

## ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: HIDDEN SPIRITUALITY: MARGINALIZED  
DESIRE IN THE WORKS OF ALBERT  
COHEN

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This dissertation studies the role of marginalized desire in the works of Swiss-French author Albert Cohen; specifically, marginalized desire within same-sex and Jewish-Christian interfaith relationships, which have historically been deemed socially and religiously corrupt and therefore have been seen to constitute boundaries to spiritual legitimacy. Therefore, this study seeks to understand why Cohen grants such marginalized desires the same spiritual legitimacy as mainstream desire in his novels, and what can be learned from the effects of this decision. Albert Cohen's relationship to marginalization is explored across the various chapters, which address immigration, oscillations between tradition and modernity, and curiosity towards same-sex and interfaith couplehood. The final chapter of this dissertation presents a pedagogical

implementation of this material. Initially perceived as an outsider, Albert Cohen used imaginative literature to compensate for this supposed errant state, as he actively sought to conquer French culture and forge his place in the Francophone Europe of the 20th century. The result is a novel that creates a refraction of pluralistic Judaism with an affirming spirituality, one that showcases the common righteousness in all of humanity. For Cohen, this righteousness exists beyond cultural constructions such as nationality, religion, or sexual orientation. Inspired by his own life experiences, the author depicts same-sex attraction as just beyond his complete ability to conquer, in essence just beyond his world, which is synonymous with the Eternal. Ultimately, this spiritual elevation of marginalized desire conducted by the author reflects a proximity to God that is possible regardless of social and cultural boundaries to spirituality.

HIDDEN SPIRITUALITY: MARGINALIZED DESIRE IN THE WORKS OF  
ALBERT COHEN

by

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## Preface

*Seigneur qui voit le secret de notre âme  
Emplis nos cœurs de l'ardeur de ta foi  
Afin qu'unis dans une même flamme  
Nous nous courbions devant toi*

*Chant du soir* des Éclaireuses et Éclaireurs israélites de France

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## Introduction

“Whatsoever that be within us that feels, thinks, desires, and animates, is something celestial, divine, and consequently, imperishable.”<sup>1</sup> In this profound statement from Aristotle, the emotions and wishes that propel a person are connected to their soul, an immortal reflection of Divine Providence. As demonstrated by many great writers, literature enables one to refract their own soulful experiences into their works, creating a vision of the world influenced by their own desires and connection to the Eternal. Even when a person’s desires are marginalized—in essence, rejected by their surrounding society—they are a reflection of a person’s soul, which holds a legitimacy decreed by God. Historically, the Jewish tradition has adapted itself in many contexts, fostering both a secular and religious culture, and serving as a testament to the endurance of humankind. “Jewish identity eludes definition because its very essence is to refuse any label or, better, any classification scheme that is not its own and to which one would like to attach it. Jewishness is not a concept, a vocabulary word. It is a human reality, an experience that is lived, supported by a history, with its own features and, what is most important, its own logic.”<sup>2</sup> (Luzzati et al., p. 6) Because Judaism is broader than simply a religious practice, one can be Jewish and completely irreligious. It is therefore possible for a non-practicing Jew to be connected to the Eternal force of Judaism: its ethereal spiritual energy, and simultaneously, the hatreds of socially perpetuated anti-Semitism. The 20th century

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<sup>1</sup> Aristotle, et al. *The Nicomachean Ethics*. Oxford University Press, 2009.

<sup>2</sup> All translations from French to English are mine, unless otherwise specified.

Romaniote Jew, Albert Cohen, embraces this nuanced duality of the Jewish experience, and the role of marginalized desire in his novels are the main focus of this dissertation.

The purpose of this study is to respond to Albert Cohen's view on Abrahamic spirituality. More specifically, the goal is to understand his implications for granting the supposedly deviant desires of same-sex and interfaith relationships a spiritual legitimacy in his novels, and to transmit these findings to the reader. The relationship between Ariane and Solal in *Belle du Seigneur* is of particular importance, as they are the primary characters that showcase these notions of marginalized desire in Albert Cohen's works. It can be argued that this relationship is a direct personification of people and experiences from the author's personal life, a tale of endurance stretching from Greece to Switzerland. To this effect, one must first understand Albert Cohen's biography to understand the philosophy he presents in his novels, which ultimately leads the reader to comprehend the spiritual legitimacy Albert Cohen infuses into his works. Consequently, this philosophy sanctifies the desires of all his characters, thereby elevating them to the same spiritual righteousness as the legitimized desire accepted within the mainstream society of his time.

"It is neither vain nor absurd to insist on Albert Cohen's childhood, and even to quote him abundantly. Perhaps more than in other cases of writers, of creators, his childhood, if it is fundamental, founding, is deeply inscribed in the books to come..." (Médioni, p. 32) Albert Cohen lived from 1895 to 1981. He was born on the Greek island of Corfu as an only child. Despite the first few happy and stable years of his

life, Albert Cohen always saw himself as an outsider, beginning with his solitary existence as an only child. He was the son of Marco Cohen, a Romaniote Jew, and Louise Judith Ferro, an Italian Jew. His grandfather was a well-established, practicing Jew, who was president of the local Jewish community. It is hypothesized that: “[Albert Cohen’s ancestors] probably went into exile on Corfu in order to avoid being drafted into the Sultan’s army.” (Médioni, p. 26) Escaping the Muslim rule of Turkey, Albert Cohen’s ancestors knew firsthand the Jewish struggle of migration, which he himself would come to know very soon. This struggle for acculturation and nomadism is a longstanding part of Jewish history, and many have experienced it besides Albert Cohen. “Certainly, the story of little Albert is not new. There are countless accounts that tell it. Only the details and circumstances vary. This topical scene could be described by Bernard-Henri Lévy as “the mori moments of anti-Semitic fury.” (Decout, p. 49) In his biography, Médioni further expresses that the Cohens, like the rest of the small Jewish community on the island, lived in peace at the time of his birth. However, it was a precarious peace that wavered in the wake of financial difficulties and increasing political tensions. When Albert Cohen was born, his family’s soap making business was in a state of decline, losing its profitability, and his parents were worried by financial insecurity. Many Jews began to leave the island in search of better economic prosperity and a better political climate, and the Cohen family would soon follow suit.

At the age of five, Albert Cohen immigrated to Marseille with his parents. The exact reason for the family’s move to France is unknown. Its proximity to Greece,

shared Mediterranean culture, economic potential for foreigners, and the widespread influence and reputation of the French empire all likely played a role in his parents' decision to move there. "According to Albert, it seems that Marco himself does not know. He had heard that Marseilles was a great city." (Médioni, pp. 32-33) Albert Cohen's solitude as an only child was only exacerbated by the move. Now in a foreign land, left alone by his hardworking parents who started an egg selling business, his inner child was searching for a sense of identity. "An only child, Albert Cohen is often alone. As soon as he wakes up, he finds the family apartment deserted. His mother, up at half past five in the morning, is already at work." (Médioni, p. 34) Médioni continues by stating that work was the only horizon for Marco and Louise. While their business eventually became enough to support them, the Cohens were poor, they knew no-one, and they did not socialize with anyone. "The separation from their native island of Corfu and their father's family corresponds to a break with family mores and the practice of Judaism. Marco and Albert very rarely go to the synagogue and it is not known whether they have received any religious education." (Médioni, p. 41) It can therefore be argued that Albert Cohen received no formal Jewish education. The move to Marseille at such a young age broke him off from a cohesive Jewish community, and his childhood proved to be void of religion. His formal education as a youth came from Lycée Thiers in Marseille, as part of the secular French curriculum. His only knowledge of Judaism as a child came from cultural observations from his family, and then a solid reinforcement of the fact that

he was indeed Jewish by an anti-Semitic attack on his tenth birthday—a moment that would stay with him for the rest of his life.

On his tenth birthday, the young Albert Cohen was mocked by a street peddler in a square in Marseille and told to leave the area. A host of anti-Semitic slurs are hurled at him, criticizing his Jewish physique and verbally assaulting his existence in France. “For Cohen, the day marks a pivotal and traumatic moment in his life. All of *Ô Vous, frères humains* revolves around the trauma of becoming conscious that, as a Jew, he is an unwanted outsider in French society.” (Kelly, p. 246) It is at this moment that Albert Cohen arguably underwent his first personal identity crisis. In his autobiographical account of this moment, *Ô Vous, frères humains*, he is accused as an outsider for his attachment to a group he barely knew, and claims that he became a Jew on that day. The underlying framework of his personal place as a marginalized individual began to take shape at that time. “Cohen interwove an evocation of the destruction of European Jewry and the account of his own initiatory experience of persecution in 1905, during the wave of French antisemitism generated by the Dreyfus Affair. The Jewish identity assumed by Cohen at the age of ten and reaffirmed by the voice of the exiled adult narrator corresponds to the negative, Sartrean definition of a Jewish identity determined by the antisemites of the dominant social group: “The Jew is a man whom other men take to be a Jew.”” (Schneider, p. 37) The paradox of the French Jew begins to present itself at this moment within Albert Cohen. While France upheld human rights as a welcoming place for many immigrants, it was raging in the wake of the Dreyfus affair, when Jews were at a

particularly difficult crossroads of cultural acceptance. To describe the Jew in the words of Sartre: “He feels that he is apart, but he no longer understands what sets him apart; he is sure of only one thing: that in the eyes of others, whatever he does, he is and will remain a Jew.” (Sartre, p. 82)

As depicted by Sartre, Albert Cohen knew firsthand the unique sense of marginalization as a Jew in Europe. Given these feelings—a sense of isolation from his family, his origins, and his own surrounding culture—Albert Cohen applied himself at school, and sought to become as culturally French as possible. “When as a child Albert Cohen came to France, he looked to an idealized version of French language and culture to form a sense of belonging in his new homeland.” (Kelly, p. 249) It is at Lycée Thiers where he met Marcel Pagnol, another future French writer, who proved to be a lifelong friend. “They read a lot: Homer, Virgil, Ovid, Shakespeare, Dickens, Stendhal, Flaubert, Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, Baudelaire, and Poe... Literature was indeed at the heart of the relationship between Albert Cohen and Marcel Pagnol.” (Médioni, pp. 60, 62) It was at this time that Albert Cohen’s interest in literature began. His exposure to French literature, along with the classics of world literature in general, gave him the tools and critical thinking skills to explore fiction writing later in life. “The child lived surrounded by French books, which did not reject him. He felt sheltered and welcomed by France. This is certainly how his desire to become a French-language writer without being French was forged.” (Decout, p. 49) His friendship with Marcel Pagnol also proved to be instrumental in shaping his view of relationships, making it clear to him that Jews and gentiles could love each

other and coexist: “Pagnol played a key role in young Cohen’s life. By his side, he felt like his equal. Cohen became aware that a Jew could be loved by a gentile.” (Médioni, p. 69) His future desires for women and marriages would continue to reinforce this realization, especially in the calmer years following the Dreyfus affair. This initial friendship proved fundamental in shaping the author’s benevolent view on interfaith relationships, first platonic and then romantic, which would perpetuate in his presentation of marginalized desire in his novels.

Throughout Cohen’s education, which included many works of classic French and world literature, it is highly possible that he consumed famous works of Jewish theatre and literature of the period as well. For example, the Yiddish play גאט פון נקמה, or *God of Vengeance*, was widely seen in Europe in the 1910s. Written by Sholem Asch, it depicts a Jewish couple who run a brothel in Poland. Ultimately, they decide to close the brothel as it has tainted their daughter’s prospect of marriage. Throughout the play, the audience is presented with various presentations of sex, including a same-sex relations between women, and discussions surrounding morality and Jewish practice in light of modernity at the turn of the 20th century. While perceived by many to be scandalous, given the juxtaposition of sexual and religious themes, it depicted a revolutionary moment in the European-Jewish experience, one at the crossroads of tradition and modernity, from which homosexuality was not absent. In the words of Naomi Seidman: “That this reconstruction of tradition should occur so transparently, so unnaturally (by lesbians! in a whorehouse!) announces the erotic powers both of tradition and the modern break with it.” (Seidman, p. 61) Had Albert

Cohen seen this play, or read about it in French periodicals at the time, it is probable that it influenced his vision on a “reconstruction of tradition” within this plane of religious consciousness, later to become visible in his novels. Shortly after the release of this Yiddish play came the publication of *Die Verwandlung*, or *The Metamorphosis*, by Franz Kafka. Another widely received Jewish work at the time, this novella tells the story of a salesman who unexpectedly finds himself transformed into an insect, and then struggles to adjust to his new condition. The transformation depicted within the text was often interpreted as a metaphor to the European-Jewish experience, and the often degrading perception cast upon marginalized Jewish communities at this time. Had Albert Cohen read this novella, it likely would have further influenced his perception of the marginalization of Jews in Europe, establishing the fundamental principles of his novels to come. Given these possible influences from Jewish theatre and literature, one can better understand how Albert Cohen’s perceptions of European Judaism were being shaped alongside their secular, French counterparts. His perceptions continued to be shaped by his decision to move to Geneva.

There are many reasons for Albert Cohen’s move to Geneva in 1914. According to Médioni, the neutrality of Switzerland assured him a tranquility that France, tainted in his eyes by anti-Semitism with the Dreyfus affair, and in the grip of war with a revanchist Germany, could not provide. This is certainly true, and the University of Law in Geneva was also a reputable institution, where he proceeded to enroll for a degree. However, it is rumored that he initially went to Geneva to pursue

a young woman named Sophie, whom he supposedly met on a weekend trip. “Did Sophie exist other than in Cohen’s fertile imagination? How can we know? He likes to blur the lines and takes pleasure in building his legend. Yes, we accept his stories, we like it that way.” (Médioni, p. 78) Such a gesture propelled by romance illustrates Albert Cohen as a romantic figure from an early age. However, a relationship with this supposed love interest did not come to fruition. Despite this failed attempt, Albert Cohen met many influential people during his university studies in Geneva that continued to shape his view on life. As Médioni continues, at one point he had a Russian Jewish roommate, Marc Chapiro, who had come from St. Petersburg to also study law in Geneva. This encounter would continue to shape his view of Jews outside the bubble of his early childhood. Soon afterwards, he met André Spire in 1917, which was a “fertile” encounter, in Cohen’s own words. “Albert is very impressed by this writer who affirms his Jewishness with such vigor. Like Cohen, Spire is that Jew who questions God. “I do not believe in you and my whole body feels you,” writes André Spire in 1911.” (Médioni, p. 87) In essence, André Spire showed Albert Cohen that it was indeed possible to be Jewish and critical of one’s acceptance of God and religion. Albert Cohen continued to affirm his own Jewishness by a rejection of religiosity, and played with Jewish themes in his writing to this effect. As a secular Jew, it can be argued that his later literary works would be his form of practicing Judaism. Continuing to grow into his own sense of self, engaging with mainstream Swiss culture, he married for the first time.

Albert Cohen was married three times. His first wife was Elisabeth Brocher, whom he married in 1919. A Swiss, protestant woman, a striking similarity can be made to Ariane in *Belle du Seigneur*, as the two have a similar background. Elisabeth is known as: “a very intelligent and rather shy girl who, despite a very strict Protestant upbringing, is playful, full of life.” (Medioni, p. 89) The personification of Albert Cohen’s characters will continue to be discussed throughout this analysis. He was very happy with Elisabeth, and in 1921 his only child, a daughter named Myriam, was born. In this same year, he published his first literary publication: *Paroles juives*, a collection of poems that announce Albert Cohen’s love for the Jewish people and unwavering connection to Judaism—which is remarkable, especially considering he was married to a Gentile at the time. As voiced by Dr. Georges Valensin, a conservative French-Jewish author from the mid-twentieth century, traditional Jewish culture at the time would have viewed intermarriage as inherently corrupt and synonymous with a loss of Jewish values: “Intermarriage is due to multiple factors that are difficult to avoid. One of the most important would be the loss or diminution of religious faith and practices.” (Valensin, p. 179) In *Belle du Seigneur*, the personification of Albert Cohen as Solal undergoes a personal struggle when deciding whether or not to marry a Jewish woman, and if this prescribed expectation from traditional Jewish culture is even possible for him. In essence, Albert Cohen’s first marriage was a very joyous time in his young adulthood, during which he continued to affirm his relationship with Judaism and engage with mainstream, non-Jewish society. However, his first marriage soon ended in tragedy.

In 1924, Elisabeth died of cancer. Once again, Albert Cohen was left alone. Death is a reoccurring theme in his works, often in parallel to desire, and arguably it stems from this initial loss. Following this loss, he continued to engage with various women.

Soon after, in 1925, he met Jane Fillion through a mutual friend. She is a homosexual, and this was well known by him. Albert Cohen was known to be a ‘womanizer’—a seductive figure, also incarnated in his personification of Solal, who liked the challenge of seducing a woman. As a widower at the time, he was intrigued with the possibility of seducing this homosexual woman, yet a sexual encounter or relationship between the two never occurred. There exists a strong element of Don Juan as a literary force throughout Cohen’s writing, a force which mirrors the author’s need to conquer his self-felt alienation from his surrounding society. His ability to seduce women is a way for him to compensate for this sentiment: “This is why love is henceforth placed under the sign of Don Juan, subjected to the sexual, to the aesthetic and, finally, to nature reduced to the biological.” (Lewy-Bertaut, p. 332) This sexual paradigm shift is explored in *Belle du Seigneur*; As Ariane is also a lesbian, there is a definite parallel between her and Jane Fillion, which was further explored in the 1988 publication of *Jane Fillion ou la Belle d’un Seigneur* by Nathalie Saint-Phalle. This critical volume will also be used later in this analysis, and the similarity between the two figures is critical to understand. It can be argued that Ariane and Solal’s relationship is a literary recreation of that of Jane and Albert, used to show how marginalized desire manifests in the theatricality of the Western love tradition. “The affair between Albert Cohen and Jane Fillion lasted several years, from the autumn of

1925 to the autumn of 1927.” (Médioni, p. 128) Note that the “affair” is rather a ‘quest’, a mission set forth by Albert Cohen to conquer what is just beyond his grasp—whether it be acculturation, or amorous connection. An interview with Jane Fillion revealed that: “Albert Cohen never loved anyone but Albert Cohen,” said Jane. So, yes, he loved himself tenderly. He was very concerned about his reputation. But as for loving someone, what I call loving, with a gift of self and being ready to sacrifice, I don’t believe it...” (Médioni, p. 128) In essence, the ‘quest’ was not one of love, but rather one around the idea of love, propelled by an internal mission to conquer the unconquerable. The connection with Jane Fillion eventually ended, and her belief in Albert Cohen’s inability to remain in a steadfast, love-focused relationship was soon reaffirmed. Albert Cohen married for a second time in 1931 to Marianne Gross, this time a Jewish woman, from whom he soon divorced. Along with Jane, Marianne holds an important place in *Belle du Seigneur*. Jane and Marianne represent this elusive idea of a relationship, also with an echo to the loss of Elisabeth, which remains just beyond Albert Cohen’s grasp.

Eventually, in 1943, he married for the third and final time to Bella Berkowich, with whom he lived for many years. She was another Jew, and he was married to her for the longest of this three wives. “Did Albert marry Bella for love? Bella is not beautiful, but she is a gentle and loving woman. She is for Albert the ideal companion, an efficient secretary and a docile servant. In fact, he says that she is ‘the perfect Jewish wife.’” (Medioni, p. 216) Albert Cohen created most of *Belle du Seigneur* during his marriage to Bella; he dictated it and she wrote it. Alongside the

creation of his crowning literary achievement, he continued with his career, which consisted of being a legal advisor to the Intergovernmental Committee for Refugees, which included France, the United Kingdom, and the United States. He was responsible for drafting the international agreement of October 15, 1946, on the status and protection of refugees. During World War Two, he spent a few years in exile in England. Afterwards, he returned to Geneva and served as director of one of the specialized agencies of the United Nations. Despite various political engagements with Israel, he refused to take up the post of Israeli ambassador in order to pursue his literary activity.

The reoccurring theme of a personal quest presents itself throughout Albert Cohen's biography; his personal relationships, political engagements, and romanesque approach to writing are all interconnected, including his ambiguous perspective on Jewish nationalism: "Very quickly he understands that in the 1930s, the most urgent problem is to fight against anti-Semitism which threatens the very survival of the Jews in Europe. The modalities of the creation of Israel did not reassure him: the danger that the country would become a warlike nation, like all nations, was real; even before the birth of the new state (which he could only rejoice about because 'a state is necessary'), Cohen understood that it would be the cause of endless conflicts. He will remain of the same opinion until his death..." (Jaton, pp. 22-23) Given that Albert Cohen had no formal Jewish education, challenged Judaism through secular thinking and engagement with mainstream Swiss culture, and was married to a Gentile, it is understandable that the forces of Zionism did not

resonate with Albert Cohen enough for him to move to Israel. He had already intentionally become acculturated to Francophone Europe during his youth, struggling to find a source of meaning in his early life, so adopting the newly created Zionist culture was not a priority for him. These skeptical approaches to Jewish nationalism are therefore interwoven with Jewish perceptions of masculinity, and Albert Cohen's response to the imposition of a traditional image. In essence, as he was not a 'classic, religious, masculine figure', his presentation of desire in his writing reinforces his opposition to traditional Jewish culture, in favor of a more acculturated place in France: "Traditional Judaism, it would seem, is at the root of the masochism of the Jewish male: violation of the law becomes the source of perverse pleasure. We have already observed how this motif of passivity and even masochism figured importantly in the Hebrew literature of the turn of the century as a symbol of the impotence of the Eastern European Jews." (Biale, p. 206) Above all, Albert Cohen wanted to rise above this "impotence" of his Jewish brothers. By creating his own place in society, forging his own success and cultural adaptation both personally and professionally, he did not blindly follow a Zionist path, nor any other supposed societal norms. Moreover, he had not been directly impacted by the Holocaust, as he sought refuge in England, and therefore did not personally experience any atrocities of war, which spared him from the direct trauma of living in Occupied Europe, and a subsequent 'need' to turn to Zionism: "If all his life, and by all his will, Albert Cohen has tended towards Israel, his love and loyalty have always remained undivided on the side of the ghettos and the 'hard workers' they produced. He is their megaphone."

(Blot and Michel, p. 128) It can be argued that witnessing the hard work of his parents as immigrants to Marseille, Albert Cohen did not want to disassociate himself from the potential success of Jewish existence in the diaspora. Had Albert Cohen suffered more directly from the Holocaust or an inability to acculturate into mainstream European society, it is possible his sentiments of Zionism would have been stronger. These historical factors from his own personal life are key in shaping his perceptions of Jewish nationalism. In fact, over the course of his novels, Albert Cohen never makes direct reference to the Holocaust or any specific historic event that impacts the Jews. For him, Judaism serves as an eternal force that extends beyond any specific historical event—of which there were many over the course of his lifetime.

In an interview conducted by Jacques Chancel, the following was asked of Albert Cohen: “J.C. Why have you never been to Israel?—A.C. Circumstances worked against me. As long as I had to earn my living, in international organizations... the trip was not an option. When finally I was able to regain some freedom, my health failed and prevented me from doing so.” (Cohen and Chancel, pp. 44-45) Therefore, even though Albert Cohen never actually went to Israel, one may argue that if given the opportunity, he would have visited there. But it must be remembered that he was critical of Israel, and his view of Jewish nationalism was not synonymous with Zionism. “Albert Cohen defined himself as a ‘Judean tree in the French forest,’ being fully aware of his Jewish singularity in the French literary landscape, but also of the duality that arises from his unconditional love for the

people of Israel and his indissoluble bond with France and its language.” (Korine-Shafir, p. 197) Albert Cohen worked to intentionally forge his own place in the ‘French forest’, and once established there, he did not want to leave. The strength of the author’s desire to make a place for himself, aware of his singularity as a Jew in his surrounding culture, can be mirrored in his desire for women and to overcome the challenge in obtaining them. His quest for Jane, for example, reflects this strong, inner will. And moreover, the characters in his novels reflect this duality of identity, caught between tradition and modernity, Jewish and Gentile, mainstream and marginalized.

In the same interview with Jacques Chancel, Albert Cohen was asked if the characters in his novels were inspired by people he knew in his own life: “J.C.: Are the characters in *Belle du Seigneur* really from your imagination? —A.C.: No, all my characters are invented. If a few of them recognized themselves, it was by chance.” (Cohen and Chancel, p. 54) One must be very critical of this claim by the author, given that many of the depictions of the characters in his novels have direct similarities to people once part of his entourage. In his phrasing of “if a few of them recognized each other”, a direct reference can be inferred to Jane and Ariane. If Albert Cohen was so enamored by women, why would there be such an overt presentation of same-sex desire in *Belle du Seigneur*? And why would it be given such a strong sense of spiritual legitimacy? Later in the same interview, Albert Cohen briefly commented on his own relationship with homosexuality: “J.C.: You are eighty-five years old, and what has changed? —A.C.: For the moment, nothing, you are right. I am always

ready to love, ready for the forbidden women. I love them! I love them! If there is one man who will never turn to homosexuality, it is me...” (Cohen and Chancel, p. 60) In this passage, it is clear that Albert Cohen has an attraction for the “forbidden”—in essence, intermarriage between a Jew and a Gentile, an occurrence which he personally experienced. Despite that he claims he will “never turn to homosexuality”, meaning he has no desire for a same-sex experience himself, that does not mean he is not intrigued by homosexuality. Besides the extract from this interview, Albert Cohen says extremely little on the matter. His enduring quest to seduce Jane Fillion for two years speaks volumes on his attempt to ‘convert a homosexual’, and that what may be ‘forbidden’ by traditional cultural norms proves erotic to the author. Even though he was married to two Jewish women, one divorced and then the other which proved to be long-lasting, his initial marriage was to a Gentile, that ended in tragedy. *Belle du Seigneur* is a massive text of over a thousand pages, and a substantial portion is dedicated to the interfaith relationship of Ariane and Solal. The volume of text alone speaks to the author’s fascination of the topic, and the homosexual element is an undeniable aspect of the couple’s marginality. It can be argued that Solal’s conquest of Ariane is a personification of Albert Cohen’s fantasy of seducing Jane Fillion and having sexual relations with her. But the reality is far more complex. It is the conflation of various women he knew and a reckoning with identity. Once in a recorded interview in the 1970s, when asked about what sparks a romantic love, Albert Cohen said: “As the starting point of a love, the beginning is always sexual. And then, thank God, comes something else—now if she or he deserves it, then that’s

another thing.” (Cohen) The apparent errant nature of same-sex desire proves interesting to Albert Cohen, and the sexual aspect to the beginning of any love is an innate component of this type of connection.

One must understand the significance of the names Ariane and Solal to comprehend the role of the revealing forces of these characters. The Latinized form of the Greek Αριάδνη, Ariane is a female name that means ‘most Holy’. In Greek mythology, Ariane was the daughter of King Minos and associated with labyrinths and mazes. The connection to holiness gives an intense spiritual element to the name, which explains Albert Cohen’s attraction to it. Moreover, the character Ariane is a figure that is searching for meaning, seeking to escape from the metaphorical labyrinth of her life. Similarly to Solal, she is constantly oscillating between acceptance and marginalization, tradition and modernity, heterosexuality and homosexuality. On an equally elevated level of spirituality, Solal, סולל, a Hebrew male name, means ‘pathfinder’ or ‘trailblazer’. Albert Cohen is systematic in his choice of names for his characters, and it can be argued that his combination of Ariane and Solal together is destined to reveal a hidden aspect of spirituality within the Abrahamic tradition from the choice of names alone. As Solal, the ‘trailblazer’, encounters and pursues Ariane, she who is ‘most Holy’, Albert Cohen’s creativity makes his reader reflect on the Divine Providence he suggests in his novels. While Albert Cohen could have chosen another Hebrew name for his character Ariane, the choice to juxtapose a Hebrew and Greek name, extensions of two individuals from

different origins, suggests a spirituality that transcends beyond religions, nationalities, or other cultural constructs.

The main argument explored in this dissertation is that Ariane and Solal are together because each of them are marginalized by society in their own ways. Ariane—who is perhaps modeled after Jane Fillion—is a lesbian, Protestant, Swiss woman, who deeply loved a woman in her past who tragically passed away. Feeling marginalized by her own sexuality, Ariane feels that a heteronormative marriage will solve her inner, conflicting feelings. However, her marriage to Adrien Deume does the opposite. Feeling stifled in her marriage, she meets Solal, who is more clearly modeled after Albert Cohen. Like the author, Solal, a Greek Jew seeking to become acculturated into Francophone Europe, has his own conflicting feelings of marginalization and engagement with society. Moreover, the choice of the Hebrew name ‘Solal’ for the characterization of Albert Cohen further solidifies this similarity. Recognizing this marginality within each other, they seek to find normalcy in a heteronormative relationship, which is prolonged throughout *Belle du Seigneur*. While this part of the novel is what is fictionalized, the premise for the plot and characters is inspired from Albert Cohen’s own personal life. Moreover, Albert Cohen’s subtle interest in homosexuality could in fact reveal a latent homosexuality within himself, which is demonstrated at a moment in the narrative by Solal. The overarching similarities between Albert Cohen’s biography and a Don Juan romanesque narrative continue throughout the novel, which depict a similar need on the author’s behalf to find meaning and seize his surroundings as a marginalized Jew.

Ultimately, these are the notions of marginalized desire which shape this study. The sexual aspect of Ariane and Solal's relationship reveals greater understanding about Albert Cohen's response to heteronormative culture at the time, and that the sexualization of homosexuality is only the beginning: "Same-sex relationships are not merely sexual. They are just like opposite-sex relationships. They can be loving, or not; faithful, or not; nurturing, or not. They mix love and passion together." (Michaelson, p. 122) When Ariane and Solal try to perpetuate their relationship because they think it is the answer to their states of marginalization and uncertainty, the results are catastrophic, leading to them taking their own lives at the end of the novel. The classic literary topos of suicide in the context of marginalized romance leads one to believe that the sociocultural contexts surrounding Ariane and Solal proved to be an overbearing force on their lives from which they could not escape.

While the primary text of interest in this analysis is *Belle du Seigneur*, it is part of a tetralogy, of which each text is essentially part of a single narrative. In chronological order they are: *Solal*, *Mangeclous*, *Belle du Seigneur*, and *Les Valeureux*. In fact, *Les Valeureux* was initially part of *Belle du Seigneur*, but the publisher Gallimard told Albert Cohen that the text was too long, and part of it had to be removed. *Les Valeureux* essentially supplements the narrative of Solal's family, and *Solal* and *Mangeclous* further the characterization of Solal. Albert Cohen's autobiographical texts are *Le Livre de ma mère* and *Ô Vous, frères humains*, which speak of his relationship to his mother and the anti-Semitic attack he underwent as a child. While these form keys to understanding to the author's background, the

narrative of *Belle du Seigneur* is the primary work that presents the author's relationship to marginalized desire. The author's *Paroles juives* and *Carnets* describe his attachments to Judaism and perceptions of God, which are used at times throughout the analysis to better understand passages of *Belle du Seigneur*. The author also produced a play in his lifetime, *Ézéchiel*, a theatrical interpretation of anti-Semitism which would be further solidified in his publication of *Ô Vous, frères humains*. Given the various forms of Albert Cohen's writing, all of his works carry a common theme of personal quest and understanding the Eternal: "Despite their diversity, the texts [of Cohen] we have can be considered as the different stages of a stubborn search for the absolute." (Schaffner, p. 10) Through his writing, this inner quest resulted in *Belle du Seigneur* being awarded the *Grand Prix du roman de l'Académie française* in 1968, and was entered into the *Bibliothèque de la Pléiade*, affirming its place as a modernist French classic novel.

Albert Cohen's novels are inherently modernist works, which reflect the writing style and literary trends of the 20th century French canon. While unique in their presentation and combination of themes, similarities can be seen when compared to other works, such as *À la recherche du temps perdu* by Marcel Proust. This novel is in seven volumes, which stem from the genesis of the novel as a literary genre in the previous century; *Belle du Seigneur*, and Albert Cohen's tetralogy as a whole, reflects a similarly lengthy exploration of themes, including marginality through same-sex interest, through a verbose use of language. Moreover, a comparison can be made to the themes presented in *Manifeste du surréalisme* by André Breton. Also a

classic text of this period, it solidifies several themes that were present to the 20th century writer, notably in the wake of the World Wars. Among these themes were non-conformism, existentialism, and esoterism, all of which are addressed throughout Cohen's works in his relationship to marginality. The notion of marginality is also one that was explored by many other 20th century texts, such as *Le Deuxième Sexe* by Simone de Beauvoir. This work begins by presenting an existentialist viewpoint on the marginality of women, from which a parallel is drawn among other marginalized groups, including the Jews, for example. It is possible that these works, along with literary and cultural trends of the time, each influenced Albert Cohen's novels in their own way, contributing to the modernist canon. According to Malamud, Modernism is clearly distinguished from any other literary period by the extent to which it depicts confusion, or makes the reader search for an elusive strand of intelligibility in the face of chaos.<sup>3</sup> While the author may have not been directly scarred by the atrocities of the two World Wars, the introspection and existentialism prevalent in the wake surrounding the wars manages to infiltrate into Albert Cohen's writing. As Albert Cohen is seeking normalcy in his marginalized state as a European Jew, and reckoning with inner notions of conquest for women and sexual desire, the modernist tradition deconstructs these crises of identity and place through various literary strategies. A primary technique in *Belle du Seigneur* is stream-of-consciousness, though which the author manages to portray the deepest and most intimate sentiments of his characters. This style of writing serves as: "a primal urge, or a cathartic

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<sup>3</sup> Malamud, Randy. *The Language of Modernism*. UMI Research Press, 1989.

compulsion, [through which] modern artists begin to find their own ways among the morass of modernity by breaking down the inherited tradition into a rubble of fragments.” (Malamud, p. 10) Given that Albert Cohen dares to address the themes of marginalized desire through his own self-personification in *Belle du Seigneur*, the nature of the modernist novel fits well into what the author tries to express. According to Malamud, writers began to seize this control of language in the early twentieth century, in order to make the realm of their own imaginations an omnipotent seat of control for the literary culture of the age. “Modernism, thus, takes as its fundamental basis the capability to write what is not understood—that is, to write beyond what is understood, in a language that transcends the inadequate language at hand.” (Malamud, pp. 6-7) Since same-sex and interfaith interest was essentially beyond the commonly intelligible standard of the period, the imaginative application of language was needed for Albert Cohen to give spiritual legitimacy to what he saw within these supposedly errant desires. While love and religion are ancient themes that have been explored throughout the history of literature, the modernist tradition of which Albert Cohen takes part enables an innovative presentation of concepts, leading one to argue that a hidden spirituality can be found within marginalized same-sex and interfaith desire. *Belle du Seigneur* constantly illustrates the presence of feminine traits in men and masculine traits in women, which enables the reader to see the binary constructions of sexuality that culture has historically created, and how excessive adherence to intelligible mainstream norms can be self-destructive. “[Taking] the novel from this point of view, Cohen probably enters by pure chance

into the field of reflections on gender that will flourish after 1968, and shows that the too clear boundaries between the sexes disappear as soon as one enters more deeply into the psychology of each one.” (Jaton, p. 54) When applied next to themes of Abrahamic spirituality, Albert Cohen is able to create an idealized, pluralistic view of a Judaism that affirms the marginalized, and does not immediately stop and contradict its affirming promise of spiritual righteousness when same-sex or interfaith desire presents itself. To this effect, in the modernist tradition: “Language becomes questioned, challenged, dismissed, vilified, reshaped, when it is unable to say all it must for the modern age.” (Malamud, p. 16) The application of language which in turn creates the story of Albert Cohen is what generates this study.

As Albert Cohen said himself: “One must have a tenderness of pity for his neighbor. I believe this to be true. And with perhaps an excessive pride, I wanted to leave what I believe to be a true gift to those who will come after me.”<sup>4</sup> Understanding this tenderness of pity is at the root of this dissertation, the analysis of which will occur across four chapters. The first chapter will analyze the impact of immigration in Albert Cohen’s works, and how his view of the French culture was shaped as an immigrant. This is a primal pillar in understanding the broader workings of desire throughout his literary corpus, as it is a fundamental component of his broader experience of marginalization. The second chapter investigates Albert Cohen’s contemporary rewriting of Jewish tradition and desire. Stemming from his own life experiences, his interpretation of the Hebrew Bible and various passages

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<sup>4</sup> Médioni, Franck. *Albert Cohen*. Éditions Gallimard, 2007.

referenced in his novels will be analyzed as to how they depict a view of Jewish traditions relative to his place and time. This interpretation leads to the creation of the paradox of the early twentieth century French-Jew, and Cohen's struggle to simultaneously accept both French and Jewish culture. In this quest to establish a sense of identity, the author manages to present the intervention of Divine Providence masked by tradition. In essence, since the Jewish tradition states that every person is created in God's image, all desires must be, by extension, a product of this creation. The third chapter will analyze Albert Cohen's transformed understanding of marginalized desire from transgression to acceptance. The apparent validity in French societal heteronormativity of the 1930s will be discussed, and to what extent Albert Cohen is cognizant of this trend. Through the construction of Ariane and Solal, a personification of his own life experiences, he presents an acknowledgement that challenges the idea that default heteronormativity is synonymous with spiritual righteousness. This acknowledgment leads to the depictions of solitude and compatibility in a romanticized vision. The overarching heteronormative expectations within French society of the period led the characters of Albert Cohen's novels to believe they were morally safe or deeply in love, while it was in fact only an illusion. These expectations lead to the understanding of oneself through same-sex affirmation. Stemming from the previous realizations of a false heteronormative narrative and romanticized views of couple hood, the author suggests that one's connection to their true innate passions is the only way to truly understand the Almighty within them. As a result, this transformed understanding of desire from transgression to acceptance

seeks to affirm the righteousness among all couples, and to propose that homosexual and interfaith unions can in fact have the same spiritual righteousness as commonly accepted unions. The fourth chapter will present a pedagogical application of the findings from the previous chapters, and explain how they can be made accessible in a French course in a secondary or post-secondary educational context. Since Albert Cohen wanted to leave what he believed to be “a true gift to those who will come after”<sup>5</sup> him, this chapter will demonstrate how passages from *Belle du Seigneur* can be used to promote a meaningful learning experience of the French language and culture through this specific work of literature. Students will understand Albert Cohen’s biography and novel as a privileged, noteworthy example of the French language, literature, and culture. Additionally, students will be able to make connections from the text and expand their own linguistic competency and cultural awareness from the presented unit of study.

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<sup>5</sup> Médioni, Franck. *Albert Cohen*. Éditions Gallimard, 2007.

## Chapter 1: Albert Cohen's primal pillar of marginalized desire: an immigrant's vision

When discussing the role of marginalized desire in the works of Albert Cohen, it must be recognized that a primal pillar of Cohen's identity is that of an immigrant, thus shaping his outlook on the French culture. In order to understand the more niche aspects of marginalized desire within the identities of Judaism and same-sex attraction, Cohen's fundamental perspective is from that of a supposed outsider, a foreigner looking into the French culture, and fully aware of his foreignness. While he moved with his parents from Corfu to Marseille at the age of five, he was very aware that France was his adopted home, and was reminded of this fact throughout his life, particularly in his formative years. It must be remembered that: "Albert Cohen defined himself as a 'Judean tree in the French forest,' being fully aware of his Jewish singularity in the French literary landscape, but also of the duality that arises from his unconditional love for the people of Israel and his indissoluble bond with France and its language." (Korine-Shafir, p. 197) This hybridity, often apparent as an oscillation between both tradition and modernity, and an attachment to either French or Jewish culture at the same time, is a reoccurring theme throughout the works of Albert Cohen, all of which stem from this primal pillar of marginality. Throughout his identity formation as a child and young adult, he sought to become as culturally French as possible, and thus become an 'insider', notably through a self-education of the French literary classics. This cultural integration is often a crucial element in the

lives of an immigrant: “Being recognized as, and coming to feel like, an ‘insider’ is a central element in the process of integration. Issues of national identity loom particularly large for the second generation.” (Alba and Foner, p. 197) Since Albert Cohen immigrated at the age of five, he was officially a first-generation immigrant, yet his early age lent itself to a different experience than that of an adult, therefore making the desire of becoming an ‘insider’ more feasible.

While most of this study explores marginalized desire within *Belle du Seigneur*, a more prominent presentation of issues related to immigration are found within *Solal*, his first novel. This text serves as a predecessor to *Belle du Seigneur*, as it establishes Cohen’s main characters that continue to develop through his fictional works, all of which fit together as a relatively continuous arc. Moreover, *Solal* was published in 1930, 38 years prior to that of *Belle du Seigneur*. Given that it was written at the beginning of Cohen’s literary career and earlier in his life, it is understandable that notions regarding immigration are more present, as these themes were more recent in the author’s own life. Towards the beginning of *Solal*, the author is introduced to Solal, the characterized form of Albert Cohen, and several of his relatives, who are considering leaving Corfu, therefore immigrating to France. Prior to the family’s immigration, there is a discussion among Solal’s relatives: Salomon, Saltiel, and Mattathias:

“—Les Jésuites donc qui ont une police terrible, continua l’inventif petit oncle, quand ils voient un de notre race qui va faire fortune en Argentine, vite ils donnent les ordres et ils te l’envoient au Spitzberg ! Et justement il n’y avait que des Juifs dans ce bateau qui allait au Spitzberg. —Nous sommes une multitude, dit gravement Mattathias. —Plus nombreux que les sauterelles et que les petits grains au désert ! ajouta Salomon, rayonnant de timide fierté.” (Cohen, p. 38)

.....  
““The Jesuits, therefore, who have a terrible police force,” continued the inventive little uncle, “when they see one of our race who is going to make a fortune in Argentina, they quickly give the orders and send him to Spitzbergen! And there were only Jews on that ship going to Spitzbergen. “We are a multitude,” said Mattathias gravely. “More numerous than the locusts and the small grains in the desert!” added Salomon, beaming with shy pride.” (Cohen, p. 38)

It must be noted that at the end of the 19th century, many Jews were discussing leaving Corfu, due to increasing anti-Semitism, political instability, and a worsening economic landscape. “The political instability and economic crisis on the island forced many Jews into exile. Many families left Corfu and went into exile in Egypt, Italy, the United States, England, and France. In the 19th century, the Jewish community of Corfu numbered about six thousand members. In 1940, there were fewer than two thousand left.” (Medioni, pp. 30-31) These figures therefore demonstrate that the Cohens were not alone in their need to immigrate to another country, and therefore leave Corfu behind in the search of a better life. As seen in the aforementioned passage, Solal’s uncle Salomon presents an imagined situation of Jewish exile as a result of external pressure. While he is “inventif” or “inventive”, it reflects the socio-political climate of the island at the time, suggesting that the Jesuits, among other invasive groups, forced the Jews out of their settlements. In the

aforementioned passage, two destinations are referenced: Spitzbergen and Argentina. Both represent distant and unknown lands; Spitzbergen as a land of the most remote exile, and Argentina as a new land of economic promise and success for Europeans, much like the United States. But more importantly, when the invaders, in this case the Jesuits, notice Jewish prosperity in regions populated by Jews, they continue to invade, sending them into further distant lands, whether these lands propose the idea of a prosperous future or not. The Jews are ultimately portrayed to be a nomadic people, reflecting a long tradition over the course of Jewish history. Uncle Salomon further describes that “il n’y avait que des Juifs dans ce bateau”, or “there were only Jews on that ship”, suggesting that a Jewish mass exodus is a looming reality for the Jews of Corfu, only reinforced by Mattathias’ comment that “Nous sommes une multitude”, or “We are a multitude”. Finally, Salomon’s reference to the Passover story, suggesting that the Jews are “Plus nombreux que les sauterelles”, or “More numerous than the locusts”, references the ultimate Exodus of the Jewish people, the one from their Biblical enslavement in Egypt. This passage of Solal is an instance that demonstrates the beginning of Albert Cohen’s style as a writer, one who mixes both the French and Jewish culture, coming to terms with the marginalization of immigration, in order to forge his place in his adoptive European home: “This ideology, which contemporary scholars have come to refer to as Franco-Judaism, was rooted in a synthesis of traditional Jewish religious concepts, such as messianism and the idea of the Jews as a ‘light unto the nations’, with French republican and nationalist ideals.” (Malinovich, p. 18) This synthesis of Jewish traditions continue to

manifest throughout the corpus of Albert Cohen, which stems from this primal pillar of identity as an immigrant. The solidification of style continues to be explored throughout *Solal*, as the forging of a new, hybrid identity as an immigrant weighs on the young Cohen: “It is between the singular and the plural that the form created by Albert Cohen is born, which expresses the conflict of the epic and the novel, of the individual and the group. ... Cohen’s genius is to have invented this conflict of forms to express the intimate conflict of the Jew in the West, but also, through him, that of modern man.” (Blot and Michel, pp. 133-134) This inner “conflict of forms” is a hallmark of Cohen’s writing, which stems from the initial marginalization of being an immigrant. Yet before *Solal* makes reference to the Cohen’s own immigration, the dialogue among *Solal*’s relatives continues with the following:

“je ne crois pas que ce Spitzberg soit un vrai pays du monde. ... Je ne sais plus où était ce Spitzberg et en fin de compte cela m’est indifférent car Dieu est partout.” (Cohen, pp. 38, 40)

.....  
 “I do not believe that this Spitsbergen is a real country of the world. ... I no longer know where this Spitsbergen was and in the end I don’t care because God is everywhere.” (Cohen, pp. 38, 40)

As said by *Solal*’s uncle Salomon, there exists a skepticism around the legitimacy of Spitsbergen as a real place. In this case, Spitzbergen chiefly refers to an idea—a distant land of escape, which ultimately materialized to be France for the Cohens. It must also be noted that Salomon (and also Saltiel) represent a conservative, traditional Jewish voice throughout Cohen’s novels, to whom *Solal*/Cohen responds at the crossroads of tradition and modernity. It is therefore

understandable that Salomon, among Solal's other relatives, are more skeptical when presented with the need to leave Corfu. Additionally, continuing on this conservative, and also spiritual, proclamation, Salomon is convinced that "Dieu est partout" or "God is everywhere". Therefore, despite any hesitance or skepticism that accompanies his departure from Corfu in search of Spitsbergen, he is comforted in the overarching Biblical tradition of God's omnipotence, convinced that regardless of where the family goes, they will be watched and protected by God. "To remain a foreigner and a Jew, even in the land of Israel, is Saltiel's paradoxical dream. This is not, however, Cohen's solution to the problem, as he, for unclear reasons, had never been to Israel." (Smith, pp. 20-21) Later in life, Cohen was offered the position of Swiss Ambassador to Israel, which he declined in order to pursue his literary career. However, it is likely that this decision was more nuanced, given his skepticism towards the feasible success of Israel as an independent nation in its early years, and also how hard he had consciously worked to become culturally part of Francophone Europe, forging a place for himself in the diaspora as a 'Judean tree in the French forest'. Solal/Cohen therefore did not want to remain distinctly foreign, or rather Jewish, compared to Salomon and Saltiel, his older and more conservative counterparts. This reckoning of identity in the wake of immigration is therefore integral to Cohen's identity formation, and therefore constructing his own desire in response to marginalization.

Before the Cohens' immigration to France, another aspect of the impending exile continues with Saltiel, who says:

“Et qui souffrait de ne pas être en Argentine ? Cent cinquante victimes juives de l’oppression et de l’intolérance religieuse !” (Cohen, p. 40)

.....  
“And who suffered for not being in Argentina? One hundred and fifty Jewish victims of oppression and religious intolerance!” (Cohen, p. 40)

As aforementioned, Argentina is referred to as an idyllic place that offers promise for Jewish settlers. Saltiel is cognizant that those who did not emigrate, whether from Corfu or other Jewish settlements throughout history, often suffered catastrophic consequences. “When people go into exile to flee a ‘pogromizing’ country, as was the case for A. Cohen’s parents fleeing Corfu at the end of the century, the history and culture to which they sail are largely idealized.” (Lewy-Bertaut, pp. 73-74) This idealization then continued to manifest for France, once it was decided that it would become their new home:

“Donc nous partons aujourd’hui. Nous irons en France et nous chercherons l’école. Dans un an, ton père aura oublié et pardonnera et tu retourneras à Céphalonie et nous verrons et Dieu est grand. Voilà comme je suis.” (Cohen, p. 103)

.....  
“So we are leaving today. We will go to France and look for school. In a year, your father will have forgotten and forgiven and you will return to Cephalonia and we will see and God is great. This is how I am.” (Cohen, p. 103)

Even once it had been decided that the Cohens—or the family at large, represented as ‘Les Valeureux’—were going to France, uncle Saltiel still clung to the prospect that they would return to their familiar island of Corfu. While Marseille represented a relatively close, Mediterranean city, already a city full of immigrants, radiating the presence of the French Empire throughout the region, it proved to be a feasible destination for the family, and entry point into France. “Marco Coen, his

wife, and his son Albert, five years old in 1900, take the boat. In the direction of Marseille and France, land of welcome for many immigrants, homeland of human rights, but also a country where the Dreyfus affair is raging.” (Médioni, p. 31)

The national ideology of France, a country of universalist principles and equality since the French Revolution, attracted many immigrants. While also coming to grips with the inclusion of Jews in the culture in the wake of the Dreyfus affair, it proved to be more difficult for Saltiel than Solal/Cohen, who was much younger:

“Croyant se rendre à Paris, il prit, les larmes aux yeux, le train qui allait à Marseille.” (Cohen, p. 104)

.....  
“Believing he was going to Paris, he took, with tears in his eyes, the train to Marseille.” (Cohen, p. 104)

It is understandable that Saltiel would express remorse in the initial moments of this journey as an immigrant. While Jewish immigration is already marginalized in nature, the presence of Greek Jews in Marseille was even more isolating, since most of the Jewish immigrants to the city at the time were from Eastern Europe. Therefore, the cultural difference between Ashkenazim and Sephardim presents itself within this immigrant context, making the Cohens truly marginalized. While Cohen was cognizant of his Jewish origins, the marginalization from the Greek and Sephardic community at an early age therefore led to a more pluralistic depiction of Judaism in his works, rather than one that was intensely focused on one branch or community: “Looking at Cohen’s formative years, nothing predisposed him to become a leading figure in ‘Sephardic literature’. The Cohen family arrived in Marseilles in a context

where Jewish immigration was predominantly Ashkenazi (Russians and Poles) and directed towards Paris (even though there was, in Marseille and elsewhere, a marginal immigration from the Mediterranean region); they did not integrate into any kind of ‘community’... Everything suggests that the writer’s childhood was that of many immigrants of the Third Republic.” (Zard, p. 267) It is therefore essential to remember this context while continuing to read Cohen’s novels, as they are, after all, the voice of Cohen/Solal, rather than Saltiel. The young, impressionable Cohen was particularly observant that the currently acculturated French Jews: “did not understand the mentality of these newcomers; they despised their ‘jargon’, the Polish-Russian Yiddish; their customs and their clothes shocked them. ... [Wasn’t] the important thing to ‘assimilate’ them as quickly as possible so that, outwardly at least, nothing distinguishes them?” (Philippe, p. 222) Given his young, impressionable age, it is understandable that Cohen wanted to acculturate himself more quickly to the surrounding, mainstream culture, even at the expense of the pious traditions of his ancestors. Remembering that this attempt to acculturate, or even survive, given the respective perspectives of Solal and Saltiel, the wake of the Dreyfus affair and its ensuing anti-Semitism did not help: “... everything related to the affair was further envenomed by a new and virulent form of anti-Semitism that had surged in France since the 1880s. Going beyond the traditional anti-Jewish teachings of Christian churches... it [suggested] that Jews were an inferior and degenerate race that must be extruded from French life.” (Begley, p. 48) This anti-Semitism proved traumatic at times for Cohen as a child, and once he reached the age of independence, he decided

to leave France for the more neutral, yet still Francophone, Switzerland. While Cohen/Solal still made this decision and was undoubtedly aware of the turbulent reception of foreign Jews at the time, immigration proved to remain more of an isolating experience as a Jew for the traditional characters in his works, like Saltiel, as opposed to Solal, who seeks to become culturally Francophone and further integrate. This dramatic shift in voice presents itself later in the novel, when Solal has grown up and plans to move to Geneva to continue his studies:

“Allons à Genève. Avant de partir, il avait dessiné des moustaches sur un beau portrait d’Arienne. Et voici, il était à Genève.” (Cohen, p. 112)

.....  
“Let’s go to Geneva. Before leaving, he had drawn whiskers on a beautiful portrait of Arianne. And so, he was in Geneva.” (Cohen, p. 112)

In this passage, it is clear that Solal is willing to move forward with his life in Switzerland, now well established in Francophone Europe. He had already met a female lover named “Arienne”, foreshadowing the character “Ariane” to come later, and the relationship that would exponentially deepen in *Belle du Seigneur*. As Arienne is not Jewish, it sets the stage that: “Solal does not frequent Jews and lives surrounded by Westerners. Like his creator.” (Decout, p. 59) This existence “surrounded by Westerners” is the fundamental cultural construction of Cohen-Solal’s psyche and viewpoint on the world. There is a whimsical element to the passage as well, as Solal “avait dessiné des moustaches” or “had drawn whiskers” on Arienne’s portrait. This action suggests a latent same-sex desire to be discussed later in this study, which the openness of Geneva, and Francophone Europe at large, presents to

Solal—an openness for personal freedom and sexual liberty that would not be possible in the old, traditional world of Corfu. “From the beginning of *Solal*, Solal’s desire to escape his origins by going to the West is clear. ... When Solal moves to France, the Child-King takes on the traits of a seductive foreigner.” (Kelly, p. 154) This seduction of Arienne is one aspect of Cohen-Solal’s desire to become acculturated into Francophone Europe, a result of marginalization from his status as an immigrant. From the perspective of Arienne, who, generally speaking, reflects the mainstream, Protestant, Swiss culture, it can be said that: “The extent of intergroup social relations, it seems reasonable to say, is thus a reflection of the acceptability of immigrant-origin individuals to the native majority.” (Alba and Foner, p. 207) Arienne therefore reflects a new generation of more progressive thinking Europeans, in contrast to anti-Semitic trends at the time, depicting a willingness to explore a relationship with a Jewish ‘foreigner.’

Not only does Solal seek to become subtly acculturated, but he proclaims it with great emphasis at a later point in the novel:

“Un grand citoyen, un bon coeur et vive Genève !” (Cohen, p. 115)

.....  
 “A great citizen, a good heart, and long live Geneva!” (Cohen, p. 115)

This proclamation, with regard to himself, can be viewed as an over-compensation of his immigrant identity. A newly forged sense of self manifests through the pursuit of a relationship just beyond his grasp, explored in the later chapters, which first takes shape in a nationalistic pride and admiration for his newly adopted city. Such a

proclamation can be viewed as strange, one that only a foreigner would adopt in a sort of over-compensation for any inferior sentiments of alterity: “Cohen’s hero is a Jew: he does not recite a learned jargon, but prophesies with all his singularity as a foreigner.” (Decout, p. 86) In the aforementioned passage, Solal’s voice only hints at Jewishness by its eagerness to become acculturated, drastically differing from that of Saltiel who clings to Biblical references and traditional Jewish culture. This dichotomy of voices, which presents itself over the course of Cohen’s novels, is at the root of exploring the contemporary identity of the French Jew, an identity which at its roots is one of being marginalized: “... in Cohen, thanks to the Biblical vector, a form of mythical exploration of a ‘Judeo-French’ or at least ‘Judeo-Western’ psyche.” (Decout, p. 149) For Cohen, this “mythical exploration” manifests in the form of desire—a desire to escape his origins which then sets the stage for giving the same spiritual legitimacy to other forms of marginalized desire. “Thus, Cohen universalizes the Jewish experience in Europe in a highly innovative manner: through a mythical and intertextual resonance associated with the alienations of passion.” (Kelly, p. 150) These “alienations of passion” ultimately lead to Albert Cohen giving spiritual legitimacy to same-sex and interfaith relationships, a spiritual capacity which is in fact forged from his need to adopt a new culture, conscious of his presence as an outsider.

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## Chapter 2: Albert Cohen's insight on Jewish tradition and desire: a contemporary rewriting

Over the course of history, Jewish traditions have provided a moral compass on which Jews were expected to live their lives, dictating the accepted standards for all aspects of life. It is therefore inevitable that these traditions, and perceptions of them, have evolved in parallel to historic events and the understanding of Jews in relation to their surroundings. While the evolution of Jewish integration into host communities has no clear starting point, this concept is notably reflected the literary representations and philosophies of nineteenth century Haskalah thinkers, foreshadowing the gradual integration of Jewish civilization in western Europe, and even its possible disappearance. In the following century in France, Albert Cohen was similarly confronted with the realities of acculturation into mainstream European society. "Cohen, it should be remembered, was born in 1895. The Dreyfus Affair had just broken out... It modulated his destiny." (Blot, pp. 27-28) Having endured anti-Semitism as a child and witnessed firsthand the sociopolitical influences of the Dreyfus Affair, the process of writing his novels created a space for him to refract his own construction of Jewish culture. While Cohen lived most of his life as a secular Jew, his writing provides a strong echo to the timeless and eternal force of Jewish traditions. However, this echo is a cultural fabrication of his own life experiences, impacted by his own affirmations and rejections of traditional Judaism. These experiences result in a literary corpus that reads at times as Biblical exegesis, but in

fact is a cultural product that seeks to create an idealized, pluralistic vision of Judaism and spiritual realities according to Cohen. Moreover, oscillating between tradition and modernity is a recurring theme in Cohen's works. Since his four novels use the same characters, a sense of continuity is established throughout them, as they all convey essentially the same story. This idea will be explored throughout this dissertation, with particular presence in this chapter.

Albert Cohen's novels seek to affirm his own presence in both the Jewish world and that of Francophone Europe, his adopted home. In the first half of the twentieth century, he often struggles to fully accept either one of them, as they appear to often contradict each other. But this struggle leads to the revelations of various personal truths, which hints at hidden affirmations of spirituality within the Jewish tradition. "This permanence, this double anchorage in history and in what goes beyond it, Albert Cohen's work illustrates it masterfully. Through the Jews to whom his gesture is dedicated, he discovered his truth, that is, the human need and claim to which the genre corresponds." (Blot, p. 250) While the contemporary rewriting of Jewish traditions in Cohen's novels may not be evident as realizations made apparent by his time, as they are often presented as spiritual revelations themselves, they inevitably demonstrate the progression of Jewish thinking in this reconciliation of culture and self-acceptance in twentieth century France. With particular attention to desire, Cohen uses Jewish traditions in his favor to legitimize marginalized desire, giving homosexual tendencies the same spiritual legitimacy as heterosexual ones. In essence, Cohen reaffirms the belief that: "The biblical legacy cannot be reduced to the

harsh and repressive structures of patriarchal custom.” (Biale, p. 12) It is through the oppression, and later progression, of his own existence as a Western-European Jew in the twentieth century that this realization could present itself in his writing.

This chapter will analyze Albert Cohen’s contemporary rewriting of Jewish tradition and desire through three related criteria: First, overt references to the Bible and their implications in Cohen’s novels will be presented. As the Torah anchors many Jewish customs and serves as a source of inspiration in Cohen’s texts, direct references to the Hebrew Bible will be analyzed as to how they depict a view of Jewish traditions relative to the author’s era. Next, the paradox of the early 20th century French-Jew will be discussed, and Cohen’s struggle to simultaneously accept both French and Jewish culture. His novels manage to present a synthesis of the two, which the author uses to his advantage in order to create a modernized view of Judaism, which transcends beyond the bounds of the past. Finally, Cohen’s perceived intervention of Divine Providence will be analyzed, as he presents it as masked by tradition. In essence, as the Jewish tradition states every person is created in God’s image; all desires must be, by extension, a product of this creation. Cohen believes this fact is masked by constraints of Jewish traditions which have been constructed over time, which social and literary trends of the era of his writing enabled him to liberate. By consequence, this contemporary rewriting of Jewish tradition and desire establish the framework for Cohen to create a revitalized Judaism, a cultural product of his time.

## 2.1 Overt references to the Bible and their implications

Albert Cohen's writing is rich in allusions to the Bible. A Jewish saying suggests that everything can be found in the Torah, it's just a matter of finding it. While Cohen's style often mirrors the rhythm of Biblical writing, his novels also directly mention the Bible or specific passages from it, which he uses to solidify simultaneously occurring themes in his works. This notion of the Bible as all-encompassing, and therefore filled with hidden possibilities, presents itself in a passage of *Belle du Seigneur*, in which Ariane, the novel's female protagonist, describes a childhood memory she shared with a friend:

“... avec Éliane quand on était petites on a creusé un trou dans le jardin de Tantlérie, c'était une cache, les repères secrets pour la retrouver on les a notés dans une Bible, ...” (Cohen, p. 371)

.....  
“... me and Éliane when we were little we dug a hole in Tantlérie's garden, a secret hidey-hole, we wrote down the instructions showing its location in a Bible...” (Cohen, p. 317) \*Note this is the translation by David Coward.

In this instance, it is no coincidence that a Bible is a tool used to show the location of a hiding spot. Moreover, its location is within “le jardin de Tantlérie”, the garden of Ariane's pious, Protestant aunt. One must remember that Ariane only came into contact with the Jewish faith through Solal, the novel's male protagonist, and beforehand only had a spiritual consciousness through her Protestant family. This suggests the plurality of Biblical teachings, extending beyond the Jewish tradition, and that righteous Christians are equally capable of accessing the Bible and hidden spiritual findings. “The nature of this biblical heritage also needs to be

clarified: does Cohen's text bear witness to an 'impregnation', conscious or not, of texts that have been read and reread, or are these structures that exegetes have found even in the New Testament peculiar to the prophetic word, of which the haunting repetitions would be both the mark and the instrument?" (Audéoud, p. 72) In the aforementioned example, the notes in the Bible leading to the cachette is both "the mark and the instrument" as its very nature as a Bible holds an innate connection to God and truth in the Abrahamic tradition, and is also used to showcase a hidden reality. The passage continues with:

"... on a mis des résolutions écrites à l'envers pour le secret des résolutions de s'élever spirituellement c'était un mot qu'on savait bien parce que Tantlérie le disait souvent, et après on a rouvert la cache pour enterrer le document tragique, ..." (Cohen, p. 371)

.....  
"... we wrote resolutions, we wrote the words backwards so that they were secret, resolutions about going in for spiritual uplift, that was an expression we knew because Tantlérie used it a lot, and afterwards we reopened the hidey-hole to put the tragic letter in..." (Cohen, p. 318)

In order to elevate what may later be perceived as errant from religious norms, Cohen establishes the common humanity among Jews and Christians. Cohen solidifies the universal and affirming origins of the Abrahamic monotheisms, which he uses as a base to forge his own understanding of their innate spirituality: "The religious traditions that spring from the Old Testament, i.e. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, all share the same personal monotheism and believe that God is living and active, thus opening the possibility of a relationship of personal communion." (Jones, Wainwright, and Yarnold, pp. 23-24) With this understanding, the extensive history of

the Deume family in *Belle du Seigneur* demonstrates that Christians do indeed have their own religious righteousness, and any Christian practice was automatically more comprehensible within the early twentieth century European sphere than Jewish ones. Within Cohen, this inner struggle to maintain Jewish culture as one that is marginalized within that of mainstream Europe seeks refuge in the common spirituality of his Christian neighbors. In essence, because Cohen sees spiritual commonalities between the two faiths, he expands upon them in order to feel less isolated in his adoptive lands of France and Switzerland. The fact that Ariane encrypts messages in the Bible strongly suggests that it is a document with hidden realizations, which Cohen demonstrates as capable of reaching Gentiles. It is clear that Ariane is a spiritual being. While she is not Jewish, her spiritual essence prevails her religious identity, and that she was raised with a spiritual consciousnesses. Could this Biblical presence foreshadow an openness to other interpretations elsewhere in Cohen's writing?

References to Christian ideology are not isolated occurrences within Cohen's writing. In *Paroles Juives*, he refers to Christians as brothers of the Jews in WWII:

Des frères en amour Des frères en Christ. ... De cette guerre, la religion juive et la religion chrétienne portent témoignage." (Carnets, pp. 10, 139)

.....  
"Brothers in love Brothers in Christ. ... Of this war the Jewish and Christian religions bear witness." (Carnets, pp. 10, 139)

This reaffirming connection between the Jews and Christians is a necessary part in removing dissonance between the groups, which foreshadows the relationship

of Ariane and Solal. “Cohen’s *Paroles juives*... This first collection is intended to be the work of a young poet with prophetic overtones, writing in a ‘foreign land,’ claiming in free verse inspired by biblical rhythm, the power to awaken his dying people.” (Zard, p. 267) In the post-Dreyfus era, it is necessary for Cohen to reinforce the common humanity and spirituality shared among the Christians and Jews, in a society distant from openly affirming its Jews.

A similar sentiment of collective spirituality continues in the beginning part of *Belle du Seigneur*, when Solal first discovers Ariane:

“– Gloire à Dieu, dit-il, gloire en vérité, car voici celle qui rachète toutes les femmes, voici la première humaine !” (Cohen, p. 51)

.....  
“Glory be to God,” said he, “in truth glory, for here is she who redeemeth all women. Behold the first woman!” (Cohen, p. 37)

The comparison of Ariane to Eve fills the passage with a Biblical energy, suggesting that despite any errant desire she may possess, she is still ultimately a creation of God. Comparing Solal and Ariane to Adam and Eve returns to the origins of humanity; by referencing the original Creation Story, Cohen minimizes the differences between their religions and backgrounds, and focuses on the innate desires of the individuals. While the true, same-sex passions of Ariane and Solal will be discussed later, this anchoring of their respective beings in a Biblical context allows Cohen to legitimize their individuality through religious imagery. “This ‘position apart from the nations’-of which the Pentateuch speaks-is realized in the concept of Israel and its particularism. It is a particularism that conditions

universality.” (Tonaki, p. 147) While the Jewish faith is unique it is interpretation of the Pentateuch, the fact that it “conditions universality” spreads the omnipresence of God’s creation to those of other faith paths. In essence, Cohen’s interpretation of the particularity of the Jewish tradition is manifested into a universal benevolence, serving as the threshold into the desires presented in his works.

At the same time, Cohen is unwaveringly Jewish. In his *Carnets*, written shortly before his death, he proclaims his unfaltering adherence to the most essential Jewish prayer, the Shema:

שמע ישראל יהוה אלהינו יהוה אחד

“Here, O Israel. The Lord is our God, the Lord is One.”

“Écoute, Israël, l’Éternel est notre Dieu, l’Éternel est Un. C’est en hébreu que je redis cette auguste proclamation, en hébreu, moi, l’incroyant, et c’est en hébreu que je la redirai à mon heure dernière. Tout cela, je l’ai déjà dit peut-être ailleurs, mais je dois le redire.” (Carnets, p. 101)

.....  
“Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One. In Hebrew I repeat this august proclamation, in Hebrew I, the unbeliever, and in Hebrew I shall repeat it in my last hour. All this I may have already said elsewhere, but I must say it again.” (Carnets, p. 101)

Along with the comparison of Ariane to Eve, the inner essence of Jewish spirituality is found within Cohen’s affirmation of the Shema. While it is known that Cohen tried to become as culturally French as possible during his schooling years, mastering the French language alongside his friend Marcel Pagnol, the repetition of and unwavering commitment to the Shema in Hebrew reaffirms an importance of the Hebrew language in the Jewish approach to prayer and Biblical interpretation. It is

through connections to the purest forms of this inner truth that connects him to God and the Jewish nation, and that all other truths can be realized. In other words, the “universalism” that extends to all of the characters and desires in his novels stems from this single prayer: “Assuming universalism is not the same as ‘evaporating’ into the surrounding culture. It is not a question either of advocating ‘assimilation’, another name for ‘dejudaization’ in the eyes of Levinas. That this universalism is [therefore] ‘particularistic’” (Tonaki, p. 148). While Cohen claims he is ‘incroyant’, or a non-believer, he forges a contemporary understanding with regard to Jewish tradition: one can be Jewish, or in fact, a Gentile, practicing or not, and still find solace in the overarching benevolence of the Eternal.

While Cohen reaffirms this common unity through the Shema, he simultaneously presents skepticism from one religious group towards the other, notably when the Deume family is resistant towards Ariane being in a relationship with Solal. Madame Deume references Proverbs 10, verse 25:

“Proverbes, chapitre dix, verset vingt-cinq. Bref, tu vois que les Juifs il faut toujours s’en méfier. – Mais les apôtres c’était des Zuifs quand même. Et puis aussi... – Oui, mais c’était il y a longtemps, coupa court Mme Deume.” (Cohen, pp. 262-263)

.....  
“Proverbs ten, verse twenty-five. So you see, you’ve always got to watch where you put your feet when you’re dealing with Jews.” “But the Apostles were Jews, you know. Besides...” “Yes, but that was a long time ago,” Madame Deume interrupted.” (Cohen, p. 222)

This Biblical Proverb is often interpreted as:

כעבור סופה ואין רשע וצדיק יסוד עולם

“When the tempest passes, the wicked is no more, but the righteous is established forever.”

When Monsieur Deume interjects, stating that the Apostles were Jewish, Madame Deume is quick to dismiss any potential benevolent overlap between them and the Christian faith, reverting to her initial statement that one must be wary of Jews. The presentation of this dialogue suggests the budding recognition of mutually intelligible spiritual practices within both faiths, a concept that is embraced by Cohen and increasingly solidified through literary and cultural trends of the 20th century. This theme of religious pluralism continues throughout *Belle du Seigneur*, as: “Cohen emphasizes that one can be Jewish and social, as long as one subscribes to the Western canon’s [idea of] ‘pur[ity]’” (Decout, p. 83). Through the presentation of this Biblical verse and the discussion surrounding it, Cohen suggests that both the Jew and his Gentile neighbor are undergoing a process of reflexion. By questioning the validity in the fact that Jews must be ‘the wicked’, and that they must remain entirely separate from their Christian brothers, a revitalized understanding of the Bible is beginning to take shape, which will later be used to reinforce the righteousness of all supposedly errant paths from spiritual righteousness.

Despite a slowly evolving understanding of the mutual spirituality between Judaism and Christianity, the residual resistance from one religion towards the other continues to present itself, this time in a discussion between Solal and his uncle

Saltiel, who wants him to marry a Jewish woman. It is noteworthy that the name Saltiel, or שאלתיאל in Hebrew, means ‘asked of God’. While Solal is in many ways the characterization of Albert Cohen, his uncle Saltiel represents an older ancestor from Greece, more deeply rooted in his Jewish beliefs and practices. Saltiel presents a traditional and conservative Jewish voice in *Belle du Seigneur*, and in this case, it is noteworthy that he is asking Solal to marry a Jewish woman, as if it were the desire of God Himself. As a recurring theme in Cohen’s work, he questions the validity in this religious prescription, questioning if such spiritual legitimacy can only be found in this specific relationship. In a passage between Solal and Saltiel, the reader is presented with these points of reflection. Moreover, one must note the generational difference, further reinforcing the premise of a contemporary revision of Jewish traditions through time. There is also a reference to the Book of Exodus, chapter 34 verse 16:

“Bref, pour lutter contre elle il fallait trouver une fille d’Israël parfaite comme la lune en sa plénitude et rondeur. Oui, une belle Israélite, absolument ! L’Éternel n’avait-il pas interdit à son peuple les filles étrangères pour épouses, au chapitre trente-quatrième de l’Exode ? – Mais où est-elle, où la trouver cette parfaite en Israël ?” (Cohen, p. 175)

.....  
 “So, to do battle with her, he was going to have to find a daughter of Israel as perfect as the moon in all its ripe and rounded fullness. Oh yes, only a Jewish beauty would do! Had not the Almighty forbidden His people to take the daughters of strangers to wife, Exodus thirty-four, verse sixteen? ‘But where is she, this perfect creature of Israel? And how am I to find her?’” (Cohen, p. 144)

This verse is often interpreted as:

ולקחת מבנותיו, לבניך; וזנו בנותיו, אחרי אלהיהן, וזנו את-בניך, אחרי אלהיהן

“And thou take of their daughters unto thy sons, and their daughters go astray after their gods, and make thy sons go astray after their gods.”

The presentation of this passage suggests that the only Biblically legitimate relationship, within the Jewish tradition, is a heterosexual marriage between two Jews. An orthodox perspective dictates that any errance from this tradition is automatically deemed corrupt and a barrier to spirituality. “The peoples around the Hebrews had a reputation for debauchery; austerity and purity of morals was a way to distinguish themselves from them.” (Valensin, p. 74) Despite this historical reputation, Cohen manages to transcend this tendency by questioning its validity. The obliged heterosexual, Jewish marriage therefore casts a sense of guilt on anyone who cannot conform to this religious prescription. Towards the end of *Belle du Seigneur*, the following sentiment is presented, which is arguably in the minds of both Ariane and Solal:

“... ô maudit amour des corps, maudite passion.” (Cohen, p. 1087)

.....  
“Oh cursed physical love! Cursèd passion!” (Cohen, p. 953)

Caught between the worlds of tradition and modernity, between two Abrahamic faiths, and between heteronormative expectations and homosexual inclinations, Ariane and Solal are overwhelmed with guilt as they seek to understand their own inner truths, while certain Biblical teachings appear to prohibit it. However, Solal does not hesitate to question this apparent obligation of a prescribed heterosexual union within the same religion. Through Solal, Cohen describes the difficulty in finding this idealized Jewish spouse, who is perhaps more an idea than a

reality. It can be argued that for Cohen: “Jewishness corresponds to the personal and subjective way of feeling Jewish while Judaism represents the religious side with its dogmas and rites.” (Decout, p. 59) This realization is key to understand this passage, as it transcends a traditional view of Jewish practice in favor for one that is applied in accordance to Cohen’s own innate sentiments. Moreover, while the entire situation regarding Solal’s expectations are anchored in heteronormativity, this questioning begins to provoke an opening of the possibility of the need to submit oneself to heteronormative marriage at all. Solal is skeptical that this “parfaite en Israël” or “perfect creature of Israel” even exists. The fact that Cohen describes at such length the spiritual righteousness of the Christians eliminates the apparent need for “Israël” to be required in order for a relationship to be spiritually legitimate, and is a “parfaite”, therefore a woman, really be necessary either? This questioning reflects Cohen’s distancing from religious prescription: “Cohen moves away from the usual procedures that tend to reduce the gaps in the borders.” (Caraion, p. 138) The dialogue surrounding the aforementioned Biblical passage, and the questioning surrounding its binary prescription, consequently opens the possibilities of introspection and a hidden spiritual righteousness.

Given that Saltiel is such a pious, Jewish figure in Cohen’s works, another notable Biblical passage is presented later in *Belle du Seigneur*, specifically Psalms 36:

“Honteux de n’avoir pas encore dit ses prières du matin, l’oncle Saltiel se lava en hâte les mains, chanta les trois louanges, puis se couvrit la tête du châle rituel et entonna les versets prescrits du psaume XXXVI.” (Cohen, p. 271)

.....  
“Feeling remiss for not yet having said his morning prayers, Uncle Saltiel hurriedly washed his hands, sang the three praises, and then, draping the ceremonial shawl over his head, intoned the prescribed verses of Psalm thirty-six.” (Cohen, p. 229)

Psalms 36 is a text by the Biblical figure David, who expresses solace found within the refuge of God’s protection. The essence of this Psalm is particularly evident in verse eight:

מה-יקר חסדך, אלהים: ובני אדם—בצל כנפך, יחסיון

“How precious is Thy lovingkindness, O God! and the children of men take refuge in the shadow of Thy wings.”

The Book of Psalms, a sacred text in both the Jewish and Christian faiths, poetically retells Biblical history, reaffirming the covenant between God and his faithful followers. It is noteworthy that Cohen chose to mention specifically Psalm 36. According to Gematria, 36 is the figure of double-chai, a number of considerable significance as it means “double life.” On the one hand, as Saltiel is a deeply religious man, he feels obligated to recite this passage as part of his morning prayers. The ancient custom of religiosity, however, holds a deeply impactful presence in *Belle du Seigneur*. As Cohen is conducting his contemporary reinterpretation of Biblical passages, the universality in this particular Psalm holds a timeless affirmation that all righteous followers of God know a state of protection. The “children of men”

therefore include all spiritual beings, limited not by religion or sexual orientation. And with reference back to double-chai, it is a refuge that extends beyond individual differences in this life, and extending beyond life itself. As Solal witnesses his uncle Saltiel recite this Psalm, he is reminded of this spiritual consciousness, which manages to transcend in other avenues of the novel. The affirming spiritual energy from within the Psalm demonstrates: “the very great flexibility of the [Biblical] system, in the semantic richness of this One...” (Mopsik, p. 129) This richness is present in both a semantic perspective, given its language that illustrates a refuge for all in the shadow of God’s wings, and more subtly by the Psalm’s number corresponding to double-chai. It is true that this particular Biblical passage is vast in its spiritual affirmations, which Cohen uses to his advantage in bridging the past and present through its placement in the novel.

While the Psalms hold spiritual value in both the Jewish and Christian faiths, their place within the Hebrew canon render them particularly close to Jewish theology. Throughout *Belle du Seigneur*, Christian hymns are also mentioned in this constant balance between the two faiths. In an declaration of Solal’s transmission of spiritual affirmations upon her, Ariane invents her own Biblical-inspired poem based on the Christian holiday of Pentecost:

“Grave soudain et saluant la venue merveilleuse de ce soir, elle entonna l’air de la Cantate de la Pentecôte, substituant non sans remords le nom bien-aimé au Nom sacré.

Mon âme croyante,  
Sois fière et contente,  
Voici venir ton divin roi,  
Solal est près de toi !” (Cohen, p. 662)

.....  
“Suddenly serious, she hailed the marvellous coming of tonight by chanting the tune of Whitsun hymn, substituting not without a qualm or two, the name of the man she loved for the Sacred Name:

O my believing soul,  
Be proud now and content,  
For see! there comes thy heavenly king,  
Solal is near: his praises sing!” (Cohen, p. 572)

Pentecost commemorates the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the Apostles and other followers of Jesus while they were in Jerusalem celebrating the Feast of Weeks, as described in the Acts of the Apostles. By placing Solal in the place of Jesus, Cohen is manipulating a Biblical concept to reaffirm the spiritual influence of Solal on Ariane. As Solal is often presented as a figure resembling a Messiah, the rapt and overt acceptance of his presence by Ariane consequently suggests an acceptance of the overarching spirituality of the Abrahamic faiths, despite their theological differences. Both Judaism and Christianity are intertwined in this passage, which is in essence an imagined Biblical creation, to reveal a broader spiritual benevolence perceived by the author. This imagined Biblical creation may be Divinely inspired, but is ultimately the work of Cohen, in this case, and his idealized presentation of spiritual understanding: “In an absolute carnivalesque inversion, Cohen proposes [a] ... monotheistic message, which is formulated not as a creed, a profession of faith,

but as a call to the human-within-a-human, [in which] man finds himself invested with an absolute responsibility.” (Kauffmann, p. 197) This “absolute responsibility” lies in a mutual understanding of the underlying spiritual affirmations within the two faiths, which is being expressed through Ariane. Additionally, while her poetic proclamation reflects the holiday of Pentecost, a parallel can be drawn between it and the Jewish holiday of Shavuot, which celebrates the giving of the Torah on Mount Sinai. Whether it be the Hebrew Bible or a savior-figure such as Jesus through Solal, the imagery presented in Ariane’s poem reflects a contemporary understanding of mutually intelligible spirituality presented by Cohen. This understanding serves as the framework to reaffirm the common spiritual legitimacy of Jews and Christians, which must be done first in order to accept any further perceived boundaries to spirituality, beyond purely religious differences.

In the aforementioned passage, it is important to note that authentic Biblical extracts are juxtaposed to ones that are invented—in other words, those that the author has created to exemplify his own understanding of the Bible. This notion of falsehood also presents itself in forms of overt criticism, such as in one instance by Ariane when she outwardly claims that the Bible, and by extent religious customs, are an “*histoire fausse absurde*”, or “ridiculous made-up tale”:

“... 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, ...” (Cohen, p. 997)

.....  
“but why in God’s name have I told myself this ridiculous made-up tale which has no basis in reality why oh why because I’ve never met any such crowd of grotesques nor have I 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” (Cohen, p. 871)

This outward criticism of Biblical history suggests that Cohen, through Ariane, in his exposure to conflicting messages from the Bible, religion, and his adoptive society, is skeptical of the absolute value it is perceived to hold. It is known that Cohen seeks to affirm the common humanity among Jews and Christians, and in the above passage, Ariane mentions that she had “encountered human beings with the noblest hearts” in the Jewish people, which prevails the “ridiculous made-up tale” which one can be left with even in the most affirming Biblical passages. In essence, this is an aspect of the paradox of the early 20th-century French-Jew, which will be discussed later, as the intersection of religiosity and modernity leads to a simultaneous embrace and rejection of Biblical teachings in the modern era. In sum, “Cohen’s reading of the Bible cannot be a strictly orthodox reading.” (Decout, p. 195)

These moments of inner conflict and contradiction in the wake of modernity present themselves elsewhere in Cohen’s works, as the true will of God is brought into question.

When wrestling among the various interpretations of Biblical passages from both the Jewish and Christian traditions, along with self-created ones from these inspirations, Cohen seeks the true purpose behind all of them, which is the innate will of God. “For the primary model in Cohen, which beyond all the impossibilities of the adventure founds its necessity, is the Bible. The déclassé does not draw his strength from a successful social ascent but from a mystical and passionate dimension, stemming from his desire for redemption.” (Decout, p. 88) In one instance, Solal discusses his amorous feelings with his uncle Saltiel, who suggests that any errance from a conventional Jewish marriage is perhaps the true will of God:

“Ton bonheur avant tout, que veux-tu, et c’est peut-être la volonté de Dieu. Qui sait, qui peut savoir ? Et après tout, notre roi Salomon a bien épousé des demoiselles qui n’étaient pas de notre peuple.” (Cohen, p. 178)

.....  
“Your happiness comes first, when all is said and done, and maybe it’s God’s will. Who knows, how can anybody know? After all, didn’t our King Solomon marry wives who were not of our people?” (Cohen, p. 146-147)

In this passage, uncle Saltiel is referring to the presentation of a Jewish law in the Book of Deuteronomy, which contradicts itself as the Jewish King Solomon breaks it in his many marriages with Gentiles. “The Hebrew Bible contains both legal and narrative material, and often the two contradict one another. For example, Deuteronomy 7:3 explicitly forbids an Israelite from marrying foreign women. Yet King Solomon did so, and the text does not judge him for it.” (Michaelson, p. 95) Mentioning this passage illustrates that through Saltiel, Cohen is cognizant of the Bible’s contradictions, and in spite of them, the authentic will of God can still

transcend: “The clear-sighted speaker thus engages in a full-scale attack on the hypocrisy of morals and language.” (Kauffman, p. 95) Through this contemporary rewriting of Biblical interpretations, Cohen continues to reinforce the framework that even supposedly corrupt desires and relationships still hold spiritual legitimacy, as even made apparent by the Bible itself.

While contradictions are present throughout the Hebrew Bible, this begs the question: what set of criteria determine in a clear and straightforward manner the path of spiritual righteousness among all, Jews and Christians alike? Although certain Psalms and other Biblical texts can be affirming in the universality of their spiritual transmission, the contradictions can question their legitimacy, and the tradition of Cohen’s writing lends itself to further investigation of Biblical prescription, leading to the need to understand the Noachide Laws, which Jewish culture has defined as the spiritually righteous path of the Gentile: “The individual who lives within these parameters lives within a conventional relationship, the model for which is the relationship between God and Noah. The Noachide covenant is the manifestation of the universal bond between God and humankind. In every case but that of the Jew—who must obey the 613 commandments detailed in the Torah—the individual who abides by the seven Noachide Laws may obtain salvation.” (Lubarsky, p. 17) Found within the open implications in the aforementioned ‘will of God’ is an echo to the universality and spiritual affirmations of the Noachide Laws, one of which dictates that spiritually righteous individuals must not engage in illicit sexual relations. However, Cohen’s interpretations of the Biblical passages mentioned in his works

overwhelmingly support and affirm marginalized desires, by Biblical tradition or otherwise. What is perceived as an ‘illicit sexual relation’ between consulting adults is largely a product of cultural understanding. Moreover, a supposedly ‘illicit sexual relation’ is not one without understanding or forgiveness, which in the time of Albert Cohen was undergoing a reevaluation in parallel to historical events. In fact, previously assumed deviant traditions are given a new sense of pardon, as heard in his own words shared in an interview: “As for forgiveness as I understand it, it is a ‘true’ forgiveness, which has nothing to do with the kind of order imposed by religion. We force ourselves, we forgive because the Church has said so, but the unconscious overrides it.” (Cohen and Chancel, p. 44) One may argue that the recreation of Cohen’s Biblical understanding therefore draws on the fundamentals of the Noachide laws—without overly emphasizing any one in particular, using their overarching teaching—that all individuals have the overwhelming potential to achieve spiritual righteousness, and his writing serves as this “pardon”. After all: “Jews, according to Cohen, are destined to wander.” (Decout, p. 190) Cohen takes this inevitable errance and presents it as an opportunity to showcase hidden spiritual righteousness, rather than an immediate boundary to spirituality.

Through Albert Cohen’s presentations of Biblical passages, both an affirmation and contradiction is presented. Through the various allusions from Jewish and Christian perspectives, which lend themselves to personal rewritings of Biblical episodes, Cohen begins to create the spiritual sphere he views as most correct: drawing on the spiritual affirmations for all of humanity, the Bible serves as a source

of guidance, but not one that supersedes one's will or true inner calling. "Compared to the glossing of the event as the Bible does, Cohen's interpretation of meaning is left to the free evaluation of the reader and the circus, always retaining an element of mystery that the author cultivates." (Decout, p. 143) The paradoxical nature of the Bible is in fact mirrored by the paradox Cohen himself endures as an early 20th-century French Jew, which will be discussed in the next section.

## 2.2 The paradox of the early 20th-century French-Jew

"Cohen's position in the literary field is clearly that of a Jewish writer seeking his voice between archaic inspiration and modernist impulse" (Zard, p. 268). In other words, Albert Cohen is a hybrid. With one foot dipped in tradition from his Jewish roots and the other in modernity through the egalitarian French culture, in essence Universalism that led to the acculturation of many French Jews<sup>6</sup>, the birth of a new generation of Jewish thinking presents itself in his works. While it may be argued that Cohen seeks to justify the unjustifiable, *Belle du Seigneur*, among his other novels, are refractions of the socio-cultural context of the decades following the Dreyfus affair, and the acculturation of Jews in Francophone Europe. Albert Cohen is not necessarily endorsing adultery, which is proscribed by the overshadowing presence of Biblical tradition, yet rather challenging the binary visions of relationships and accepted standards which have historically been blindly followed.

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6 Tonaki, Yotetsu. "Emmanuel Levinas et le problème de la laïcité Place de la judéité en France contemporaine." *Études de langue et littérature françaises*, vol. 102, 2013, pp. 137–152.

For example, since the entire relationship between Ariane and Solal is an extra-marital affair, as Ariane is already married to Adrien Deume, yet only feels remotely understood by Solal in the absence of Varvara, the blind acceptance of strict monogamy within marriage is at the very least critiqued, and presented as not necessarily perfect.

Despite the Universalism and openness that generally characterizes the French culture, it must be noted that: “France has historically been ill at ease with diversity. France’s monarchy, for instance, worried that religious diversity impeded political centralization and undermined the power of the crown... Then, in the early 1800s, Napoleon formalized the Revolutionary compact with Judaism... he made rabbinic leaders commit themselves to the principle that Judaism would be subordinate to citizenship. This was the defining moment in French Judaism.” (Shurkin, pp. 157-158) This historical context is essential to understand the external need to adopt a sentiment of French nationalism, which Cohen explores over the course of his life and his novels. In essence, Cohen depicts the paradox of the *early* twentieth century French Jew, and one’s struggle at the time to simultaneously accept both French and Jewish culture. “European national cultures are, virtually by definition, assimilationist visions. Be they *Israélites* or *Juifs*, most Jews who have claimed for themselves a national identity have developed their cultures according to rules established by the universalistic values of the Enlightenment.” (Friedlander, p. 222) Cohen ultimately uses this hybridity to his advantage in order to create a

contemporary Judaism, a cultural product of universalist principles surrounding him, which embraces and elevates all spiritual beings.

The formative years of childhood hold unwavering significance on any life, and Cohen's is no exception. Having immigrated to France from Greece as a child, in the wake of the Dreyfus affair, his primal visions of Judaism were influenced by personal questioning following anti-Semitic hatred. "The explosion of the Dreyfus affair brought 'the Jewish question' to the centre of French public discourse and created networks of social and cultural action that helped spark off a new kind of Jewish self-questioning in France... [shaping the] values and ideals on which the French Republic was founded." (Malinovich, pp. 26-27) It is argued that Cohen in fact became Jewish as a result of these realizations. "One is born a Jew, that is a certainty. But one is not born with the consciousness of being Jewish. ... Cohen did not have the easiest of times. He received his Jewishness on his tenth birthday as an aggression." (Decout, p. 47) This birthday was a traumatic moment in his young life, as he was subject to an anti-Semitic attack in Marseille, presented in *Ô Vous, frères humains*:

"J'étais devenu un juif et j'allais, un sourire léger et quelque peu haggard aux lèvres tremblantes." (Cohen p. 95)

.....  
"I had become a Jew and was going, a light and somewhat haggard smile with trembling lips." (Cohen p. 95)

However, even though Cohen was offered the opportunity to serve as ambassador to Israel during the course of his career through the League of Nations, he remained unwaveringly attached to his European home, an attachment which started at the age of ten:

“Ayant ainsi décidé de ma vie à venir, je me levai, et sur ma main je déposai un baiser, peut-être un baiser à ma petite France à moi. Ainsi en ce jour de mes dix ans, et je repris ma marche sur le chemin de ma vie.” (Cohen, p. 129)

.....  
“Having thus decided on my life to come, I stood up, and on my hand I placed a kiss, perhaps a kiss to my own little France. So it was on this day of my tenth birthday, and I resumed my walk on the path of my life.” (Cohen, p. 129)

It must be noted that Cohen is not completely unique in his experience here. He was like many assimilated European Jews, like Theodore Herzl. While his skepticism in the success of a Jewish state did not render him a Zionist, his identity as a Jew remained steadfast in his integration within the French culture. In fact, while the Dreyfus affair is often remembered by its anti-Semitic discourse, most remembered by *J'accuse* by Émile Zola, it did not empty France of its contributions from Jewish culture: “Narratives of modern Jewish history often locate the importance of the Dreyfus affair in the crisis of anti-Semitism that it revealed. [Despite] the cries of ‘death to the Jews’ that accompanied Dreyfus’s degradation ceremony... [they were] not relevant to the vast majority of French Jews, for whom the final outcome of the affair in favour of Dreyfus bolstered their confidence in the Republic.” (Malinovich, p. 27) The wake of the Dreyfus affair are visible in Cohen’s works, noticeably *Ô Vous, frères humains*, which illustrates the rising anti-Semitic

tensions palpable in public spaces in France. This memoir describes the formative moment in Cohen's life, at the age of ten, when he is publicly mocked by a street peddler in a town square and told to leave, which is emblematically represented in the following passage:

“un sale juif, hein ? ton père est de la finance internationale, hein ? tu viens manger le pain des Français, hein ? messieurs dames, je vous présente un copain à Dreyfus, un petit youtre pur sang, garanti de la confrérie du sécateur, raccourci où il faut, je les reconnais du premier coup, j'ai l'oeil américain, moi, eh ben nous on aime pas les juifs par ici, c'est une sale race...” (Cohen, pp. 38-39)

.....  
“a dirty Jew, eh? your father is in international finance, eh? you come to eat the bread of the French, eh? ladies and gentlemen, I present to you a friend of Dreyfus, a little pure-blooded youtre, guaranteed to be a member of the brotherhood of the secateur, shortened where necessary, I recognize them at first sight, I have an American eye, well we don't like Jews around here, they're a dirty race...” (Cohen, pp. 38-39)

As reflected in the taunts and slurs directed towards him, it is understandable that Cohen underwent trauma and introspection regarding these two fundamental aspects of his identity: his national attachment and his religion. “It is thus in this inaugural persecution that the Jewish name was able to establish itself and fix for ever a Jewish identity that the work takes on the task of declining through its fictions. We have here, as it were, the emergence of a scene of the Jewish subject and of writing, the configuration of which must be brought to light in order to think in the best possible way about the articulation between thought and the poetics proper to the work.”(Decout, p. 48) This autobiographical volume, *Ô Vous, frères humains*, describes the wave of emotions he endured afterwards, stretching from the love of

Jews to self-hatred. But ultimately, Cohen sought to integrate himself into the French language and culture, finding refuge in his ability to adapt to his environment in his own way. “Albert Cohen does not wish to be a marginal writer... In fact, it is imperative for him to become a great writer in the French language... To become a great writer in the French language is to become French more than full-fledged, it is also to belong, it is to give back to France what it has given him.” (Maisier, p. 148)

One may argue that the anti-Semitic hatred unlocked a need within Albert Cohen to transcend a boundary between his Jewish traditions and French culture, which he successfully did through the successful publication of his novels. Jews have historically adapted themselves to their host cultures, often a necessity in order to survive. In this case, Cohen’s works showcase this adaptation in the form of indemnification, serving as a testament of success despite such adversity: “Alongside its painful images of loss, guilt, and death, Cohen’s text offers expressions of love and reparation to the shattered ten-year-old boy, to the victims of the camps, to the assassins of the Jews, and to the adult writer rehearsing his mourning.” (Schneider, p. 39)

As seen in his works, this compassion extends to recreate an inclusive spirituality towards all who are marginalized, including all forms of marginalized desire. The legitimacy he gives towards Ariane and Solal’s relationship, for example, stems from this personal experience of marginalization and external hatred, which Cohen uses against the will of his oppressor to rise above societal constructs. While Ariane and Solal are not destined to be life partners, it is through their relationship that the hidden affirmations present themselves—that interfaith and homosexual

desires are not inherently corrupt and impediments to spirituality. “[Cohen presents] a suffering which is at once the sign of Election and hope for redemption.” (Schneider, p. 39) The hybridity of Cohen’s youth is essential in understanding these choices he makes in his writing, and an attachment to France is what embraces his proposed recreation of an inclusive Judaism, one that does not equate European nationalism with an absence from Judaism. Even Solal’s pious uncle Saltiel describes his pride in his French citizenship:

“...nous sommes demeurés fièrement citoyens français, immatriculés au consulat de Céphalonie, parlant avec émotion le doux parler du noble pays mais agrémenté agrémenté de mots anciens du Comtat Venaissin de nous seuls connus, et durant les veillées d’hiver lisant en pleurs Ronsard et Racine...” (Cohen, p. 150)

.....  
“... French citizens we have been proud to remain, duly registered by the consulate at Cephalonia, thrilled to speak the sweet tongue of the old country spiced with fustian vocables unique to the county of Avignon and known only to us, and honoured on long winter evenings to be dewy-eyed readers of Rosnard and Racine.” (Cohen, p. 124)

This passage depicts a complete adoption of the French culture with no apparent clash in contrast to Jewish traditions. This is in fact the ideal outcome of Cohen and his fellow Jews in Western Europe. However, as witnessed from the initial seeds of doubt sown by the wave of anti-Semitism following the Dreyfus affair, the reality proved to be far more nuanced, oscillating between sentiments of integration and exclusion. “This opening towards the outside world and the putting into practice of the principle of a transnational Jewish solidarity... will be verified in various circumstances with the rise of the feeling that all Jews have a common destiny. At the

same time, another feeling is emerging: that of a rift between the Jews and France.” (Azira, p. 256) This “rift” manifests itself on several occasions throughout Cohen’s works. This can be seen in another discussion between Solal and Saltiel regarding Solal’s future spouse. In this instance, Saltiel expresses his strong need for Solal to marry a Jewish woman. Solal replies that he will not pursue Ariane since she is not Jewish, which of course is false, and Saltiel is left puzzled by his fascination for Gentiles. His need for Solal to marry a ‘Jew of the time’ is a projection of his own need, which has been imposed upon himself from an inevitable social progression:

– “Elle est belle, et Ariane est son nom.  
– Israélite, mon fils ?  
– Non. Une dernière fois la voir ce soir et après fini, je la laisse tranquille. ... Cet enfant ne trouvait plaisantes que les filles des Gentils ! ... Que leur manquait-il donc, à part la blondeur ? ... Enfin qu’elle ait un peu le Genre Moderne tout en allant à la Synagogue !” (Cohen, pp. 153, 154, 177)  
.....  
“‘She is beautiful and Ariane is her name.’  
“‘Is she Jewish, son?’”  
“‘No. One last time shall I see her this evening and then it will be over, I shall let her be.’”  
“‘How was it that only the daughters of Gentiles were pleasing to the boy’s eye? ... What was it that they didn’t have, apart from not being fair of hair? ... She should be a Modern Girl, but also go to Synagogue!’” (Cohen, pp. 127, 146)

It is noteworthy that even though Saltiel is the religious, conservative Jewish voice in *Belle du Seigneur*, his acculturation into Francophone Europe renders his version of the ideal spouse for Solal a woman who is modern, yet still regularly attends a synagogue. In this passage, Cohen is reinforcing the reality that nuance is part of acculturation; the Jewish values and traditions cannot be absent from the

dominant culture that surrounds them. This nuance in 20th century Francophone Europe reflects the values of reason and reflection that are historically part of the French culture: “This vision of a humanity all in black and white does not correspond to the traditional philosophy of a France that cultivates reason and doubt.” (Philippe, p. 227) Moreover, these conflicting ideas regarding intermarriage are not new within European Jewish literature. In fact, this discussion mirrors those in classic Yiddish writer Shalom Aleichem’s short stories, in which Tevye’s daughters marry spouses of decreasing levels of religiosity.<sup>7</sup> In an attempt to satisfy the needs of his uncle, Solal tells himself that he will not engage further with Ariane because she is not Jewish, however she is still a woman, which only transgresses the prerequisites of inter-religiosity, not homosexuality. Solal and Ariane are never able to fully satisfy each other, as the notions of an idealized relationship take precedence in their minds. By extension, this is Cohen’s projection of love as a theatricalization from the Western tradition: Citing G. Albert, Audéod observes that: “the trial of love is the trial of sublimated blindness” and all the work of Cohen is the denunciation of the “theatricality of the West.” The term ‘theatricality’ is very appropriate, because it is indeed a comedy. The lovers, constantly in representation, offer only a façade, most often deceptive, of themselves.” (Audéoud, p. 159) This oscillation between tradition and modernity leads therefore to the characters “fooling themselves” in the pursuit of an external prescription they have imposed upon themselves. Even though Ariane is

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<sup>7</sup> This instance occurs in the chapter in which Chava marries a non-Jew, and Tevye sits shiva: Sholem Aleichem. *Tevye the Dairyman : And, Motl the Cantor's Son*. Translated by Aliza Shevrin, Penguin Group, 2009.

not Jewish, it has been established that she is a spiritually righteous being, and she is also conflicted between tradition and modernity as she navigates the stage of Western relationships. An extension of this constant oscillation is illustrated by her relationship with Solal itself:

“Ariane qui l’appelait sa joie et son tourment, son méchant et son tourmente-chrétien, mais aussi frère de l’âme, ...” (Cohen, p. 465)

.....  
“Ariane, who called him her joy and her pain, her tormentor and her Christian-baiter, but also her soul-brother.” (Cohen, p. 401)

In this passage, Cohen is aware that: “To reduce Judaism to antinature—that is, to its purely moral function of repressing instincts—and to identify all that is natural with paganism, quickly leads to insoluble paradoxes.” (Schaffner, p. 279) By Ariane also expressing hesitance towards her relationship with Solal, it showcases a common spiritual thread between Solal’s Jewish origins and her own Christian ones. While Solal brings understanding and excitement to her life, the entire relationship is an extra-marital affair from her spouse Adrien. Thus, this expansion into new social and spiritual realms is not without occasional resistance. In fact, while reflecting on it herself, Ariane acknowledges the intensity of her own feelings:

“... c’est fou les possibilités érotiques d’une jeune fille de bonne famille comme moi, sans parler de mon amoralité totale ...” (Cohen, p. 494)

.....  
“amazing really the erotic potential of a well-brought up young lady like me, not to mention my complete amorality,” (Cohen, p. 426)

Even a young lady who is “de bonne famille”, or “well-brought up”, still has innate sexual urges, and because she—and Solal—are often blinded by the omnipresent objectives of the theatre of Western love, they often fail to acknowledge their same-sex attraction. In essence, this is exemplary of the decision to choose the path of Universalism, which resonates within the often conflicting sentiments of the 20th-century French-Jew. “Since emancipation in 1791, French Judaism has defined itself according to its embrace of the Revolution’s universalist principles and its disavowal of political, cultural, and doctrinal separateness.” (Shurkin, pp. 156-157) On the one hand, they are liberated by the openness of French society to engage in a free, “love marriage”, but on the other hand are restricted by the society’s heteronormativity, only reinforced by the heteronormativity and other bounds imposed by traditional Jewish culture. “Such an ideological transformation is manifest not only in the modes by which each ideology is practiced and embodied but also—perhaps especially—in the ways that the ideology of romantic love camouflaged aspects of marriage that contradicted its tenets.” (Seidman, p. 30) By extension, this ideological transformation of legitimized romantic relationships is reflective of Cohen’s own metamorphosis, bridging both tradition and modernity.

One critic has even claimed that Ariane is “nearly Jewish”, along with all women, which can be concluded from Cohen’s key novel: “When reading *Belle du Seigneur*, one thinks that every woman is Jewish in a way, a Jewish woman, the only being of this chosen people of Misfortune... *Belle du Seigneur* is impregnated with all

the existential fatalism of the Jewish culture.” (Lefebvre, p. 55) Moreover, Ariane expresses her proximity to the Jewish people, claiming they are the “people chosen of God” and considers officially entering the faith:

“Eh oui, mon ami, c’est cher d’être le peuple de Dieu ! ... Oui, c’est le peuple de Dieu. Me convertir ?” (Cohen, pp. 565, 601)

.....  
“Oh yes, there is a high price to pay to be the chosen of God! ... Yes, the people chosen of God. Shall I convert?” (Cohen, pp. 488, 519)

Even without officially converting to Judaism, it is clear she is already a spiritually righteous being and displays on several occasions a proximity to God and pious devotions, while like Solal, is forging her own crossroads in the landscape of French society. She depicts by extension this ‘Jewish paradox’ between tradition and modernity as she is getting dressed one evening:

– Tu es princière, tu sais. – Mes seins sont découverts à moitié, dit-elle, le dos toujours tourné, mais considérant droit son mari dans la glace. Il n’y a que les pointes qui soient cachées. Cela ne te gêne pas ? – Mais, chérie, d’abord ils ne sont pas découverts à moitié, voyons. Juste d’un tiers peut-être. – Si je me penche, c’est de moitié. – Mais tu ne te pencheras pas. Et puis d’ailleurs, le grand décolleté, c’est admis pour les robes du soir. – Et si c’était admis de les montrer entièrement, tu serais d’accord ? demanda-t-elle, et dans la psyché elle eut de nouveau ce regard direct, masculin. – Mais pour l’amour du ciel, chérie, que vas-tu chercher ? – La vérité. Veux-tu que je les sorte lorsque je serai devant ce monsieur ? – Ariane ! s’exclama-t-il, épouvanté. Pourquoi dis-tu de pareilles horreurs ? – Bien, on ne lui montrera que la moitié supérieure, articula-t-elle. La moitié admise et convenable. Il y eut un silence et il baissa les yeux. Pourquoi continuait-elle à le regarder ainsi, droit dans les yeux ? Mon Dieu, dans les bals les plus chic, des femmes du meilleur monde étaient décolletées. Alors ? Le mieux était de changer de conversation, d’autant plus qu’il était déjà sept heures quarante-deux.” (Cohen, pp. 365-366)

.....  
 “You look pretty as a princess, you know.” “My breasts are half bare,” she said, still with her back to him but looking directly at her husband in the mirror. “Only the nipples are hidden. Doesn’t that bother you?” “But darling, they’re not half bare. It’s more like a third.” “If I lean forward, it’s half.” “Then don’t lean forward. Anyway, plunging necklines are considered perfectly suitable for evening wear.” “And would you mind if it was considered perfectly suitable to show the whole lot?” she asked, and in the mirror she gave him another direct, masculine look. “What on earth are you getting at, for goodness sake?” “The truth. Do you want me to make them pop out when I meet this man?” “Ariane!” he exclaimed, appalled. “Why are you saying such horrible things?” “Very well, I’ll only show him the top half,” she said coolly. “The bit that’s suitable and seemly.” There was a silence and he looked at the carpet. Why did she go on looking, staring, glaring at him like this? For God’s sake, at the smartest balls the most fashionable women wore low necklines. So what? The best plan would be to change the subject, especially since it was now seven forty-two.” (Cohen, p. 312)

This significant scene occurs at a crucial moment in the novel. Before even formally meeting Solal at a ball, her husband, Adrien, tells her to dress in a revealing manner, supposedly appropriate fashion for the time and place. She asserts her feminine power by resisting Adrien’s insistence, and by casting a “regard direct, masculin”, she projects her own individuality and embraces the strength in her femininity, an ability to surmount any societal expectations of heteronormative conformation. Adrien serves as a tool at this moment she uses to express her inner voice: “[Adrien is] the ultimate other against whom she defines herself: Germanic, she is not a Jew; lesbian, she does not desire the male; Genevan Protestant, she loathes [societal] theatricality.” (Abecassis, p. 178) While Adrien claims that showing her breasts in a revealing manner is “admis” for an evening dress, which is by extension a progression of twentieth century social code, she is remaining true to her

own intuition, which beneath the surface of this example are amorous feelings towards Jews and her own sex. And this resistance to Adrien is not void of spirituality; her desire to cover her breasts, besides simply personal preference, stems from her conservative upbringing from her aunt Tantlérie. She is therefore progressing beyond mainstream protocol and remaining true to the spiritual influence within her—a delicate balance which mirrors the path of Albert Cohen. “The popular culture of nineteenth-century Jews marked a transition from ‘traditional’ to ‘modern’ values, but that transition was not straightforward. Since notions of love, though not necessarily defined in purely modern terms, circulated in Jewish culture throughout the Middle Ages, they formed a kind of foundation for new romantic and erotic attitudes during the nineteenth century.” (Biale, pp. 167-168) In essence, *Belle du Seigneur* manifests this trend in the twentieth century, beginning to explore latent themes of feminism and heteronormativity, an inevitable part of the surrounding social culture in which Jews felt compelled to acculturate.

Remembering that Ariane’s relationship with Solal is an extra-marital affair, it is clear that she is a product of a contemporary society, never feeling completely satisfied by any heteronormative relation, even with Adrien, her own husband. In one instance, she outwardly critiques the institution of marriage:

“C’est une honte, cette conception du mariage ! La femme, propriété du mari ! On ne lui laisse même pas le droit de s’appeler de son vrai nom ! Elle doit porter, imprimée au fer rouge sur son front, la marque de propriété du mari ! Comme une bête !” (Cohen, p. 252)

.....

.....  
“Such a view of marriage is downright disgraceful! A wife is her husband’s chattel! She doesn’t even have the right to be called by her own name! She must bear the mark of her husband’s ownership like a brand burned across her forehead! Like an animal!” (Cohen, p. 212)

To an extent, these sentiments depict her dissatisfaction within her own marriage. However, they highlight the nuance within the intelligible institution of marriage within the ongoing power of Biblical tradition, and voices an underlying contempt for the nature of the institution itself, along with any binary religious prescriptions associated with it. Angry to the point of saying that a wife is the “*propriété du mari*”, or “husband’s chattel”, reveals an intense dissatisfaction with the custom of marriage, and rejects that one should be expected to succumb to it. Within the overshadowing presence of Biblical tradition, the concept of marriage embodies both eroticism and religion. While the institution of marriage within this tradition is one that is superficially intelligible, therefore understood as legitimate without profound introspection, it is an institution that only works when the eroticism and religion within it correspond to the desire of the individuals involved. In essence, marriage is an exterior experience, while the eroticism and spiritual consciousness transmitted through religion is an interior experience. “Eroticism and religion are closed to us insofar as we do not situate them resolutely on the plane of interior experience. We situate them on the level of things, which we know from the outside, if we give in, even if without knowing it, to the forbidden.” (Bataille, p. 42) Bataille therefore suggests that transgression to what is deemed ‘forbidden’ is an inevitable

part of eroticism and religion. Through Ariane, Cohen suggests that religious traditions within the ‘open’ and intelligible institution of marriage are not synonymous with the fulfillment of sexual desire, nor the attainment of spirituality. After all, Albert Cohen was married three times in his life, and knew the shifting sentiments of love and attraction towards each of his wives.<sup>8</sup>

This being the case, while there are overlapping similarities at certain instances, it is important to note the difference between Cohen’s autobiographical texts, which have little to no reference towards the feminine subject and sexual desire, and his fictional narratives, which are strongly founded on the subject. One can argue that only through the primal realizations presented in his autobiographical works, such as *Ô vous, frères humains*, that the depth of understanding as a result of them can extend to uplift and legitimize alternate forms of marginality which are presented in his lengthier novels. “In each of these fictional texts, a dual structure recounts two separate but interconnected narratives: the novelistic form recounts the love/hate relationship between a Jewish man and a Protestant woman, while the epic elements depict the cultural conflicts of diasporic Jews.” (Schneider, p. 40) The paradox of Albert Cohen’s condition, a Jew caught between both French and Jewish culture, is left ultimately unresolved, yet further explored in his fictional novels. And this progression, even in the context of his fiction, is visible when comparing *Solal* and *Belle du Seigneur*: “While *Solal* describes the earnest attempt by a Jewish protagonist

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<sup>8</sup> Albert Cohen’s marriages are further described in this biography: Médioni, Franck. *Albert Cohen*. Éditions Gallimard, 2007.

to create a belonging for himself in the West, thereby witnessing to the belief that such integration is still believed possible, *Belle du Seigneur* takes a premise that Jewish integration in the West is, if not impossible, then somehow beside the point.” (Kelly, p. 156) It is noteworthy that *Solal* was published in 1930, and *Belle du Seigneur* in 1968. The 38 years between the two is significant, given that *Belle du Seigneur* is less focused on this need to acculturate and assimilate in the West as a Jew, while rather digs to a place of even deeper understanding beyond a constructed national sentiment. By this point, one may argue that Cohen had already found a sense of stability in the French culture. Moreover, given that *Belle du Seigneur* addresses Jewish history in a largely metaphorical and over-arching sense, not referencing any real historical events with precision, it lends itself to recreate its own visions of Judaism and spiritual presence, which touch all of his characters. Therefore, from this understanding, any integration into the West is “besides the point” as it is irrelevant when presented with the hidden spiritual affirmations of the Eternal.

As aforementioned, oscillating between tradition and modernity is a recurring theme in Cohen’s works. Since his four novels use the same characters, a sense of continuity is established throughout them, as they all convey essentially the same story. While his later novels have less of a need to present notions of acculturation and integration, it remains an innate part of Solal’s personal conquest: “Solal’s entire being-his body, his thoughts, his feelings-oscillates incessantly between the Jewish ghetto and the good society of Geneva.” (Miernowska, p. 54) despite the

expectations to resist intermarriage and adhere to traditional gender roles, Cohen voices at times that he has done a disservice to the Jews by transgressing beyond a traditional Jewish framework in his novels. On two occasions in his *Paroles juives*, he states the following:

“Que mes lèvres tordues sourient Que mes lèvres s’écrient avec bravade Que mes lèvres hypocrites disent Louange et gloire Gloire au Dieu d’Israël D’éternité en éternité Amen. ... “J’ai péché contre mon peuple Mon peuple d’intelligents Mon peuple d’orgueilleux. Car j’ai dit Heureux les pauvres en esprit.” (Cohen, pp. 31, 60)

.....  
“Let my twisted lips smile Let my lips cry out with bravado Let my hypocritical lips say Praise and glory Glory to the God of Israel From everlasting to everlasting Amen. ... “I have sinned against my people My people of understanding My people of pride. For I said Blessed are the poor in spirit.” (Cohen, pp. 31, 60)

In the first extract, in the form of a prayer, Cohen claims that he has “lèvres hypocrites”, or “hypocritical lips”. From this declaration, one can infer that a traditional approach within the overshadowing presence of Biblical tradition dictates that adhering to a spiritual path cannot be synonymous with embracing change and modernity. It is understood to be a prayer, given its conclusion with “Amen”, and that *Paroles juives* proclaims the author’s attachment to the Jewish tradition at great length. It is far less a text of social and religious critique than his novels. Therefore, the fact that this passage mirrors a prayer is significant, as it suggests a revelation from within the author of the deepest possible level. While prayer is as individual as each human being, it is described within the Oxford University Press text, *The Study*

*of Spirituality*, as follows: “Prayer above all else is conversation with God. It is the primary speech of the true self to the true God. It reaches far below words into the affects and images and instincts living in us unconsciously... We speak in prayer from our most hidden heart to the hiddenness of God, in whose astonishing image we were fashioned and find our true faces.” (Jones, Wainwright, and Yarnold, p. 24) One may argue that Cohen seeks forgiveness for daring to share the realizations he holds as true, a benevolent critique towards the Jewish tradition, which custom has required him to acknowledge, and therefore seek repentance. However, as demonstrated in the previous section, the Bible itself can be hypocritical, and Cohen uses it as a tool to his advantage. Yet the guilt from transgressing beyond primarily social expectations remains a nagging thought in Cohen’s mind. In the second extract, the word “péché”, or “sinned”, is repeated several times throughout the poem, suggesting that he has sinned in some aspect of his life. While no human being is perfect, it is clear that Cohen still struggles with the need to showcase a progression beyond the obligations of tradition, and still respect them. Although Cohen believes extra-marital and homosexual amorous desires to still be spiritually legitimate, he accepts that orthodox Judaism, and greater society surrounding him cannot always accept these perceptions. He is therefore a hybrid, and embodies many of the clashes between tradition and modernity often part of the early 20th century French-Jewish experience. This reality therefore suggests that: “Jewishness can be seen as a ‘spirituality alien to the received category of religion’, a spirituality which is decisive for Cohen and which is knotted around certain customs which have a strong emotional charge and around a solidarity

with the suffering of one's own." (Decout, p. 67) Judaism, and by extension the ongoing power of Biblical tradition, is therefore more pluralistic within Cohen's vision, which is refracted by his acculturation in secular and Christian aspects of his surrounding Francophone culture. Through Cohen's own suffering, from blatant anti-Semitism as a child or rather more subtle difficulties in acculturation, he develops his own pluralistic interpretation of Judaism as an affirming force for the marginalized, even among the Jews themselves. Through his contemporary rewriting, at some points more than others, Cohen is able to synthesize the French and Jewish cultural spheres in his own manner, shaped by his desire to give spiritual legitimacy to all individuals.

### 2.3 An intervention of Divine Providence masked by tradition

Albert Cohen describes the intervention of Divine Providence as masked by tradition. In essence, as the Jewish tradition states every person is created in God's image, all desires must be, by extension, a product of this creation. Cohen believes this is masked by constraints of Jewish traditions which have been constructed over time, which through the realizations of living in his time and place, have enabled him to liberate these desires in his writing. At times, his characters are blinded by the previously mentioned 'theatricality' of legitimized, Western romance, and perhaps succumb to prescribed standards in the false belief that they are spiritually correct. However, what Cohen perceives as true, or destined by Divine Providence, presents

itself on several occasions in his novels, notably through the spiritual aura that occurs in Ariane and Solal's relationship.

In *Belle du Seigneur*, when Ariane and Solal exchange kisses for the first time, she turns to him and says:

“Dites, c’est Dieu, n’est-ce pas ? demandait-elle, égarée, souriante.” (Cohen, p. 457)

.....  
““Tell me, is this not God’s doing?” she asked with a bewildered smile.” (Cohen, p. 393)

And shortly thereafter, while playing the piano for him, the narrator states:

“Pieusement, elle jouait pour lui, et son visage était convaincu, visité.” (Cohen, p. 454)

.....  
“Piously she played for him, her face aglow with faith, transfixed.” (Cohen, p. 391)

It is noteworthy that these descriptions surround the initial intense physical encounter between the two, and a portion of the excitement is likely from the novelty of the situation. But Ariane is convinced that it is God who has brought them together, also likely influenced by her own idealized visions of tradition: “For many people, the antiquity of sexual norms is a reason to obey them...When a sexual norm has such deep layers of sediment, or blankets enough territory to seem universal, the effort of wriggling out from under it can be enormous.” (Warner, p. 6) Ariane’s first true love was with another woman, a young Russian woman named Varvara. After her death, Adrien saved her from an intense depression, and they married. However, the reader

is led to believe that Ariane is only attracted to women, as she never felt fully satisfied in her marriage, and discovers later in her relationship with Solal that a similar sentiment presents itself. But in this moment, as she feels a sense of excitement and relief from the burdens of her marriage, she is convinced that it is a Divine intervention. And besides, it is possible that it is in fact an act of God, in all that Solal reveals to her. “Cohen’s work thus proposes, more than an epic in the manner of traditional gestures, a crossing of Jewish existence within the Western world.” (Decout, p. 11) For Cohen, and through Ariane, this “Jewish existence” is beyond simply a living, social reality within this world, as Ariane is convinced that there is something Divinely destined in her encounter with Solal. The entire conflation between the Jewish experience and the Western world is deeply multifaceted throughout Cohen’s work, on both a physical and meta-physical level. Therefore, the dynamic nature of the expression of God’s influence on Cohen’s characters suggests that as they are already spiritually conscious, they believe God is at the center of all that crosses their path.

Since Cohen draws on imagery and teachings from both the Jewish and Christian traditions in his works, he uses Solal as a metaphor for a Messianic figure who brings teachings and spiritual righteousness to Ariane. And select Jewish philosophers affirm the righteousness and universality of Christian teachings Cohen seeks to convey. To this effect, Ariane describes Solal in the following manner:

“il parle de Dieu avec ce regard ailleurs il m’enseigne le chemin la vérité et la vie moi j’écoute à genoux très pure il ne parle plus maintenant il reste debout devant moi parce qu’il sait ce qui va venir je suis très émue je m’incline je fais une révérence grand respect” (Cohen, p. 217)

.....  
“he speaks of God but does not look at me for his eyes are fixed on some distant prospect he gives me knowledge of the path of truth and life and I in purity of heart give ear on bended knee he stops speaking he stands before me because he knows what must come to pass I am moved to tears I bow my head I give a curtsy of profound respect” (Cohen, p. 180)

Through Solal, it is suggested that God’s path is “le chemin la vérité et la vie”, the French version of “via et veritas et vita”, a Latin phrase meaning “the way and the truth and the life”. The words are taken from the Biblical passage John 14:6, and were spoken by Jesus in reference to himself.<sup>9</sup> Despite Ariane’s innate homosexual desire and disdain for the male form, she is so transfixed by Solal’s presence in her life that a religious energy is cast on the entire scene. The subtle use of this initially Christian phrase in a text that is overwhelmingly spiritual from a Jewish perspective challenges the distinctions between the two, and suggests that God’s truth will ultimately prevail, in all relationships. “Cohen in fact develops in his writings a strategy of denouncing anti-Semitic stereotypes through the grotesque exaggeration of Jewish characters, which allows him to take up these stereotypes on his own account and to manipulate them, to use them in order to change their meaning and scope.” (Maisier, p. 25)

Instead of Solal immediately rejecting Ariane’s affection, as one can infer that Saltiel would do, the embrace of her spiritual energy suggests a benevolence between the teachings of the two faiths, as they are searching for complete fulfillment.

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<sup>9</sup> *King James Bible*. Project Gutenberg, 1992.

Cohen suggests that one cannot always understand or ration God's will, and this transcends through his characters. It can be affirmed that Cohen: "plays on the principles of the Talmud and the Kabbalah, working on the spatiality of the text, making the interpretation and the question wander in his work, disconcerting the letter, the name or the number in an endless movement." (Decout, pp. 57-58) Ariane says on various occasions that she does not fully comprehend why she is in a relationship with Solal, still masked by the social idea that he has the potential to 'save her' from her unfulfilled marriage, while in fact, the repression of her same-sex desire is the root of her unhappiness. On various occasions, she expresses the following:

"J'avais senti d'avance la volonté de Celui qui sait tout ! ... Enfin, tout reste dans l'incertain, entre les mains de Celui pour qui tout est certain. ... C'est Dieu qui l'a mis sur mon chemin." (Cohen, pp. 199, 323, 417)

.....  
 "I had anticipated the will of God, from Whom nothing is hid! ... There's no knowing how it will all turn out, it's in the hands of the Almighty, to whom all things are known. ... He was placed on my path by God." (Cohen, pp. 165, 275, 357)

The same affirmation of Divine Providence can be applied to her homosexual tendencies as well—however she never thinks to question them as she does with her relationship to Solal. To explain this apparent Divine affirmation of her same-sex desire, which escapes Ariane's consciousness, one may note that sexual exploration is encouraged in the similarly secretive passages of the Kabbalah, since there is an element of sex that is connected to God. In fact, another term for the Kabbalah is תורת הסוד, or the Secret Torah, suggesting it contains hidden spiritual revelations.

Through the spiritual auras that Ariane and Solal witness, notably in their initial intimate encounters, the primordial essence of Biblical and religious traditions are revealed, erasing the differences between the two beings and focusing on the Divine aspect of sexual discovery. Mystical thought through the Kabbalah suggests: “God’s emanations are both male and female. Although men—and male seed—are the active elements in the mystical doctrine of intercourse, women are not merely passive recipients of male seed. The feminine is given pride or place in the system of the *sefirot*, as the element that mediates between God and the world. (Biale, p. 112) Ariane candidly admits at the end of *Belle du Seigneur* that she has never felt attracted to men, and has always had homosexual desires and was deeply in love with Varvara, which becomes increasingly evident over the course of the text: “This is clearly an enduring lesbian love affair, not a passing sorority infatuation.” (Abecassis, p. 157) It can be inferred that all of the emotional and physical torment between her and Solal, and her and Adrien, was therefore part of a mystic, spiritual process in order for her to affirm and solidify her homosexual tendencies beyond the ‘theatricality’ of Western romance, which unfortunately, she could not escape before taking her life with Solal. In this context, the Kabbalah serves as an affirming aspect of Jewish culture which can be used to affirm innate sexual desires within a spiritual context, even though they may be marginalized by mainstream Jewish communities, conservative practice within the overshadowing presence of Biblical tradition, and the dominant secular culture.

A noteworthy aspect of Cohen's narrative strategy is his ability to shift among the inner monologues of his various characters. In one instance, when the narrator is in the mind of Solal, showcasing Solal's thoughts, he expresses his belief that Ariane is in fact decreed by destiny to cross his path, and that she embodies her own spiritual calling regardless of whether or not she is Jewish:

"C'était elle, l'inattendue et l'attendue, aussitôt élue en ce soir de destin, élue au premier battement de ses longs cils recourbés." (Cohen, p. 48)

.....  
"It was She, the Unexpected One so long awaited, revealed as the Chosen One on that evening decreed by Destiny, proclaimed by the first flutter of her long curved lashes." (Cohen, p. 34)

The juxtaposition of "l'inattendue et l'attendue", or "the Unexpected One so long awaited", mirrors the apparent paradox referenced in the previous sections, as Cohen is a hybrid of cultures. This ambivalence to fully adhere to either traditional Jewish culture or secular, or Christian-dominated, French culture, extends through virtually all of *Belle du Seigneur*. Because Ariane is "élue", or "Chosen", as a spiritual figure, her homosexuality an integral part, it is argued that she therefore reveals a spiritual legitimacy regardless of whatever sexual or romantic act in which she finds herself. The Kabbalah can further legitimize her innate homosexuality and spiritual righteousness, when analyzing one text in the *Zohar*, the chief text of the Kabbalah: "As one text in the *Zohar* points out, the nature of *malkhut* is that it has no stable identity but instead reflects the configuration of powers above it, sometimes loving and sometimes angry. ... Oscillating between positive and negative poles, she is the very definition of ambivalence." (Biale, p. 112) The *malkhut* the tenth of the

*sephiroth*, one of the ten emanations surrounding the Infinite and by means of which it relates to the finite. In essence, it is a mystical interpretation of God, suggesting that this realm of Jewish spirituality is affirming of same-sex desire. In other words, the oscillating nature of the feminine aspect of God, which can by extension be reflected in Ariane, can affirm or reject whatever desire it feels compelled to. Since the Abrahamic spiritual perception of God is in essence beyond the binary human concept of gender, this ambivalence, which can be an affirming force, manifests itself in Jewish mysticism to support any sexual desires that are marginalized through their surrounding cultures. This manifestation is further affirmed by Solal later in the text, who becomes aware by the middle of the novel that Ariane is attracted to women:

“Tant pis, Dieu ne faisait pas attention à ces détails, et puis quoi, il savait bien comment elle était faite.” (Cohen, p. 495)

.....  
 “No matter, God wasn’t bothered by little things like that, and anyway He knew what she looked like with no clothes on.” (Cohen, p. 427)

As Solal is ultimately a product of his adoptive European home, the aforementioned passage reads as an affirming, contemporary understanding of one’s desires. Since Cohen already affirms the spiritual righteousness of Ariane as a Gentile, through Solal, he is able to affirm her homosexuality through this portrayal. Many aspects of Ariane’s difference to Solal can be encompassed by “ces détails”, or “little things”, but her homosexual desire is undoubtedly part of it. Moreover, the phrasing of “il savait bien”, “He knew”, further reinforces God’s omniscience, and her desire for Varvara is no hindrance to her attaining spiritual righteousness. This

perception of ambivalence within Divinely accepted sexual desire illustrates the evolution of Jewish understanding in the era of Cohen, and reflects, by extension, the notion of progression and acculturation that has existed throughout Jewish history: “Judaism has been most successful in transforming itself (and, in certain important instances, others) in response to its encounter over the centuries with other traditions and cultures. And yet it has been able to maintain a balance between continuity and change. It has been able to to integrate many new ideas that were first ‘alien’ but which became ‘Jewish.’” (Lubarsky, p. 11) As society evolves, does an acceptance to the varieties of love that have always existed not also evolve? Judaism, and various approaches to theology, are therefore not entirely apart from the host country in which it is practiced. As Solal and Ariane are above all products of their European surroundings, any perception of a spiritual presence will be influenced by such culture. The affirmations Cohen presents therefore depicts a cultural shift toward a less orthodox Jewish practice, and suggests that even marginalized desires can hold the same legitimacy in the French culture as traditionally accepted ones.

While Solal has these inner inclinations that Ariane is homosexual—and the next chapter will discuss the fact that Solal in fact has latent homosexual tendencies—he is simultaneously unable to fully accept this fact as the novel continues at such length. This resistance shows the evolutionary process of the early twentieth century, a time still challenging for interfaith and homosexual relations. It is also possible that Ariane struggles from internalized homophobia as well, and to this effect, the two prolong their “theatrical” heterosexual encounter for over a year. “Although

something in Ariane touches Solal's inner core, he fails to appreciate her visceral hatred of the phallic order, her phobia about the phallus itself, her homosexuality, and above all, her desire for death. Solal must be partly blind to the obvious, since the whole novel would not be narratable, would implode, did Solal not cling to these misconceptions." (Abecassis, p. 158) It is understandable that these evolutions are occasionally met with resistance, even on a personal level. Solal admits at one point that he would like to be seen as a different kind of Jew:

"... 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 ..." (Cohen, p. 997)

.....  
"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 of men because I make mock of them" (Cohen, p. 871)

While Cohen states that he is not Solal in various interviews and personal declarations, his character is closely a reflection of Cohen's own life experiences and perspectives. As Solal proclaims himself as "un Juif exceptionnel", or "an exceptional Jew", this can manifest into the affirmation of desires still marginalized despite the evolving consciousness of European society. In essence, Cohen reaffirms that often: "some sexual tastes or practices (or rather an idealized version of them) are mandated for everyone. All too commonly, people think not only that their own way of living is right, but that it should be everyone else's moral standard as well. They don't imagine that sexual variance can be consistent with morality." (Warner, p. 4) This notion of

breaking free of apparent religious and social prescriptions inevitably seeps into realms of Jewish practice, is evident in Cohen's other works, such as *Les Valeureux*:

“Je Vous parlerai aussi des Progrès de l'Humanité grâce aux Dix Commandements ! ... Vous voyez combien la Loi de Moïse Vous a changée !”  
(Cohen, pp. 321-322)

.....  
“I will also tell You about the Progress of Humanity thanks to the Ten Commandments! ... You see how much the Law of Moses has changed You!”  
(Cohen, pp. 321-322)

In a prolonged discussion in *Les Valeureux*, Solal's relatives discuss their role in contemporary France and how Jewish law has evolved, or rather their relation to it over time. Through the word choice “grâce aux Dix Commandements”, or “thanks to the Ten Commandments”, the reader is led to believe that the Ten Commandments, rather than absolutely suppressive, have the ability to help Jews adapt to contemporary life, in whatever host culture they may find themselves. “Theologically, emotionally, even spiritually, love transforms, and necessarily, the permutations in the nature of that love affect the ways in which it alters us, and our commitments to the sacred.” (Michaelson, p. 217) The theological transformation of how the Ten Commandments are perceived, and the role they play in the lives of Solal's relatives, demonstrates the consciousness of Jewish communities regarding matter in the time of Cohen's writing. It is suggested that Cohen's view of societal progression manifests into a progressive openness of Jewish laws, which consequently yield a more inclusive spiritual realm accessible to all. This authentic dialogue is a characteristic element of Cohen's writing, which characterizes him as a Jewish writer

that promotes discussion: “Neither the public nor the critics have singled out Roger Ikor, André Schwartz-Bart, Albert Cohen or Elie Wiesel because they are Jewish, but each of them, by the mere quality of his work, has allowed readers to gain a true perception of the Jewish world and has opened up the authentic dialogue that only art allows.” (Philippe, pp. 395-396) The inclusion of Albert Cohen alongside other Jewish writers, including Elie Wiesel, gives Cohen the same societal impact as his contemporaries, which reveal an understanding of the human condition through their relation to Judaism. Cohen’s connection to Judaism therefore enables him to extend spiritual revelations to all, and through the ideals of emancipation from the post-Dreyfus era, the French culture serves to complement it. This being the case, in his final years of life, Cohen expresses his desire for all Jews to have the realizations he has acquired throughout his life:

“O mes Juifs, connaissez votre peuple, vénérez-le d’avoir voulu le schisme et la séparation, d’avoir décidé devant le mont Sinaï, d’avoir follement décidé qu’il ne voulait plus être de la nature et obéir à ses animales lois, d’avoir décidé qu’il obéirait à la Loi morale, Loi nouvelle qu’il inventait et qui allait, de par sa volonté, transformer le primate en homme. Hélas, ils ne voient pas et ne verront pas ma vérité, et je reste seul et morfondu avec ma vérité.” (Cohen, p. 133)

.....  
 “O my Jews, know your people, venerate them for having wanted schism and separation, for having decided before Mount Sinai, for having madly decided that they no longer wanted to be of nature and obey its animal laws, for having decided that they would obey the Moral Law, a new Law that they invented in which they would, by their will, transform the primate into a man. Alas, they do not see and will not see my truth, and I remain alone and mortified with my truth.” (Cohen, p. 133)

As seen in his *Carnets*, Cohen feels alone and mortified with his truth, “ma vérité”. In his eyes, an imperfect people, having wanted schism and separation from the rest of humanity, the Jews have, in essence, forsaken an understanding of the entirety of their people. In other words, through the rituals and creations of Jewish culture over time, a division has been created not only between Jews and Gentiles, but within Jewish communities themselves, at the expense of understanding the hidden benevolence of the Almighty. “May they not forget that this other who intrigues and sometimes irritates them is only their double, this human brother evoked by Albert Cohen in his *Carnets*.” (Phillipe, p. 401) Cohen’s sensitivity towards the marginalized are understandable given his own childhood and identity formation at the crossroads of tradition and modernity, the aforementioned paradox of the French Jew of his era. Therefore, one can infer that the common humanity—which is this case an understanding and acceptance of one’s differences of desire, can remain unseen by his fellow Jews, despite his attempts to not only present it, but spiritually legitimize it. There is no single, definitive answer as to why it can remain unseen—binary religious observance, remaining sheltered from acculturation—including the consumption of contemporary literature, never having experienced personal traumas that caused one to contemplate one’s existence, traditions, or upbringing, or an absence of curiosity towards exploring non-normative and supposedly errant desires are possible reasons. But regardless, Cohen’s use of literature as a tool to forge his own spiritual practice, through which he shares his interpretations of Jewish texts and traditions in a

pluralistic way, he echoes the notions of Universalism at the root of the French culture, showing Judaism as an evolving, living culture that can adapt to survive.

Albert Cohen's contemporary insight on Jewish tradition serves as the basis to spiritually legitimize marginalized desire. The direct references to Biblical passages suggest that the Torah serves, more or less, as an affirming source for all spiritual beings, reflected consequently in Christian practices and even his own invented religious texts. "Cohen's work on the Law is therefore neither a wise and scrupulous reading of the Bible nor blasphemous vandalism. More than a reader or destroyer, Cohen is a rereader." (Decout, p. 63) Through these primal sources, one understands Cohen's place as a hybrid figure between both traditional Jewish culture and a Franco-European society in an era faced with religious change and an increasing social acceptance of individuals despite residual strains of anti-Semitism. The consequent introspection renders a nuanced vision of Jewish traditions, which Cohen uses throughout his poetry and novels. "One thing is certain: the decisive influence that the Affair will have on the fate of the Jewish community of the twentieth century, that is to say, on the fate of children who, like Albert Cohen, take their first steps, learning to read and write, while it breaks out, flames and dies." (Blot, p. 27) This metaphorical flame is particularly evident in *Belle du Seigneur*, notably in the spiritual aura surrounding Ariane and Solal. Despite it being a relationship filled with potential problems and destined to fail, it is through this notion of destiny decreed by God that the protagonists are able to realize and affirm their homosexual attractions.

While sometimes blinded by the “theatricality” of Western love and relationships, in their artificiality, they inevitably mirror the expectations of traditional Jewish or Christian partnerships in the sense that they are anchored in heteronormativity and respect other religious boundaries. One may therefore wonder: “However, Solal cannot accept these torturing contradictions: did he invent it to assert his difference?” (Korine-Shafir, p. 199) The conflation of Cohen/Solal is perpetuated throughout *Belle du Seigneur*, and by questioning whether or not the contradictions presented through religious and mainstream culture are ‘invented to assert difference’, the author and his respective character challenge these notions. By daring to transgress these norms, which Cohen’s formative years and later introspection proved to create, a canvas of acceptance beyond traditional interpretations of Jewish spirituality is painted by his works. This acceptance is further expanded upon in the next chapter, as Cohen sheds further light on the homosexual sentiments of the characters and how they shift from a place of transgression to one of acceptance.

\* \* \*

### Chapter 3: Albert Cohen's transformed understanding of desire: from transgression to acceptance

The dominating belief in the Jewish tradition has historically reaffirmed the idea that the only spiritually legitimate relationship for marriage is one that is heterosexual and between two Jews. According to Dr. Georges Valensin, a conservative French Jewish author from the mid-twentieth century, traditional Jewish practice has repressed the acceptance of homosexuality and intermarriage due to the apparent obstacle they present towards Jewish values: "The people around the Hebrews had a reputation for debauchery; austerity and purity of morals was a way to distinguish themselves... [and this morality] seemed hardly compatible with homosexual practices." (Valensin, p. 74) Any couple that deviates from this reinforced standard, whether by Biblical interpretations or cultural practices, likely a combination of both, is therefore marginalized, deemed as inherently corrupt and void of attaining spiritual righteousness. The prescription of heteronormativity is therefore present in this idea, which is reaffirmed in the ongoing power of Biblical tradition and encompassing Franco-European cultures at the time of Albert Cohen. However, there is simultaneously an innate difference from the surrounding dominant culture, as Jewish identity results in the imposition of an image, making even heteronormativity somehow errant from mainstream society within this Jewish subtext. An interfaith and homosexual relationship would therefore be twice as errant from spiritual legitimacy within this plane of thinking. As explored in the previous chapter, the literary tradition

of Albert Cohen is one that seeks to reassess the validity in the binary nature of these religious prescriptions, in an effort to showcase the spiritual validity within the supposedly marginalized desires of homosexual and interfaith couples. When reading Albert Cohen's novels, as they undertake the process of normalizing the apparent abnormal, one contemplates: "[Whether] human sexuality [is] an analogy for a process within the divine, or is it an allegory emptied of physical content?" (Biale, p. 113) Albert Cohen seeks to understand this allegory, showcasing the hidden spirituality through the acceptance of marginalized desires.

Through this analysis of Albert Cohen's works, the main focus of marginalized desire rests on the characters of Ariane and Solal, the main characters in *Belle du Seigneur*, both of whom have homosexual tendencies. While the presentation of Ariane's is much more overt through her initial love affair with Varvara, and reoccurring through her disgust for the male sex, Solal's more subtle homosexual desires equally lend themselves to analysis in this chapter. It can be argued that Albert Cohen plays with the notion of abnormality with regard to these characters—the apparent charge of abnormality that is cast upon this marginalized desire renders them an object of interest for the author: "Abnormality is desirable in the same way as exclusion, in spite of the tensions it entails, bringing both honor and unhappiness, prevalent of a profit that remains in the state of wishful thinking." (Maisier, p. 136) Because "abnormality" equates to "exclusion" in terms of desirability, Albert Cohen seeks to transcend beyond these social stigma, which he experienced firsthand to a

degree, which therefore led to his own religious practice by normalizing the supposedly errant desires of his characters. Ariane and Solal notice a marginality within themselves, as they are both “abnormal” from both the perspectives of sexual preference, and for Solal as an ‘errant Jew’, they are wishful in the sense that they will be understood by themselves, and society at large, through their relationship. They are together because of an external social ordination of heteronormativity; their relationship is merely a façade to appeal the societal default of the period, and over time, it begins to crumble. All the while, Albert Cohen does not chastise these homosexual desires, or the fact that Ariane and Solal are also breaking a prescription of refraining from inter-religious relationships, but rather elevate them to be an extension of the Eternal within them.

This chapter will analyze Albert Cohen’s transformed understanding of desire from transgression to acceptance through three related criteria: First, the false validity in French societal heteronormativity of the 1930s will be presented, and to what extent Albert Cohen is cognizant of this narrative. Through the construction of Ariane and Solal, he presents an acknowledgement that challenges the idea that default heteronormativity is synonymous with spiritual righteousness. As Ariane is the characterization of Jane Fillion, a lesbian who captured his attention for many years, the characterization of Solal as Albert Cohen is the refraction of this real-life experience. Next, Albert Cohen’s depictions of solitude and compatibility in a romanticized vision will be discussed. The overarching heteronormative expectations

within French society of the period lead the characters of Albert Cohen's novels to believe they are morally safe or deeply in love, while it was in fact only an illusion. The cracks in this falsehood consequently enable the author to showcase the hidden spiritual legitimacy that comes in contrast to commonly viewed spiritual obstacles. As Albert Cohen sought to establish a sense of societal acceptance within himself, marginalized as a Jew, he extends these notions of marginalization in the framework of same-sex desire through the character dynamics of Ariane and Solal. Finally, the author's presentation of understanding of oneself through same-sex affirmation will be analyzed. Albert Cohen explores this idea, as he was curious about same-sex desire in his futile attempt to seduce Jane Fillion. His futile attempt to seduce Jane Fillion ignited his desire to explore non-heterosexuality. While one may grow in pursuit of understanding these desires, or in the case of Albert Cohen, 'conquering' them first, they remain an unwavering part of a Divinely decreed soul, which becomes present in the characterization and narrative strategy of *Belle du Seigneur*. Albert Cohen's practice of Judaism in essence is conducted through the hidden spirituality he seeks to showcase, despite being unable to seduce and conquer his own Ariane. As a result, this transformed understanding of desire from transgression to acceptance seeks to affirm the righteousness among all couples, and that homosexual and interfaith unions can in fact have the same spiritual righteousness as commonly accepted unions.

### 3.1 The false validity in heteronormativity

As Albert Cohen was formed by the heteronormative society of his time, the characters in his novels are no exception. Ariane and Solal cling to the belief that a heterosexual couple is by default legitimized by society, and therefore accepted. In attempt to conform to this model, they try to convince themselves that their amorous gestures towards each other are sincere reflections of their love, which is arguably a false narrative. A particularly emblematic instance occurs in the second half of *Belle du Seigneur*, when Solal kisses Ariane:

“Il l’embrassa aussitôt sur le front, sur les yeux, sur les mains, pour la contaminer d’espoir.” (Cohen, p. 884)

.....  
“He kissed her once on her forehead, her eyes, her hands, to infect her with hope.” (Cohen, p. 772)

The word choice of “la contaminer d’espoir”, or “infect her with hope”, suggests that a toxicity exists within this external —and then internal—heteronormative expectation, hence the verb “contaminer”, or “infect”, seeks to suppress any supposedly errant desire from within a person. Through his kisses, Solal is trying to fill within Ariane the belief that a heterosexual union is the only valid form of union hood, and the hope to succumb to it. It can also be argued that he is trying to affirm this to himself, yet struggles, as he does not kiss her directly on the lips. While the reader is led to believe that Ariane and Solal have intercourse at various points in the novel, it is noteworthy that Solal does not kiss Ariane more intimately in the aforementioned passage, suggesting a latent homosexuality that will be explored later.

“This narrative effect corresponds moreover to a configuration of desire, since Solal, the arouser, regrets and finally dreads the sexual demand of his lover whose exhaustion he hopes for.” (Noudelmann, p. 338) In essence, the infectious kisses on Ariane’s forehead foreshadow the exhaustion of a heteronormative quest. Thus, Ariane and Solal are never truly content together. Their initial moments of romantic interest lead the reader to believe they are moments of unbridled passion, while the characters themselves are convincing themselves of this apparent heterosexual legitimacy, Solal shapes his own vision of desire, which he tries to imprint upon Ariane.

This discontentment is visible at another moment in the narrative, having escalated to a point where Ariane can no longer support it, as seen in this discussion between her and Solal:

“Et maintenant à quoi pensez-vous ? demanda-t-il. Je pense que j’ai pitié de moi, dit-elle, parce que toute ma vie va se passer à vouloir vous plaire, à mettre des talons trop hauts et des jupes trop étroites, à faire des rotations avec ma robe, comme tout à l’heure, genre mademoiselle de La Mole, c’est assez lamentable et je me dégoûte, je deviens une femme, c’est affreux. Elle s’agenouilla, lui baisa la main. Terrible, ce besoin de s’agenouiller. Dites, gardez-moi, gardez-moi toujours, lui dit-elle.” (Cohen, p. 483)

.....  
““And now what are you thinking?” he asked. ‘I’m thinking how sorry for myself I am, because the rest of my life will be spent trying to please you, wearing heels that are too high and skirts that are too tight, twirling my dress like I did just now, like Mademoiselle de La Mole in the book, it’s quite appalling and I make myself sick, I’m turning into a regular female, it’s dreadful.’ She knelt and kissed his hand. Deplorable, this urge to be forever falling on her knees. ‘Say you’ll keep me, keep me by you always,’ she said.” (Cohen, p. 417)

In this passage, Ariane is becoming cognizant that she is a puppet for Solal's amorous escapades, a creation of an imagined socially respectable couple. In her phrasing of "je me dégoûte, je deviens une femme, c'est affreux", or "I make myself sick, I'm turning into a regular female", it is clear to the reader that she is suffering from the continued imposition of heterosexual gestures and relations. From her "turning into a regular female", she is repressing her lesbian urge—and this presents itself as a kiss on the hand, not in a more intimate place, as Solal did to her. This social conditioning is in essence a mask that the characters wear, which only perpetuates the false idea that heteronormativity is synonymous with a righteous union: "For Cohen-Solal, the mask constantly represents the obligatory role played in the social space or the appearance of love: impossible to be sincere, naked, under the gaze of the other." (Lewy-Bertaut, p. 161) This mask is the adoption of a role, and by extension, a sort of theatricality that defines the Western tradition of relationships and courtship. Through his novels, Albert Cohen creates a stage on which he criticizes this supposed ultimate power held by the heterosexual default.

Another moment in the text demonstrates the characters' realization of their presence as actors:

"Acteurs, oui, ridicules acteurs. Acteur, lui, l'autre soir en son agenouillement devant elle. Actrice, elle, avec ses mains tendues de suzeraine pour le relever, avec son vous êtes mon seigneur, je le proclame, fière sans doute d'être une héroïne shakespearienne." (Cohen, p. 478)

.....

.....  
“Actors, that’s what they were, absurdly play-acting. He had been acting the other night when he had gone down on his knees to her. She had been acting too when she had held her out her hands like some lady paramount and feudally bade him rise, acting with her ‘You are my lord, I proclaim it with trumpets’, clearly fancying her chances as a Shakespearian heroine.” (Cohen, p. 413)

This passage reveals that both Ariane and Solal are conscious in their adaptation of the externally expected role of heteronormativity. The mocking reference to a Shakespearian heroine casts a feudal energy on the encounter, suggesting that upholding traditional gender roles in a relationship are absurdly outdated. Despite this realization, they manage to remain together until the very end of the narrative, acting together to satisfy the accepted status of traditional heteronormativity, regardless of how outdated it may be. The tradition of the modernist period enables Albert Cohen to at least make his characters overtly question the archaic nature of heteronormativity, yet the force remains too great for them to escape. In turn, the influence of heteronormativity is a subject of interest in the theatrical dimension of *Belle du Seigneur*. Essentially serving as puppets in contrast to their marginalized desire, Ariane and Solal shed light on the innate falsehood within the heteronormative culture in which they find themselves: “In the world seen as theater, life loses its gravity: it becomes a game. Moreover, the discovery of theatricality brings comfort in that it sheds new light on social relationships and offers a new framework of explanation for existence.” (Bélisle, p. 107) This social obsession continues to oscillate within Albert Cohen’s narrative, and each amorous interaction between

Ariane and Solal is apparently subject to the external view, granted internally imposed, of sexual conformity:

“Car l’action du sexuel est passagère tandis que souveraine et durable celle du social. ... Ô force du social.” (Cohen, pp. 306, 826)

.....  
“For the action of the sexual is fleeting, while the social urge is sovereign and enduring. ... Oh the power of social conformity!” (Cohen, pp. 260, 719)

Through the intertwined narrative strategy of *Belle du Seigneur*, Albert Cohen makes it clear that social hierarchies of the period infiltrate into every aspect of one’s persona, including sexuality. The lengthy discourse surrounding Adrien’s love for power and role in the League of Nations, and his spar with Solal, reinforce this hierarchical nature, which inevitably creates a mainstream, legitimized desire and a marginalized one: “Sex has a politics of its own. Hierarchies of sex sometimes serve no real purpose except to prevent sexual variance. They create victimless crimes, imaginary threats, and moralities of cruelty.” (Warner, p. 25) To this effect, Albert Cohen draws a parallel between marginalized desire and the marginalization of the Jews in Western Europe. As Albert Cohen attests to the sentiment of “otherness”, this same sentiment can be felt in other marginalized groups. “Cohen’s renewal of sexuality, as well as the ambition to live love as a genesis, thus calls into question the categories of the masculine and the feminine, of the other and the self. One death in particular is then at the heart of the questioning of both love and Jewishness: otherness.” (Decout, p. 260) The notion of “otherness” is at the root of the problem

explored here, which Albert Cohen explores through the avenue of same-sex desire in light of marginalization and heteronormative standards.

Another aspect of “otherness” is the imposition of the Jewish image upon Albert Cohen as a Jewish man, both direct and self-imposed, which he seeks to overcome through the discourse and inner monologues presented in his novel. “It was only with Sigmund Freud that these various concerns began to fuse into our contemporary understanding of the relationship between sexual organs and psychosexualities.” (Johnson, p. 22) The Modernist literary period, which refracts the evolutionary conscious of psychology at the time, begins to overtly illustrate the conflation between sex and sexuality—the reality of being a man and its social implications. By giving the marginalized desires of homosexual and interfaith interest the same spiritual legitimacy as their mainstream counterparts, Albert Cohen, in his own way, is liberating himself of the stigma associated to the Jewish man as an outsider in all contexts, whether they be political or social absent from any direct sexual connotation. It has been seen that: “Eastern European Jews elevated a totally oppositional view of masculinity—one that favored scholarship, gentleness, self-abnegation... [as opposed to the] Western masculine image.” (Rosenberg, p. 2) While Albert Cohen was a Sephardic Jew, the same current of separateness from ‘default Western masculinity’ remains a current within Jewish communities, which he witnessed. While he did not want to completely distance himself from this Jewish image, the negative perceptions of Jewish masculinity as completely distinct and unable to acculturate were clearly bothersome for Cohen, as he sought to transcend

this apparent barrier. In the words of Hoberman: “The exceptional status of the Jewish male has been his exclusion from a European ideology of adventure. ... For the adventurer the world is a field of action on which he explores his own capacities, and the role of other people is to serve the ends of an essentially aesthetic project whose perfect result is a kind of male grandeur. ... This doctrine, and the military culture from which it derives, have shaped the predominant image of masculinity in the West.” (Rosenberg, p. 19) It is therefore clear that the dominant, ‘Christian’ culture of Europe has formed the notions of default masculinity in the West, to which the Jewish man struggled to adapt in his quest for greater acculturation. Albert Cohen’s attempt to ‘conquer’ Jane Fillion is by extent his own attempt to shed his own stigma as an ‘outsider’ to the Western idealized vision of masculinity, and therefore adopt it and become more fully acculturated. The fact that Jane was a lesbian added another aspect of interest to this personal conquest, leading to Albert Cohen’s curiosity in the intermixing between these various aspects of identity. “In the early Zionist era: “Since there was a widespread belief that manhood in general was imperiled in both Europe and America at this time, it behooved Jewish males, who were considered just barely men themselves and were identified with women and homosexuals, to participate in the ‘muscular Christian’ movement on their own terms as the ‘new muscular Jews.’” (Rosenberg, pp. 21-22) Given Albert Cohen’s curiosity towards same-sex desire, his own self-need to transcend beyond the stereotypical imposition of inferiority towards Jewish men was only magnified, to crush any barriers or hinderances towards acculturation, or even spirituality, that they present. If Albert Cohen was going to

succeed as an outsider in Francophone Europe, he could not let the supposedly inferior social stigmas of emasculate Jewish men, homosexuality, and interfaith couple hood stand in his way.

While one religious tradition may perceive another as being corrupt or untrue, simply because it does not align with the predicated values of its own system, the same principle is reflected in the marginalization of same-sex interest. Ariane and Solal try to combat this otherness, despite their differences, which only perpetuates the false validity of heteronormativity. Moreover: “It seldom occurs to anyone that the dominant culture and its family environment should be held accountable for creating the inequalities of access and recognition that produce this sense of shame in the first place.” (Warner, p. 8) While traditional Jewish culture may therefore be a marginalized group by itself, its expectation for heteronormativity in the wake of spiritual legitimacy presents a similar trend visible in mainstream society, thereby creating an additional marginalized group. As a result of their marginalized state, Ariane and Solal have the ability to question their surrounding society—despite being able to fully escape it, their marginalized status and awareness of their homosexual interest gives them a critical perspective on the sexual norms of society. For example, when Solal is observing his colleagues in a meeting one day at the League of Nations, he takes a moment to contemplate on the almost horrific reality that people are clothed during the day, adopting a social role of order, only to be completely animalistic in their private sexual escapades at night:

“ces ministres sont sérieux habillés et la nuit déshabillée ils gigotent sur leurs pauvres femmes mais personne ne semble se douter de cette bouffonnerie ... En cette volière, le sexuel primait parfois, atténuant ou supprimant le social.” (Cohen, pp. 204, 306)

.....  
“they look ever so proper and serious keep all their clothes on by day and at night they swarm naked all over their poor wives but nobody seems to think it’s ridiculous... Sometimes, in this gilded cage, sex occupied the high ground, attenuating or even supplanting the dominant social imperative.” (Cohen, pp. 170, 260)

Solal is not hesitant to criticize the “bouffonnerie” of the dominant heterosexual culture surrounding him. Through this, he presents a hypocrisy that exists through traditional power structures, and from his perspective, no one thinks twice about it. He sees a compassion towards the “pauvres femmes”, or “poor wives”, seemingly victims to the animalistic urges of their male counterparts, which further realizes the created social structures that have been created in essence by default, with no real understanding of the injustice or marginality that is created as a result: “The Cohen narrative gives thickness, life, and voice to these used characters who are usually barely mentioned” (Cabot, p. 22). By critically observing the apparent absurdity of the heteronormativity of mainstream society, Albert Cohen challenges his reader to question sexual practices which are historically deemed legitimate, seeing that they are in fact not as idealized as one may be led to believe. While imagining one’s colleagues outside of their professional standing, reduced to sexual beings, may be unimaginable, Solal dares to see the hidden realities of life beyond the outward social presentation, and how it in essence generates a power structure at the expense of those who do not conform to it: “What remains ‘unthinkable’ and ‘unsayable’

within the terms of an existing cultural form is not within that form; on the contrary, it is the marginalized, not the ally, the loss of sanctions. Not to have social recognition as an effective heterosexual is to lose one possible social identity and perhaps to gain one that is radically less sanctioned.” (Butler, p. 105) The marginalized desire of Ariane and Solal allow an introspection on these norms, demonstrative of the introspective rhetoric of the modernist novel.

Ariane has her own moment in which she cannot fathom the animalistic nature of sex, yet cannot refrain from acknowledging it:

“Papa que je respecte tant Papa affreux sur Maman la maniant aussi comme une bête Papa poussant aussi des cris de chien haha haha comment est-ce possible évidemment tous les gens puisqu'il y a tout le temps des naissances” (Cohen, p. 204)

.....  
“I look up to my Daddy I really do grisly thought Daddy also sprawling on top of Mummy like an animal Daddy snarling and woofing aah aah how is it possible still everybody must do it since people are being born all the time” (Cohen, p. 169)

While reflecting upon the unthinkable reality of a heterosexual encounter, Ariane in essence reaffirms her own homosexual interest by projecting a disgust towards it. Other references to her disgust of the male sex in the novel further reaffirm this sentiment, which have the underlying critique of the heteronormative current in society. “Ariane views any phallic-based sexuality as bestial due to the asymmetry between the penetrating male and the violated female.” (Abecassis, p. 162) As she asks herself “comment est-ce possible”, or “how is it possible”, the reader understands the powerful and transformative nature of sex, and how the

politicization of an act so innate to the human experience can be problematic. “From this foundation, humanity turns away with horror, but at the same time it maintains it. The animality is even so well maintained in the eroticism that the term of animality, or bestiality, does not cease to be bound to him.” (Bataille, p. 103) This recognition of the animalistic nature of a sexual encounter begins to remove the societal norm of heterosexuality from its elevated place it has been commonly given. The decomposition of this cultural creation allows one to understand that other sexual desires are still connections among humans with righteous potential, and the arbitrariness of heteronormativity begins to present itself.

Throughout most of Ariane and Solal’s relationship, there is a forced sense of intimacy that seeps into the narrative. While aware that she is more interested in women, Ariane continues to perpetuate the false validity of heteronormativity in her physical gestures towards Solal. Although disgusted, she cannot escape this overwhelming pressure to be with a man:

“J’aime que tu me déshabilles, j’aime que tu me voies nue, lui dirait-elle. Oh, assez, trop pénible.” (Cohen, p. 877)

.....  
 “I like it when you undress me, I like you to see me naked, she would say. Oh stop it, I can’t take much more of this.” (Cohen, p. 765)

Caught in an oscillating cycle between a created sense of interest and disgust, Ariane begins to realize the false validity in the narrative of heterosexual pleasure, that of which she has convinced herself. “Ariane, rendered passive, is an open book, an *object* of love to whom the meaning of her speech no longer belongs but is

imposed on her by a continual over-interpretation. The clairvoyant gaze operates in such a way that the other person no longer manages to constitute himself as a subject but becomes the screen on which Solal projects his ambivalence.” (Lewy-Bertaut, p. 164) Solal later feeds on this passivity to perpetuate his own desires, shaped by what he has convinced is legitimate for himself based on society’s ordination. However, even in this passage, Ariane similarly perpetuates the inner monologue of heteronormativity, claiming that she likes it when Solal undresses her and sees her naked. But because this statement is immediately followed by her claiming that it is painful, the façade of heteronormativity begins to crack. “The attraction of the passion, that the Western literature did not cease exalting, would thus correspond to an intimate and unavowed desire of suffering, of annihilation.” (Audéoud, p. 167) The modernist novel is open to critiquing this romanticized Western vision of love and connection, of which *Belle du Seigneur* is demonstrative. A later passage continues by describing the building effects of adopting this false heteronormativity and its destructive impacts:

“... malheureuse et qui ne voulait pas le savoir, ne voulait pas voir leur naufrage. Alors, son malheur sortait comme il pouvait, par des maux de tête, des oublis, des fatigues mystérieuses, un amour accru de la nature, une horreur suspecte du snobisme. En tout cas, ne jamais lui dire la vérité, elle en mourrait. Leur pauvre vie.” (Cohen, p. 921)

.....  
 “So unhappy, yet not wanting to admit it, refusing to see that their ship was on the rocks. As a result, her unhappiness showed itself as and when it could, in headaches, fits of absent- mindedness, mysterious onsets of tiredness, an enhanced love of nature and a suspect horror of snobbery. Whatever happens, never tell her the truth. It would kill her. Their miserable life together.” (Cohen, p. 803)

It is noteworthy that in this chapter, “Leur pauvre vie”, or “Their miserable life together”, is repeated seven times at the beginning of seven respective paragraphs. Echoing the importance placed by Jewish culture on the number seven, which reflects both the number of days in which the world was created and the Sabbath, Albert Cohen suggests that each day of existence for Ariane and Solal is laden with depression and sexual dissatisfaction. This repetition serves as an ultimate reinforcement of the self-destruction that occurs when one succumbs to an overarching sexual norm that does not align with one’s own. “Homosexuality or bisexuality are therefore a catalyst of uncertainty and trembling, of redistribution of affinities within the social animality that assigns sexual identities to stereotyped roles.” (Decout, p. 242) In light of this wake of uncertainty, at this point in the narrative, Ariane has not yet been completely transparent to Solal that she is a lesbian, still dealing with the inner pressure to keep her secret, as she “ne voulait pas le savoir”, or “not wanting to admit it”. However, the reader’s insight to this reconciling with sexual fulfillment and social pressure manages to de-mask the homosexual desire of the characters, serving to further question the false validity in heteronormativity: “The word ‘unmask’ perfectly defines Cohen’s approach and that of his characters, who unmask the false and pernicious aspects of Western myths.” (Audéoud, p. 153) Albert Cohen in essence deconstructs the myth of heteronormativity, suggesting that such deconstructions consequently reveal the innate form and shared humanity behind the cultural constructs of hierarchical sexuality. By forming their own views and questioning the validity of the

heterosexual defaults of Western culture, Ariane and Solal can better understand their own marginalized place in society and their own sexuality—an exploratory process which continues throughout the whole narrative.

At one point, Solal asks himself if he is a homosexual:

“Ou peut-être essayer d’être homosexuel ? Non, pas drôle de baiser des lèvres moustachues. Voilà d’ailleurs qui juge les femmes, ces créatures incroyables qui aiment donner des baisers à des hommes, ce qui est horrible.” (Cohen, p. 421)

.....  
“Or perhaps I should try being a homosexual? Best not, I wouldn’t fancy kissing anybody with a mustache. And that, of course, is the measure of woman: a creature who, incredibly, actually likes kissing men. Horrible thought!” (Cohen, p. 361)

The fact that this question crosses Solal’s consciousness suggests a latent homosexuality within him that will be discussed later in this chapter. Solal convinces himself that he is not homosexual, since kissing another man would be reflective of the mainstream heterosexual practice of a woman. Solal idealizes women as spiritual beings, convincing himself of the beauty of the female form. The idea that a creature so perfect could enjoy the brutish and rugged physique of a man escapes Solal’s reasoning. Through this realization, he subtly legitimizes same-sex desire, whether it be between two women or two men. If two women kissing is therefore more fitting with an idealized view of female beauty, only possible through the conditioning of a heteronormative view of the female physique, this logic also applies to two men kissing, despite the fact that Solal claims he is not a homosexual, succumbing to heteronormative practices in his relationship with Ariane. “Indeed, the woman in

Cohen is a being in the confines of contradictory logics: the sexual logic of the thoughts of Ariane reveals, more than a penchant for the lesbianism in the strict sense, a real sexual ambiguity of a being shared between the love of the men and the women. Ariane seems from then on to become the ground of a struggle of antagonistic desires which answers the vision of the world which governs the texts... Also homosexuality is an integral part of Cohen's messianism in love." (Decout, p. 247) Through these "contradictory logics", Cohen continues to play with the benevolences that comes from sexual ambivalence, which slowly reveal the façade of heteronormativity in the Western love tradition. Through Solal's apparent need to justify that he is not a homosexual, he only reinforces the potential that he is one. Because Solal claims that kissing a mustached face is the act of a woman, he is only playing into the hands of a heteronormative society which ordines such behavior: "... for heterosexuality to remain intact as a distinct social form, it *requires* an intelligible conception of homosexuality and also requires the prohibition of that conception in rendering it culturally unintelligible." (Butler, p. 104) Through the deconstruction of the sexual interest between men and women, and the normative trends of society, Solal is at the very least somewhat conscious of the system of marginalization in which he inhabits. While unable to escape it, justifying that he is not a homosexual because such a gesture would be representative of a heterosexual woman, he transforms his understanding of sexuality to affirm a belief he creates for himself. He does not say anything to the effect of: "I am not a homosexual because I am not sexually attracted to men"—but rather it would be representative of a

mainstream woman, which he is not. “Solal’s enterprise is thus reduced to a unique and neurotic paradigm: to exacerbate Ariane’s female part. Since he can only love himself by hating himself, Solal needs to love Ariane by hating in her what he hates in himself.” (Decout, p. 274) Since Ariane and Solal each convince themselves that they are heterosexual, arguably Solal more outwardly than Ariane, they in fact become simultaneously the antithesis of one another, yet also virtually the same. As they are each attracted to their own respective sex, or at the very least intrigued by it, Ariane and Solal realize that, united in their difference, they are being deceived by the Western love tradition.

Solal further expresses his apparent disdain for homosexuals at another moment in the text:

“Les bavardages de ce snob homosexuel m’ennuient, disait-il alors, et pour la forcer à se remettre en état de décence il lui proposait de jouer aux échecs.” (Cohen, p. 922)

.....  
“‘Proust was a homosexual snob and his chatter bores me,’ he would say, and to force her to make herself decent, would suggest a game of chess.” (Cohen, p. 804)

By using the term “homosexuel” in reference to his dislike for Proust, he casts homosexuality in a negative light, reinforcing mainstream heteronormativity. Cohen’s voiced disdain for this author suggests a latent envy towards Proust’s success, as comparisons can be made between the style and themes of Proust’s novel and that of Cohen, suggesting an admiration of the work through emulation. But more importantly, this entire passage only further reaffirms that Solal is a product of his

cultural surroundings, since directly after his condemnation of Proust, he forces Ariane to put herself together—an entirely culturally subjective dictation. However, given that Solal is not absent from being critical of this heteronormativity, he then challenges Ariane to a game of chess, a game which by nature encourages reflection, foresight, and critical thinking. The contradictory nature of sexual impulses and practices is again visible in this passage, since a predicated disdain for sexual marginality prefaces it, then is immediately followed by a challenge to it. Caught in the oscillating nature which extends through the whole narrative, Albert Cohen uses Solal to undermine the apparent validity in heteronormativity. “It is by taking this path that Cohen emancipates himself from the traditional models of the love relationship such as Stendhal had for example been able to sketch them through the process of crystallization.” (Decout, p. 274) Since the aforementioned passage is in essence a dense contradiction of viewpoints, it prefaces the hidden spirituality within same-sex and interfaith desire. It can only be liberated by acknowledging the apparent contempt that has been culturally constructed over time, and then challenging it. “If the ideology and the solutions proposed by the author lead to a dead end, they at least have the merit of underlining the shortcomings of 20th century Western society.” (Maisier, p. 140) In essence, seeking to elucidate the innate spirituality within the marginalized desires of the characters in *Belle du Seigneur*, hidden by mainstream culture, Albert Cohen’s “solution” is one of affirmation and acceptance. At the very least, they reveal that this marginalization is created by 20th century Western society,

and once it has been deconstructed, the driving force of desire can be understood on its own terms.

Solal confesses at another point that the driving force of sexuality is mysterious, and it can be seemingly unconquerable from a woman:

“Ô imbattable amour d’une femme, étrange pouvoir du sexuel.” (Cohen, p. 834)

.....  
“Oh, woman’s unconquerable love, oh the mysterious power of sex!” (Cohen, p. 727)

By claiming that a woman’s love is “imbattable”, or “unconquerable”, he appears to announce an impossibility in his ability to conquer it. It can be argued that this further solidifies his own homosexuality, or at least an acknowledgement in the weakness of the heteronormative institution dictating legitimized desire. The “étrange pouvoir du sexuel” is ultimately what generates this analysis, and Solal’s recognition of the transformative and unknown powers it holds is an acknowledgment to its multifaceted forms, which means by extension that even those deviant from an accepted standard hold legitimate potential. “Indeed, beyond the heterogeneity, both social and religious, of the characters chosen by the narrator, all are beings characterized by a great goodness, a certain simplicity. They deliberately position themselves outside the workings of society, on the fringe of hypocrisy, power games, sex and love. The metalepses thus acquire a true existential significance. ... The metalepses thus become the expression of a Jewishness which dreams of being a true humanism.” (Decout, p. 144) In this passage, through Solal, Albert Cohen seeks the

common humanity from a pluralistic Jewish perspective by acknowledging the awe in sexual power, and its multifaceted potential to transform one's understanding of society.

Through Albert Cohen's approach that challenges the validity in heteronormativity, the characters in his novels are made aware of the falseness of this historically reinforced narrative. Through the marginalization of their same-sex desire, they are presented with the opportunity for introspection—and to understand that a forced adoption of these heteronormative sexual practices between two homosexual individuals leads to an unfulfilled existence of angst. "Cohen whispers his secrets in the ear of his attentive reader... Cohen seeks to establish a logic of the aside that distills, as if outside the body of the text, comments on many characters." (Decout, p. 138) Various observations of society's functions and sexual dictation, from both external and internal perspectives, give Ariane and Solal the opportunity to realize that a heteronormative imposition on their lives may not yield the righteousness or truth that they are commonly believed to provide.

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### 3.2 Solitude and compatibility in a romanticized vision

The overarching heteronormative expectations within French society of the period led the characters of Albert Cohen's novels to believe they were morally safe or deeply in love with each other, while it was in fact only an illusion they had created for themselves. In essence, in an effort to combat the solitude from the marginalization society has imposed upon same-sex desire, the characters find solace in being together. However, they learn that they are not sexually compatible with each other, and these struggles reveal the hidden spirituality that transcend from the depths of such marginalized desire. It is through Albert Cohen's depictions of solitude and compatibility in a romanticized vision that the entire premise of *Belle du Seigneur* is set, starting at the beginning of the novel with Ariane's marginalization from her own family during her initial relationship with Varvara:

“Seule au monde, personne à qui m’adresser... Les gens de mon milieu, cousins, parents éloignés, connaissances, m’avaient lâchée depuis ma fugue et ma vie avec “la révolutionnaire russe”. (Cohen, p. 28)

.....  
“Alone in the world. Not a soul I could turn to. ... The people in my set, cousins, distant relatives, acquaintances, had dropped me since I’d run away and started living with “the Russian revolutionary”. (Cohen, p. 17)

It is noteworthy that Varvara, Ariane's female lover, was also Russian, and Albert Cohen plays with her nationality to further expand the supposedly errant nature of their relationship. In the wake of the Dreyfus affair, and the shifting attitudes towards religiosity in the public sphere, Ariane's desire for Vavara is twice as scandalous, as she is both a woman and Russian, which for the period was the

quintessence of the unknown and errant from mainstream French culture. This is an echo to the Russian Revolution; occurring from 1917 to 1923, in the decade before the first draft of *Belle du Seigneur* was written, the recency and knowledge of the event was still present in the socio-political landscape of Europe. It is not by chance that Albert Cohen chooses Varvara, a Russian, to be Ariane's female lover. The reference to the personal liberation that accompanied the reform of Russian society had penetrated into the Francophone culture of Western Europe, suggesting a progression beyond the limitations of a patriarchal and monarchical society. Moreover, the name Varvara envelops the quintessence of the unknown, as it means *stranger* or *foreigner*. The Latinized form of the Greek Βαρβάρα, it is a female name of Greek origin, which then entered the Slavic cultures of Eastern Europe as Βαρβαρα. The choice of names is extremely important in understanding Albert Cohen's works, along with revealing meaning in Jewish culture in general. As a character, since Varvara represents overt, same-sex desire, the sense of her name serves as a refraction of mainstream society's interpretation of her as a lesbian—someone who is 'foreign' or 'apart' from what is deemed socially intelligible. As mentioned in the introduction, the name Ariane is also of Greek origin, and means 'most Holy'. By placing Varvara and Ariane together, Albert Cohen is in essence placing 'foreign' and 'most Holy' together also, which reveals the hidden spirituality in marginalized desire from purely an importance of names, which is at the root of this analysis. Similarly to how Solal, the 'trailblazer', encounters and pursues Ariane, Albert Cohen's creativity makes his

reader reflect on the Divine Providence that resonates in this passage, suggesting that what is supposedly ‘foreign’, in essence ‘unknown’, is in fact, ‘most Holy’.

However, Varvara and Ariane’s relationship was not met without resistance: “At eighteen, Ariane begins her studies in literature at the university, where she meets a young Russian immigrant named Varvara Ivanovna... Tantlérie is not thrilled, especially when she discovers that Varvara is a socialist revolutionary. Ariane rebels against the Calvinist aunt and moves out into a small student apartment with Varvara, where she spends the happiest moments of her life.” (Abecassis, p. 156) It is through this intense moment of Ariane’s young life that she solidifies her own understanding of intimacy and fulfillment, both on a physical and meta-physical level. It is clear to her that she has intense same-sex desire, and the joy that Varvara brings her surpasses any political or religious construct. Given that Tantlérie is a pious Protestant, she reflects the traditional Abrahamic tradition, mirrored by the Jews, in the sense that anyone errant from the intelligible path of spiritual righteousness is inherently corrupt: “Obviously, religious liberty does come at a cost. Many religious communities, after all, are interested not only in their internal affairs, but in creating a broader society that conforms to their vision of ethics and truth.” (Michaelson, p. 151) Because Varvara is both a woman and of another nation, Ariane’s relationship with her is essentially the most distant partner that her family and society could have chosen for her. However, she is in fact empowered by choosing her own partner, solidified in this modernistic tradition of female independence, and this initial torrid love affair proves to be unmatched for the rest of the narrative. After the tragic death

of Varvara to tuberculosis, it is at such point that she enters into her marriage with Adrien, who she claims saved her from her intense depression. While Varvara is a fleeting character in the novel, Ariane thinks of her long after her death, and her imprint on her life is indelible. Adrien is the complete contrast to Varvara, and is completely socially intelligible—a successful career-driven heterosexual man who comes from a similar culture and puritan religious background. While perhaps helpful to her in the short-term, the long-term effects were detrimental to Ariane’s wellness, as she was blinded by her romanticized vision of cultural homogenization.

When reflecting on meeting Adrien, she says:

“Il m’a demandé un soir si je voulais l’épouser et j’ai accepté. J’avais besoin de quelqu’un de bon, s’intéressant à moi, m’admirant, alors que je savais bien que j’étais une déclassée... Sa patience quand je lui ai dit que j’avais peur des choses qui se passent entre un homme et une femme.” (Cohen, p. 29)

.....  
“One evening he asked me if I’d marry him, and I said yes. I needed somebody who was kind, somebody to be on my side who thought a lot of me, though I fully realized that I had committed social suicide... His patience when I told him what I was scared of what goes on between a man and a woman.” (Cohen, p. 18)

Adrien is not known to the reader to have any same-sex desire, and also not known to identify with any aspect of marginalization from society. It can therefore be argued that when Ariane says he was patient with her when she expresses her “peur des choses qui se passent entre un homme et une femme”, or that she was “scared of what goes on between a man and a woman”, he does not take this to be same-sex interest, or rather a disgust of the male sex, but rather something such as inexperience. While her relationship with Adrien may have been viewed as more

intelligible to the social norm, and he was “quelqu’un de bon”, or “somebody who was kind”, who appeared to love her, she still felt to be a “déclassée”, or a ‘downgrade’, to rephrase the English translation—unable to escape from the realization that the charade of her heterosexual relationship could not erase her inner understanding that she was a lesbian. She is in fact a reflection of the “...binary restrictions [that] nevertheless still operate to frame and formulate sexuality and delimit in advance the forms of its resistance to the “real.”” (Butler, p. 75) This is what makes her relationship with Adrien, and later Solal, a romanticized view of compatibility in place of the inner sentiment of solitude due to marginalized desire. “Although she hates the bestial male rapist, the bourgeois spouse resigns herself to periodical violation. Adrien Deume may force himself upon his wife from time to time, but the lesbian aristocrat keeps her subjectivity intact, her own steam of thoughts, her irony and laughter just as he inflates and relates into his repulsive epilepsy.” (Abecassis, p. 162) This succumbing to a romanticized and socially intelligible relationship is similar with Solal as it is with Adrien—however, Solal, like Ariane, has a foreign element as he is Jewish as Varvara is Russian. Varvara and Solal also have same-sex tendencies, and through their relationships with Ariane, in essence understand the social consequences of marginalized desire. Moreover, Ariane’s relationship with Solal is an extra-marital affair, which is another religious and cultural taboo aspect cast upon them. This is also a challenge to monogamy, another layer of critique Albert Cohen does not hesitate to conduct upon the Western love tradition. Since he was married three times to three different women, Cohen knew

firsthand the complexities of human love and relationships. While it cannot be oversimplified to infer that from Ariane and Solal's relationship that Cohen is endorsing adultery, but like how he challenges other supposedly intelligible norms, endorsed by religion or society, Cohen suggests that there is more to monogamy than meets the eye. As Ariane and Solal could only understand their marginalized desire through each other in a moment of desperation, this critique of a traditional, monogamous marriage presents itself as one that can be unfulfilling or unfitting—at least with the wrong person. The result is that Adrien is therefore the unlucky one, in a sense, as he is married to a woman who simply cannot conform to the societal expectations surrounding her, and he is left in an inauthentic and unfulfilled marriage.

This narrative of solitude and compatibility in a romanticized vision continues in Ariane's relationship with Solal, who Ariane claims is sent to her by the Almighty, a decree by destiny. And despite the fact that Ariane is never completely fulfilled by Solal, the idea still manages to prolong itself throughout the narrative that he is her ideal soul mate:

“... seule amie de toi-même, et au premier battement de tes paupières, je t’ai connue, c’était toi, l’inattendue et l’attendue, aussitôt élue en ce soir de destin, ...” (Cohen, p. 444)

.....  
“... having no friend but yourself, and at the first flutter of your eyes I knew you, know you as the Unexpected One so long awaited, knew you at once for the Chosen One on that evening decreed by Destiny...” (Cohen, p. 381)

As aforementioned, because of Solal's own inherent social marginalization as a Jew, and to an extent his own latent same-sex desires, it is likely that Ariane sees her own marginalization reflected in him, in his ability to understand an aspect of her that was also present in Adrien. The hidden spirituality in this passage is visible when Ariane claims Solal to be "élue en ce soir de destin", or the "Chosen One on that evening decreed by Destiny" as her divine partner. The imagery presented casts an energy of praise onto Solal, who for the first time since Varvara, he is someone who she can claim she 'knows', in the deepest sense of the term. In fact, 'to know' a person also has a Biblical and sexual connotation. This is particularly evident when examining the nuance in the French verb 'connaître', which one meaning is 'to know a person'. According to the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie Française*, 'connaître' or 'to know' also has a spiritual importance: "Dans la langue biblique : Connaître une personne, avoir avec elle un commerce charnel. Adam connut Ève, qui conçut et enfanta Caïn. Par périphrase : Connaître une femme au sens biblique du terme, bibliquement."<sup>10</sup> In English, this definition renders: "In the Biblical language: To know a person, to have carnal commerce with him. Adam knew Eve, who conceived and bore Cain. By paraphrase: To know a woman in the biblical sense, biblically." This overwhelming need to be 'known' by someone is by extent a need to be spiritually legitimized, therefore calling the need to be 'known' by God into the picture. The "commerce charnel" or "carnal commerce" is an intrinsic aspect of this omniscient knowledge of a person, from which a divinely decreed partner, and also

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<sup>10</sup> *Dictionnaire de l'Académie Française*. 9th edition.

God, are aware. A belief in the overshadowing presence of Biblical tradition affirms that nothing happens without the watchful eye and knowledge of God. This brings forth the long lasting need for Ariane, and then Solal, to be 'known'—in a sense, have their own identities reaffirmed, which they do for each other, both marginalized beings in the shadow of society. "Sexual activity is a moment of crisis of isolation. This activity is known to us from the outside, but we know that it weakens the feeling of self, that it puts it in question. We speak about crisis: it is the interior effect of an objectively known event." (Bataille, p. 110) While a heterosexual encounter is an "objectively known event", all sexual encounters are therefore moments of "crisis of isolation." The inner solitude of Ariane and Solal is recognized within each other, and their imagined compatibility is created on this premise, all in a romanticized vision intelligible to society. The isolation described in Bataille's quote is only strengthened in the marginalized nature of a relationship that is destined to fail, built on the ability to somewhat understand the other person, yet remaining distant from the full potential of sexual fulfillment. The spiritual plane that accompanies the praise of Solal reflects the hidden spirituality of the encounter, as their relationship is the best attempt at attaining intelligible purpose in the culture in which they live: "The spiritual etymon thus potentially mobilizes, in their smallest aspects, all the words of which the character is a speaker." (Cabot, p. 19) This blissful infusion of a spiritual consciousness in the construction of their relationship continues, as Ariane further convinces herself that Solal is the answer to her unhappiness:

“Sa joue contre l’épaule de son seigneur, elle lui demandait de dire encore, les yeux fermés, bienheureuse d’être connue, mieux que d’elle-même connue, moquée et louangée par ce frère de l’âme, le seul au monde qui la connaissait, et c’était cela l’amour adorable, l’amour d’un homme, et Varvara ce n’était rien, plus rien, pauvretés évanouies.” (Cohen, p. 442)

.....  
“Laying her cheek against the shoulder of her lord, she closed her eyes and asked him to tell her again, blessed in the knowledge that she was known, known better than she knew herself, that she was mocked and lauded by he who was her soul’s brother, the only human being in the world who really knew her: this was love in all its glory, to be loved by a man, next to which Varvara was nothing, less than nothing, a heap of unimportance now gone for ever.” (Cohen, p. 379-380)

In their knowledge of each other, through their desire for each other and marginalized position in society, Albert Cohen presents this knowledge of the marginalized other as an extension of God’s understanding of all of humanity. In this passage, the third-person narrator adopts a tone that mirrors that of Ariane, proclaiming that Solal, despite his religious and cultural differences, is her “frère de l’âme, le seul au monde qui la connaissait”, or “soul’s brother, the only human being in the world who really knew her”, which suggests a common love that transcends any supposedly unintelligible criteria. Therefore, God understands the marginalized, apart from any social structure or religious presentation of God, and this is mirrored in Solal: “This servitude has a sacred character: it is in the gift of oneself that the greatness and nobility of the woman is born.” (Audéoud, p. 161) However, unable to fully escape this social pressure, the same sentence continues to perpetuate the legitimacy of a heteronormative relation to which they succumb, still blinded by the fact that it is not right for them: “c’était cela l’amour adorable, l’amour d’un homme,

et Varvara ce n'était rien, or "this was love in all its glory, to be loved by a man, next to which Varvara was nothing". The constant oscillation between a spiritual truth and sincere fulfillment and the imagined, legitimized fulfillment is an ongoing theme in Albert Cohen's novels, which persists until the very end of *Belle du Seigneur*. "The couple turns out to be a prison, whereas it was a promise of life before facing the duration. The myth of passionate love borders on loneliness, since exceptional people can only love each other in the absolute sense on the fringes of reality and therefore of society." (Decout, p. 86) The social sphere is therefore synonymous with what is "real", and any amorous desire apart from this intelligible construction of reality is marginalized. However, Ariane and Solal can only understand themselves through validation of the other, and by extension the affirming presence of God, through this marginalized place. The thematic of love is, in essence, what generates the entire progression of the plot: "... the social adventure, in its facilities, is overflowed by the love theme. Rivalry in passion thus operates as a catalyst for Solal's desire and not exclusively as a social motive." (Decout, p. 84) It is through this marginalized state, initially distant from the social norm yet also creating a field in which introspection can take place, that Ariane proclaims Solal as 'son seigneur' or 'her lord'. "*Belle du Seigneur* can be read as an immense pamphlet against deceptive and destructive passion, a negation of true love embodied by nuptial love, which proceeds from filial, maternal and divine love." (Audéoud, p. 160) With emphasis on "divine love", the text serves to affirm the transformative nature of society's margins, and how they can sculpt and bring out an understanding of one's self and the Eternal.

While often masked by the institutions of legitimized heteronormative marriage, endorsed by the institutions of organized Judaism and Christianity, this remains hidden from view—sometimes by Ariane and Solal themselves.

Ariane continues to defend her apparent love for Solal, which she convinces herself is stronger than that she held for Varvara; however the continuous reference to Varvara and the understanding she brought her, which appears to the reader to be of greater importance to Ariane, surfaces in these passages:

“je n’ai jamais aimé les baisers qu’avec Varvara j’aimais toucher sa poitrine je croyais que c’était de l’affection... je ne cesserai d’aimer ma Varvara quelque’un qu’on a aimé éternellement *semel semper* ... je l’aime absolument et pourtant une une une peur répugnance pour, enfin, le désir de l’homme, mais pas toujours, quelquefois seulement, parfois il m’en impose... mais jamais avec Varvara, une grande bienveillance pour elle, lui je l’aime tellement plus, mais avec elle il y avait une entente, ...” (Cohen, pp. 211, 368, 499-500)

.....  
“I’ve only ever liked kissing Varvara I liked touching her breasts I thought it was just to do with affection... I’ll never stop loving my Varvara if you’ve loved someone you’ll go on loving them forever *semel semper*... I absolutely adore him but at the same time I feel this fear, this aversion to spit it out, male desire, but not all the time, just sometimes, but sometimes he just steamrollers me... I never did that with Varvara, I was always very indulgent with her, I love him much more, but with her there was this understanding.” (Cohen, pp. 175, 315, 431)

In this stream of consciousness passage, Ariane outwardly voices her disgust for the male form, and then immediately contradicts herself saying she loves Solal more than Varvara. In her mourning from Varvara, her absence from her life, she is repeatedly convincing herself that Solal’s place, on the surface more legitimate because of its heterosexual façade, is more authentic than her relationship with Varvara. However, with Varvara, there was an “entente” that she does not feel with a

man: “Ariane’s visceral free-associative stream of consciousness articulates a cogent opposition to the specific cultural contexts of heterosexual romantic ideology.” (Abecassis, p. 161) This deconstruction of the Western myth of heterosexual compatibility continues, and the traditions of the modernist novel lend themselves to a literary landscape open to this level of critique. As Albert Cohen bridges tradition and modernity in his works, Ariane is not hesitant to criticize her dislike of the male form, which is by extent an overt critique of the heteronormative societal default. It can be argued that when Ariane states “parfois il m’en impose”, or “sometimes he just steamrollers me”, this is a larger reference to her surrounding culture, beyond only Solal. The imposition of a religious or cultural prescription is at the root of Albert Cohen’s critique, and only by outwardly recognizing her dislike for the male form, as Ariane does in the aforementioned passage, can she progress to understand her own self and innate spiritual potential. Jack Abecassis says that: “Ariane’s stream of “gratuitous verbal aviation without communicative aim” could not be more hostile to heterosexual romantic myth, men, their hairy bodies and intrusive penises—at least at first, as the steam of consciousness, after a long detour, does end up all the same in a sustained Joycian orgasmic “yes.” (Abecassis, pp. 160-161) However, this “yes” is one blinded by her solitude and need for compatibility in a romanticized vision. Occasionally, as a result of this, Ariane asks how Solal has become this figure of paramount importance to her:

“Ô mon amour, serre-moi fort, je suis à toi purement toute, disait-elle. Qui es-tu, qu’as-tu fait pour m’avoir prise ainsi, prise d’âme, prise de corps ?” (Cohen, p. 458)

.....  
“‘O my love, hold me close, I am yours in all purity,’ she said. ‘Who are you, what did you do to overwhelm me completely, body and soul?’” (Cohen, p. 395)

What Ariane never realizes is that she has given Solal a metaphorical throne in her life. His social position and dominance over her lends to a “prise d’âme, prise de corps”, or her being “overwhelm[ed]... completely, body and soul”, which throughout Albert Cohen’s writing are inseparable. To this effect, Ariane and Solal can be compared to the medieval chivalric romance of Tristan and Isolde, the tragic tale of two lovers fated to share a forbidden but undying love. The relentless nature of their relationship, which is clearly present in *Belle du Seigneur*, suggests the intertwining of body and soul in an inescapable fusion. In order to deconstruct the idealized view of passion in the Western love tradition in order to showcase Divine benevolence, the author uses tropes from these classic literary influences: “To deconstruct the idealized image of passion that governs a good part of the Western tradition, Albert Cohen paradoxically resorts to Greek myths, whose great hermeneutical value he thus recognizes. By combining Jewish, Christian, and pagan symbolisms, he makes *Belle du Seigneur* a syncretic enterprise of restoration of the divine in the service of a taste for the absolute.” (Schaffner, p. 296) It can therefore be interpreted that the awe and admiration presented in *Belle du Seigneur*, while destined to fail like in Tristan and Isolde, manages to showcase a hidden righteousness that is anchored in a spiritual consciousness beyond this world. This awe and admiration equally has a living, sexual component, which is unique to those of humans: “In the

human sphere, sexual activity is detached from animal simplicity. It is essentially a transgression.” (Bataille, p. 118) By transgressing from body to soul, Ariane perpetually reinforces her belief that Solal is her entire life’s purpose—but it is rather Solal who takes the human form of her self-convinced answer to her inability to conform to the social current of legitimized sexuality.

In a continued self-affirmation of Solal’s place in her void of solitude, she tells him:

“Aimé, tu as fait de moi une vraie femme.” (Cohen, p. 510)

.....  
“Darling, you’ve made a real woman of me.” (Cohen, p. 441)

Not only does she believe Solal is filling the lack of companionship in her life, but giving her the social recognition she desperately craves—or at least, is on the path of achieving it. Ariane’s idea of a “vraie femme” “... thusly mirror[s] Cohen’s obsessive indictment of the romantic and his repeated equation of Ariane, the Western woman, and romantic heroines, these “idiotes” led astray by romantic mystification.” (Abecassis, p. 161) In Albert Cohen’s quest to deconstruct the traditional desires of the Western woman, he portrays Ariane so overtly as someone unable to escape them. While she dares to embark on her extra-marital affair with Solal, and occasionally exert her female dominance in other ways, she is an overwhelmingly passive figure—but through this passivity, and her subsequent marginalization of desire, hidden notions of spiritual present themselves in spirit of it. “The woman in Cohen is thus both the instigator and the privileged depository of the divine feeling of tenderness.”

(Decout, p. 241) The only understanding of a “vraie femme” according to Ariane comes from her surrounding culture, which is Western Europe in the 1930s. At that time a “vraie femme” often did not transcend social protocol to embrace her homosexual desires, and her adherence to this apparent cultural truth infiltrated into her self-image, fueled by her often self-imposed heterosexual relations with Solal. This self-imposed need to combat solitude is reflected again at other instances in the text:

“au fond je m’aime d’amour... je n’ai pas de meilleure amie” (Cohen, pp. 201, 501)

.....  
“I think deep down I must be in love with myself... I don’t have a best friend” (Cohen, pp. 167, 432)

It can be said that Ariane is a subject of homosexual repression. It can be argued that the same is the case for Solal, however much more prominent for Ariane. Since she is therefore a marginalized subject of repression, she perpetuates it in her own internal narrative that her heteronormative façade is more morally and socially correct. “The ‘subject’ who emerges as a consequence of this repression becomes a bearer or proponent of this repressive law. The libidinal chaos characteristic of that early dependency is now fully constrained by a unitary agent whose language is structured by that law.” (Butler, pp. 107-108) In essence, Ariane is searching for herself through Solal. Because Solal is also marginalized to an extent, she sees herself reflected in him, and the attention she gives her mirrors that which she once admired in Adrien, and previously Varvara. But the idea of a normalized sexuality is what

continues to isolate Ariane from the heteronormative crowd, and the conflation of morality and heterosexuality is what proves to be so problematic: “The idea of normal sexuality, he argued (Alfred Kinsey), is too distorted by moralism to be an accurate picture of normal behavior, and if people really were willing to accept behavioral norms as normal, then their sexual morality would have to be radically different.” (Warner, p. 55) Ariane must therefore love herself to compensate for what the heterosexual façade cannot provide her. Within the heteronormative sphere, embracing homosexual tendencies would exceed socially accepted limits, which is only partially reduced, or rather repressed, in the relationship between Ariane and Solal: “There is in nature and there remains in man a movement which always *exceeds* the limits, and which never can be reduced only partially.” (Bataille, p. 46) This repression is ultimately grounded in the ongoing quest to understand one’s own self, and to be understood—in essence, harness the same spiritual legitimacy within mainstream desires for those that are marginalized. This is particularly clear towards the end of the narrative, when Ariane looks at Solal and says:

“Se comprendre, c’était s’aimer, n’est-ce pas, sourit-elle, paupières plus exquisement palpitantes que jamais.” (Cohen, p. 816)

.....  
 “When people understood each other, they would love each other now wasn’t that so? she said with a smile, and her eyelids fluttered more exquisitely than ever.” (Cohen, p. 710)

When cast into the margin of society, one cannot help but question. In this passage, Albert Cohen presents through Ariane both a question and an affirmation on what it means to fulfill one’s marginalized desires, which are rooted in understanding.

The spiritual essence which envelops the passage, emphasized by Ariane's "paupières plus exquisement palpitantes que jamais", or "eyelids [that] fluttered more exquisitely than ever", suggests the hidden spirituality that comes from Ariane's simultaneous questioning—and affirmation—of what she perceives to be love with Solal. Prefacing her fluttering eyelids is a rhetorical question that she asks, furthering the sense of enchantment in the passage. Both the voice and unvoiced speech throughout *Belle du Seigneur*, whether it be monologue, dialogue, or stream of consciousness: "The enchantment that all speech creates is thus the very heart of Cohen's reflection on the narrative. The fascination for the voice thus deploys a kind of intoxication that seizes everyone, characters, reader and even narrator." (Decout, p. 144) The reader can more broadly conclude from *Belle du Seigneur* that it is a testament to anti-love—that love cannot be forced. The vulnerability of those who desire their own sex lead Ariane to believe that love can be forged within a socially intelligible mold—a quest which is ultimately impossible. "As soon as passion can be lived on a daily basis, on the fringe of the human community, it is struck with a slow and painful death. Thus, the solitude of two people quickly becomes intolerable after Solal has taken Ariane away from her husband." (Audéoud, p. 165) Behind Ariane's smile at the end of the novel is a "mort lente et douloureuse". The marginalization of same-sex desire in the period of Albert Cohen requires an understanding before an unconditional love can enter. Being so distant from the heteronormative society that envelops them, Ariane's unending need to understand herself and her relationship with Solal is conflated with love. It can be argued that an innate sexual understanding is more present between two homosexuals

of the same sex, such as Ariane and Varvara, as opposed to a falsely adopted heteronormative sexual relationship, such as between Ariane and Solal. This innate sexual understanding then manifests into other facets of life, which ultimately led to the end of Ariane and Solal's affair. Without the innate sexual understanding, and satisfaction of same-sex urges, the love which Ariane seeks so desperately to find remains elusive.

As Ariane initially accepted Adrien to be her husband, it was from a place of desperation, grieving the loss of her initial homosexual lover. The dissatisfaction from the relationship manifested into her affair with Solal. While Solal proved to also be a marginalized figure with whom Ariane could identify, it was no substitute for the unparalleled sexual understanding and fulfillment provided by Varvara. This mirrors the attempted conquest of Jane Fillion by Albert Cohen. The heteronormative façade in Ariane and Solal's relationship was riddled with questioning, conflating understanding with love, and false convictions of righteousness by following the societal norm. "Whatever the reason for this shift in focus, *Belle du Seigneur*'s author leaves the struggle with Jewish identity behind in order to take on the portrayal of the more universal (and ultimately, perhaps, Western) alienation of *l'amour-passion*. Or, more accurately perhaps, he joins these two questions—these two *alienations*—into an unprecedented whole." (Kelly, p. 157) Given the circumstances in which they find themselves, two marginalized figures seeking companionship with nowhere else to turn, a hidden spirituality presents itself. Through Ariane's praise of Solal, who claims he is a divinely decreed figure in her life, a foreshadowing of sexual

understanding is presented. Their relationship is the best attempt at attaining intelligible purpose in the culture in which they live, which is not absent from the regard of the Eternal.

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### 3.3 Understanding of oneself through same-sex affirmation

Stemming from the previous realizations of a false heteronormative narrative and romanticized views of couple hood, the characters in Albert Cohen's novels suggest that one's connection to their true innate passions is the only way to truly understand the Almighty within them. As a result, Cohen's transformed understanding of desire from transgression to acceptance seeks to affirm the righteousness among all couples, and that homosexual and interfaith unions can in fact have the same spiritual righteousness as commonly accepted unions.

In one instance, the dimension of a sexual encounter between Ariane and Solal beyond the physical sphere is revealed:

“... c'est qu'il sache mon amour et que je sache le sien donc baisers indispensables pas seulement physiques nos âmes se cherchent se pénètrent par ce moyen oh oh oh ...” (Cohen, p. 685)

.....  
“I love him and I know that he loves me so kisses are very important but they must be more than just physical our souls must seek each other and mingle by means of our kisses oh oh oh” (Cohen, p. 591)

In this passage, Ariane is aware that a sexual encounter is more than a physical experience, but rather one that is a reflection of the Eternal. Constantly conflicted in her passionate encounters with Solal, she recognizes that a sexual encounter is a soul-searching experience. Albert Cohen suggests that this recognition was possible only through the forced adoption of the heteronormative theatricality of the Western tradition. In essence, as a blessing in disguise, the Eternal, through Solal,

enabled her to vocalize these sentiments. As reaffirmed by Georges Bataille, sex enables one to: “embrace the totality... in the enactment of characters and scenes revealing of the impossible.” (Bataille, pp. 102, 151) This ‘impossibility’ begins to showcase the imagination of Albert Cohen, drawing from his experience with Jane Fillion to personify a spiritual situation. The initial difference in sexual preference is what prompted Albert Cohen’s interest in the matter: “Albert Cohen loved Jane, once again, for not being like ‘all of the other women’.” (Saint Phalle, p. 112) The possibility embodied in this difference becomes the object of interest in this analysis, which suggests the hidden spirituality within the marginalized desire.

Caught between the expectations of heteronormativity and her own homosexuality, Ariane imagines that the best partner for her would be both male and female at the same time:

“Une belle femme nue qui serait en même temps un homme pas bien ça... oui qui serait en même temps un homme” (Cohen, p. 201)

.....  
 “a beautiful nude who was female and also male in one no that wouldn’t be right... yes who was male too” (Cohen, p. 167)

The complexity of the human sexual experience is demonstrated here by presenting the binary construction of gender, which has become rigidly defined through societal practices. Foucault further affirms these degrees of nuance, which Ariane is beginning to experience, in his *Hétérotopies*: “On ne vit pas dans un espace neutre et blanc ; on ne vit pas, on ne meurt pas, on n’aime pas dans le rectangle d’une feuille de papier. On vit, on meurt, on aime dans un espace quadrillé, découpé,

bariolé, avec des zones claires et sombres, des différents niveaux” (Foucault, pp. 23-24). Ariane therefore embodies the ambivalence of Albert Cohen, to an extent, as she is conflicted between her compatibility with a man or a woman. As Albert Cohen was conflicted with his own Jewish identity in Western Europe, this ambivalence is manifested through Ariane’s sexual awakening. “Plunged into indeterminacy, Cohen’s bisexuals become declassified like the Jews, valorized outsiders whose transgression establishes the possibility of an evacuation of force. A threat of extinction hangs over society. However the social likes the castes and the boxes, what is clear and readable, not the sexual ambiguity which escapes its legislation and threatens it.” (Decout, p. 242) Through this sexual ambiguity, which is a refraction of the social ambiguity experienced by Albert Cohen in other aspects of life, presents the reader with a viewpoint into the inner complexities of human sexuality.

The conflation of male and female preference, and challenging the duality of the human sexual experience continues at another critical moment in the novel. It is clear that Ariane has overt same-sex desires, as her character is directly inspired from Jane Fillion, who was also a lesbian. But Solal, who is the personification of Albert Cohen, also possesses a latent homosexuality, which is explored at one moment in *Belle du Seigneur* in a discussion between him and Ariane. It occurs at a moment when the two are discussing seduction, and when Ariane tries to make Solal fully understand what she is trying to say, she tells him to imagine her as a man. At this moment, she refers to an imaginary cousin of Solal, and calls this figure ‘Nathan’—and when imagining himself interacting in this seductive manner with a man, Solal is immediately better able to understand the situation:

“Voilà, c’est fini, je ne séduis plus.

— Eh bien, ne séduisez plus, mais dites les autres manèges. Faites comme si j’étais un homme. — Un homme, répéta-t-il, soudain émerveillé. Oui, un jeune cousin à moi, très beau, qui sera venu me demander comment tourneboulter son idiote ! Nathan, il s’appellera. Entre hommes, ce sera agréable. Allons, commençons. Où en étais-je?

— La cruauté.

—La cruauté, donc. Oui, mon Nathan, je te comprends.” (Cohen, p. 428)

.....

“‘I’m not doing any more seducing.’

‘All right, don’t. But tell me the other tactics. Pretend you’re telling a man.’

‘A man,’ he said, suddenly wonder-struck. ‘Of course! You are a young cousin of mine, very handsome, who has come to ask how to bamboozle some dim girl. Call him Nathan. Men’s talk! Lovely idea! Let’s make a start. Where was I?’

‘Cruelty.’

‘Ah yes, cruelty. I understand you, Nathan, I do.’” (Cohen, p. 367)

While an interview with Albert Cohen revealed that the author claimed he was not a homosexual, his interest in homosexuality within his own self is subtly revealed through the characterization of Nathan. It is noteworthy that Solal is “émerveillé” or “wonderstruck” at the idea of shifting the romantic focus to a man, which is only solidified with the claim that “Entre hommes, ce sera agréable”<sup>11</sup>. “From this point of view, Solal’s latent homosexuality, symbolic of a [personal] search... The latent homosexuality of Solal would be on the contrary a research of “homologation, of identification of the sexes under the aegis of an ideal...” (Decout, p. 243) Moreover, the concept of ‘homologation’ through self-understanding is made more apparent once this homosexual interest has been realized. As aforementioned, the need for personal understanding is at the root of what Ariane and Solal see in the potential of their relationship. When Ariane says “je te comprends” or “I understand you”, having

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<sup>11</sup> In this instance, I find the more accurate translation of the passage to be: “Between men, that would be nice.” This translation better highlights the claim that Solal is curious about homosexual experience.

adopted the male role of Nathan, it can be argued that the understanding of oneself through same-sex affirmation has been achieved.

One must understand the significance of the name Nathan, or rather Nathaniel, נתניאל in Hebrew, to comprehend the role of this imagined character's revealing force. Nathaniel, a Hebrew male name, means 'God has given'. This name features in the Old and New Testaments of the Bible. In Hebrew, the name comes from the words נתן (natan, to give), and אל (el, which is used to refer to God). Nathaniel was also a court prophet in the time of King David. Albert Cohen is systematic in his choice of names for his characters, and the characterization of Nathan is representative of God's giving of inner understanding to Solal, and by extension the characters as a whole. This understanding is affirmed through sexual exploration, the clarity of which is revealed to Solal in this moment with Ariane, pretending to be a man. It also enables Ariane to explore her own possibilities in presenting gender to express understanding, or rather convey the understanding of another. Through the Jewish tradition, a person's own understanding comes from God, and even through marginalized desire, this hidden aspect of spirituality transcends. While Cohen-Solal may not have been overtly homosexual, the exploitation of its ability to achieve deeper understanding in this passage is significant:

“Le terrible, ô mon Nathan, c’est que cet amour religieux, ainsi acheté au sale prix, est la merveille du monde. ... Encore ceci, Nathan. Ne crains pas de considérer avec attention ses seins.” (Cohen, p. 432)

.....  
“The appalling thing, Nathan, is that this same sacred love, bought at such sordid cost, is the wonder of the world. ... And hear this too, Nathan. Do not be afraid to stare at her breasts.” (Cohen, pp. 370, 373)

The aforementioned passage presents the only two other instances in the text where Nathan is mentioned. In this case, after having been introduced to Nathan by Ariane, Solal begins to speak directly to him. Here, he suggests that sacred love must come at the expense of suffering. To this effect, it is clear that the Ariane-Solal dynamic is one of searching and suffering—and an aspect of the sacred manages to transcend in spite of it. “One of the most enigmatic paradoxes of *Belle du Seigneur* is indeed that this novel can be both one of the most virulent novelistic denunciations of love-passion and a great novel of passionate love. Solal moreover warns the imaginary Nathan, in his great seduction scene, that passionate love, though “bought at the dirty price” is the “wonder of the world.” (Schaffner, p. 283) The enigma continues throughout the entire moment when Solal speaks to Nathan. In essence, he is telling his own pseudo-homosexual persona to look directly at the human form, to contemplate and reflect upon his own relationship to it. In a radio interview, Albert Cohen claims that: “Solal entered the kingdom of women because it is a philo-Semitic kingdom... he does well in that nation, in the female nation. He says of himself that he would have preferred so much to love a man, to be made a man. But that, he cannot. ... And then he’s contradictory ... he’s contradictory.” (Cohen) From this revelation, it is seen that Cohen-Solal, as a marginalized Jew, felt more welcomed in mainstream society by the presence of women. After all, women represent for him a “philo-Semitic kingdom”, meaning they more accepting than their male counterparts of any initially perceived errant traits, such as the marginality of Jews in Francophone Europe. But with subtle reference to the psycho-sexual experience with

Nathan, Solal in fact would have preferred to love a man. While women may be more accepting of difference, which is an attractive and pleasing quality, men are the source of his true sexual desire. However, apparent obstacles, whether religious or secular, or likely some combination of both, prevented this male homosexual union. And contributing to the enigma of the experience, Albert Cohen repeats twice that he is “contradictory”. While one cannot deduce that Cohen-Solal was a closeted homosexual, the information from the radio interview and characterization of Nathan reaffirm that: “A great Prussian theme taken up by Cohen, homosexuality thus suggests its presence in the work” (Decout, p. 242), which at the very least demonstrates a curiosity that presents itself throughout *Belle du Seigneur*. It is of significant interest for Albert Cohen, who apprehended a connection between the inner desire of an individual, regardless of sexual orientation, and a spiritual element. By exploring the male characterization of homosexuality, it is a reality that touches both the male and female characters in his works, and suggests it as an omnipresent phenomenon from the Eternal.

It is not until the very end of *Belle du Seigneur* that Ariane openly admits to Solal that she dislikes men. In a heated exchange between the two of them, it is clear that Ariane was exasperated when finally vocalizing this inner truth. Cohen-Solal, having finally ‘conquered’ this aspect of Ariane, which had been building throughout the entire narrative, is revealed at this moment:

“— Tu aimes les hommes, n’est-ce pas?  
 — Non, ils me dégoûtent !  
 — Et moi ?  
 — Toi aussi !  
 — Enfin ! sourit-il, et il affila son nez avec satisfaction, car voilà qui était simple et net.” (Cohen, p. 1083)

.....  
 ““You like men, don’t you?  
 ‘No. Men disgust me!’  
 ‘Me included?’  
 ‘Yes, you too!’  
 ‘So we’ve got there at last,’ he said with a smile, and he sharpened his nose between thumb and forefinger, not without a certain satisfaction, for this at least was simple and clear-cut.” (Cohen, p. 949)

This scene can be a declaration of the eroticism of bodies, rather than the eroticism of the heart, according to the philosophy of Georges Bataille. Most of *Belle du Seigneur* is a misunderstanding, or rather, false understanding of the eroticism of bodies to fit the heteronormative mold, focusing instead of the eroticism of the heart. But when provoked to this final point, directly being asked of her sexual preference, Ariane is left no other choice but to cry. “The eroticism of the bodies has anyway something heavy, sinister. ... The eroticism of hearts is freer. If [desire] separates itself in appearance from the materiality of eroticism of the bodies, it proceeds from it in that it is often only an aspect of it stabilized by the mutual affection of the lovers.” (Bataille, p. 24) No longer able to rely solely on the superficial layer of eroticism of the heart, this declaration of physical attraction, or rather non-attraction, is the end result of Cohen-Solal’s conquest of the homosexual female. The heteronormative façade is now broken, and Ariane’s secret is now vocalized and revealed. “The

psychosocial manifestation of homosexuality takes many forms: individual, subcultural, and cultural. It can have an individual aspect, most often secret, either because of its condemnation or because the bearer wants to conceal his orientation.” (Corraze, p. 30) But in this moment of ultimate revelation, does the male-female distinction truly matter? Or does it reveal the evolution of a transformative process within the author and his characters, showcasing a hidden spiritual element of God and humanity? “Masculine, feminine, basically what does it matter... Did Jane teach him, or did he think that way before she did? Whatever the answer, he subtly lends his most typical thoughts to Ariane.” (Saint Phalle, pp. 189-190) Ariane ultimately represents what is just beyond Cohen-Solal’s grasp. In his inability to seduce, or ‘covert’ Jane Fillion to heterosexuality in his personal life, Cohen refracts this experience with a successful outcome, in getting Ariane to admit that she is homosexual. But the same process does not happen in reverse. Ariane represents the passive member of the couple, and Solal the active member. In essence, Ariane could have challenged Solal to say the same—more overtly assert his own latent homosexuality, which she explored through the characterization of Nathan—but in this fragile moment, she did not. It can be argued that Albert Cohen implemented this aspect of the plot to his own advantage, to leave an element of conquest from the male perspective visible at the end of the novel. “How can one not think of Don Juan when listening to Solal conquer, seduce, and make Ariane succumb like an umpteenth victim?” (Saint Phalle, p. 188) This decision could have been made as a result of an unresolved inferiority complex; an overcompensation for any latent male-

homosexuality within Cohen-Solal. Or, it could be a refraction of Albert Cohen's continued reconciling with traditional Jewish norms regarding heteronormative marriage within the Jewish faith, taking shape in the form of spiritually legitimizing same-sex desire. While an equalization of marginalized desire can be concluded from the various examples in this section, the heteronormative Don-Juan tradition manages to be retained throughout the text.

Albert Cohen's transformed understanding of desire from transgression to acceptance leads the reader to better understand the author's concept of love: "Love according to Cohen is invested with a mission: to serve as an intermediary, a messenger of the in-between, in order to access the realm of the ethical." (Decout, p. 279) This intermediary can take the form of either sex, male or female, and understanding one's same-sex desire is in fact an extension of Divine Providence. By deconstructing the false validity in French societal heteronormativity of the 1930s, Albert Cohen challenges the idea that it is synonymous with spiritual righteousness. As Albert Cohen sought to establish a sense of societal acceptance within himself, marginalized as a Jew, he extends these notions of marginalization in the framework of same-sex desire through the character dynamics of Ariane and Solal. The author once shared in an interview that: "All 'true' human life fascinates me." (Cohen and Chancel, p. 121) Regardless of the religion or sexual preference found within the soul of this 'true' human life, Albert Cohen transforms his understanding of it in a quest to legitimize his own desire to integrate and pursue a fulfilling life.

## Chapter 4: Albert Cohen's novel as a resource for the study of marginal identities: a pedagogical implementation

As explored in the previous chapters, it is clear that the works of Albert Cohen are rich in literary imagination, which present their reader with multiple moments for reflection and introspection. Given the longstanding tradition of studying literature as part of a secondary and post-secondary education, Albert Cohen's novel has the potential to become an object of study to enrich a student's understanding of the French language, literature, and culture. Albert Cohen's works have been previously studied in the French educational context; as recently as 2021, a passage from *Belle du Seigneur* appeared as a textual commentary on the national *Brevet* exam. While it is clear that the novel holds its place as a valuable object of literary study in France, the same case can be made when adapted for the educational context of French as a Foreign Language in the United States. This chapter will analyze [a set of potential aspects of Albert Cohen's works](#), or the novel, to explore and fulfill a respective set of goals to be accomplished from studying world literature, specifically in the secondary and post-secondary classroom of the 21st century. Albert Cohen's work is particularly valuable as it highlights notions of marginality through the experiences of immigration, religion, and sexuality, all of which lend themselves to deeper exploration. Then, the chapter will explore [a set of pedagogical approaches and strategies](#) that can be used to facilitate teaching the novel to acquire the aforementioned goals, followed

by [a lesson plan](#) to illustrate an example of how these goals, approaches, and strategies can be combined in a series of classes.

#### 4.1 Potential aspects of the novel to explore

While a dynamic and imaginative work of acclaimed world literature has a multitude of aspects that can be studied, a set of five potential aspects have been identified for this chapter. Given the pedagogical context of a French as a Foreign Language course in a secondary or post-secondary educational setting in the United States in the 21st century, here are the aspects of the novel, their respective goals, and their justifications: [Forming Adolescent Identity](#), [Cultivating Empathy and a Spirit of Inclusivity](#), [Language Acquisition](#), [Critical Thinking](#), and [Developing Global Citizens](#).

##### Forming Adolescent Identity

A principal goal from literary study in a secondary and post-secondary setting is to form adolescent identity. Given that most students in this educational environment are in adolescence and early adulthood, they are in a formative stage of life, developing their own identity and relation to the world. Literary works hold immense potential for students to explore various relations to the world and diverse perspectives, and profound engagement with these works can help to solidify these emerging identities: “Deep engagement with fictional narratives can support the

processes of identity formation and individuation by allowing the adolescent reader to identify with, empathize with, and take on the experience of various fictional characters.” (Lind, p. 47) Through the guided study of imaginative literature, these fictional characters can teach valuable lessons to students, which hold the potential to contribute to their identity formation. Additionally, as particularly evident in the foreign language classroom, students are often presented with cultural backgrounds and ideologies that showcase the culture of the target language, which lend themselves to a deeper understanding of such culture. The processes of “identity formation and individuation” can therefore be viewed as a diverse and universal reality for adolescents, leading to a deeper appreciation for the target language and culture, and more interpersonal understanding of self.

Through guided literary study, adolescents can investigate various life situations and emotional experiences: “Fictional narratives support identity formation by allowing adolescents to explore alternate identities, taking on the subjective emotional experience of various characters in endlessly diverse circumstances.” (Lind, p. 49) These diverse circumstances can therefore lead to understanding cultural and historical contexts, all the while serving to develop the equilibrium between autonomy and interdependency. In essence, literature can serve as a tool to develop reason, a critical component of adolescent identity, as youth begin to make more decisions for themselves and solidify their relationship to the world. “Secondary students are deep in the process of coming to grips with the idea that human beings can simultaneously be autonomous and interdependent. ... Yet as part of this process,

students are developing the capacity to care not only about their own needs but about how they can contribute to the greater good.” (Miller, p. 30) By adapting literary works into an educational framework, a deeper understanding of a text can be achieved, therefore facilitating the goal of forming adolescent identity that extends beyond the text itself.

While the value of literary study is understood, it has been mentioned that ‘guided literary study’ is key to achieving the broader goal of adolescent identity formation. An aspect of this guidance is for the educator to understand that identity develops within a given cultural framework: “It is important to emphasize that identity develops within a given cultural context and cannot be divorced from environmental constraints and interpersonal influences. The adaptiveness of a particular processing orientation may depend on the socio-historical circumstances within which it is instantiated.” (Adolescent Identity Formation, p. 211) In essence, the instructor must be cognizant of a student’s individual receptivity to a particular literary text, and understand the broader context around the novel before any identity formation can take place. In other words, before literature can extend into deeper realms of identity formation within the adolescent mind, it must be made accessible to the student, and scaffolded as necessary for comprehensibility in the classroom setting. Moreover, ‘identity formation within the adolescent mind’ is encompassing of various domains, and the novel can touch different domains for different students: “With respect to the content of an individual’s sense of identity, Erikson (1968) identifies a broad array of domains in which the person develops a self-reflective

perspective. Identity elements develop around [various factors, including] one's vocation; one's ideologies (e.g., religious, political, and economic beliefs); one's philosophy of life; one's ethical capacities; one's sexuality; the personal meaning of one's gender, ethnicity, culture, and nationality; and one's relationship to 'an all-inclusive human identity'" (Adams, p. 54). As suggested by the developmental psychologist and psychoanalyst Erik Erikson, there are various dimensions to an individual's identity, and the stage of adolescence is a primal period in developing these dimensions. Since guided literary study of the novel can reveal diverse cultural contexts and imaginative characters to adolescents, it can be fundamental in the processes of forming their identities.

The works of Albert Cohen contribute to forming adolescent identity, notably because the author described his own relationship to it in his texts. For example, in [Chapter 2: Albert Cohen's insight on Jewish tradition and desire: a contemporary rewriting](#), a reference is made to the anti-Semitic trauma he endured as a child. He shares this in his autobiographical work, *Ô Vous, frères humains*: "J'étais devenu un juif" (Cohen, p. 95), or "I had become a Jew", in reference to his identity formation following a specific anti-Semitic incident on his tenth birthday. Within the corpus of Albert Cohen, the conflation of Jewish identity and French identity in the 20th century is a major element; religion and nationality are two key aspects of identity in the aforementioned dimensions listed by Erik Erikson. Moreover, as seen in the same chapter in *Belle du Seigneur*, Cohen presents a broader understanding of the Jewish identity struggle through his characterization of Solal: "Eh oui, mon ami, c'est cher

d'être le peuple de Dieu !" (Cohen, p. 565), or "Oh yes, there is a high price to pay to be the chosen of God!" (Cohen, p. 488) Cohen's works therefore lend themselves to forming adolescent identity as a key component of literary study.

### Cultivating Empathy and a Spirit of Inclusivity

Cultivating empathy and a spirit of inclusivity is another fundamental goal of secondary and post-secondary literary study. As a work of world literature, the novel is constructed using a variety of literary tropes, such as stream-of-consciousness. Through this trope, which is particularly present in Albert Cohen's novel, the reader is deeply immersed in the direct thoughts of a fictional character: "Only in fiction is the mind of another transparent. The empathetic person attempts to reconstruct the mental experience of another, and if she does this too crudely she will probably not get credit for empathy at all, just as a person who cannot move her feet in a one-two-three rhythm will not get credit for waltzing." (Nussbaum, p. 328) As Nussbaum suggests, fiction, as opposed to nonfiction, encourages the reader to "reconstruct the mental experience of another", which cultivates empathy towards the other. When addressing themes such as marginality, whether it be in the context of immigration, religion, sexuality, or otherwise, this spirit of inclusivity is key, as greater understanding of the other is cultivated through this acquired empathy. "Typically, this empathy will be accompanied by good wishes toward the object, if the child has received a basically loving upbringing; but ambivalence is never absent, and aggressive wishes need continually to be curbed by her incipient desire for reparation. Teachers need to be

alert to these complex dynamics.” (Nussbaum, pp. 427-428) For the educator, a component of guided literary study is an understanding of his students and their receptivity towards cultivating empathy through literary texts. In other words, a literary text or lesson may need to be modified to allow for the overarching goal of conveying a spirit of inclusivity to occur, considering the individual needs of various students.

When adolescents and young adults are immersed in a literary text through guided literary study, a close proximity to the text begins to present itself: “Once the student reads a literary text, he begins to inhabit the text. He is drawn into the text. Understanding the meanings of lexical items or phrases becomes less significant than pursuing the development of the story. The student becomes enthusiastic to find out what happens as events unfold via the climax; he feels close to certain characters and shares their emotional responses.” (Abida, p. 13) While literature can be studied to accomplish many goals in the foreign language classroom, by “pursuing the development of the story”, the student becomes invested in the text, and by extension begins to cultivate empathy for the characters within it. Moreover, by witnessing the “emotional responses” of the characters through a text, a spirit of sympathy is created as the students make connections to their own emotions and life experiences, and how they compare and contrast to those of the characters. This cultivation of empathy can therefore deconstruct various forms of prejudice: “We should not deny that each form of prejudice is both internally multiple and distinct from other forms. And yet we find a thread running through many forms: the intolerance of humanity in oneself. This

refusal, connected with shame, envy, disgust, and violent repudiation, turns up not only in misogyny but in other prejudices to the extent that they share the logic of misogyny.” (Nussbaum, p. 350) By becoming invested in a literary text and exploring the emotional responses within it, one can seek to replace “the intolerance of humanity” by cultivating a spirit of inclusivity. Literature therefore serves as a means for fostering empathy towards the marginalized, as certain textual developments, such as characterization and plot development through various tropes, seek to convey this compassion. Adolescence and young adulthood are the ideal times to cultivate this understanding of the other, which is a prominent goal in studying the novel.

Also, the works of Albert Cohen more broadly foster empathy for greater humanity, among all of its similarities and differences, by conveying universal struggles, with which the reader can empathize. For example, in [\*Chapter 1, Albert Cohen's primal pillar of marginalized desire: an immigrant's vision\*](#), Saltiel is seen crying during his immigration to France: “Croyant se rendre à Paris, il prit, les larmes aux yeux, le train qui allait à Marseille” (Cohen, p. 104), or “Believing he was going to Paris, he took, with tears in his eyes, the train to Marseille”. The sadness and emotional struggle conveyed by immigration in this passage can evoke a sense of empathy from the reader, especially since many readers may be immigrants themselves. Moreover, in [\*Chapter 3, Albert Cohen's transformed understanding of desire: from transgression to acceptance\*](#), the reader is presented with various sentiments from Ariane. She sees herself as the: “seule amie de toi-même” (Cohen,

p. 444), or as “having no friend but yourself” (Cohen, p. 381). A spirit of inclusivity can be evoked from the reader from this expression of loneliness.

### Language Acquisition

Given that Albert Cohen’s novel can be used as a tool in the teaching of French as a Foreign Language, it is therefore a resource for those studying the French language. “Literature is an example of language in use and is a context for language use. Thus studying the language of literary texts as language in operation is seen as enhancing the learners’ appreciation of aspects of different systems of language organization.” (Abida, p. 13) Learners may appreciate various aspects of the novel, such as the “language organization” of Albert Cohen’s writing. It is true that voice, style, and imagery are all conveyed through the author’s construction of language, which simultaneously present the reader with new vocabulary and grammatical structures. Each individual lesson can focus on different aspects of the novel and its ability to facilitate language acquisition, with the overarching outcomes of motivation and exploration: “Literature and language are closely related and this is a fact none can deny. Literature, whether canonical or not, can [make] positive contributions to the language class by being motivating and thought provoking.” (Abida, p. 11) Within the context of a secondary and post-secondary course on French as a Foreign Language, it is not expected that students comprehend every aspect of the primary source, as the language of Cohen’s novel is extremely complex. Regardless, it can still have “positive contributions to the language class”, as it demonstrates the

language in use. Furthermore, by exposing students to different linguistic and cultural concepts, it promotes the broader goal of competence in the target language.

The quest to know and understand, or rather be known and understood, presents itself in Albert Cohen's novel, notably from a place of inner conflict as a result of marginalization. For example, in [\*Chapter 2: Albert Cohen's insight on Jewish tradition and desire: a contemporary rewriting\*](#), I demonstrate that Ariane expresses at one moment her 'knowledge' of Solal, who she has convinced herself is her Divinely decreed partner: "je t'ai connue, c'était toi, l'inattendue et l'attendue, aussitôt élue en ce soir de destin" (Cohen, p. 444), or "I knew you, know you as the Unexpected One so long awaited, knew you at once for the Chosen One on that evening decreed by Destiny" (Cohen, p. 381). In this passage, the verb 'connaître', or 'to know', is explored, as it has both a literal and figurative meaning, the latter having a spiritual connotation. While this specific passage is not part of the proposed pedagogical adaptation of this study, it serves to illustrate the linguistic complexity of the novel, and how it can be used in a foreign language class to further a student's understanding of French in use at the literary level.

### Critical Thinking

Reading Albert Cohen's novel promotes critical thinking about various themes, such as marginalization through immigration, religion, and sexuality. The linguistic and cultural presentations throughout the novel lend themselves to reflection and introspection, which are skills that are valuable far beyond the context

of a foreign language class: “Using literature as a tool in the teaching process can go beyond language learning and into the realms of critical thinking, a skill which is vital in today’s world.” (Abida, p. 13) A guided course of literary instruction incorporates opportunities for students to expand their critical thinking around a text, which is a fundamental goal of studying the novel. Given that the novel incorporates such sophisticated themes through its language, the historical and cultural context surrounding it can enable the student to make connections and deepen their overall critical thinking skills: “Critical thinking is closely related with the skills of analyzing arguments, making references, evaluating, and making decisions. And the feature of literary text contains many aspects that require deep reading and critical thinking. Literature supplies many linguistic opportunities to the language learner and represents the language of real-life contexts.” (Abida, p. 12) Given that the novel presents such a rich development of its characters, students can challenge and seek to understand their thinking, and compare it to trends of thinking in the modern era. The critical thinking skills that come from analyzing the themes within the novel render the it a useful resource in the foreign language classroom.

These critical thinking skills are of paramount importance in an education that prepares students for success in the 21st century: “In terms of developing skills for the twenty-first century focused on life-long learning, critical thinking should be the core of all classroom teaching.” (Hammes, p. 31) As this century is largely defined by interconnectedness of world societies through technology and globalization, critical thinking skills that are interdisciplinary will have the greatest benefit for students,

which a guided literary study can cultivate. To this effect, innovative pedagogy that prepares students for real-world success must be updated accordingly: “Despite the dominant focus of high school education being memorization of content, action must be taken to instill in teenagers a tenacity and drive to think for themselves.” (Hammes, p. 24) In other words, seeking to develop a student’s understanding around a text and an identification with the characters will lead to greater, more broadly applicable critical thinking skills than requiring the rote memorization of plot details, for example. This being the case, it can be said that the ensuing “critical analysis will help students discern answers to complex questions via understanding how to analyze options and determine the best response.” (Hammes, p. 25) Therefore, though the novel itself may not provoke “answers to complex questions”, it serves as a context from which guided pedagogy can fulfill this goal.

The works of Albert Cohen showcase critical thinking among their characters, and more importantly, the situations that they present lend themselves to an application of such critical thinking. For example, as seen in [Chapter 1, \*Albert Cohen's primal pillar of marginalized desire: an immigrant's vision\*](#), I show that Salomon expresses skepticism that Spitzbergen is a real place: “je ne crois pas que ce Spitzberg soit un vrai pays du monde. ... Je ne sais plus où était ce Spitzberg et en fin de compte cela m’est indifférent car Dieu est partout” (Cohen, pp. 38, 40), or “I do not believe that this Spitsbergen is a real country of the world. ... I no longer know where this Spitsbergen was and in the end I don’t care because God is everywhere” (Cohen, pp. 38, 40). Salomon first pronounces this skepticism on its own, and then

rationalizes it by a proclamation of his spiritual affirmation. This passage illustrates a skeptical nature that transcends Albert Cohen's works, which do not hesitate to challenge what is commonly believed to be the default, prescribed standards by religion and Western society. Another example, as seen in [\*Chapter 2, Albert Cohen's insight on Jewish tradition and desire: a contemporary rewriting\*](#), is when Ariane and Adrien have an argument, initially about Ariane's attire, which ultimately reveals her struggle between tradition and modernity: "– Et si c'était admis de les montrer entièrement, tu serais d'accord ? demanda-t-elle, et dans la psyché elle eut de nouveau ce regard direct, masculin. – Mais pour l'amour du ciel, chérie, que vas-tu chercher ? – La vérité" (Cohen p. 365), or "And would you mind if it was considered perfectly suitable to show the whole lot?" she asked, and in the mirror she gave him another direct, masculine look. "What on earth are you getting at, for goodness sake?" "The truth" (Cohen, p. 312). As there is no one, single, definitive answer to this quest, it therefore demonstrates the vast nature of the subject, and how the characters' oscillations between tradition and modernity lend themselves, and consequently their reader, to think critically.<sup>12</sup>

### Developing Global Citizens

Developing global citizens is a key goal of nearly every foreign language course, and learning from world literature can help pursue this goal. Since Albert

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<sup>12</sup> The aforementioned quote also appears as part of the [chosen excerpts](#) that appear in the appendix of this study, which accompanies a scene in *A Grand Affair*.

Cohen was an immigrant at an early age, and had an international perspective on life which shaped his cultural identity, the reader can learn about becoming a global citizen through a guided study of his novel. In essence, by learning to read literature, students learn how to read the world around them: “A common attempt to justify literature’s place as an academic subject is to list skills widely recognized as necessary in today’s world that can be developed through reading and writing about texts... More promising is another claim: that learning to read literature helps us to read the world around us.” (Bruns, p. 11) The historical and cultural context surrounding a unit of study around a literary work can further supplement this understanding of world events, which is an integral component of comprehensive literary study. Given the multicultural landscape of much of the United States, cultivating this awareness of an interconnected world through literature fosters intercultural competencies, a valuable skill for success in the 21st century: “Acquiring knowledge about immigrant groups, their sociocultural histories, and their expectations of the new culture will enhance the intercultural competencies necessary to build and manage a more inclusive learning environment that would attract and retain today’s foreign born.” (Alfred, p. 17) Whether it be from immigrations from generations past or those of today, understanding the interconnectedness of majorities and their respective minorities are refracted through the literary lens. The foreign language classroom readily lends itself to transmitting these notions to students, which literature only supplements.

It must be remembered that pursuing a goal as dynamic as developing global citizens is not met without challenges. As a given literary work is the cultural refraction of only one individual, it can by no means cultivate a globally-minded person singlehandedly: “Teaching world literature poses intellectual as well as institutional challenges. Whatever their approach, people who teach this subject must develop a working sense of what they mean by the term. What literature? Whose world? How has *literature* been understood in its myriad manifestations over time and across space? Pedagogically, just how much time can and should be spent in class on issues of definition, literary history, and cultural context?” (Damrosch, p. 3) While there are no single, correct answers to these questions, they highlight the fact that studying world literature, while rich in its potential, must be carefully addressed and adapted as necessary. Although Albert Cohen’s novel is the key text of interest in this study, the effective and innovative educator must situate it alongside other texts and cultural materials to facilitate a meaningful and successful language course for his students. Ultimately, “Good teachers have always found ways to focus on illuminating moments or conjunctions that can open up distinctive social, historical, and aesthetic contexts for the works treated.” (Damrosch, p. 9) By exploring the “illuminating moments” of the novel, it can serve as a valuable resource in pursuit of the goal of developing global citizens.

Albert Cohen’s novel lends itself to cultivating a global mindset. As seen in [Chapter 2, \*Albert Cohen’s insight on Jewish tradition and desire: a contemporary rewriting\*](#), I discuss how Saltiel takes pride in his French citizenship, having become a

naturalized citizen from Greece: “... nous sommes demeurés fièrement citoyens français” (Cohen, p. 150), or “... French citizens we have been proud to remain” (Cohen, p. 124). This passage addresses themes of marginality from immigration, and also a restructuring of Jewish identity at the crossroads of tradition and modernity, forging a new path of acculturation in 20th century France.<sup>13</sup> By exploring this passage, students can further develop as global citizens, understanding the historical and cultural background of Albert Cohen leading to this moment in his novel, which ultimately contributes to the goal of developing global citizens through guided literary study.

#### 4.2 Pedagogical approaches and strategies used to teach the novel

While a multitude of effective teaching tactics can meet various learning objectives, in this chapter I outline a set of two pedagogical approaches and two pedagogical strategies that can be used to explore the novel, as aforementioned. The proposed pedagogical approaches are: [Active Learning](#) and [Student Centered Learning](#). The proposed pedagogical strategies are: incorporating a [variety of media](#) and a [variety of exercises](#).

To understand how the novel can be best situated in a French language course, it is helpful to reference the five Cs, a set of goals established by the American

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<sup>13</sup> This passage also appears as part of the [chosen excerpts](#) that appear in the appendix of this study, which accompanies a scene in *A Grand Affair*; both the textual excerpt and film scene appear at the same point in the appendix, previously mentioned in the goal of [Forming Adolescent Identity](#).

Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages. This frame of reference established by ACTFL is commonly referenced by language educators to situate their lessons, and connect the target language and unit of study to other areas. According to the ACTFL, these five goal areas: “stress the application of learning a language beyond the instructional setting. The goal is to prepare learners to apply the skills and understandings measured by the Standards, to bring a global competence to their future careers and experiences.” (ACTFL) Among the five goal areas, which are communication, cultures, connections, comparisons, and communities, the final three goal areas are particularly strong in this proposed teaching of Albert Cohen’s novel.

Firstly, connections are at the root of studying this novel, as many parallels can be drawn between the historical context of Albert Cohen and other historical events in Europe at the time. Studying *Belle du Seigneur* lends itself to further exploring other notable historical events, particularly those in relation to the European Jewish experience, such as the Dreyfus affair, WWII, and the Holocaust. Albert Cohen’s young life was directly shaped by the wake of anti-Semitism in France in the years following the Dreyfus affair, which was a massive time of socio-cultural change in Francophone Europe, particularly with regard to religion. In collaboration with teachers in other disciplines, or by adding or supplementing the proposed unit of study, students could read *J’accuse* by Émile Zola or watch the 2019 historical drama film of the same name directed by Roman Polanski, to further their understanding and make connections to this key historical event. Students could also collaborate with an English or History course, which could study other texts or films related to the

Holocaust, and perhaps also take a trip to a Jewish or Holocaust memorial museum, to give greater and meaningful context on the historical events surrounding the author and novel.

Secondly, the novel is ripe with opportunities for students to make comparisons, which initially come from the context of the novel itself. For example, *Belle du Seigneur* presents many comparisons that come from its characters and setting, such as the comparison between men and women, homosexual and heterosexual, Judaism and Christianity, and immigrant and non-immigrant. From these presented comparisons, students can expand upon their own understanding of these combinations, and furthermore, compare how these combinations are presented in the novel and in other texts, or real life.

Thirdly, the novel is a valuable resource for exploring various communities. Within the text of *Belle du Seigneur*, many groups are presented, such as those who are marginalized by immigration, religion, and sexual identity. The root of these groups is the common thread of marginalization, which can serve as a common theme for students to explore other communities. Students can expand upon how each of the presented communities is depicted in the context of the novel, and how these communities, or other marginalized groups, are presented in other contexts and time periods.

Moreover, with this understanding of the ACTFL five Cs and their particular relevance to studying Albert Cohen's novel in a French course, it must be noted that the pedagogical approaches and strategies discussed in this chapter serve as the basis

from which these Cs can be further explored, notably connections, comparisons, and communities. In essence, the approaches and strategies enable the pedagogy from which the learning of the novel and beyond can take place. To this effect, one must understand that a pedagogical approach differs from a pedagogical strategy. Within the context of this chapter, I discuss that the pedagogical approaches of Active Learning and Student Centered Learning are developed pedagogical disciplines that have been extensively researched and studied. These are in contrast to the pedagogical strategies of incorporating a variety of media and a variety of exercises in a lesson plan, which are simply techniques that supplement the design and instruction of a course.

### Active Learning

Active Learning is a pedagogical approach that engages the student in a lesson, prompting the student to then apply their broader thinking surrounding the lesson. It has become an increasingly common approach in secondary and post-secondary educational settings in recent years, as part of reforming pedagogy for the 21st century. According to Michael Prince: “Active learning is generally defined as any instructional method that engages students in the learning process. In short, active learning requires students to do meaningful learning activities and think about what they are doing.” (Prince) This widely accepted definition comes from foundational research in this field, notably conducted by pedagogical scholars Charles Bonwell and James Eison. In essence, Active Learning prioritizes direct participation in activities

and assignments in an engaging course setting, the antithesis of passively receiving information in a lecture. Course content is therefore more integrated in the student's mind, enabling them to make connections and better pursue the various goals of studying the novel. "This approach makes it possible to explore essential ideas in ways relevant and important to students, helping them integrate experiences, concerns, and issues from their own lives with course material. This integration makes learning genuine, unique, and enduring for each student." (Miller, p. 11) In the foreign language classroom, Active Learning is critical to building linguistic proficiency, as this strategy promotes practice and engagement of course material beyond rote memorization. The repetition of linguistic, literary, and cultural motifs through Active Learning therefore "makes learning genuine", therefore more meaningful for the student.

Besides cultivating a student's own appreciation for the course material, research on Active Learning has found that: "Students in active learning classes outperform those in traditional lectures on identical exams. On average, students taught with active learning got scores 6% higher than students in a traditional class... In Freeman's words, (in an interview with D. Lederman, 2014): The impact of these data should be like the Surgeon General's report on "Smoking and Health" in 1964—they should put to rest any debate about whether active learning is more effective than lecturing." (Blaz, pp. 3-4) Even if exams, such as standardized tests, do not evolve in parallel with current pedagogical research, this passage suggests that students in Active Learning classes outperform other students. The comparison to "Smoking and

Health” is a bold claim, suggesting that Active Learning is undoubtedly more beneficial for the student, akin to living a smoke-free lifestyle.

Furthering the research on cognitive processing and Active Learning, brain researchers claim that: “[Recent] brain research shows us that we must stop and use information often in order to transfer it to long-term memory. This must be done periodically during the reading process itself.” (Blaz, p. 231) Active Learning seeks to use, or rather apply, a student’s learning throughout a course of study, rather than waiting for demonstrative competency on a single, summative assessment. During the reading process, particularly relevant when studying the novel, taking time to pause and apply knowledge surrounding a student’s reading helps to therefore solidify such knowledge in the student’s long-term memory. In other words, activities that directly engage students and promote them to make their own connections will lead to a research-proven solidification of course material in the brain. “For the reader’s experience of the text’s world to be available as an object in transitional space, as I’ve said, the reader must immerse himself in that world. For literary education this means that an immersive stance toward texts must not only be made visible in instruction but must take priority, not to the exclusion of the reflective, distancing mode of reading but as the context or frame in which the latter gains its significance.” (Bruns, p. 117) To therefore render the novel as an “object in transitional space”, in essence a living document with which students can connect and identify, Active Learning would be the ideal pedagogical strategy to create an immersive reading experience. By prioritizing Active Learning while teaching the novel in the foreign language

classroom, a teacher can ensure that students have a much more meaningful linguistic and cultural experience, and better internalize the material into their long-term memory through interpersonal connections.

As presented in the appendix of this study, a variety of original activities and exercises have been created to teach Albert Cohen's novel, which specifically prioritize the framework of Active Learning. While all of the activities and exercises seek to actively engage students in the material of the proposed unit, it is clear that certain ones are more directly engaging than others. Among these activities is the [‘Drawings of plot progression—La progression de l'intrigue en images’](#)<sup>14</sup>. This activity asks students to draw a sequential progression of the plot of *Belle du Seigneur*, the résumé of which they have been presented. It seeks to actively engage students who are artistic and creative, applying meta-cognitive knowledge of the text and language, as they draw a small image of various plot points and write a summary in the target language. Another activity that directly employs Active Learning is the [‘Historical comparison—s'ils étaient en vie aujourd'hui’](#)<sup>15</sup>. This exercise requires students to actively reflect on the historical context surrounding the novel, with which they have been sufficiently presented to complete this task, and then compare how the characters in *Belle du Seigneur* would react if they were alive today. Students are asked to discuss these scenarios among themselves in the target language, referencing four chosen clips from the cinematic adaptation of the novel, *A Grand Affair*.

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<sup>14</sup> [Appendix 5](#)

<sup>15</sup> [Appendix 14](#)

Moreover, another activity that utilizes Active Learning is the [‘Projet Final’](#)<sup>16</sup>, a dynamic project that requires students to collaborate in order to create a video presentation. As this project can serve as a summative assessment, it is particularly beneficial that it draw on the fundamentals of Active Learning, as it enables students to authentically demonstrate their understanding of the novel and its consequent linguistic and cultural transmissions, showcased creatively in a video project. It encourages students to become technologically literate, an increasingly valuable skill in the 21st century, as they compare *Belle du Seigneur* to another creative work. Finally, the activity [‘Les Cinq Questions’](#)<sup>17</sup> also seeks to engage students through Active Learning, as it requires students to adopt the role of either Ariane or Solal, the two main protagonists of *Belle du Seigneur*, who in turn respond to questions asked by other students. As opposed to simply reading about these characters and appreciating them within the literary corpus, students actively engage with the novel by adopting the characteristics of the characters, bringing students’ understanding of the text to another dimension. By adopting a role of this nature, it requires students to think creatively and engage with the material beyond the limitations of their own interests, or even their own biases regarding marginalization. It is through these activities and exercises that students can internalize the linguistic and cultural aspects presented through Albert Cohen’s novel, and therefore have a more memorable and meaningful experience in their course.

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<sup>16</sup> [Appendix 15](#)

<sup>17</sup> [Appendix 16](#)

## Student Centered Learning

Student Centered Learning is a pedagogical approach that prioritizes a student's autonomy in a course, and encourages the student's engagement with other students as much as possible. As defined by Carl Rogers: "Student-centered learning has been defined most simply as an approach to learning in which learners choose not only what to study but also how and why that topic might be of interest." (Rogers)

Carl Rogers was an American founder of Humanistic Psychology, and one of the founding scholars to explore Student Centered Learning. His commonly accepted definition exemplifies the autonomy and responsibility of the learner, as opposed to the teacher having full control and coverage of any given content. In contrast to traditional pedagogy, along with the aforementioned Active Learning, this approach is in essence a paradigm shift. To this effect, in the words of Alison King: "the professor, instead of being the 'sage on the stage,' functions as a 'guide on the side,' facilitating learning in less directive ways." (King, p. 30) While still responsible for presenting course content, the teacher has a less active role than in traditional, lecture-based courses. "The student-centered approach makes it possible for the teacher to take on the role of guide and mentor—the caring adult every child needs as many of as possible—right there in the classroom. Traditional teaching methods raise barriers between teacher and student in the form of one-size-fits-all lessons, tests, and grades that put students in their place and keep them there." (Miller, p. 4) Student Centered Learning therefore seeks to deconstruct the "barriers between teacher and student" historically constructed by traditional pedagogy. While this approach does not imply

that there are no boundaries between the teacher and student, the power dynamics are shifted to enable a more open and encouraging learning environment, one that permits student autonomy and practice of course content without the constant input of the educator. It is true that this paradigm shift may seem contradictory to a language educator, who is often convinced that he or she is present to transmit knowledge to his or her students and correct their mistakes. While this aspect of the teacher's presence is not entirely absent in the framework of Student Centered Learning, it is significantly reduced, prioritizing students to engage independently, apart from the teacher, as part of the classroom experience. The teacher therefore only provides guidance and corrects when necessary, creating a more affirming and active environment for the students. While students may make more linguistic errors through this approach in a language classroom, what transcends is the overarching, communicative, linguistic proficiency of the students, accompanied by historical and cultural knowledge provided through guided instruction of the novel. In essence, this approach more directly prepares students for success in life outside of the classroom, in which their autonomy that has been reinforced and cultivated through this pedagogical technique will be exemplified.

Through Student Centered Learning, a more natural classroom experience is created, with a greater sense of autonomy that more closely mirrors life outside of a pedagogical context. Through activities and exercises that employ Student Centered Learning, students respond to linguistic and cultural input on a deeper level, rather than simply memorize them superficially: "This kind of [learning] also encourages

students to *respond to* their readings in an open-ended, emergent, and constructivist vein, rather than being expected to *account for* texts within explanatory paradigms (whether old or new, traditionally edifying or radically critical).” (Paulson, p. 163)

The “constructivist vein” is a crucial component of Student Centered Learning, as the manifestation of creativity showcases the root of not only linguistic and cultural acquisition, but a deeper inter-personal understanding of the novel. Through activities that range from collaborative discussions to independent creations, the broader learning of the student as a whole human being becomes the focus of this pedagogical approach, rather than the mastery of specific concepts for the sake of mastering them. While certain disciplines require this mastery of content for various reasons, it can be said that a more memorable and meaningful experience can come from a Student Centered approach to the novel in a foreign language course.

Moreover, a similarity can be drawn to experiential learning, which similarly seeks to create a more natural learning environment in which students experience material firsthand, without the constant, direct influence from the teacher: “Acquisition of authentic knowledge via experiential learning is accomplished through moderate curricular support of the experiential learning opportunity, the opportunity itself, and proper reflection—all of which are advocated by the philosophical giants of experiential learning.” (Facemire, p. 68) When students complete their education and move on from the structure of a given foreign language class, the experiences and engagement with which they are presented will serve them far better than a traditional, one-sided lecturing, within this frame of pedagogical

theory. The “moderate curricular support” consists of skillfully constructed lessons and carefully constructed materials to fulfill the overarching goals of studying the novel.

As visible in the appendix of this study, a variety of original activities and exercises have been created to teach Albert Cohen’s novel, which specifically prioritize the framework of Student Centered Learning. The first of these activities is a class debate, or rather two debates that address different topics: [‘L’importance de la littérature’](#)<sup>18</sup> and [‘Quitter son pays d’origine’](#)<sup>19</sup>. In these debates, students are assigned a role which they must adopt, therefore prompting engagement beyond those dictated by their own biases or preferences, seeking to build empathy and create more inquisitive global citizens. This engagement is further sparked by the nature of the debated topics themselves, which are the importance of literature as part of a general course of study in the 21st century, and the emotional repercussions of leaving one’s country of origin. Students lead these debates themselves in the target language, with the instructor participating only when necessary, such as to prompt the conversation to continue or change course, or to correct linguistic errors as deemed necessary. The second of these debates is followed by an interpersonal audio recording assignment, in which the student continues to reflect on the given topic, this time voicing their own opinion on it individually. Moreover, two writing activities have been created within the realm of Student Centered Learning, enabling students to share their own

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<sup>18</sup> [Appendix 2](#)

<sup>19</sup> [Appendix 17](#)

reflections on the novel and showcase their broader understanding of it. These include an in-class timed essay, '[Réponse à une lettre](#)'<sup>20</sup>, and the '[Composition écrite finale](#)'<sup>21</sup>. In the first of these exercises, students must create a response to an open-ended prompt. In this case, the prompt is an interpretation of the character Ariane, showcased in a modernized letter format. Ariane asks the student for their advice, as she voices her conflicted feelings regarding to whom she is sexually attracted, consequently seeking to elicit a spirit of inclusivity from the student. The second exercise also solicits a written response from students. It is a more lengthy writing assignment than the first one, requiring students to answer a set of open-ended questions in a letter to the author, imagining he could read their compositions, and addressing questions such as the importance of literature as part of a general course of study in the 21st century, which mirrors to an extent the previously conducted debate. Both of these exercises require more than a rote memorization of the text, drawing upon students' meta-linguistic competencies to engage with the target language, and make their own connections. These proposed exercises prioritize student autonomy and individual expression, engaging with the various aspects of language acquisition, and creating a classroom environment that is more representative of the world outside of a language class.

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<sup>20</sup> [Appendix 9](#)

<sup>21</sup> [Appendix 18](#)

### Variety of Media

In contrast to the previously discussed pedagogical approaches of Active Learning and Student Centered Learning, incorporating a variety of media is simply a pedagogical strategy that gives students more avenues through which to experience course content. By seeking to include diverse formats of media, the educator can bring the novel to life, which can spark greater interest and foster a deeper engagement of the material with students. “If the learner is interested in the item, he or she is dealing with it in several ways, often making new connections to past learning. Interest will significantly extend a student’s attention span.” (Blaz, p. 16) By visualizing the novel through film, for example, students are given another perspective on the story presented through the text, enabling them to develop their meta-cognitive processing surrounding the themes within it. Moreover, if some students are simply more interested in films than in novels, the film adaptation of the novel will resonate more with those students.

Incorporating film in a guided unit of literary study can be a significantly advantageous pedagogical decision, as it cultivates the connection between not only students and the presented material, but language and literature: “Cultivating the connection between language and literature implies transforming the literary pedagogy developed under print culture in this century—and such a transformation, fortunately, is already under way. It implies the use of technologies both old and new—and both are available.” (Paulson, p. 158) Incorporating film study alongside that of literary study is an example of this “use of technologies” in a pedagogical fusion,

promoting diversified exposure to notions of marginality presented in the novel. When students are able to visualize such themes in action on screen, they are more likely to develop a sense of empathy, one of the primary goals from guided literary study. Critical thinking is another primal skill that can be cultivated through the diversified presentation of media, such as films: “For the most part, movies are stories, and stories (unlike lectures or sermons) are open to interpretation.” (Watkins, p. 17) Echoing the previously presented pedagogical strategies, supplementing literary study with films reinforces student autonomy and individual thinking throughout a lesson, as it provides them with another means of interpreting these stories. In fact, Plate argues that it is particularly beneficial when analyzing a text with a religious aspect, such as *Belle du Seigneur*: “Religion and film are akin. They both function by recreating the known world and then presenting that alternative version of the world to their viewers... Religions and films each create alternate worlds utilizing the raw materials of space and time and elements, bending each of them in new ways and forcing them to fit particular standards and desires.” (Plate, p. 2) In essence, the cinematic adaptation of the novel works in a similar way as the novel itself, as they both refract Jewish culture and spiritual consciousness in their own way. By “presenting that alternative version of the world” to the students, through both the novel itself and in film, students have twice as many opportunities to solidify their understanding of the marginality being discussed with regard to religion, along with immigration and sexuality.

As seen in the various pedagogical materials presented in the appendix of this study, [a series of four film clips](#)<sup>22</sup> have been chosen from *A Grand Affair*, to supplement authentic extracts from *Belle du Seigneur*. While the cinematic adaptation of the novel was done in English, it is still of pedagogical value for the students, as it aids in the visualization and internalization of the setting and themes depicted in the novel. Although the audio may not be in French, the presentation of film clips in English are not automatically void of pedagogical value. The envisioned unit of study incorporates other opportunities to facilitate students' listening practice in French with other sources, such as [interviews related to the novel](#).<sup>23</sup> In essence, films hold greater pedagogical promise in the foreign language classroom than simply conveying audible language for the students to internalize: "Movies are very effective teaching tools and have positive and effective results... Therefore, teachers must understand the power of video materials in order to capture the attention of learners, increase their motivation and enhance their leaning experience." (Jamalyar, p. 130) Among the chosen series of four film clips, "the power of video" is sought to accompany the original text in showing various moments of *Belle du Seigneur*, including Ariane's prayer and stream-of-consciousness, Solal at a synagogue, and Ariane and Solal arguing. These scenes, along with *A Grand Affair* in its entirety, are cinematic adaptations of the novel that do not identically follow the plot, nor do they capture the full characterization of Ariane and Solal presented in the novel. In fact, all film

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<sup>22</sup> [These film clips appear at various points in the appendix, including entries 6, 7, 10, 13, and 14.](#)

<sup>23</sup> [Appendix 8](#) and [11](#)

versions of novels are in essence, adaptations. Although it may not be a comprehensive reflection of the text, it still holds pedagogical value as a resource enabling students to visualize the various presentations of marginalization.

In addition to film scenes, clips of the audiobook *Belle du Seigneur* have also been included alongside [the chosen textual extracts and film scenes in the pedagogical adaptation of the novel](#).<sup>24</sup> “Audiobooks have traditionally been used in schools by teachers of second-language learners... In many cases, audiobooks have proven successful in providing a way for these students to access literature and enjoy books.” (Johnson, p. 2) By giving students the opportunity to listen to the original French text, they are further engaged in the novel with another form of media. Hearing the words spoken by a professional narrator gives another dimension to the text, which can help progress through the passages which may be difficult for language learners. By visualizing the chosen components of the novel through a film and also listening to them through an audiobook, students therefore are further immersed in the cultural richness of the novel and given more opportunities to critically think about it.

### Variety of Exercises

Closely related to the previous section on incorporating a variety of media, implementing a variety of exercises is a pedagogical strategy that gives students a diversified means through which to experience course content. While not a

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<sup>24</sup> [These audiobook clips appear at various points in the appendix, including entries 6, 7, 10, 12, and 13.](#)

pedagogical approach with its own extensive body of research, this teaching technique is particularly beneficial to accommodate a wide range of learning styles, a reality with which all educators are inevitably faced. “Learning style is the manner or fashion how someone acquires, attains, retains, and uses imagination to attain skills or information. Due to its variable nature it can be termed as individual style of learning based on individual and intrinsic differences and the mode they prefer to learn new things.” (Hussain, p. 33) By placing an emphasis on the most effective pedagogical strategies in order to maximize “how someone acquires, attains, retains, and uses” course content, implementing a variety of exercises therefore gives a lesson more dimension, which speaks to the learning styles of different students. The most commonly understood learning styles focus on the modes through which each learner receives and processes new information, which include visual, auditory, kinesthetic, and reading and writing. Accommodating various learning styles also draws a parallel to the previous sections on Active Learning and Student Centered Learning, which prioritize active engagement among students in a lesson, which therefore lends itself to a diverse array of exercises in a given unit of study, rather than only lectures and writing. “Remember that the standard method of teaching literature—reading followed by worksheets or discussion—is best suited to the linguistic learners in your classroom. In order to reach *all* your students, you will have to adapt this subject matter for visual/spatial, logical/mathematical, kinesthetic, auditory, and all learning styles. After all, since all students are a mixture of several learning styles, variety will benefit your classroom.” (Blaz, p. 229) Because all students are a mixture of different

learning styles and resonate with them in their own way, implementing a variety of exercises seeks to touch upon these different learning styles in varying capacities, each exercise placing various amounts of emphasis on different skills.

Because a variety of exercises addresses different skills related to linguistic and cultural competency, not only are a variety of learning styles accommodated, but the broader goals of studying the novel are better achieved. Forming Adolescent Identity, for example, is a psychological parallel that can be further evoked from a student and reinforced when presented through various avenues of application. The novel lends itself to this dynamic pedagogical interpretation: “In a course on fiction, narrative, or the novel, these implicitly psychological parallels become available for our most imaginative, explicit, intellectual deployment. Every literary technique or realist, modernist, or postmodernist/metafictional narrative can be adapted into a pedagogical technique as well; every literary convention of narrative structure can be turned into a classroom practice.” (Showalter, p. 95) The novel is therefore an adaptable tool that can serve a variety of pedagogical goals, and this adaptability is reflected in a variety of exercises that can accompany studying it. The intricate process of Forming Adolescent Identity can therefore be further solidified through studying a novel when a student is required to not only read it, but actively work with peers to create a reflective project about it.

As part of the scaffolded approach to language acquisition, a pedagogical principle that seeks to systematically build upon students’ prior knowledge to introduce new information, a variety of exercises related to the novel need to be

presented to students in successive segments: “Students first need to analyze the technique in the text; second, to have it named and defined [or rather, clarified] through handouts, or course webpage sites, so that they can identify and recognize it; and third, to see how it operates in the classroom, and to imagine for themselves alternative ways to represent it.” (Showalter, p. 95) When a variety of exercises is given to students, these stages in comprehending a text and its respective themes can be done actively and imaginatively. Such a scaffolded approach reflects the fundamentals of Active Learning and is most impactful when a diverse set of activities is made available to language learners, which gives them the ability to demonstrate language use outside of the classroom: “One emphasis of this aspect of language learning is that in addition to using the language in the classroom, the student must also demonstrate the ability to use the language outside of the classroom.” (Blaz, p. 85) A traditional approach to studying the novel, which is limited to lecturing and writing, only focuses upon a particular skill set within the student, rather than a broader, more comprehensive demonstration of their learning. The scaffolded approach to linguistic and cultural acquisition through a variety of exercises seeks to give students more inclusive and holistic opportunities to showcase this learning.

[The appendix](#) to this study presents a diverse collection of exercises that have been scaffolded to first introduce the students to literary study and the novel, culminating in the interactive and imaginative application of their newly acquired knowledge. Accommodations of the aforementioned diverse learning styles is present

among this variety of exercises. For example, a series of exercises has been created for [auditory learners](#)<sup>25</sup>, which caters to students who learn best by listening. These auditory exercises take authentic interviews surrounding the novel, one from the author himself and another from a reader, and then enable students to showcase their understanding of these interviews. Students are further immersed in materials related to the novel, actively working on their listening competency in the target language. Plus, the [audiobook recordings of the excerpts from the novel](#)<sup>26</sup> also contribute to auditory learners. These audiobook recordings are incorporated in the same exercises as those that cater to visual learners, in which a passage of the film adaptation of the novel is made available to students. Visual learners also have the opportunity to showcase their learning through [an artistic application of plot details, seen in one activity](#),<sup>27</sup> which is supplemented by a brief written accompaniment. Finally, students who learn best by primarily reading and writing are also accommodated [among the various activities](#),<sup>28</sup> and other assignments and assessments seek to accommodate other learning styles through a combination of tasks. It is understandable that a unit focused on the novel will incorporate significant practice of these skills, notably at an advanced level to accompany a high level of study. A set of articles has been chosen to accompany studying the novel itself, and the plot of the novel has been summarized in the target language, so it is accessible in a secondary or post-

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<sup>25</sup> [Appendix 8](#) and [11](#).

<sup>26</sup> [Appendix 6](#), [7](#), [10](#), [12](#), and [13](#).

<sup>27</sup> [Appendix 5](#).

<sup>28</sup> [Appendix 1](#), [3](#), [4](#), [6](#), [7](#), [9](#), [10](#), [12](#), [13](#), and [18](#).

secondary educational setting. The chosen extracts of the novel are presented to students in the original French along with their English translation. This choice has been implemented to further students' competence in biliteracy: "When biliteracy is fostered, literacy skills and strategies used in one language transfer to the other—especially when both languages use the same writing system." (Ernst-Slavit, p. 2)

Given the complex linguistic nature of the novel, the goal is not for the language of the novel to be analyzed itself for the acquisition of specific vocabulary, for example. Rather, the goal is for students to experience the text as an example of the French language in use, and the bilingual presentation of passages enables students to access the themes of marginalization that are crucial to studying this novel without the register of language making them inaccessible, consequently impeding the broader goals of studying the novel. The accompanying English translations of the novel are therefore not void of pedagogical value, rather they serve the broader understanding of students' reading capacity in French, and overarching linguistic and cultural acquisition. Moreover, the activities following each reading passage check for student comprehension through various multiple-choice questions and short writing passages in the target language, so students cannot be completely dependent on the English translation to demonstrate their broader understanding of the novel and its themes. Therefore, a variety of exercises seeks to accommodate a diverse range of learning styles, echoing other pedagogical strategies such as Active Learning, in the pursuit of a more memorable and meaningful learning experience of the novel.

Following this analysis, [a lesson plan](#) has been created, a concrete example of a series of ten class sessions that addresses the [exploratory aspects of the novel of Part One](#), using the [pedagogical approaches and strategies of Part Two](#). This lesson plan is an example of how the goals, pedagogical strategies, and created materials in the appendix can synthesize in a teachable series of class sessions, and can be modified, adjusted, and supplemented as necessary.

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## SITUATED LESSON PLAN — EXAMPLE UNIT ON ALBERT COHEN

This situated lesson plan could be implemented in a junior or senior level French course at the secondary level, or a 300 or 400 level French course at the post-secondary level. It must also be noted that this lesson plan is intended for students with an intermediate to advanced level of French proficiency, and contains mature content. When taught at the secondary level, the maturity of students should be considered, along with the school climate in general, to teach mature content.

### Lesson 1

—Classwork: [Class debate—L'importance de la littérature : jouer le rôle](#)<sup>29</sup>

—Homework: [Article with questions—À quoi sert la littérature ?](#)<sup>30</sup>  
(given before this lesson—can be discussed during the lesson)

In this introductory lesson, students begin to discuss the role of literary studies as part of a comprehensive and balanced education in the 21st century. Before this first lesson, students have already been given an article to read, introducing the concept of literary study from the perspective of a Francophone writer. This article also consists of questions, which may be collected for a formative grade or discussed at the beginning the lesson. The main classwork activity consists of an in-class debate, in which students are divided into two teams. (The following prompt is presented: D'après vous, quel rôle la littérature joue-t-elle dans les études

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<sup>29</sup> [Appendix 2](#)

<sup>30</sup> [Appendix 1](#)

d'aujourd'hui ? Y-a-t-il une importance dans une éducation générale, et pourquoi ?)

One team collaborates to brainstorm reasons justifying the importance of literary study, and the other team does the opposite, suggesting that it is irrelevant in current general education. Afterwards, the students conduct a debate, trying to convince the other side of their perspective. Students may also reference the article that was read prior to this lesson to support their claims.

## Lesson 2

—Classwork: [Article with questions—Entretien imaginé et contexte historique](#)<sup>31</sup>

—Homework: [Written passage with questions—Résumé du texte](#)<sup>32</sup>

Continuing to the second lesson, the first classwork activity is to read an article and complete a series of questions to check for reading comprehension. The article is a simulated interview with the author, discussing various aspects of his background and literary career. While this activity could be completed independently, it could be read aloud by various students to practice reading and pronunciation skills. The questions could also be completed by students in small groups and then reviewed as a class. Finally, students will be given a written passage with comprehension questions to complete for homework. This is a summary of the text, which gives a chronological presentation of the plot. Emphasis is placed on the aspects of marginalized desire as they occur throughout the timeline of the text.

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<sup>31</sup> [Appendix 3](#)

<sup>32</sup> [Appendix 4](#)

### Lesson 3

—Classwork: [Drawings of plot progression—La progression de l'intrigue en images](#)<sup>33</sup>

—Homework: [Written passage with questions—Excerpts 1](#)<sup>34</sup> and [2](#)<sup>35</sup>

As the unit progresses, as suggested at the beginning of the second lesson, the teacher may collect the previously assigned homework for a formative assessment grade, or discuss the responses with the students at the beginning of class. Next, students will work together to complete a series of drawings to explain the progression of the plot. Students also incorporate transition words, as prompted on the document, to improve the flow of telling a story. Remember that prior to receiving this assignment, students will have received another summary of the text<sup>36</sup> which has been marked with numbers, indicating various points within the progression of the plot, indicating where a specific excerpt is situated in relation to the rest of the narrative. For homework, students will read two chosen excerpts from *Belle du Seigneur*, each of which have an accompanying audio clip from the 2021 release of the audiobook narrated by Éric Caravaca. Each excerpt is also accompanied by a short passage from the movie *A Grand Affair* to complement the students'

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<sup>33</sup> [Appendix 5](#)

<sup>34</sup> [Appendix 6](#)

<sup>35</sup> [Appendix 7](#)

<sup>36</sup> [Appendix 4](#)

understanding of the given passage of text. The completion of the first two excerpts are to be completed before the next lesson.

#### Lesson 4

—Classwork: [Audio screening with questions—Interview with Annie Cohen: attention, chef d’œuvre !](#)<sup>37</sup> and [Timed writing practice—Read and reply to a letter](#)<sup>38</sup>

—Homework: [Written passage with questions—Excerpt 3](#)<sup>39</sup>

At the beginning of this lesson, the teacher may collect the previously assigned reading homework for a grade, or discuss it as a class. The first classwork activity is the screening of an audio clip followed by a series of comprehensive questions. In this clip, students are exposed to a secondary source that discusses *Belle du Seigneur* and its testament to the French literary tradition. It is suggested that the clip is first played without students having seen the questions, then again—and possibly a third time—once students have been given the questions to which they need to respond. It is then suggested that students work together in pairs or small groups to answer these questions, then discuss the correct answers together as a class. Next, for the second half of the class period, students will be given a timed writing practice activity. In this assignment, students will compose an email response—in essence, a short letter—in which they write to Ariane from a modern perspective.

Students will synthesize their knowledge about the text and make connections to

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<sup>37</sup> [Appendix 8](#)

<sup>38</sup> [Appendix 9](#)

<sup>39</sup> [Appendix 10](#)

contemporary culture in this applied writing activity. This in-class essay may then be collected for a formative grade, and feedback should then be given to students within the next few lessons for guided writing practice. For homework, students will continue to directly engage with the novel by reading another excerpt, accompanied with the audio recording and corresponding passage from the movie.

### Lesson 5

—Classwork: [Audio screening with questions—Interview with Albert Cohen: la passion, la séduction, le vrai amour](#)<sup>40</sup>

—Homework: [Written passage with questions—Excerpts 4](#)<sup>41</sup> and [5](#)<sup>42</sup>

At the beginning of this lesson, the teacher may collect the previously assigned reading homework for a grade, or discuss it as a class. Similarly to the previous lesson, the first classwork activity is the screening of an audio clip followed by a series of comprehensive questions. In this clip, students are exposed to a personal interview conducted with the author, in which he addresses various notions of desire and connection as they are presented in his novel. As done in the previous lesson, this audio clip may be played a few times for the students, once before seeing the questions, and then a few times after. Students may discuss the responses to the questions among themselves before reviewing the correct answers as a class. For homework, students are to read the final two excerpts of the novel with the

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<sup>40</sup> [Appendix 11](#)

<sup>41</sup> [Appendix 12](#)

<sup>42</sup> [Appendix 13](#)

accompanying audio and movie clips. Students may begin working on this assignment before the end of the lesson, either with each other or independently.

## Lesson 6

—Classwork: [Historical Comparison—If Ariane/Solal were alive now, how would they act?/S'ils étaient en vie aujourd'hui—class discussion, partner discussion after watching each individual video clip](#)<sup>43</sup>

—Homework: [Projet Final \(to present in lesson 10\)—Compare Albert Cohen and this book to another book you know, or song/poem you know, and explain why you made this comparison. \(Video project—project based learning, with questions at the end for in-class discussion\)](#).<sup>44</sup>

First, the teacher may collect the previously assigned reading homework for a grade, or discuss it as a class. Students will re-watch the film segments of *A Grand Affair* to prompt their responses in a historical comparison activity. After working together in partners and sharing their impressions with the class, students will be introduced to the final project, the last summative assignment of this unit. Students will collaborate in pairs or small groups over the course of the week to make a comparison between Albert Cohen and *Belle du Seigneur* to another text or song/poem, and explain why the comparison was made.

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<sup>43</sup> [Appendix 14](#)

<sup>44</sup> [Appendix 15](#)

## Lesson 7

—Classwork: [Les Cinq Questions](#)—Write five questions you would like to ask Ariane/Solal (and have a partner respond, adopting the role—presentations)<sup>45</sup>

—Homework: Continue working on [final project](#)<sup>46</sup>

In this lesson, with a partner, one student will adopt the role of either Ariane/Solal, and the other will remain his/her self, out of character. The first student will respond to a set of questions prepared by the second student. A similar introspection of character presented in the classwork for lesson six is presented here, requiring students to solidify their understanding of the characterization presented in the text and apply it in a dynamic situation. Once students have completed the activity having adopted one role, they may switch and repeat it. To conclude the lesson, the teacher may have each pair of students share one of their questions and responses, circulating around the class. For homework, students will continue working on their final project.

## Lesson 8

—Classwork: [Class debate—Quitter son pays d'origine](#)<sup>47</sup>

—Homework: [Interpersonal audio recording](#)<sup>48</sup> and continue working on [final project](#)<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> [Appendix 16](#)

<sup>46</sup> [Appendix 15](#)

<sup>47</sup> [Appendix 17](#)

<sup>48</sup> [Appendix 17](#)

<sup>49</sup> [Appendix 15](#)

In this lesson, students will complete another in-class debate, similar to the one completed in the first lesson. In this activity, students are divided into two teams. One team collaborates to brainstorm reasons justifying that immigration is a frightening experience, and the other team does the opposite, suggesting that it is an enriching one. (The following prompt is presented: Quitter son pays d'origine pour aller s'installer dans un autre est une expérience effrayante ou enrichissante ? En quoi est-elle différente aujourd'hui par rapport à l'époque d'Albert Cohen ? Qu'en pensez-vous ?) Students conduct a debate based on these questions, trying to convince the other side of their perspective. Students' own biases or impressions are removed from the debate, given their assigned role to a respective side of the argument. Students will then vote to determine which side had the more convincing presentation. For homework, students will create a brief audio recording to voice their own response to the prompt questions, along with continue working on their final projects.

## Lesson 9

—Classwork: [Composition écrite finale](#)<sup>50</sup>

—Homework: Continue working on [final project](#)<sup>51</sup>

This is the only lesson of the unit in which the main focus is not directly on active speaking and interpersonal oral communication in French. In this lesson, students will complete a summative graded assignment to synthesize the thinking

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<sup>50</sup> [Appendix 18](#)

<sup>51</sup> [Appendix 15](#)

they have completed over the course of the unit, and demonstrate their analytical abilities in written French.

### Lesson 10

This is the final lesson of the unit. Teachers may use this class time as desired for students to showcase their presentations and conclude the unit. It is suggested that each pair or group of students play their video presentation or its equivalent for the class, and then respond to questions asked by other students. This class period can also serve as a celebratory time for reaching the end of the unit.

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## Teacher's notes:

\*The materials in this appendix appear in the order in which they would be presented to students in a successive lesson plan, with each item scaffolding on the next.

\*\*The proposed correct answers to multiple-choice questions have been underlined for teacher reference, along with proposed, sample answers to free-response questions. These indicated answers will have to be removed before the materials are distributed to the students.

# À quoi sert la littérature ?

Naïm Kattan—septembre 2013

Jeune adolescent, je traversais les ruelles du marché à Bagdad en direction de l'école. De jeunes garçons de mon âge, pieds nus, proposaient leur service de hammal (portefaix) aux clients des épiceries et des étals de fruits et de légumes. Ils étaient illettrés, comme les trois quarts de la population. Je débutais alors comme écrivain de nouvelles. Fort de mon privilège, je m'adressais à ces garçons en pensée : « J'écris. Vous allez voir. Cela va changer. » J'étais candidement convaincu que la littérature change le monde. Lecteur avide, je découvrais l'Occident, la liberté qui régnait dans des pays où la littérature, l'art et la musique trônaient, où il n'était pas interdit à un garçon de parler en tête-à-tête avec une jeune fille. Bref, la littérature a changé mon monde.

## Connaissons l'auteur



Naïm Kattan (1928-2021) était un romancier, essayiste et critique canadien d'origine juive irakienne. Il est l'auteur de plus de 30 livres, traduits en plusieurs langues.

Traversant maintes péripéties, franchissant de nombreux obstacles, j'ai décidé d'écrire dans une langue qui n'était pas la mienne, de passer de l'arabe au français et de publier des livres. Sans être désenchanté ni découragé, je me suis rendu compte que la littérature ne change pas le monde. Du moins, pas dans l'immédiat de son expression. Des écrivains affrontent la censure et parfois la prison. D'autres demeurent anonymes, ignorés. À certaines époques et dans divers pays, ils ont pu contribuer à susciter des bouleversements sociaux, voire des révolutions. Cependant, leur influence la plus durable s'exerce individuellement sur les lecteurs et les lectrices. Des personnages littéraires nous font rêver. Nous nous reconnaissons dans d'autres et ressentons une

profonde gratitude de recevoir de tels dons. Ces dons comprennent la poésie et la fiction (roman, nouvelle, théâtre) des écrivains classiques comme des contemporains, de notre pays comme ceux du monde entier.

- (30) Dans un monde aux prises avec des bouleversements et des déchirements aussi bien politiques que sociaux et technologiques, la littérature fait face à des menaces de marginalisation et d'altération de son caractère. Elle risque d'être condamnée à l'éphémère en dépit de l'apparente « efficacité » dont profitent certains auteurs se situant, en fait, à l'extérieur de la littérature. Selon leurs motivations, ils se divisent en (35) trois catégories, avec des recoupements et des combinaisons entre elles.

- La première peut être désignée comme le nombrilisme. Elle comprend les auteurs qui obéissent à un changement social venant renverser le rapport de l'individu avec les autres, instaurant une société fragmentée, en perte de cohésion, dans un état de constante vulnérabilité devant l'éphémère. Il est entendu qu'ici, l'éphémère ne concerne (40) pas la vie mais celui institué par la logique marchande, qui confine l'individu à lui-même. Ses liens sociaux fragiles et contradictoires sont réduits et sans profondeur. Il tombe dans l'égotisme, le narcissisme et s'en tient au récit de ses réactions immédiates et de ses relations intimes. Le règne du privé prédomine et ce qu'on qualifie d'autofiction en résulte souvent. La solitude et l'isolement de l'auteur peuvent revêtir un aspect littéraire, (45) mais demeurent sans dimension humaine. Les adeptes de cette littérature sont légion, en France particulièrement.

- La deuxième catégorie est celle des auteurs qui ont recours à des éléments de sexualité et de violence. Ils cherchent ainsi à accrocher le plus grand nombre de lecteurs en usant des hameçons les plus efficaces. Le sexe est dès lors exhibé en dehors du (50) sentiment. Il est mécanique et aboutit souvent à la violence et à la perversité. Voyeurisme, inceste... La violence imprègne toute relation.

- La troisième catégorie est l'exploitation du récit à des fins de divertissement. Le cinéma et la télévision en fournissent des éléments en instituant des comédiens et des animateurs en vedettes, voire en figures publiques. La célébrité acquise grâce aux médias (55) est un ressort pour accroître la vente. Certains auteurs affirment ainsi leur appartenance

à la littérature qu'ils exploitent en s'en écartant.

Il n'est pas question dans mon esprit d'une quête de pureté. La littérature appartient au monde tout autant que le monde lui appartient. En surface, vu les menaces qui la cernent, elle ne sert à rien. Cependant, il importe de l'intégrer à la vie. Or, il est de (60) plus en plus difficile d'aborder le réel dans sa diversité afin de l'exprimer, le porter et le vivre. Au-delà de la sociologie, de l'anthropologie, tout roman, tout poème, tout essai peut sonner l'heure du réveil. Ils nous permettent de résister à la plongée dans le gouffre de l'argent, de la violence et du spectacle afin de prendre conscience et la mesure du réel et du monde, afin que notre vie ne soit pas reléguée à la pure distraction (au double sens (65) du terme), c'est-à-dire à l'absence. De plus, la littérature nous permet de rêver. Le rêve n'est pas fuite ou évasion mais une dimension qui enrichit notre existence, une porte qui s'ouvre sur l'avenir et sur autrui. En rejoignant l'autre, le prochain, nous assumons notre propre existence en nous engageant dans notre milieu et auprès de ceux qui nous entourent.

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### Questions post-lecture

Après votre lecture de l'article, répondez aux questions suivantes :

1. Pourquoi l'auteur s'est-il mis à écrire ?

A) Il souhaitait défier sa société traditionnelle.

B) Il voulait avoir un impact sur le monde.

C) Il avait envie de quitter son pays d'origine.

D) Il désirait découvrir d'autres paysages.

2. Comment la littérature a-t-elle changé la vie de l'auteur ?

A) Elle a permis sa connaissance des filles.

B) Elle a transformé sa perception de l'Histoire.

C) Elle a rendu son éducation possible.

D) Elle a fait une ouverture de son esprit.

3. Que fait l'auteur dans le deuxième paragraphe ? (Lignes 18-29)

- A) Il réfléchit aux auteurs du passé.
- B) Il évalue les difficultés du monde littéraire.
- C) Il pèse la réalité nuancée d'être écrivain.
- D) Il proclame la grande réussite des romanciers.

4. Laquelle est la motivation personnelle de l'auteur ?

- A) revendiquer ses droits humains
- B) mener une quête honnête
- C) trouver les secrets de l'Occident
- D) se venger des garçons de son enfance

5. Quelle est une possibilité de la littérature proposée dans le dernier paragraphe ? (Lignes 57-69)

- A) Elle peut faire plaisir comme les autres médias.
- B) Elle peut nous rappeler de l'impossible.
- C) Elle peut avancer en parallèle avec la vie contemporaine.
- D) Elle peut maintenir une tradition de grand caractère.

6. Selon l'article, lequel est un obstacle dont l'auteur avait besoin de surmonter ?

- A) Se battre pour une place dans le monde littéraire
- B) Écrire dans une autre langue
- C) Chercher une maison de presse
- D) Créer une lecture intelligible

7. Dans le troisième paragraphe, quel est un défi auquel la littérature d'aujourd'hui est confrontée ?

- A) Elle est remplacée par les études de science.
- B) Elle perd sa crédibilité comme matière académique.
- C) Elle se trouve dans un monde chargé de politique et technologie.
- D) Elle remarque le déclin de puissance comme art d'expression.

8. Quel est le ton qui décrit mieux l'article ?

A) optimiste

B) mélancolique

C) déçu

D) perplexe

9. D'après l'auteur, pourquoi la littérature moderne se divise-t-elle en trois catégories ?

Comment l'approche de l'auteur diffère-t-elle ?

10. D'après vous, quel rôle la littérature joue-t-elle dans les études d'aujourd'hui ? Y'a-t-il une importance dans une éducation générale, et pourquoi ?

# L'importance de la littérature : jouer le rôle

## Question à débattre

D'après vous, quel rôle la littérature joue-t-elle dans les études d'aujourd'hui ?

Y-a-t-il une importance dans une éducation générale, et pourquoi ?



POUR

Une moitié va discuter des raisons pour lesquelles la littérature est toujours importante dans une éducation générale d'aujourd'hui. Travailler avec votre groupe pour créer une liste des raisons pour soutenir votre perspective adoptée.

Exemple : *C'est une tradition d'étudier la littérature classique. On peut apprendre*

La classe se divise en deux !



CONTRE

L'autre moitié va discuter des raisons pour lesquelles elle est inutile dans l'ère moderne. Travailler avec votre groupe pour créer une liste des raisons pour soutenir votre perspective adoptée.

Exemple : *Le monde d'aujourd'hui est riche en technologie. La littérature n'est plus nécessaire pour élaborer une pensée critique...*

Enfin, la classe va faire un mini-débat sur le sujet. Vous allez essayer de convaincre l'autre côté que votre perspective est correcte. Enfin, la classe va voter pour voir la pensée collective.



## Entretien imaginaire d'Albert Cohen<sup>1</sup>

*Pouvez-vous nous parler de votre jeunesse ?*

Je suis né sur l'île grecque de Corfou en 1895, dans une famille juive séfarade. Mon grand-père présidait l'importante communauté juive de l'île. À la suite d'un pogrom (violente émeute dirigée contre les juifs), ainsi qu'une situation économique difficile, mes parents ont décidé d'émigrer à Marseille alors que je n'avais que cinq ans. Ils y ouvrirent un commerce modeste.



Albert Cohen (1895-1981)

(10) Un jour de 1905, à l'âge de dix ans, je me suis fait traiter de « youpin » (terme péjoratif et insultant désignant une personne juive) par un commerçant, événement que je raconte dans mon texte autobiographique *Ô vous, frères humains*. En 1904, je suis entré au lycée, et je me suis lié d'amitié avec un autre élève, Marcel Pagnol, qui restera mon ami durant toute ma vie. Je me suis senti un étranger au fil de ces années, et je voulais donc adopter la langue et culture française afin de m'intégrer le plus possible. J'ai obtenu mon baccalauréat en 1913.

*Vous avez vécu dans plusieurs villes d'Europe, pouvez-vous nous expliquer les raisons de ces déménagements ?*

En 1914, j'ai quitté Marseille pour Genève, en Suisse, où j'ai obtenu ma licence de droit en 1917. La Suisse, pays francophone près de la France, me paraissait plus sûr et neutre que La France au niveau politique et social. En 1919, je me suis marié et j'ai obtenu la nationalité suisse. Ma femme est morte en 1924, et je me suis remarié en

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<sup>1</sup> Texte adapté d'après : Albert Cohen—*Le livre de ma mère*, Éditions Classico Collège, Bérénice Gallimard, 2017.

(25) 1931. Lors de l'invasion allemande en mai 1940, j'ai fui à Londres, en Angleterre. J'étais donc conscient de la Shoah, mais je n'ai pas vécu ses atrocités de manière personnelle. Pendant la Seconde Guerre Mondiale, j'ai participé au sionisme, un mouvement politique et religieux qui réclame la création d'un État d'Israël ; mais j'en ai finalement été très déçu et m'en suis éloigné en 1944. Bien que j'aie eu envie d'aller en Israël, je n'y suis  
(30) jamais allé, en raison de ma santé et des obligations personnelles. Ma mère est décédée à Marseille en janvier 1943 et, cette même année, j'ai rencontré celle qui deviendra ma troisième épouse.

***Pouvez-vous nous parler de votre carrière diplomatique ?***

J'ai travaillé comme fonctionnaire à la Division diplomatique du Bureau  
(35) international du travail, à Genève, de 1926 à 1931. En 1944, je suis devenu conseiller juridique au Comité intergouvernemental pour les réfugiés. J'étais chargé de l'élaboration d'un accord international portant sur le statut et la protection des réfugiés juifs allemands et autrichiens. À partir de 1947, j'ai occupé la fonction de directeur dans une des institutions des Nations-Unies. En 1957, on m'a proposé le poste d'ambassadeur  
(40) d'Israël, que j'ai refusé pour poursuivre ma carrière d'écrivain.

***Que représente pour vous votre activité littéraire ?***

Je n'ai jamais considéré mon travail d'écrivain comme une activité professionnelle à part entière. C'est pourquoi j'ai peu communiqué sur le sujet. J'ai travaillé pour la plupart de ma carrière en tant qu'avocat et de diplomate. Cependant, durant les  
(45) dernières années de ma vie, j'ai accordé des entretiens pour parler de mes livres.

***Comment qualifieriez-vous votre œuvre ?***

Mon œuvre est essentiellement romanesque, c'est-à-dire une littérature narrative qui porte sur l'amour et la quête personnelle. Mon premier roman, *Solal*, paru en 1930, est un vrai succès. Ce livre marque le début d'un cycle, une sorte d'épopée consacrée à  
(50) une famille juive et inspirée de l'univers professionnel que j'ai côtoyé. *Mangeclous* y fait

suite en 1969. Mais mon livre le plus connu reste *Belle du Seigneur*, publié en 1968, qui raconte l'histoire d'amour tragique qui a uni mes deux héros, Solal et Ariane. Le roman connaît un grand succès, et j'ai reçu la Légion d'honneur à la suite de sa parution.

## **Contexte historique et culturel : Albert Cohen**

### **Le génocide juif**

(55) Les communautés juives d'Europe ont été frappées par l'antisémitisme à de nombreuses reprises dans l'histoire. Ces persécutions ont pris un tour plus dramatique à partir de la fin du XIXe siècle, en Europe de l'Est notamment, mais aussi en France, où les discours antisémites étaient courants. En témoigne l'affaire Dreyfus, qui a divisé la société française de 1896 à 1906 : le capitaine Dreyfus est condamné pour trahison, à (60) tort, et probablement parce qu'il est juif. Il est finalement innocenté.

En Allemagne, après l'accession au pouvoir d'Hitler en 1933, les persécutions vont croissant : les ghettos, le travail obligatoire et les décorations massives vers des camps de concentration. En 1942, le gouvernement nazi décide de mettre en oeuvre la "solution finale", c'est-à-dire l'extermination systématique et méthodique des Juifs. Les chambres à (65) gaz sont mises en place. Au printemps 1942, six camps d'extermination sont ouverts en Pologne. On pense que six millions de Juifs ont ainsi été exterminés ou tués par les conditions des camps de concentration.

Il faut attendre les années soixante-dix pour que le grand public prenne conscience de l'ampleur du génocide, mais aussi du fait que l'extermination, qui a touché (70) d'autres populations, ciblait les Juifs au premier chef.

### **Une terre fondée**

Le peuple juif n'a jamais eu un territoire propre : l'histoire des Juifs est indissociable de la diaspora (la dispersion des membres de la communauté à travers le monde). L'histoire personnelle d'Albert Cohen en tant qu'immigré y fait partie.

(75) À partir de la fin du XIXe siècle, parallèlement à la montée des persécutions contre les Juifs, se développe un mouvement appelé “sionisme” qui réclame la création d’un État juif. Albert Cohen en a fait partie pendant quelques années. En 1917, par la Déclaration Balfour, le Royaume-Uni se prononce en faveur de la création d’un “foyer national pour le peuple juif” en Palestine : c’est la première étape d’un long processus.

(80) À l’issue de la Seconde Guerre mondiale, l’État d’Israël est créé en 1947, afin d’offrir un refuge aux Juifs rescapés de la Shoah ou issus de la diaspora. Mais sur les terres accordées à Israël vivaient déjà des Palestiniens qui se sentent dépossédés de leur pays. Bien qu’Albert Cohen soutenait le mouvement sioniste pendant un certain temps, il restait sceptique sur le mouvement, et avait déjà cherché à s’intégrer dans l’Europe

(85) francophone.

Depuis 1948, l’État d’Israël est donc pris dans un grave conflit avec la Palestine, réactivé régulièrement lors de guerres entre Israël et des coalitions de pays arabes, comme en 1967, en 1973, en 1987 ou en 2000. Les problèmes de territoire se doublent de profondes divergences religieuses, culturelles et économiques.

#### (90) **La remise en question de la littérature**

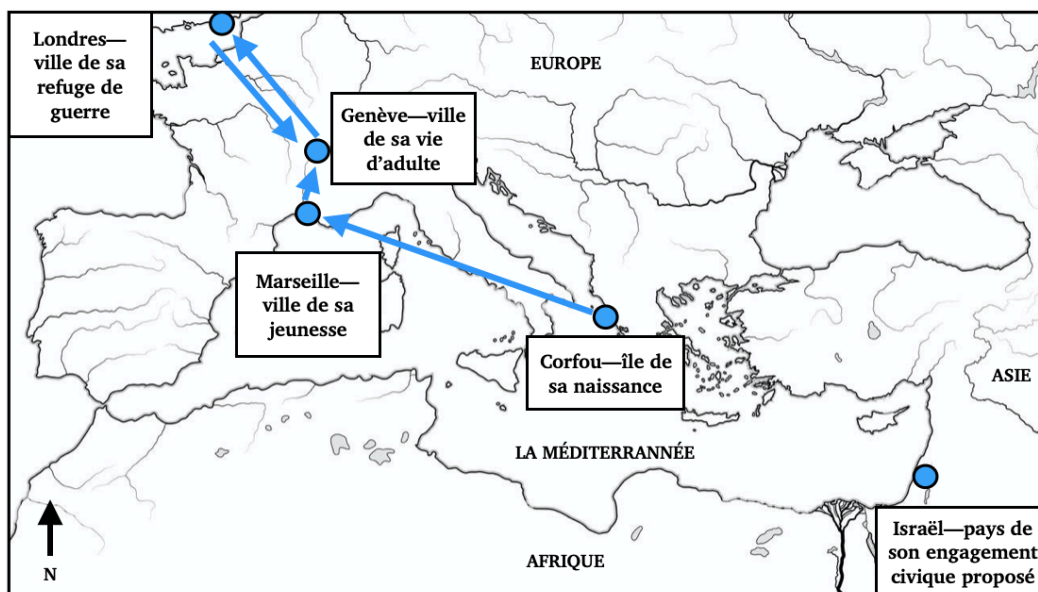
Après-guerre, la découverte des génocides perpétrés par les nazis laisse l’Occident sans voix. L’être humain ne pourra plus jamais être envisagé de la même manière, et cette prise de conscience brutale a des répercussions très fortes sur les arts. Les auteurs s’interrogent sur la possibilité d’écrire après la Shoah : que dire, désormais ? à propos de  
(95) quoi ? Trois grands mouvements littéraires de l’après-guerre tentent de répondre à ces questions.

L’existentialisme est un courant philosophique et littéraire, mené en France par Jean-Paul Sartre (auteur du roman *La Nausée*, en 1938), qui estime que l’être humain forge le sens de sa vie par ses actions. L’existentialisme considère chaque personne  
(100) comme un être unique, maître de son destin et responsable des valeurs qu’il décide d’adopter.

Le mouvement du Nouveau Roman est né en 1953. Ce groupe d’auteurs pense qu’après la Seconde Guerre mondiale, il n’est plus possible d’écrire des romans comme auparavant. En 1956, Nathalie Sarraute faisait déjà entrer le roman dans “l’ère du (105) soupçon” dans un essai du même nom. En 1963, dans *Pour un Nouveau Roman*, le chef de la file Alain Robbe-Grillet rejette l’idée, dépassé selon lui, d’intrigue, de portrait psychologique et même de la nécessité des personnages, marqués par le vide.

Dans les années cinquante se développe enfin le théâtre de l’absurde, dont les principaux représentants sont Samuel Beckett et Eugène Ionesco avec des pièces comme (110) *En attendant Godot* (1953) pour le premier et *La Cantatrice chauve* (1950) pour le second. Ces pièces mettent en scène la déraison de l’existence humaine, dénuée de sens et vouée à la mort. Dans un univers vide et abandonné de Dieu ou des valeurs humaines, les personnages ne peuvent que combler le néant et passer le temps par des paroles absurdes. Paradoxalement, ce théâtre révélateur d’une profonde angoisse est aussi (115) souvent très drôle.

Bien que l’œuvre d’Albert Cohen ne rentre pas nettement dans ses trois catégories, son roman reste un reflet de ce style moderne du XXe siècle. La rédaction du *Belle du Seigneur* a pris 38 ans, donc ce livre propose une lecture profonde sur une variété de thèmes et de sujets.



Carte des migrations d’Albert Cohen

## Questions post-lecture

Après votre lecture de l'entretien imaginaire d'Albert Cohen, ainsi que le contexte historique et culturel, répondez aux questions suivantes :

1. Albert Cohen est de quelle origine ?

- A) juive ashkénaze
- B) protestante
- C) juive séfarade
- D) catholique

2. Qu'est-il arrivé à Albert Cohen à l'âge de dix ans ?

- A) Il a été attaqué et appelé un terme péjoratif.
- B) Il a rencontré Marcel Pagnol.
- C) Il a immigré à Marseille avec ses parents.
- D) Il a fait ses études religieuses.

3. Albert Cohen a-t-il obtenu la nationalité de quel pays ?

- A) La France
- B) La Suisse
- C) L'Angleterre
- D) L'Israël

4. Pourquoi Albert Cohen a-t-il fui à Londres pendant quelques années ?

- A) Pour apprendre l'anglais afin de pouvoir voyager plus facilement.
- B) Pour poursuivre la rédaction de son roman et rencontrer d'autres auteurs.
- C) Pour continuer sa carrière politique et augmenter son expertise.
- D) Pour s'échapper à l'invasion d'Europe pendant la Seconde Guerre Mondiale.

5. Pourquoi Albert Cohen a-t-il refusé le poste d'ambassadeur d'Israël ?

- A) Il souhaitait poursuivre sa carrière d'écrivain.
- B) Il voulait complètement abandonner le sionisme.
- C) Il avait envie d'obtenir un autre poste politique.
- D) Il désirait découvrir d'autres paysages hors de l'Europe.

6. Comment qualifier l'œuvre d'Albert Cohen ?

- A) Narrative
- B) Argumentative
- C) Théâtrale
- D) Poétique

7. Combien de fois Albert Cohen s'est-il marié ?

- A) jamais
- B) une fois
- C) deux fois
- D) trois fois

8. Qu'est-ce que l'affaire Dreyfus ?

- A) La réforme de la politique en Europe francophone et ses effets.
- B) La période de tension religieuse avant la Seconde Guerre Mondiale.
- C) La fausse accusation de trahison d'un capitaine et l'antisémitisme qui a suivi.
- D) L'exode des juifs séfarades en France après la période de décolonisation.

9. Pourquoi l'État d'Israël est-il fondé ?

- A) Pour fonder une société démocratique dans une région traditionnelle.
- B) Pour créer un refuge aux Juifs rescapés de la Shoah ou issus de la diaspora.
- C) Pour épanouir le pouvoir des puissances coloniales en Asie de l'Ouest.
- D) Pour établir une terre qui hébergerait les religieux de toute origine.

10. Quelle est la philosophie des mouvements littéraires après la Seconde Guerre Mondiale ?

- A) Les atrocités de guerre restent éloignées de la création artistique.
- B) La pensée collective souhaite reconnaître un temps du passé.
- C) La littérature est obligée de respecter une rédaction précise.
- D) L'être humain ne peut plus jamais être envisagé de la même manière.

11. Quelles sont quelques difficultés qu'Albert Cohen a dû se confronter ? Comment ces expériences ont-elles contribué à sa quête de soi, ainsi qu'à son œuvre littéraire ?

12. Quitter son pays d'origine pour aller s'installer dans un autre est une expérience effrayante ou enrichissante ? En quoi est-elle différente aujourd'hui par rapport à l'époque d'Albert Cohen ? Qu'en pensez-vous ?

## *Belle du Seigneur* : Résumé du texte

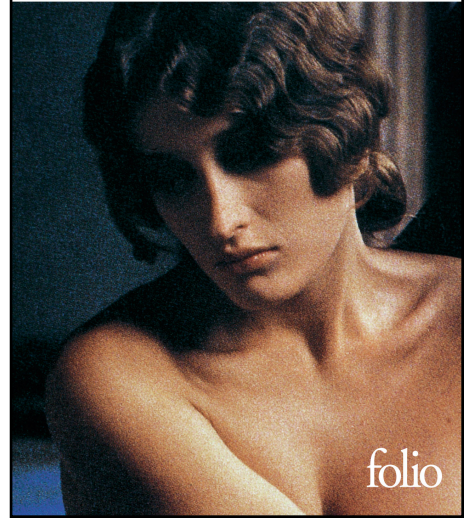
*Belle du Seigneur* est un roman de l'écrivain suisse francophone Albert Cohen publié en 1968. Le roman, dont la rédaction commencée *Ligne* dans les années 1930, a été interrompue par (5) la Seconde Guerre mondiale, a longuement été repris, corrigé et augmenté. Le roman a été finalement publié par les éditions Gallimard en 1968.

Troisième texte d'une tétralogie qui commence (10) avec *Solal* (1930) et *Mangeclous* (1938), ce roman a reçu le grand prix du roman de l'Académie française. L'auteur y entrecroise et superpose les voix des personnages. Dans les 106 chapitres se mêlent le désir, la complexité de la société, la passion, la (15) drôlerie, le désespoir et les exaltations du cœur. Le roman raconte la passion morbide d'Ariane et de Solal, mais aussi l'amour de Cohen pour la langue française et pour l'écriture.

*Belle du Seigneur* est considéré comme l'un des grands romans de langue française du <sup>xx</sup>e siècle, qualifié de « chef-d'œuvre absolu » (Joseph Kessel-- (20) journaliste, romancier, membre de l'Académie française qui a vécu de 1898-1979). Le roman est aussi proclamé « comme une culture en produit une douzaine par siècle » (François Nourissier--journaliste et écrivain qui a vécu de 1927-2011). Le livre connaît aussi un succès public de très grande ampleur et demeure la meilleure vente de la collection Blanche des éditions Gallimard.

(25) *Belle du Seigneur* est le récit de la passion de Solal et d'Ariane : deux individus qui sont seuls, mais spirituels—①—en marge de la société. Ils se comprennent dans leur marginalité—mais ils ne sont pas compatibles entièrement. Ils essaient de créer un

**Albert Cohen**  
*Belle du Seigneur*



amour entre eux, pour échapper le regard normatif de la société, mais ils ne peuvent pas le trouver.

(30) Ariane est une jeune aristocrate protestante, d'origine suisse, comme la première femme d'Albert Cohen. Elle est homosexuelle, mais après la mort de Varvara, sa première amante, elle s'est mariée avec Adrien, un petit bourgeois qui travaille à la Société des Nations. Dans un sens, Adrien a sauvé Ariane de sa dépression. Mais Ariane est quand même déprimée, insatisfaite sexuellement et émotionnellement.

(35) Solal est juif, d'origine grecque et un grand séducteur. Il est aussi le responsable hiérarchique d'Adrien à la Société des Nations. On peut voir plusieurs parallèles entre Solal et Albert Cohen, au niveau personnel et professionnel. Comme Cohen, Solal cherche à s'intégrer dans la société, qui est parfois en conflit entre tradition et modernité —②—et la séduction des femmes est une manière d'aborder ce conflit. Il est

(40) hétérosexuelle, mais quand même intéressé par l'attraction homosexuelle. Solal cherche à séduire Ariane, pour qu'ils se trouvent heureux tous les deux dans leurs différences. L'essai de leur amour, et l'humanité commune par conséquent, est effectivement l'objectif du *Belle du Seigneur*.

Au début du roman, Solal s'introduit chez Ariane. Il est déguisé en vieux juif, (45) pauvre et laid, et la jeune femme est horrifiée. Solal enlève son déguisement et lui déclare, malgré son scepticisme quant à l'amour, sa passion. Ariane lui résiste. Après cette épisode initiale, Solal envoie Adrien en mission à l'étranger pour trois mois. Il revoit Ariane et à l'issue d'un immense discours sur la séduction—③—Ariane finit par lui céder. Ils vivent une intense passion, et l'impression de cette amour s'est proclamé d'une

(50) manière fortement spirituelle. Mais cependant, Ariane rêve à son amante homosexuelle, disparue. ④ Elle n'arrive pas à exprimer son désir pour les femmes jusqu'à la fin du livre.

Solal contemple également son propre désir sexuel périodiquement. En tout cas, elle est maintenant pris par lui. Grâce à la complicité de ses cousins, Les Valeureux, Solal enlève Ariane. Ils s'enfuient dans le sud de la France. Après quelques mois, Adrien rentre de sa (55) mission et il est effondré par le départ de son épouse. Ariane et Solal s'installent dans un

luxueux hôtel sur la Côte d'Azur. Ils semblent vivre un bonheur idéal, pourtant Ariane et Solal commencent à se lasser de cette existence inauthentique. Leur "histoire d'amour" commence à se fondre, car leur incompatibilité se présente. La montée de l'antisémitisme en Europe cause Solal de perdre à la fois son poste et la nationalité française. Vivant (60) difficilement cet échec et supportant mal cette prison d'amour, Solal se montre de plus en plus violent, et Ariane exprime enfin qu'elle n'était jamais vivement attirée par Solal, ni par les hommes en général. ⑤ Prisonniers de leur solitude, les amants reviennent à Genève et se suicident à l'Hôtel de Ritz.

\* À noter : les chiffres correspondent à un moment représenté dans la version filmique.

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### Questions post-lecture

Après votre lecture du résumé du livre, répondez aux questions suivantes :

1. Qui sont les personnages principaux de *Belle du Seigneur* ?

- A) Ariane et Solal
- B) Ariane et Adrien
- C) Adrien et Solal
- D) Varvara et Ariane

2. Comment catégorise-t-on *Belle du Seigneur* ?

- A) Un conte adapté du Moyen-Âge
- B) Un recueil d'histoires courtes
- C) Un chef d'œuvre de la littérature française
- D) Un roman classique de l'antiquité

3. Pourquoi Solal a-t-il envoyé Adrien en mission ?

- A) Pour faire progresser sa carrière.
- B) Pour exercer son pouvoir de patron.
- C) Pour représenter le voyage d'Albert Cohen.
- D) Pour avoir un moment intime avec Ariane.

4. Quel est un défi personnel de Solal, et par ailleurs Cohen ?

- A) Accepter le fait qu'il n'aime pas les femmes.
- B) Trouver une équilibre entre tradition et modernité.
- C) Apprendre les coutumes européennes.
- D) Gérer ses sentiments de culpabilité.

5. Qu'est-ce qui arrive à Ariane et Solal à la fin du livre ?

- A) Ils se tuent.
- B) Ils s'enfuient.
- C) Ils se marient.
- D) Ils s'aiment.

6. Quels aspects isolent Ariane et Solal de la société courante ?

- A) Les affaires du gouvernement et l'athéisme
- B) L'espionnage et la critique de religion
- C) L'homosexualité et le judaïsme
- D) L'alliance politique et le protestantisme

7. À quel moment du roman Ariane dit-elle à Solal qu'elle n'est pas attirée par les hommes ?

- A) Au début
- B) Au milieu
- C) À la fin
- D) Tout au cours de l'intrigue

8. Comment ce livre est-il un produit de son époque ? Verrait-on un livre publié qui est si longue et si complexe aujourd'hui, et pourquoi ?

9. D'après vous, quels sont les thèmes les plus importants dans ce roman, et pourquoi ?

## Belle du Seigneur : la progression de l'intrigue en images

Instructions : Dessinez la progression de l'intrigue de *Belle du Seigneur* dans les encadrés ci-dessous. Dans chaque encadré, expliquez le moment et son importance. Utilisez des mots de transition pour faciliter votre description.

| <u>Exemples des mots de transition</u>          |   |   |   |   |   |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| D'abord   | Après   | Ensuite   | Par conséquent                                  | Alors   | Enfin   |
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# ① Ariane fait sa prière — Texte de Belle du Seigneur adapté en film

 [Click here to listen to this audio clip](#)

“Tant pis, Dieu ne faisait pas attention à ces détails, et puis quoi, il savait bien comment elle était faite... J’aime que tu me déshabilles, j’aime que tu me voies nue, lui dirait-elle. Oh, assez, trop pénible.” (Cohen, pp. 495, 877 Kindle)

“No matter, God wasn’t bothered by little things like that, and anyway He knew what she looked like with no clothes on... I like it when you undress me, I like you to see me naked, she would say. Oh stop it, I can’t take much more of this.” (Cohen, pp. 427, 765)



 [Click here to watch this film clip](#)

\*Teacher’s note: Remember that the film is loosely inspired on the original novel. The original text and corresponding film clips are not an identical match, but have been chosen to visualize the main idea presented in the text.

① **Ariane fait sa prière** — Texte de *Belle du Seigneur* adapté en film

1. À quoi font référence les mots “ces détails” dans cette situation ?
  - A) Ariane est d’origine protestante
  - B) Ariane est nue et homosexuelle
  - C) Ariane fait de la prière libre
  - D) Ariane n’est pas comme les autres femmes
2. Qui est représenté par les mots “tu” et “lui” dans ce passage ?
  - A) Solal
  - B) Dieu
  - C) Solal et Dieu
  - D) Personne
3. Quel mot signifie la douleur derrière l’élément spirituel du passage ?
  - A) voies
  - B) nue
  - C) assez
  - D) pénible
4. Le déshabillage d'Ariane est une métaphore pour laquelle des idées suivantes ?
  - A) On se débarrasse de sa vie passée
  - B) On peut la mieux comprendre sans barrières
  - C) On doit aller au vif du sujet
  - D) On ne peut pas penser tout habillé

5. En considérant la préférence sexuelle d'Ariane, pourquoi le fait que Solal la déshabille serait-il “pénible” ? Pourquoi continue-t-elle de se mettre dans cette situation ?

On sait qu'Ariane est lesbienne. Elle est avec Solal parce qu'ils peuvent se comprendre, dans leurs états de marginalité respectifs. Elle est avec lui pour cette raison, en continuant dans l'espoir qu'ils peuvent s'aimer et s'entendre physiquement, ce qui n'arrive jamais entièrement.

6. D'après ce passage, quelle conclusion peut-on faire de l'omniscience de Dieu ?

Dieu sait tout sur toutes les personnes, y compris le désir inné. Il n'y a donc rien hors de sa vision.

\*Teacher's note: Many of the proposed answers to the multiple choice questions throughout this appendix, particularly the questions following the post-reading/film clip segments, are open to interpretation. Moreover, for speculative questions that are open-ended, especially the writing prompts that precede a short, written response, students may describe *how* they arrived at a certain answer, or justify *why* they think a certain answer is true. Finally, the short, written response answers that have been provided are examples—individual student responses will vary in linguistic competency and level of analysis.

## ② Solal à la synagogue — Texte de *Belle du Seigneur* adapté en film

 [Click here to listen to this audio clip](#)

“...nous sommes demeurés fièrement citoyens français, immatriculés au consulat de Céphalonie, parlant avec émotion le doux parler du noble pays mais agrémenté de mots anciens du Comtat Venaissin de nous seuls connus, et durant les veillées d’hiver lisant en pleurs Ronsard et Racine... Honteux de n’avoir pas encore dit ses prières du matin, l’oncle Saltiel se lava en hâte les mains, chanta les trois louanges, puis se couvrit la tête du châle rituel et entonna les versets prescrits du psaume XXXVI... Eh oui, mon ami, c’est cher d’être le peuple de Dieu !” (Cohen, pp. 150, 271, 565 Kindle)

“... French citizens we have been proud to remain, duly registered by the consulate at Cephalonia, thrilled to speak the sweet tongue of the old country spiced with fustian vocables unique to the county of Avignon and known only to us, and honoured on long winter evenings to be dewy-eyed readers of Rosnard and Racine... Feeling remiss for not yet having said his morning prayers, Uncle Saltiel hurriedly washed his hands, sang the three praises, and then, draping the ceremonial shawl over his head, intoned the prescribed verses of Psalm thirty-six... Oh yes, there is a high price to pay to be the chosen of God!” (Cohen, pp. 124, 229, 488)



 [Click here to watch this film clip](#)

## ② Solal à la synagogue — Texte de *Belle du Seigneur* adapté en film

1. Que signifie "lisant en pleurs Ronsard et Racine" ?
  - A) La famille de Solal a du mal à s'acculturer dans la société
  - B) La famille de Solal admire tellement la littérature française
  - C) La famille de Solal n'arrive pas à comprendre les textes
  - D) La famille de Solal se voient reflétés dans la culture
2. Pourquoi le mot "Honteux" se présente dans le passage ?
  - A) On se sent une obligation de maintenir les valeurs du judaïsme
  - B) On est pressé à adopter la culture européenne
  - C) On trouve les valeurs traditionnels difficiles à préserver
  - D) On avoue qu'on est devenu un hybride de cultures
3. Qu'est-ce qui rend le fait qu'on soit juif "cher" à cette époque-là ?
  - A) l'inclusion
  - B) la tolérance
  - C) la marginalisation
  - D) l'acceptance
4. Lequel est un synonyme du "châle rituel" ?
  - A) une écharpe
  - B) un blouson
  - C) une couverture
  - D) une tapisserie
5. Où se trouve la synagogue dans le clip du film ? Qu'est-ce que cela révèle au niveau de l'état des juifs en France à cette époque-là ?

La synagogue se trouve dans une cave, caché de vue. Cela se comprend, étant donné la marginalisation des juifs et l'antisémitisme avant la Seconde Guerre Mondiale.
6. D'après le clip du film, comment Solal est-il en conflit entre la tradition et la modernité ? Quel geste dans la synagogue montre ce conflit, et pourquoi ?

Solal hésite de couvrir sa tête ou pas. Il porte un chapeau, puis l'enlève, enfin le porte à nouveau. Les regards avec l'homme et le garçon en prière contribuent à cette hésitation. Cela représente son conflit interne entre le judaïsme traditionnel et la société moderne de l'Europe.

## Belle du Seigneur — attention, chef-d'œuvre !

Une émission présentée par Victoria Anaton Sarazin sur Fréquence Tel Aviv—juin 2017

 [Click here to listen to this audio clip](#)

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### Questions post-écoute

Après votre écoute de l'émission, répondez aux questions suivantes :

1. Qu'est-ce que la lectrice a-t-elle découvert après une deuxième lecture de *Belle du Seigneur* ?
  - A) Il est merveilleusement bien écrit.
  - B) Il est un passage de l'Histoire juvie.
  - C) Il est plus complexe que dans ses souvenirs.
  - D) Il porte sur une belle histoire d'amour.
  
2. Qu'est-ce que la lectrice voulait dire par le fait que l'antisémitisme "transpire tout le livre" ?
  - A) C'est un sentiment qui a des hauts et des bas.
  - B) C'est une force sociale ancrée dans le temps.
  - C) C'est une réalité qui prend la forme d'un animal.
  - D) C'est un thème qui est omniprésent.
  
3. Comment est-ce qu'Albert Cohen a été influencé par le moment traumatique de son enfance ?
  - A) Il voulait devenir le plus français possible.
  - B) Il résistait toute intégration dans la société.
  - C) Il mettait la bienveillance des autres en question.
  - D) Il hésitait à choisir une voie professionnelle.
  
4. Qu'est-ce qu'on peut dire sur le style d'écriture de *Belle du Seigneur* ?
  - A) C'est très fort, ce qui provoque une réflexion sur les motifs sociaux.
  - B) C'est très élégant, ce qui donne une admiration des lieux présentés.
  - C) C'est très dense, ce qui permet l'exploration profonde des personnages.
  - D) C'est très fluide, ce qui ouvre une lecture facile et paisible.
  
5. D'après cette émission audio, quel est le ton principal de la réception de l'œuvre ?
  - A) Inquiet
  - B) Admiratif
  - C) Prudent
  - D) Méfiant

## ***Belle du Seigneur : Réponse à une lettre***

Introduction : Cette lettre a été envoyée d'Ariane à l'une de ses amies imaginées—non présentées dans le livre. Imaginez que vous êtes cette personne à qui elle s'adresse. Vous allez répondre à ce message avec vos conseils.

Ma chère amie,

Je vous écris cette lettre afin de m'exprimer, pour libérer mon esprit. Je suis en relation avec Solal depuis un an maintenant, mais je suis toujours baignée dans la tristesse. Malgré les moments passants de bonheur entre nous, il y a un vide intérieur qui me tourmente. Au début, on se comprenait—on se voyait dans l'un et l'autre. Mais quand je réfléchis sur ce qu'il apporte à ma vie, je ne suis ni entendue, ni aimée comme il me faut.

Ma première relation avec Varvara était la plus belle, car on était heureuses ensemble, elle et moi. Après sa mort, je croyais en Adrien, un homme de grand statut, pour me sauver en ce moment de deuil. C'était ce que la société attendait ? Au fil du temps, cette relation ne me plaisait plus, et je me suis lancée en relation avec Solal avec le même espoir de sauvetage. Mais voilà, je prends ma plume en ce moment pour vous écrire que rien n'a changé. Les hommes me dégoûtent, mais je n'arrive pas à l'accepter entièrement. Mais à la fois, j'ai du mal à croire que l'amour entre deux femmes ne soient aussi faisable. Je me sens anormale, tellement en marge de la société.

Que devrais-je faire, ma chère amie ? Qu'est-ce que vous feriez si vous étiez à ma place ? Comment puis-je m'échapper de cette situation ?

Dans l'attente de votre réponse...

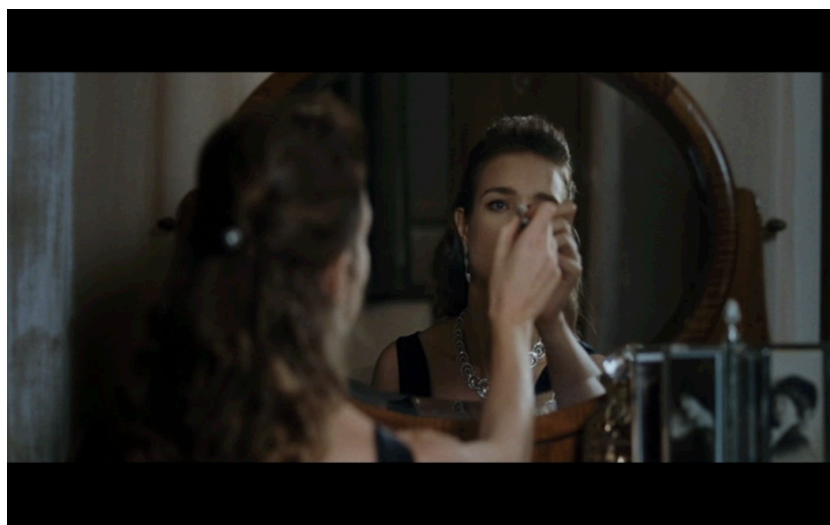
Bien à vous,  
Ariane

### ③ Le conscience d'Ariane — Texte de *Belle du Seigneur* adapté en film

 [Click here to listen to this audio clip](#)

“un Juif errant en somme... d'ailleurs que les femmes soient attirées par les hommes en général ça me dépasse ces poils sur les bras et puis chaque monsieur sait mieux que l'autre les hommes ont des mamelles petites qui ne servent à rien pourtant complètes avec mamelons celles des femmes sont bien plus belles ils nous imitent mais c'est raté tandis que nous on ne leur a rien emprunté tout est à nous... – Tu es princesse, tu sais. – Mes seins sont découverts à moitié, dit-elle, le dos toujours tourné, mais considérant droit son mari dans la glace. Il n'y a que les pointes qui soient cachées. Cela ne te gêne pas ? – Mais, chérie, d'abord ils ne sont pas découverts à moitié, voyons. Juste d'un tiers peut-être. – Si je me penche, c'est de moitié. – Mais tu ne te pencheras pas. Et puis d'ailleurs, le grand décolleté, c'est admis pour les robes du soir. – Et si c'était admis de les montrer entièrement, tu serais d'accord ? demanda-t-elle, et dans la psyché elle eut de nouveau ce regard direct, masculin. – Mais pour l'amour du ciel, chérie, que vas-tu chercher ? – La vérité. Veux-tu que je les sorte lorsque je serai devant ce monsieur ? – Ariane ! s'exclama-t-il, épouvanté. Pourquoi dis-tu de pareilles horreurs ? – Bien, on ne lui montrera que la moitié supérieure, articula-t-elle. La moitié admise et convenable. Il y eut un silence et il baissa les yeux. Pourquoi continuait-elle à le regarder ainsi, droit dans les yeux ? Mon Dieu, dans les bals les plus chic, des femmes du meilleur monde étaient décolletées. Alors ? Le mieux était de changer de conversation, d'autant plus qu'il était déjà sept heures quarante-deux.” (Cohen, pp. 205, 215, 365-366 Kindle)

“he's the original Wandering Jew... how on earth women can be attracted to men in general is beyond me such hairy arms and they all know better than the next one men have small breasts they're quite useless but they're fully formed complete with nipples women's are much more beautiful men have copied us but it didn't work we've borrowed nothing from them so we come out winners... You look pretty as a princess, you know.” “My breasts are half bare,” she said, still with her back to him but looking directly at her husband in the mirror. “Only the nipples are hidden. Doesn't that bother you?” “But darling, they're not half bare. It's more like a third.” “If I lean forward, it's half.” “Then don't lean forward. Anyway, plunging necklines are considered perfectly suitable for evening wear.” “And would you mind if it was considered perfectly suitable to show the whole lot?” she asked, and in the mirror she gave him another direct, masculine look. “What on earth are you getting at, for goodness sake?” “The truth. Do you want me to make them pop out when I meet this man?” “Ariane!” he exclaimed, appalled. “Why are you saying such horrible things?” “Very well, I'll only show him the top half,” she said coolly. “The bit that's suitable and seemly.” There was a silence and he looked at the carpet. Why did she go on looking, staring, glaring at him like this? For God's sake, at the smartest balls the most fashionable women wore low necklines. So what? The best plan would be to change the subject, especially since it was now seven forty-two.” (Cohen, pp. 171, 179, 312)



 [Click here to watch this film clip](#)

③ **Le conscience d'Ariane** — Texte de *Belle du Seigneur* adapté en film

1. Quelle description de Solal correspond aux propres sentiments d'Ariane ?  
A) droit  
B) chic  
C) direct  
D) errant
2. D'après ce passage, comment Ariane pense-t-elle des hommes ?  
A) dégoûtée  
B) intéressée  
C) perplexe  
D) inquiète
3. Lequel est un synonyme pour “épouvanté” ?  
A) surpris  
B) terrifié  
C) pensif  
D) concerné
4. Pourquoi Ariane veut-elle couvrir ses seins ?  
A) Faire le contraire de ce que veut Adrien  
B) Plaire Solal et sa famille juive  
C) Affirmer son pouvoir féminin  
D) Initier un changement vestiaire
5. Dans le contexte de *Belle du Seigneur*, lequel est un métaphore pour “la moitié supérieure” ?  
A) L'évolution de la société européenne  
B) La haute sphère des riches et lucratifs  
C) Les vœux de la Société des Nations  
D) Le désir traditionnel accepté par la société

6. D'après le clip du film, quels sont les exemples de comment Ariane souhaite casser les stéréotypes de l'hétéronormativité féminine ?

Tout d'abord, elle ne comprend pas comment les femmes peuvent être attirées par les hommes. Elle dit qu'elle déteste le rouge-à-lèvres et refuse de le porter. En fait, elle en utilise pour dessiner sur le miroir. De plus, elle trouve que sa robe est trop serrée, ainsi que trop courte.

7. Quand Ariane exprime qu'elle cherche “La vérité”, qu'est-ce qu'elle veut dire ? Quel est le sens plus vaste de cette question ?

À part la volonté de savoir les attentes précises d'Adrien, elle se cherche à la fois. Elle cherche à affirmer ses actions et sa décision de ne pas être soumise aux intérêts traditionnels.

# Belle du Seigneur : la passion, la séduction, le vrai amour

Une émission présentée par Françoise Estèbe sur l'Iconoclaste—≈1970

 [Click here to listen to this audio clip](#)

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## Questions post-écoute

Après votre écoute de l'émission, répondez aux questions suivantes :

1. D'après le passage audio, pourquoi Solal se sent-il à l'aise avec les femmes ?
  - A) Elles sont plus intéressantes pour lui que les hommes.
  - B) Elles lui fournissent l'amour dont il désire.
  - C) Elles comprennent mieux la diversité sexuelle.
  - D) Elles acceptent son altérité en tant que juif.
  
2. Selon la présentation d'Albert Cohen, lequel est vrai sur la relation d'Ariane et Solal ?
  - A) Ils avaient un fort désir sexuel pour l'un et l'autre.
  - B) Ils étaient plutôt des frères humains que des amants.
  - C) Ils connaissaient un amour sans bornes.
  - D) Ils poursuivaient une nouvelle rencontre.
  
3. Quel verbe l'auteur utilise-t-il pour décrire un respect mutuel, sans qu'il soit forcément un amour ?
  - A) Entendre
  - B) Adorer
  - C) Estimer
  - D) Admirer
  
4. Pourquoi Solal joue-t-il avec la force ?
  - A) Il cherche à comprendre ses limites.
  - B) Il a du mal à adopter une personnalité douce.
  - C) Il essaie de passer entre les binaires du masculin et du féminin.
  - D) Il veut continuer à vivre dans la société courante.
  
5. Lequel est un synonyme du dernier mot de ce passage audio ?
  - A) Conforme
  - B) Paradoxal
  - C) Cohérent
  - D) Déductif

#### ④ Ariane touche une autre femme — Texte de *Belle du Seigneur*



[Click here to listen to this audio clip](#)

“À l'Université, je fis la connaissance de Varvara Ivanovna, une jeune Russe émigrée, fine, intelligente. Bientôt nous devînmes amies. Je la trouvais très belle. J'aimais baiser ses mains, ses paumes rosées, ses tresses lourdes. Je pensais à elle tout le temps. En somme, c'était de l'amour... Heureuses, elle et moi... Une belle femme nue qui serait en même temps un homme pas bien ça... oui qui serait en même temps un homme... oh j'aime pas les hommes ne ne et puis quelle drôle d'idée quelle imbécillité de vouloir introduire ce cette ce cette chose chez quelqu'un d'autre chez quelqu'un qui n'en veut pas à qui ça fait mal... je n'ai jamais aimé les baisers qu'avec Varvara j'aimais toucher sa poitrine je croyais que c'était de l'affection... Affreux, elle était un instrument. Ô Varvara si fine, si délicate, comme c'était exquis de dormir avec elle, dans ses bras.” (Cohen, pp. 26, 27, 201, 202, 211, 258 Kindle)

“At University, I met Varvara Ivanovna, a young Russian émigrée, shrewd and very bright. We soon became friends. I thought she was very beautiful. I loved kissing her hands, her pink palms, her thick hair. I thought about her all the time. In short, it was love... She and I were happy... a beautiful nude who was female and also male in one no that wouldn't be right... yes who was male too... I don't bally well like men stop saying that and anyway what a silly idea how stupid can you get wanting to stick your that your thing into someone who isn't interested it just hurts her... I've only ever liked kissing Varvara I liked touching her breasts I thought it was just to do with affection... Horrible thought: she was just something to be used. O Varvara, so smooth, so silky, lying in Varvara's arms had been exquisite.” (Cohen, pp. 16, 167, 168, 175, 218)

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④ **Ariane touche une autre femme** — Texte de *Belle du Seigneur*

1. Lequel est un synonyme d' "exquis" ?

- A) sympathique
- B) formidable
- C) agréable
- D) plaisant

2. Quel mot Ariane n'arrive-t-elle pas à dire à travers son bégaiement ?

- A) le sexe masculin
- B) la touche masculine
- C) le sexe féminin
- D) la touche féminine

3. Quel sentiment le regard féminin entre Ariane et son amante montre-t-il ?

- A) le bonheur
- B) l'amitié
- C) le respect
- D) l'amour

4. Pourquoi Ariane pense-t-elle directement à Varvara après qu'elle aperçoit qu' "elle était un instrument." ?

- A) Son rapport avec les hommes reste superficiel
- B) Son désir inné est seulement satisfait par les femmes
- C) Son expérience hétérosexuel est temporaire
- D) Son impression du corps masculin est complexe

5. Comment décrire Ariane et Varvara dans ce passage ? Quels aspects du désir y sont présents ?

Ariane pense fort à Varvara. Elle exprime son amour pour elle, et comment elle est la préférée de toutes ses relations. Elle mentionne également son ambivalence entre les sexes qui se présente parfois, mais enfin elle préfère la touche féminine de Varvara.

⑤ Ariane et Solal se disputent — Texte de *Belle du Seigneur* adapté en film

 [Click here to listen to this audio clip](#)

— Tu aimes les hommes, n'est-ce pas ?  
— Non, ils me dégoûtent !  
— Et moi ?  
— Toi aussi !  
— Enfin ! sourit-il, et il affila son nez avec satisfaction, car voilà qui était simple et net.” (Cohen, p. 1083 Kindle)

“You like men, don’t you?  
‘No. Men disgust me!’  
‘Me included?’  
‘Yes, you too!’  
‘So we’ve got there at last,’ he said with a smile, and he sharpened his nose between thumb and forefinger, not without a certain satisfaction, for this at least was simple and clear-cut.” (Cohen, p. 949)



 [Click here to watch this film clip](#)

⑤ **Ariane et Solal se disputent** — Texte de *Belle du Seigneur* adapté en film

1. Quel adjectif décrit mieux le ton de ce passage ?

- A) révélateur
- B) sournois
- C) enthousiaste
- D) critique

2. Quel synonyme peut catégoriser ce dispute ?

- A) une discussion
- B) une consultation
- C) une interrogation
- D) une demande

3. Que représente la “satisfaction” exprimé par Solal à la fin de ce dispute avec Ariane ?

- A) Solal a marqué le dénouement de cette relation
- B) Solal a appris quelque chose de nouveau
- C) Solal a réussi à s'exprimer
- D) Solal a pu faire une conquête ultime

4. Qu'est-ce qu'on peut conclure étant donné ce dispute ?

- A) Ils développent une haine pour l'un et l'autre
- B) Ils voient la société qui s'effondre sur eux
- C) Ils comprennent enfin que leur relation est un échec
- D) Ils apprennent la fausseté de leurs désirs

5. Comparez le passage du texte, dans lequel Ariane avoue son désir inné, et le clip du film, dans lequel elle n'arrive pas. Comment expliquer le sentiment qui est néanmoins transmis ?

Dans le texte et le clip du film, Ariane aperçoit que la relation ne peut plus durer. En ce moment, elle est la plus honnête avec ses sentiments, dit ou non. C'est un sentiment de tristesse qui a été caché depuis le début du roman.

6. Pourquoi Ariane ne se défend-elle pas davantage et n'affirme-t-elle pas son pouvoir féminin ? Comment cela montre-t-il la différence entre elle et Solal par rapport à elle et Adrien ? Pourquoi est-ce important ?

Ariane a une relation distincte avec Solal et l'admire beaucoup plus qu'Adrien. Elle se voit en Solal, donc n'ose pas le critiquer. On dirait que c'est important parce que la relation avec Solal l'a permis d'arriver à cette réalisation dans le temps qu'il fallait.

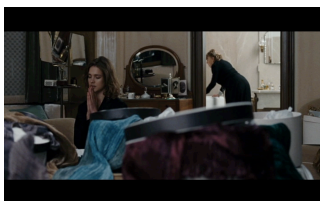
## Belle du Seigneur : s'ils étaient en vie aujourd'hui

Instructions : Après avoir regardé chaque clip du film, identifiez la problématique de la scène. Avec un partenaire, discutez de comment le comportement des personnages serait différent s'ils étaient en vie aujourd'hui. Peut-être il y aurait une grande différence—ou non. Justifier votre position.

Exemple : *Quand Ariane ne veut pas porter une robe révélatrice qui montre ses seins, je pense qu'elle ferait de même aujourd'hui. Une femme indépendante exercerait ses droits de la même manière.*

1 sur 4

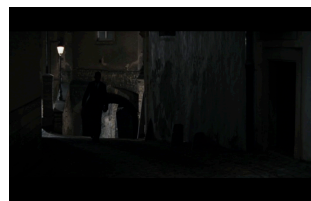
① Ariane fait sa prière



 [Click here to watch this film clip](#)

2 sur 4

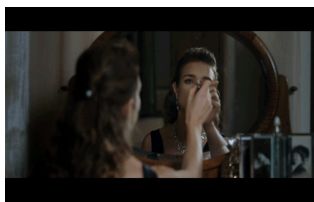
② Solal à la synagogue



 [Click here to watch this film clip](#)

3 sur 4

③ Le conscience d'Ariane



 [Click here to watch this film clip](#)

4 sur 4

⑤ Ariane and Solal se disputent



 [Click here to watch this film clip](#)

\*Teacher's note: Remember that the circled number indicates the point at which each occurrence takes place in the plot summary.

## Belle du Seigneur : Projet Final

Instructions : Vous allez réaliser un projet final qui porte sur une comparaison entre *Belle du Seigneur* et un autre média de votre choix. Comparez le roman avec un autre texte que vous connaissez (un roman, un poème ou une pièce de théâtre), une chanson, une œuvre d'art, ou bien un film. Expliquez pourquoi vous avez fait ce choix, et quels sont les éléments en commun. Qu'est-ce qu'on apprendrait en prenant les thèmes de *Belle du Seigneur* et le média de votre choix ?

Vous allez travailler avec un/une partenaire ou dans un petit groupe, selon les instructions de votre professeur. Votre présentation sera réalisée par la voie d'Adobe Express. Votre présentation doit durer entre 4 et 6 minutes. Soyez sûr d'inclure une introduction à votre comparaison, vos objectifs de la présentation (pourquoi vous présentez le média de votre choix), ainsi que votre analyse. Les images, les vidéos courts et la musique peut très bien s'installer dans votre présentation. Enfin, ajoutez une conclusion et un remerciement à vos spectateurs.

Exemple : *Belle du Seigneur* nous fait penser à une peinture, qui s'appelle \_\_\_\_\_. L'artiste est \_\_\_\_\_, qui vivait à la même époque qu'Albert Cohen. La peinture porte sur...

Votre travail sera noté avec la grille de notation ci-dessous<sup>2</sup> :

| Criteria                | Ratings   |  |  |                   | Pts   |
|-------------------------|---|--|--|-------------------|-------|
| Qualité du contenu      | 7 pts<br>Bonne qualité, contenu logique, des solutions proposées                        | 5 pts<br>Un bon contenu mais c'est un peu superficiel, il manque de l'information, des solutions | 3.5 pts<br>Contenu trop superficiel, il manque de l'information, des solutions | 0 pts<br>No Marks | 7 pts |
| Description écrites     | 7 pts<br>Pas (ou très peu) de fautes, c'est un bon travail                              | 5 pts<br>Quelques fautes mais c'est bien   | 3.5 pts<br>Trop de fautes, peu ou pas de relecture                             | 0 pts<br>No Marks | 7 pts |
| Narration               | 7 pts<br>Une narration claire et compréhensible   | 5 pts<br>Une narration avec des erreurs qui empêchent un peu de bien comprendre                  | 3.5 pts<br>Une narration incompréhensible                                      | 0 pts<br>No Marks | 7 pts |
| Éléments visuels variés | 7 pts<br>Une bonne variété d'éléments visuels (des cartes, des vidéos, des images etc.) | 5 pts<br>Quelques éléments visuels différents mais pas beaucoup                                  | 3.5 pts<br>Trop peu de variété   | 0 pts<br>No Marks | 7 pts |
| Sources                 | 2 pts<br>Sources incluses   | 0 pts<br>Pas de sources  |  |                   | 2 pts |
| Total Points: 30        |   |  |  |                   |       |

<sup>2</sup> Source: University of Maryland, Department of French, 2023.

## Belle du Seigneur : Les Cinq Questions

Instructions : Vous allez travailler avec un/une partenaire. L'un/une d'entre vous sera Ariane (ou Solal, comme vous voulez) et l'autre sera une personne externe, hors du livre. Vous allez réaliser ensemble un entretien—une série de questions pour Ariane/Solal, et ses réponses. Créez au moins cinq questions et réponses. Vous allez présenter vos questions et réponses à la classe—les réponses doivent durer 20 secondes.

Exemple :

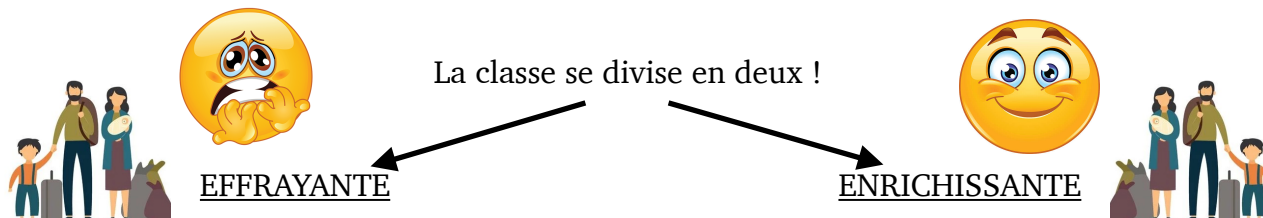
*Personne externe* : Pourquoi faites-vous de la prière ?

*Ariane* : Je ne suis pas religieuse, mais je suis une personne spirituelle. Pour moi, la prière est une conversation entre moi et Dieu. J'implore ses conseils pendant l'incertitude à travers mes relations, et le chemin de ma vie...

# L'immigration—effrayante ou enrichissante : jouer le rôle

## Question à débattre

Quitter son pays d'origine pour aller s'installer dans un autre est une expérience effrayante ou enrichissante ? En quoi est-elle différente aujourd'hui par rapport à l'époque d'Albert Cohen ? Qu'en pensez-vous ?



Une moitié va discuter du côté effrayant de l'immigration, à l'ère d'Albert Cohen et à nos jours. Travailler avec votre groupe pour créer une liste des raisons pour soutenir la perspective adoptée.

Exemple : *L'immigration pose de nombreux soucis, comme l'incertitude du travail et des soins médicaux...*

L'autre moitié va discuter du côté enrichissant de l'immigration, à l'ère d'Albert Cohen et à nos jours. Travailler avec votre groupe pour créer une liste des raisons pour soutenir la perspective adoptée.

Exemple : *L'immigration est riche en possibilités, comme la liberté religieuse et des opportunités d'économiques...*

Enfin, la classe va faire un mini-débat sur le sujet. Vous allez essayer de convaincre l'autre côté que votre perspective est correcte. Enfin, la classe va voter pour voir la pensée collective.



\*Devoirs : Après le débat, créez un enregistrement personnel à ce sujet. Répondez de manière personnelle dans une réponse de deux minutes.

## Belle du Seigneur : Composition écrite finale

Instructions : Vous allez écrire une composition écrite sous la forme d'une lettre à Albert Cohen, en imaginant qu'il peut vous lire. Dans trois paragraphes, répondez aux questions suivantes. Soyez sûr d'inclure une introduction et une conclusion.

- D'après vous, quelle est la signification du titre ?
- Avez vous aimé l'histoire du *Belle du Seigneur* ou non, et pourquoi ? Comment est-ce que vous avez reçu cette histoire en tant que lecteur/lectrice moderne ?
- Comment ce texte examine-t-il la quête de soi ?
- Devrait-on étudier ce roman, ou la même la littérature, pour recevoir une éducation générale au XXI<sup>e</sup> siècle ?
- Qu'est-ce que vous diriez de plus à l'auteur ?

Votre travail sera noté avec la grille de notation ci-dessous<sup>3</sup> :

| Criteria         | Ratings  |   |   |   |   | Pts   |
|------------------|--|---|---|---|---|-------|
| Language         | 10 pts<br>no errors in grammar presented in lesson; very few errors in subject/verb or noun/ adjective agreement; work was well edited for language. | 8 pts<br>occasional errors in use and form of the grammar presented in lesson; occasional errors in sub/verb or adj/ noun agreement; mistakes do not impede comprehensibility; some editing but not complete. | 6 pts<br>frequent errors in use and form of the grammar presented in lesson; some errors in sub/verb or adj/noun agreement; mistakes often impede comprehensibility; work was poorly edited for language. | 4 pts<br>abundance of errors in use and form of the grammar presented in lesson; frequent errors in subject/verb or adj/noun agreement; non-French sentence structure; erroneous use of language makes the work mostly incomprehensible; no evidence of having edited the work for language; or not enough to evaluate. | 10 pts  |       |
| Vocabulary       | 8 pts<br>broad, impressive, precise & effective word use/choice; extensive use of words studied.   | 6 pts<br>adequate but not impressive; some erroneous word usage or choice, but meaning is not confused or obscured; some use of words studied.  | 4 pts<br>erroneous word use or choice leads to confused or obscured meaning; some literal translations and invented words; limited use of words studied.  | 2 pts<br>inadequate; repetitive; incorrect use or non-use of words studied; literal translations; abundance of invented words or words in English; or not enough to evaluate.   | 8 pts   |       |
| Content          | 8 pts<br>very complete, thorough, relevant, on target.   | 6 pts<br>good information, relevant, some improvements can be made  | 4 pts<br>adequate information, some development of ideas; some ideas lack supporting detail or evidence.  | 2 pts<br>minimal information; information lacks substance (superficial)   | 0 pts<br>inappropriate or irrelevant information [0.5 pts]; or not enough information to evaluate | 8 pts |
| Organization     | 4 pts<br>logically and effectively ordered from intro to conclusion; main points and details are connected, fluent.                                  |   |   | 2 pts<br>limited order to content; lacks logical sequencing or ideas; ineffective ordering; very choppy, disjointed.  |   | 4 pts |
| Total Points: 30 |  |   |   |   |   |       |

<sup>3</sup> Source: University of Maryland, Department of French, 2023.

## Writing/Discussion prompts following multiple choice questions

\*Teacher's note: These questions are all of the writing/discussion prompts that appear throughout the appendix. They have been compiled in this section for easy reference, along with their English translations, also for easy reference. Since this lesson plan and these pedagogical materials may be adapted as necessary, any writing prompts may be used as discussion prompts, and vice versa. This entry is for teacher reference only.

- Quelles sont quelques difficultés qu'Albert Cohen a dû se confronter ? Comment ces expériences ont-elles contribué à sa quête de soi, ainsi que son œuvre littéraire ? | What are some of the difficulties that Albert Cohen had to face? How did these experiences contribute to his quest for self and his literary work?
- Quitter son pays d'origine pour aller s'installer dans un autre est une expérience effrayante ou enrichissante ? En quoi est-elle différente aujourd'hui par rapport à l'époque d'Albert Cohen ? Qu'en pensez-vous ? | Is leaving one's home country to move to another a frightening or rewarding experience? How is it different today than it was in Albert Cohen's time? What do you think about it?
- D'après l'auteur, pourquoi la littérature moderne se divise-t-elle en trois catégories ? Comment l'approche de l'auteur diffère-t-elle ? | According to the author, why does modern literature fall into three categories? How does the author's approach differ?
- D'après vous, quel rôle la littérature joue-t-elle dans les études d'aujourd'hui ? Y-a-t-il une importance dans une éducation générale, et pourquoi ? | What role do you think literature plays in today's studies? Is there an importance in a general education, and why?
- Comment ce livre est-il un produit de son époque ? Verrait-on un livre publié qui est si longue et si complexe aujourd'hui, et pourquoi ? | How is this book a product of its time? Would you see a book published that is so long and complex today, and why?
- D'après vous, quels sont les thèmes les plus importants dans ce roman, et pourquoi ? | What do you think are the most important themes in this novel, and why?
- En considérant la préférence sexuelle d'Ariane, pourquoi le fait que Solal la déshabille serait-il "pénible" ? Pourquoi continue-t-elle de se mettre dans cette situation ? | Considering Ariadne's sexual preference, why would Solal's undressing her be "painful"? Why does she continue to put herself in this situation?
- D'après ce passage, quelle conclusion peut-on faire de l'omniscience de Dieu ? | From this passage, what conclusion can be made about God's omniscience?

- Où se trouve la synagogue dans le clip du film ? Qu'est-ce que cela révèle au niveau de l'état des juifs en France à cette époque-là ? | Where is the synagogue in the film clip? What does this reveal about the state of the Jews in France at that time?
- D'après le clip du film, comment Solal est-il en conflit entre la tradition et la modernité ? Quel geste dans la synagogue montre ce conflit, et pourquoi ? | According to the film clip, how is Solal in conflict between tradition and modernity? What gesture in the synagogue shows this conflict, and why?
- D'après le clip du film, quels sont les exemples de comment Ariane souhaite casser les stéréotypes de l'hétéronormativité féminine ? | From the film clip, what are some examples of how Ariane wants to break the stereotypes of female heteronormativity?
- Quand Ariane exprime qu'elle cherche "La vérité", qu'est-ce qu'elle veut dire ? Quel est le sens plus vaste de cette question ? | When Ariane expresses that she is seeking "The Truth", what does she mean? What is the larger meaning of this question?
- Comment décrire Ariane et Varvara dans ce passage ? Quels aspects du désir y sont présents ? | How can we describe Ariane and Varvara in this passage? What aspects of desire are present?
- Comparer le passage du texte, dans lequel Ariane avoue son désir inné, et le clip du film, dans lequel elle n'arrive pas. Comment expliquer le sentiment qui est néanmoins transmis ? | Compare the passage in the text, in which Ariane confesses her innate desire, and the film clip, in which she does not. How can we explain the feeling that is nevertheless transmitted?
- Pourquoi Ariane ne se défend-elle pas davantage et n'affirme-t-elle pas son pouvoir féminin ? Comment cela montre-t-il la différence entre elle et Solal par rapport à elle et Adrien ? Pourquoi est-ce important ? | Why doesn't Ariane stand up for herself more and assert her feminine power? How does this show the difference between her and Solal versus her and Adrien? Why is this important?

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## Conclusion

There exists an expression in French culture that compares an orgasm to the moment of death: '*la petite mort*' or 'the little death'. This erotic expression dates from the 16th century, a time in which human anatomy was being deeply studied. It is believed to be coined by Ambroise Paré, one of the pioneers of modern surgery, who called orgasm a small death because of the short fainting or shivering that it can provoke. Given the intense physical sensation of orgasm, this climatic moment of the human sexual experience is transformative, a living moment unlike any other, and can be a reflection of the Eternal: "It is life mixed with death, but in it, in the same moment, death is a sign of life, an opening to the unlimited." (Bataille, p. 101) While the expression '*la petite mort*' does not appear in the corpus of Albert Cohen's works, the transformative nature of orgasm and its comparison to a near-death experience is evident in *Belle du Seigneur*, particularly at the end of the novel. While the exact moment of an orgasm is never described in the text, the surrounding moments of intense physical connection lend themselves to the event, each of which are closer to the end of the lives of Ariane and Solal. At the end of the novel, both of them take their own lives, which therefore presents suicide in this work, a classical literary topos. However, it is not a glorified suicide—it is one of two tormented individuals who, united in their marginality, cannot find any escape from heteronormative ordination, and are convinced that the afterlife is the only promising alternative to their miserable lives:

“Ô aimante exaspération, chant des chairs en lutte, rythme premier, rythme maître, rythme sacré. Ô coups profonds, frissonnante mort, sourire désespéré de la vie enfin qui s'élance et fait éternelle la vie. ... et elle souriait que oui, ils se retrouveraient là-bas, souriait avec un peu de salive moussant au bord des lèvres, souriait qu'ils seraient toujours ensemble là-bas, et rien que l'amour vrai, l'amour vrai là-bas ...” (pp. 1047, 1109 Kindle)

.....  
“Oh chafing love, song of contending flesh, primal rhythm. Oh the deep thrusting, the shuddering release, the despairing smile of life which at last breaks free and makes life eternal. ... and she smiled at him as if to say but of course they would be together again, afterwards, on the other side, and flecks of froth collected in the corners of her smile as she smiled to say they would be together always on the other side, and there would be real love there, there was only true love on the other side...” (pp. 917, 973)

Eschatology is not absent from Albert Cohen's writing, and the overarching Biblical views on the inescapable end of the human condition. While the Jewish tradition typically emphasizes engagement with and incorporating spirituality into העולם הזה, or This World, eschatology is an inevitable and definite aspect of the Abrahamic Monotheisms. In this passage, Ariane references “là-bas” or “the other side”, which is an allusion to העולם הבא, or the World to Come, suggesting that it is a place where there is “rien que l'amour vrai” or “only true love”. This can be doubly inferred to represent both the love and knowledge of a sexual partner, and also of God. For Ariane and Solal, this life represents a fallen place, one that is scarred and imperfect, in which love evades them. If the omnipotent love and knowledge from a sexual partner or God evaded both Ariane and Solal in this fleeting, terrestrial life, they convince themselves that these feelings are only possible beyond a societal construct, in the World to Come. While even the concept of the afterlife is in fact a construction based on religious and cultural narratives, which Cohen/Solal and Ariane

do not hesitate to criticize, the power of Biblical traditions and beliefs never evade them, even in their final moments of life. In fact: “Life enters Solal at the moment of death.” (Decout, p. 90) When no longer obliged by the societal gaze to maintain the “despairing smile of life”, Ariane and Solal finally end their seemingly endless cycles of succumbing to the theatricality of the Western love tradition, in which they are convinced love will finally come to them. “The other side”, which can also mean the other side of adversity and marginalization, could not be attained by them in their lifetimes—thus, they are convinced that it is only in the World to Come that they will be free. It is therefore evident that: “The writer uses his power of imagination to capture a delusion” (Valbert, p. 23), a “delusion” that has been described throughout Cohen’s massive novel. “It is tempting to read the story of Ariane and Solal as that of the Christian and Jewish peoples, inextricably bound, fatalistically destined to play out a tale of love and death.” (Kelly, p. 158) While this reading is certainly plausible, it is more nuanced, as it uses the overarching Biblical tradition to refract both French and Jewish culture as an affirming spiritual force, which consequently deconstructs the myth, falsehood, and theatricality of the Western love tradition. Moreover, while suicide is a deeply problematic and tragic reality, its presence in this novel suggests that it is under the watchful eye of God. Even though Ariane and Solal leave This World at the end of the novel, one is led to believe that they are not spiritually corrupt. In fact, Albert Cohen has given their marginalized desire the same spiritual legitimacy as mainstream desire, showcased throughout the various *petites morts* in

their own way, which if anything is made more apparent in their passing to the World to Come, not the contrary.

Albert Cohen elevates same-sex and interfaith desire to the same spiritual legitimacy as heterosexual desire within the same religion to demonstrate the common righteousness that exists in all of humanity. By doing so, Cohen in essence deconstructs the myth of heteronormativity, suggesting that such deconstructions consequently reveal the innate form and shared experience of the human condition behind the cultural constructs of hierarchical sexuality. Cohen does not hesitate to question the apparent validity in religious or social ordinations, which manifests through his characters. The characterization of his own self in the form of Solal seeks to conquer this evolving state of existence in the wake of the Dreyfus affair. As Cohen sought to become as culturally French as possible, he actively sought to root himself in Francophone Europe, despite his own marginality as a Jew. Part of this acculturation can be attributed to his first of three marriages, which was to Elisabeth Brocher, a Swiss, protestant woman. He was very happy with Elisabeth, with whom he had his only child, a daughter named Myriam. It is therefore clear that he experienced the overarching tradition of righteous spiritual affirmations in both the Jewish and Christian faiths, despite their fundamentally unique theological perspectives. He manifests this joy as a pluralistic interpretation of Judaism, which in essence is also a cultural refraction of Jewish acculturation in Francophone Europe over the course of the 20th century. After the passing of Elisabeth Brocher, and before Cohen married again, his encounter with Jane Fillion, a lesbian, sparked his

curiosity in same-sex desire. Stemming from his initial sentiments of alterity as an immigrant, a part of Cohen's desire for acculturation was through his quest to seduce women, and therefore become a part of mainstream Francophone society through them, his inability to attain this successful seduction from Jane Fillion manifested itself into the characterization of Ariane. This inability to fulfill an aspect of his cultural quest, an aspect of desire that remains just beyond his grasp, proves to be a great object of interest for Cohen. Because it is just beyond his grasp, it is therefore synonymous with the Eternal. It remains just beyond his attainment, like unbridled proximity to God. Therefore, what is marginalized by society—same-sex and interfaith desire—is spiritually elevated, accompanying the deeply spiritual imagery and references to Judaism throughout Cohen's works. While Cohen was not religious, he was still unwaveringly Jewish, and he was writing in order to conduct his own practice of Judaism. He was writing for himself first, and second to leave what he believed to be “a true gift to those who will come after”<sup>52</sup>, and one aspect of this gift is the affirming spiritual legitimacy showcased in his writing. “Thus, for Cohen, literature becomes an enterprise capable of perpetuating the Biblical myth, of giving faith in the idea of eternity in Israel.” (Decout, p. 147) It can be learned that by creating a refraction of Judaism in response to his own life journey and cultural influences, Cohen is able to transmit the affirmations of universalism within the French and Abrahamic traditions to those who are supposedly viewed as errant and spiritually corrupt. Moreover, his own life journey and cultural influences, which

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<sup>52</sup> Médioni, Franck. *Albert Cohen*. Éditions Gallimard, 2007.

ultimately led to the creation of *Belle du Seigneur* and its consequent reception in French culture, lend themselves to be adapted in the context of a secondary or undergraduate French course, so students may continue to learn from his legacy.

A reading of Albert Cohen with this understanding suggests that: “To claim that Judaism or Christianity or any other religion is the one, complete, final truth by which all individuals gain salvation is to commit idolatry. It is to exalt that which is, for all its beauty and power, nonetheless partial, limited, and unfinished.” (Lubarsky, pp. 7-8) As spiritual righteousness is not limited to only one religion or its followers, the same claim can be made for those who are marginalized by their desires. One is therefore led to believe that same-sex and interfaith desire are only marginalized because of they are the products of a marginalizing force, and Albert Cohen seeks to deconstruct this force through an affirming, universalist spirituality. “By combining in the single character of Solal, Christ, and the Wandering Jew, Cohen puts on a triumphant Wandering Jew. His wandering has become a triumphal march.” (Smith, p. 18) As part of his own practice of Judaism, Albert Cohen’s writing, through his characterization of Solal, depicts a Jew who is not crushed by the image of Jewish masculinity, but embraces a new side of it—one that is spiritually righteous, despite oscillating between tradition and modernity. While conflicted, ultimately unable to escape alongside his intriguing homosexual object of interest, he straddles two cultural domains which slowly become more interconnected. “The same ambivalence—desire to be one, desire to be other—characterizes his attitude towards the world of letters. He wants to belong to it, while retaining his Jewishness.” (Smith, p. 7) It is

through Albert Cohen's legitimization of marginalized desire that a hidden spirituality is revealed, showcasing an aspect of the ongoing power of Biblical tradition previously unseen by the mainstream gaze.

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