are published in Paris by Gallimard. The editions I have used are dated as follows: *Solal*, 1971; *Mangeclous*, 1969; *Belle du Seigneur*, 1968; *Les Valeureux*, 1969. The other works by Cohen

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which I have mentioned are: *Ezéchiel* (Paris: Gallimard, 1956) and *O vous frères humains* (Paris: Gallimard, 1972). There is also a volume of poetry not mentioned in this essay: *Paroles juives* (Geneva: Kündig, and Paris: Crès, 1921).

<sup>5</sup> Albert Memmi, *The Liberation of the Jew*, trans. Judy Hyun (New York: The Orion Press, 1966), pp. 175-176.

<sup>6</sup> As one reviewer puts it, they are "gas bags, greedy, ceaselessly moralizing fiddlers on the roof lamenting their misfortune." ("Impossible People," *TLS* (12 March 1970), 287.)

<sup>7</sup> "The Black Days of the Lioness" (*Mangeclous*, p. 74).

<sup>8</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *Tout compte fait* (Paris: Gallimard, 1972), p. 179.

<sup>9</sup> It seems safe to assume that the character called Jérémie in both these works are one and the same. They both have the same essential characteristics.

<sup>10</sup> "O servile smile, poor Jérémie's only defense. O my Jews, poor earth mites, detested and so easily crushed by clapping two hands." (*Mangeclous*, p. 234.)

<sup>11</sup> "Suddenly I am haunted by German horrors." (*Les Valeureux*, p. 237.)

<sup>12</sup> "Yes, men were like rain drops on windows. This drop would be falling to the left, then suddenly to the right. That was its destiny. Well, as for Jérémie, for fifty years he had been a raindrop falling in the direction of catastrophe." (*Mangeclous*, pp. 240-241.)

<sup>13</sup> "...chosen for sorrow, kings through sorrow," (*ibid.*, p. 172). As Albert Memmi points out in *La Libération du Juif*, this has frequently been the only way Jews have managed to give meaning to their misfortune and therefore make it more bearable.

<sup>14</sup> "The sky of fine turquoise porcelaine seemed so beautiful to him, and such pure brightness smiled down on him, that he bit his lip to stop himself weeping." (*ibid.*, p. 8.)

<sup>15</sup> "Suddenly, in a whirling and cracking thunderbolt of illumination, Mangeclous understood that God loved each individual being with an absolute love, that He loved especially this bird and especially the ridiculous, insignificant man called Mangeclous." (*ibid.*, p. 337.)

<sup>16</sup> "...and not a Jewish nobody, over-eating to console himself for being nothing." (*ibid.*, p. 103.)

<sup>17</sup> "Ah! What good fortune to be myself!" (*Les Valeureux*, p. 63.)

<sup>18</sup> "...all those turncoats [who] ate pork, rejoiced in knowing Prefects, and spoke condescendingly of Cephalonia." (*Mangeclous*, p. 102.)

<sup>19</sup> Albert Memmi, *Portrait of a Jew*, trans. Elisabeth Abbott (New York: The Orion Press, 1962), p. 294.

<sup>20</sup> "...to keep us in good Jewish form." (*Les Valeureux*, p. 296.)

<sup>21</sup> "And besides, Chancellor Hitler had been taking it upon himself for some time to revive the soul of Israel." (*Mangeclous*, p. 103.)

<sup>22</sup> "...the Germans, a people of nature, have always hated Israel, a people of anti-nature." (*Belle du Seigneur*, p. 764.) It is also interesting to note that Freud saw all religion as a suppressive force against primitive drives. Being a Jew, he may well have been made aware of this by Judaism.

<sup>23</sup> "Do not, later on, be repelled by our deformity. We are the monsters of humanity, for we have declared war on nature." (*Solal*, p. 35.)

<sup>24</sup> "...this obedience to the Law which nothing justifies nor sanctions except our mad, hopeless, unrewarded will." (*Belle du Seigneur*, p. 767.)

- 25 "Why I live? To do commandments of religion." (*Mangeclous*, p. 171.)
- 26 Mangeclous makes the same point in *Mangeclous*, p. 146.
- 27 "Your respect for culture, an attribute of the powerful caste, is only in the long run, and at its deepest level, respect for the power to kill, a secret, unrealised respect for yourself." (*Belle du Seigneur*, p. 307.)
- 28 "For the poor are vulgar, take no interest in beauty and in what uplifts the soul, and are truly quite different from Queen Mary of Rumania, who, in her memoirs, has given thanks for the faculty which, it seems, God has given her 'to feel deeply the beauty of things and to rejoice in it.'" (*ibid.*, p. 486.)
- 29 "...a solemn cretin of about fifty, scented and monocled." (*Mangeclous*, p. 197.)
- 30 "...Under Secretary-General of the League of Nations, a lamentable man of importance in a buzzing and honeyless hive." (*Belle du Seigneur*, p. 305.)
- 31 "...the disobliging specialist in death." (*O vous frères humains*, p. 23.)
- 32 "He was just one of the human beings who had followed one another for thousands of years, a man who would soon die, and in the thousands of years which would follow his death, nobody would think of him, nobody would know he had existed, and in truth he would never have existed." (*Les Valeureux*, p. 232.)
- 33 "Human brothers, you and I, promised to death, soon laid out beneath the ground, you and I, well-behaved and parallel!" (*Belle du Seigneur*, p. 293.)
- 34 "...putrescence held in abeyance." (Louis Ferdinand Céline, *Voyage au bout de la nuit*, Paris: Livre de Poche, 1952, p. 421.)
- 35 "...future corpse." (*Belle du Seigneur*, p. 59.)
- 36 "It is in such trifles that these wretches, who will soon die and rot, stinking beneath the earth, spend their time." (*ibid.*, p. 235.)
- 37 "...amusement in order to forget death." (*ibid.*, p. 300.)
- 38 "...where sleep former lovers and their loved-ones." (*ibid.*, p. 416.)
- 39 "Shame at owing their love to my physical attraction, my sickening physical attraction which makes the darlings' eyes blink." (*ibid.*, p. 301.)
- 40 "Strength, strength, that is the only word on their lips. What is strength when all is said and done but the old power to knock your prehistoric friend over the head in some corner of the virgin forest of a hundred thousand years ago?" (*ibid.*, p. 314.)
- 41 "He says he likes Kafka. So the idiot is delighted. She thinks it is because he is intellectually all right. Really, it is because he is socially all right." (*ibid.*, p. 306.)
- 42 "But a Jewish woman in a wig never loses her prestige, for she is on a level where physical ugliness can no longer rob her of prestige." (*ibid.*, p. 312.)
- 43 Cohen himself expresses the same attitude. See Jean Montalbetti, "Albert Cohen: l'horreur du genre humain," *Les Nouvelles Littéraires*, 19-25 juin 1972, p. 6. On the difficulties a Jew experiences in escaping the influence of his religion, see also Albert Memmi, *Portrait of a Jew*, pp. 294-300.
- 44 Albert Memmi, *The Liberation of the Jew*, p. 294.

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<sup>45</sup> "But when we have our own State, be assured, we shall spit on money, and in our villages there will be no more money, everything will be free. And this will be an example for the whole world and an answer to those who slander us." (*Les Valeureux*, p. 242.)

<sup>46</sup> "But in these anguished eyes, a sudden joy, joy for my brothers, free in Jerusalem, free henceforth, joy of my proud people, free for ever in Israel. Allelulia!" (*ibid.*, p. 238.)

<sup>47</sup> "...calm and proud and beautiful and of noble bearing and rude warriors if necessary." (*Belle du Seigneur*, p. 764.)

<sup>48</sup> "My people has never known how to hate. Its tragedy, throughout the centuries, can be explained by the lack of hate it showed towards those who tried to exterminate it, towards those who, often, succeeded in humiliating it. Our only chance, at this moment... is to learn the art and the necessity of hate." (Elie Wiesel, *La Nuit, L'Aube, Le Jour*, Paris: Seuil, 1961, p. 194.)

<sup>49</sup> "...a dying species." (*Les Valeureux*, p. 94.)

<sup>50</sup> "...a very ancient people, quite different from the Crusaders, who date from the day before yesterday." (*Solal*, p. 243.)

<sup>51</sup> "O Titus, destroyer of Jerusalem, I had to come and have a few words with you and let you know your conquered people are well! By the way, O conqueror of the Jews, what happened to your mighty empire?" (*Les Valeureux*, p. 269.)

The same point is made in a more humorous vein in *Ezéchiel*, where the tattered figure of Jérémie enters, leading by a long cord a tiny dog called Titus.

<sup>52</sup> "...this book will be my farewell to a dying species of which I wanted to leave some trace after me." (*ibid.*, p. 94.)