



# The League of Nations As Seen by Albert Cohen: A User's Guide to Social Magic

Maxime Decout

## ► To cite this version:

Maxime Decout. The League of Nations As Seen by Albert Cohen: A User's Guide to Social Magic. Diplomacy and the Modern Novel, 2020. hal-03147545

**HAL Id: hal-03147545**

**<https://amu.hal.science/hal-03147545>**

Submitted on 22 Feb 2021

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

## 2 The League of Nations As Seen by Albert Cohen: A User's Guide to Social Magic

---

MAXIME DECOUT

Contrary to popular belief, Albert Cohen was not an ambassador but an international civil servant.<sup>1</sup> His wide-ranging experience as a lawyer and negotiator had a pronounced effect on his literary works, particularly in the representation of diplomacy as a form of bureaucracy. The League of Nations plays a prominent role in his satires on diplomacy, especially in *Mangeclous* (translated as *Nailcruncher*) and *Belle du Seigneur* (translated as *Her Lover*), published in 1938 and 1968 respectively. Solal, a career diplomat, loses his position as under-secretary at the League of Nations in *Her Lover*; he also appears as the protagonist in *Solal* (1930) and in a minor role in *Nailcruncher*.<sup>2</sup> Throughout his novels, Cohen depicts the diplomatic world as a complex mechanism that registers correspondences among the civil service class, members of the Deume family in *Her Lover*, members of Solal's eccentric family nicknamed the Valiants, and, as a literary precedent in the representation of the diplomat in a modernist setting, Marcel Proust's depiction of Norpois, the career diplomat in *Remembrance of Things Past*. Cohen focuses his study of the values and customs of international civil servants on language as it is used at the League, as well as the language used by individuals at home and in social situations outside the workplace. Generally speaking, the crisis of language among civil servants at the League of Nations is symptomatic of a modern crisis in values. Moreover, in Cohen's novels, bureaucratic language mutes broader concerns about the position of international bodies on the global political scene.

In contrast with many other writers, diplomacy for Cohen is not an enriching experience. Nor does diplomacy in fiction prove that literature has a pragmatic dimension. It is an ineffectual construct, essentially linguistic, based on non-pragmatic language. At the League of Nations, civil servants use an idiosyncratic language governed by its own set of codes. Mastering these codes indicates that one belongs to the world

of bureaucracy, not to the world beyond. In fact, those who speak this idiolect do not aim to connect with the outside world; instead, they distance themselves from it. Linguistic competence does not, in this case, abide by the norms of communication. As an institution – in the sense that Pierre Bourdieu uses the term to signify the reproduction of authority through education, apprenticeship, adherence to rules, delegation of responsibility, and so forth (175–86) – the League of Nations bestows authority upon some speakers over others.

The authority of speakers also depends on the authority vested in certain auditors. To be heard by someone in a position of authority within this hierarchical milieu means one is being taken seriously. In addition to these acts of “social magic” (Bourdieu 207), which confer hegemonic power on some members of the tribe rather than others, another system of triage, more primitive perhaps, and certainly cruder, separates the chosen few from the reprobates. Differences are formalized, albeit mysteriously. A certain violence, all the more powerful because it remains symbolic and unspoken, is permitted within institutional strictures. Irony undermines, or contradicts, verbal and verbose diplomacy in Cohen’s novels. First, by describing civil servants as animalistic, even bestial, in their striving and cravenness, Cohen erases any so-called social magic that diplomacy might be thought to possess. Animal metaphors expose bureaucrats’ true nature, hidden beneath the veneer of culture afforded by language. Secondly, and as an antidote to the self-referential world of diplomacy and bureaucracy, the Valiants inventively and ironically ape diplomacy, and thus free it from its institutional constraints.

### Civil Servants, Dilettantes, and Baboons

With the League of Nations as his source material, Cohen sharpens his critique of diplomatic bureaucracy by looking at a typical day in the life of an idle civil servant, Adrien Deume. Adrien’s activities are set against a vast tableau of characters, whose behaviour is shown *in situ*, including their social pursuits. In these frescoes of the inner workings of diplomacy, meetings are portrayed as social opportunities rather than professional events. For Proust – not only a primary model for Cohen in this regard, but also an identifiable source for his readers, and thus a model to be at once assumed, studied, and extended – diplomacy and society are already part and parcel of each other. As social animals, a subspecies of the socialite or snob, diplomats in Proust’s *Remembrance of Things Past* adapt quickly to any milieu in which they find themselves. They mingle. More so than in the diplomatic world,

the worldly settings of parties and salons offer a privileged view of this exotic species. Norpois, former ambassador and friend of the Narrator's father in Proust's novel, frequents the salon of Mme de Villeparisis, the outcast aunt of the Duke and Duchess of Guermantes. Although he is more usually glimpsed at receptions than at embassies, he continues to use the codes and customs of the Chancery even outside of his work (Henry 7–22).

For Cohen, as against Proust, the diplomat or the international civil servant is more often than not depicted in his official capacity, surrounded by his peers. His profession is so ingrained in him that receptions and social functions become mere extensions of the workplace. Hence Cohen registers a change in modern civilization and the mechanisms of diplomacy: a process of professionalization in which the means of production and the control of policy are concentrated in the hands of increasingly powerful professional politicians and bureaucratic structures. From that starting point, two main spheres appear in the novels: the macrocosm of the League of Nations and the microcosm of the Deume family. Shuttling back and forth between these two worlds, Adrien demonstrates, in a manner quite different from Proust's, how the social world interacts with diplomacy. Between these two spheres, the difference is more of scale than of type: structure and *habitus* remain the same. For example, Adrien, preparing for a meal with Solal, general under-secretary of the League, tells Antoinette that "at a formal dinner you eat just a little bit of everything" (*Her Lover* 136). In response, Antoinette modifies this phrase ever so slightly: "at formal and *official* dinners one eats just a little of each course" (153; emphasis added). The adjective, slipped in by Antoinette, lays bare the fantasy that a private meal, as soon as it is transferred into the world of public affairs, can be a political game with uncertain stakes.

This interaction (or reciprocity) between the social world and diplomacy is at the origin of Proust's and Cohen's different narrative techniques, and it demonstrates the differing values in their worldviews. In *Remembrance of Things Past*, Norpois's shortcomings represent those of an entire social class, insofar as he typifies the snobbish, aristocratic, and cultured diplomat. Yet this mocking criticism is made available only through the observations and commentary of the Narrator – always presented as highly perceptive – and, to a lesser degree, of his mother, Bergotte, and Charlus. In Cohen's novels, the narrator's use of irony broadens the mockery, and a greater diversity of views on the milieu is offered by Solal, Ariane, and the Valiants, who come from Cephalonia. These diverse critical approaches meld into a chorus whose main characteristic is irony.

As Cohen portrays them, the diplomats-cum-bureaucrats are all dilettantes or amateurs. The most iconic of these is Adrien. He continually leafs through files, then closes them without doing a lick of work (*Mangeclous* 431–7). He punctuates his days with washroom breaks, “a legitimate little pastime that offers the additional advantage of stretching his legs,” or by taking the elevator up and down to count the floors of the building (492, 439). His “plan of action for the day” is an exercise in absurdity: “First, have a hook installed to hang scissors so I won’t have to look for them anymore. Must be systematic about these things! Second, examine the new filing system for articles from the French press. Third, a little laxative tonight because this morning things didn’t quite work out. And off to work we go!” (430). Adrien surrounds himself with objects that convey a whole aesthetic of inaction and a system of ironic meanings. At the office, he tries to beat his personal record for melting a praline in his mouth; he toys with his stapler, his pen, his pencil sharpener, his watch. Adrien’s time-wasting activities are profoundly bourgeois. They shed light on a desire to possess and handle things, even ridiculous things such as nail scissors; at the same time, they show up Adrien’s vacuity, his utter lack of interiority. He gives himself over to empty, slack, unproductive stretches of time as a form of escapism. In his inactivity, he embodies the image of an international organization at its most torpid and ineffectual.

The international civil servant is no longer a worldly man informed by tradition, culture, and breeding, like Norpois, an exemplar of pre-war society in *Remembrance of Things Past*. The modern functionary cannot even lay claim to an ideological conviction, the way, for instance, Norpois adheres to patriotism as a cause in and of itself. In Cohen’s novels, the civil servant faces a hurtling void where meanings blur and dissipate. If he can, on the one hand, be accurately slotted into a social or professional category, he cannot, on the other hand, be identified according to political, ethical, or ideological criteria. He inhabits a neutral zone that defies distinction and definition. In Cohen’s universe, the international civil servant has no real opinion on politics or any ethical commitment, aside from a certain racism for which the Jewish character, Mossinsohn, pays the price (*Mangeclous* 468–70). Like Finkelstein, he is a “social nothing who was not only no use to man or beast but, more damningly, could not harm a fly” (*Her Lover* 264). The international civil servant is bound only by a double standard, namely personal interest and a passion for domination:

The worship of power is universal. Note how underlings bask in the sun of their leader, observe the doting way they look upon their chief, see them

ever ready with a smile. And when he utters some inane pleasantry, just listen to the chorus of their sincere laughter. Yes, sincere. That's the most awful part of it. For underneath the self-interested love your husband has for me exists another, perfectly genuine and selfless love: the abject love of power, a reverence for the power to destroy. Oh that fixed and captivated grin of his, the obsequious civilities, the deferential curve of his backside as I talked to him. The moment the dominant adult male baboon steps into the cage, the younger, smaller, adolescent males get down on all fours, assuming the welcoming, receptive position of females, adopting the position of voluptuous vassalage, paying sexual homage to the power of destruction and death, the moment the dominant fearsome adult male baboon steps into the cage. Read up on apes and you will see that what I say is true. (*Her Lover* 342–3)

Where calculation meets cravenness, the international civil servant materializes. In Cohen's judgment, he is not only a professional socialite – a dilettante of diplomacy – but also a baboon.

The group scenes at the League of Nations follow this general rule: they form a portrait gallery, which, despite apparent diversity, reveals a limited range of attitudes. Within the group, the dominator displays his omnipotence to the dominated, who accepts being subjugated with pleasure because of his admiration for the stronger person. Modelled on animal behaviour of domination and submission, the international civil servant's behaviour tips over into an unrelenting *habitus*. In short, the civil servant is subject to the most basic and the most comprehensive stereotyping. When diplomats come together, they blur into a mob; because they mimic each other ferociously, they are hard to distinguish one from the other. The League of Nations, supposedly the place of civilization and "politeness," in the seventeenth-century sense of formality and protocol, turns out to have a wild, hidden, suppressed nature. It is true that Proust, too, uses the trope of animality in *Remembrance of Things Past*, as when images of fish proliferate during the Marquise de Saint-Euverte's soirée in *Swann in Love*. (Many gentlemen at Saint-Euverte's party wear monocles, which Swann takes to be a sign of their conformity to fashion and habit and which make them look goggle-eyed, like fish.) But Cohen plays up with unprecedented energy the animalistic aspect of individual characters during group scenes (*Nailcruncher* 174–8; *Her Lover* 109–13, 256–66).<sup>3</sup>

This "babooning" of characters, to coin a term, is superimposed on the official divisions between class A and class B civil servants. In these divisions, "symbolic power" is enshrined in objects (Bourdieu 201–12). In *Her Lover*, power is flaunted: "The habit of the great and the good,

kings, generals, diplomats and even members of the French Academy, of wearing a sword which is the badge of the killer" (345). Consecrating already established class differences, this caste system assigns power to élites on the grounds that "wealth, marriages, friendships and connections give the members of this class the power to harm others" (342). A further dynamic is at play in the official ordering of civil servants: an "Important Person" competes with a "More Important Person," if not the "Most Important Person," and "inferiors" try to come into contact with superiors, who in turn avoid them to target people more important than themselves (257–8). This pecking order may be informal, but it is widely accepted as the natural order of things. The point of this game is to escape weaker figures, to court stronger ones, or to be seen in a position of domination over someone slightly weaker or, better still, equal in status. The official distinctions between A and B, set by the international organization, ought to be based on skills and competence. Instead, they enact and legitimate hierarchies on the symbolic and official stage, which is to say in the realm of the herd or the pack.

The portrayal of League of Nations civil servants as apes or baboons overturns the traditional image of diplomacy as being connected with culture and literature. Cohen satirizes the way that civil servants instrumentalize culture and literature for the sake of advancing their social and professional standing. On the flyleaf of a book by Winston Churchill, Adrien writes "Ex Libris Adrien Deume," about which the narrator wryly comments, "One was an intellectual, after all!" (*Nailcruncher* 274). Deume writes a paper on Paul Claudel, the author and diplomat, but he sends copies only to people who could prove useful to him. He could not care less about his pamphlet; the point is "to craft the perfect inscription" (*Mangeclous* 424). His study is only intended to "butter up" the poet, to "make his acquaintance" (425). Buoyed by his success with this venture, Adrien wants to ride the momentum: "Also need to write a little brochure about Gide. No, because he's a communist. A brochure on Valéry since he's a member of the intellectual cooperation committee. And on Giraudoux because of Quai d'Orsay" (425). In his literary dilettantism, Adrien resembles Proust's Norpois, who has a foot in the door at the French Academy but has no real respect for literature. Afflicted with poor literary taste, Norpois despises Bergotte. Nevertheless, he believes that a career in literature would suit the Narrator very well and offers to put him in touch with a striving young writer of his acquaintance. The offer is, nonetheless, a wicked joke. The young writer of Norpois's acquaintance has penned "a book dealing with the Sense of the Infinite on the Western Shore of Victoria Nyanza," in addition to a study "on the Repeating Rifle in the Bulgarian Army"



(*Remembrance* 1:489). Norpois, like Adrien after him, sees literature only through the lens of diplomatic and social advantage, in other words in terms of careers and power relationships.

In spite of the cultural instrumentalization that appears in both Proust's and Cohen's works, Adrien is not Norpois. He fancies himself talented in the literary arts. He cultivates a chin-strap beard in order to make him "look like a romantic poet, or, rather, even more like a modern painter" (*Nailcruncher* 270). He sits down at the piano, which he cannot play, and produces a "shrill medley" of notes and "fancy work by the left hand" in imitation of Chopin (272–3). Ensnared at his work-table, he embarks on writing a novel while wearing a silk shawl around his shoulders, which he imagines to be the uniform of a true artist (*Mangeclous* 342). He even tells his wife, when career advancement appears to be stagnating, that he has had enough of the League of Nations, that he wants to be like Marcel Pagnol "with lots of money, because that's the only thing that matters," or like Louis-Ferdinand Céline, "a man of his time," or maybe like Jules Romains, "a prolific writer, who can churn out a novel every six months" (482). In *Her Lover*, Adrien is racked by the same desire to become an artist: "Of course, she [his wife] was absolutely right, for God's sake! The Secretariat was just a job, it paid the bills. But his life, his real life, was Literature, just you wait and see! When he got to the office, he'd sit down and definitely come up with a sure-fire subject for a novel. Now let's see, what would be original?" (222). The deliberate echo of Proust – "Real life, life at last laid bare and illuminated ... is literature" (*Remembrance* 3:931) – exposes just how second-rate Adrien's ambitions truly are.

Adrien confides to Solal that he has written a few poems that are meant "to express rather than to communicate" (*Her Lover* 322). Furthermore, he plans to write something that will be, as he says, "unique of its kind, I think, it won't have a plot and, in a way, it won't have any characters either" (322). Upon a suggestion from Solal, Adrien decides that his novel will be about Don Juan. Guided by modernist precepts of unrestrained – and unoriginal – formal innovation, he intends to call the novel "Juan," because he thinks that title will startle people with its originality (659). In contrast, Norpois denounces "Art for Art's sake," on the grounds that "at this period of history there are tasks more urgent than the manipulation of words in a harmonious manner" (*Remembrance* 1:489). This criticism might be perfectly justified, but, in light of the diplomat's social and often formal concerns – what might also be described as the manipulation of words in a harmonious manner – Proust ironically discredits it.

Whereas Proust identifies the chasm separating diplomatic art, consisting of allusions and fixed forms, from true literary creation, Cohen



for his part provides no artistic escape hatch for the instrumentalization of literature. He offers no genuine creator in his work. No matter how hard one looks, a figure like Bergotte in *Remembrance of Things Past* never appears in either *Nailcruncher* or *Her Lover*.

### A Frozen Language of Stereotypes

Above all, Cohen perfectly understands that one of the essential forms of symbolic power in a bureaucracy is language. Like Proust, he brings together the language of society and the language of diplomacy. Both languages use indirect speech and allusion. This attention to language, especially the inherent capacity for insinuation and assumption that words allow, forms the basis of Cohen's sociology of verbal interaction. The League of Nations has the distinction of being, more than anywhere else, a place where language has the last word. In this milieu, language takes precedence over reality itself. Proust, too, observes diplomatic meticulousness, not to say round-aboutness, with regard to language. While reading one of Norpois's articles, the Narrator notices an insistent attachment to certain verbs and formulas: "The reader may perhaps have observed in these last pages that the conditional was one of the Ambassador's favourite grammatical forms, in the literature of diplomacy. ('Particular importance would appear to be attached' for 'Particular importance is attached.')

But the present indicative employed not in its regular sense but in that of the old 'optative' was no less dear to M. de Norpois" (*Remembrance* 3:653).

In Cohen's novels, form becomes the only real concern of League of Nations employees who join in the unbridled pursuit of the signifier as an end in itself. Divorced from the things it signifies, language acquires an importance all its own, a reality detached from the world. Adrien, like Norpois, frets over proper language usage. In the end, his real "work" amounts to quibbling about words:

– Van Vries will disapprove. He doesn't much like "relative to" either. It would be better to say "that related to."

He crossed it all out. No, it wasn't any good. After "our services," it should be "learned about with the greatest interest." ... What if, instead of starting with "I have the honour," he put "In response to your letter of et cetera in which you were kind enough to et cetera"? (*Mangeclous* 437)

Similarly, Le Gandec consults Adrien about whether the phrase "agree with our opinion" is correct, or if "agree with our point of view" might not be more appropriate (478).

Symbolic power depends not only on forms of speech and the compatibility of any utterance with intelligible codes formulated within a group, but also on the power that emanates from the speaker. The hierarchy among Adrien, Le Gandec, and Van Vries takes shape in and through language; at the same time, language sustains that hierarchy. Indeed, Adrien uses little insights that give him a slight advantage in this linguistic universe. He takes great pride in having had the idea to “use the word *development* in the plural, which would give it more gravity”:

And the greatest feather in his cap, this ingenious expression by which, when it was impossible not to use “with regard to,” one could at least avoid repeating it. Historically, his colleagues would write “with regard to Syria and regarding Palestine.” That’s where he could use “regarding both Syria and Palestine.” And the “pieces of documentation” and “pieces of information” and the “received with thanks,” to whom did one owe all that? To him! Before, we simply said “documentation,” “information.” A debt of thanks was due him! (*Mangeclous* 484)

It is necessary not only to manipulate the traditional, legitimate language of the League but also to be able to invent new expressions mimicking the same model. By adding to the limited repertory of acceptable bureaucratic language, one builds and magnifies an image of self and an image of the League at the same time. Statements, irrespective of their meaning, have a dual value: first, as a sign of belonging to the group; second, as a distinction within the group if the civil servant demonstrates appropriate innovation. One has to demonstrate this faculty for conformity to higher echelons of the bureaucracy, even while one takes minor risks, in order to receive validation:

Anxious to shine in the presence of their silent chief, this fine body of men went at it with a will and improvised enthusiastically, conjuring up in the strange language of the Secretariat “avenues to be explored,” “the consensual accord to be sought on the repartition of responsibilities both in the organizational and the operational contexts,” “perceived models of approach to this problem,” “the published track record of the specialized agencies,” “the provision of back-up equipments which governments, if approached in a spirit of cooperation, might be incited to take on board.” (*Her Lover* 280)

The League is therefore the locus of a paradox in communication: verbal interaction succeeds even when it functions beyond meaning

and comprehension. *Nailcruncher* puts the problem as clearly as possible, within the limits of bureaucratic mystification: "Everyone understood they did not understand, with the exception of Chester and Solal, who understood and pretended not to understand. The others, who did not understand, pretended to understand" (*Nailcruncher* 178). This basic principle for discussion at the League of Nations in *Nailcruncher* resonates with an agenda for a meeting proposed in *Her Lover*: "Action to be taken to promote the goals and ideals of the League of Nations" (*Her Lover* 278). This nebulous statement virtually predicts the vacuous debates that follow. No one knows what the action item means, but everyone makes proposals in the same vein: confusing and convoluted formulations mask fundamental meaninglessness. Sir John, who proposes the agenda, "expected his subordinates to tell him what he wanted" (278). Everyone speaks with great conviction: "the rule of rules being never lose face, always appear to be on top of things, and at all cost never admit to not understanding or not knowing what to do" (278). A series of proposals follows, each as incoherent as the next. Van Vries declares that the plan of action must be "systematic" and "concrete"; Benedetti retorts that a "program" of action would be far more valuable than a "plan" of action, and that this program must be a "specific project" (279). In truth, no one understands anything. Nonetheless, every statement is "conscientiously noted by the stenographer, who could not make head nor tail of any of them, for she was an intelligent girl" (281). Maxwell, responsible for drafting a guidance note, delegates the work to Mossinsohn, who, hardworking and serious, "would simply make up what the six heads of section had decided" (282).

This speech, devoid of all content, serves only to consolidate relationships of power, even as it forbids any decision-making or concrete action by the institution. Jargon-filled and pointlessly sterile discussions all lead to the same tried-and-true solution:

the setting up of a working party to explore avenues and to present, to an ad hoc committee to be constituted at a later date and composed of members delegated by national governments, the draft of a specific project setting out concrete proposals which shall form the broad framework of a long-term programme of systematic and coordinated action designed to promote the goals and ideals of the League of Nations. (281)

Incapable of resolving any issue, the intermediaries tasked with considering the matter multiply. Meanwhile, resolutions are postponed until a later date. Therein lies the tragic consequence of this professionalization and bureaucratization of diplomacy. Unable to unite around common

ideals, the League will never be able to make its voice heard on the international scene. International authorities sink inevitably into inaction, "the waters [having] been so muddied" by political waffling (281).

Not taking a position on anything is more than just a symptom of this uniquely formal communication: not taking a stand is also the goal. Expressing a meaning could pose a risk or cause an inconvenience; at the very least, meaning might hinder linguistic proliferation. Thus, it is more polite to forego any meaning at all. Only when someone strives to deny meaning is it indirectly taken into consideration at all. Some characters excel in the art of speaking without saying anything. The mastery of prattle earns them a position of advantage:

Van Vries's notes were greatly admired by his fellow heads of section but made his staff tear their hair. He was a past master of the art of saying nothing. He was pathologically circumspect, and quite capable of stringing together a dozen sentences which seemed pregnant with meaning but, on close examination, meant nothing at all and therefore did not commit him to any point of view. It was this buffoon's very special talent that he could take pages and pages to say nothing. (288–9)

Deliberately uncontroversial, language at the League of Nations is a discursive practice that aims to manage delicate matters without ever implicating the speaker – or, for that matter, the audience.<sup>4</sup> As artful and savvy as it may be, this practice of skirting responsibility is diplomacy at its most perilous, since it can only avoid showing conflicts, not avoid the conflicts themselves. As such, by exposing the limitations of the diplomatic pirouettes within bureaucratic language, Cohen's novel is also at its most prescient. Even before the League drastically reduced its operations in 1938 – its headquarters in Paris remained completely shuttered during the Second World War and it officially ceased operations in 1946 – Cohen foresaw its ineffectuality. In *Nailcruncher*, Scipion, a friend of the Valiants who hails from Marseille, is welcomed at the League by passing himself off as an Argentine representative. He asks the Comte de Surville what happens at the League of Nations in the event of a war:

"We start a file ... We meet, and issue to the Press a cautious communiqué in which we express our sorrowful regrets."

"And if the war goes on?"

...

"Then," he said in a forceful voice, "we adopt strong measures. We appoint a committee and sometimes even sub-committees and we go so far, if necessary, as to beg the belligerents to cease their carnage ..."

"And if the war goes on?"

"Then we no longer send a polite request, but we recommend them to cease hostilities ..."

"And if the war goes on?"

"Then we pass resolutions in which, while admitting that the weaker party is right, we do not say that the strong party is wrong ..." (*Nailcruncher* 191)

Scipion presses on with his questions until Surville finally relents:

Each country may do as it pleases. We wash our hands of it. After all, our task is to issue prudent recommendations and to pass clever resolutions which inconvenience no one. Our job can be summed up in the one word: "appeasement!" (292)

As the very pinnacle of inefficiency, the Comte de Surville is assigned to a file called, preposterously, "Propaganda in Toy-shops in Favour of Disarmament" (*Nailcruncher* 182).<sup>5</sup>

### **The Valiants: Breathing New Life into the Language of Diplomacy**

The only real counterbalance to the sclerotic universe of diplomacy is the paradoxical imitation of diplomatic conventions offered by the Valiants.<sup>6</sup> By aping the professional diplomat's codes of behaviour, the Valiants demonstrate that he is always already a caricature of his own career. Each civil servant may be a caricature in his own way, but Adrien serves as the epitome of the genre. In a parody of an espionage plot in the highest echelons of international bureaucracy, he discusses his colleagues with his wife, Ariane, over the telephone: because Adrien believes himself to be under surveillance, or wishes he were, he uses ridiculous codenames. Solal becomes Suzanne; Kanakis becomes K. During this phone conversation, he explains his ingenious system of basing codenames on initials, which rather gives the game away (*Her Lover* 292–4).

Parody achieves its full expression with the Valiants – a nickname for five cousins in the Solal family, including Nailcruncher. Whereas civil servants in Cohen's novels are usually animalized, the Valiants parade about in elaborate costumes that create some distance between them and their bestial state. At the same time, their ingenious outfits mock the symbols of power loved by diplomats. Their vestimentary excess is such that the Valiant cousins, abiding scrupulously by custom, indicate their inability to submit to protocol. Vital and inventive, they remain

outside the strictures of diplomatic fanfare. For example, the narrative dwells at length on Nailcruncher's attire as he prepares to leave for the League of Nations:

New frockcoat with silky lapels. Starched shirt. A spotted lavallière adding a touch of dash. Panama hat, given the heat. Sand-shoes, for he had tender toes. Tennis-racket and golf club in the manner of English diplomats. Gardenia in his buttonhole. Intellectual pince-nez solemnized by a black ribbon on which his long teeth chewed with gay abandon. (*Her Lover* 233)

Taken one by one, these items could be signs of belonging to a group. Taken together as a motley sartorial ensemble, they surrender all value. According to Nailcruncher, the cousins attend the "Foolery of Nations or Salad of Noodles or Circle of Simpletons" (*Nailcruncher* 171). These nicknames play on the initials of the League of Nation in French – SDN or the Société des Nations: "Satisfaction of the Nourished and the Satiation of the Navel and the Saturation of Noodles!" along with "Sopha of Nephews" (285, 293). They invoke diplomatic protocol while indulging in the carnivalesque.<sup>7</sup>

The cousins also play dress-up with the gregarious, bureaucratized language of diplomacy. With unusual verve and creativity, they breathe new life into its standardized and empty phrases. Incapable of following the codes of this idiolect, Nailcruncher saturates his speech with supposedly diplomatic formulations, often unsuitably and incongruously. When taken for a foreign president and asked how he should be announced, he replies: "I am here incognito ... Negotiations. Political secrets. It will be enough, O liveried underling, to give him the password, which is Cephalonia. Now go, make haste! ... But hear this, my good man. I shall wait no longer than five minutes ... It is a rule which I have always observed in my official life. Convey this intelligence to whomsoever it may concern" (*Her Lover* 235). When he arrives at the Deumes' and finds Hippolyte alone, he introduces himself as a diplomat and asks, using quaint, archaic terms, that his "topper ... be deposited in the cloakroom, in accordance with what the English call the diplomatic drill via the usual channels" (248). A chapter entitled "Concerning the Envoy Plenipotentiary: On Sipping and Supping" (251) humorously evokes diplomatic manuals governing protocol. Hippolyte cannot help but be impressed by Nailcruncher, because Hippolyte draws everything he knows about protocol from a society guide. But Nailcruncher, not one to be ruled by a book, uses fancy as his guide. Protocol for him is not a constraint, but a veritable smorgasbord of delights. He habitually metaphorizes diplomacy as food. In one instance, he creates a menu based

on whatever he can find in the kitchen. He invents a sort of histrionic feast of phrases, where culinary and linguistic symbols combine and multiply, as if by parthenogenesis. In his inventiveness, Nailcruncher knows no limits: "What would suit me best would be to have a swirled nationality, like a strawberry and vanilla ice. I should like to have a Franco-British-American-Czecho-Scandinavian-Swiss passport" (*Nailcruncher* 290). He does not hesitate to offer culinary advice to the Queen of England in a thinly diplomatic letter (305), and he goes so far as to dream of a "universal sandwich" (*Valeureux* 289). He overreaches categories and limits, to the point of celebrating peace among peoples and religions with an unlikely toast: "let's drink with stout hearts and make the most of the time we have on this earth! A murrain on racial discrimination!" (*Her Lover* 255). Nailcruncher's diplomacy is frankly culinary: more than restraint, asceticism, and separation, he blends categories and finds pleasure in new gustatory combinations. His aesthetic could not be further from Norpois's. In *Remembrance of Things Past*, Norpois, over a meal, entertains fellow diners "with a number of the stories with which he was in the habit of regaling his colleagues in 'the career,'" but, when faced with a pineapple salad, dons the mantle of discretion once again: "after fastening for a moment on the confection the penetrating gaze of a trained observer, [he] ate it with the inscrutable discretion of a diplomat, and without disclosing to us what he thought of it" (*Remembrance* 1:495). For the Valiants, by contrast, food and language are the symbol of an exteriorized interiority, the basis for sharing. They reinvent diplomatic customs by suffusing them with new meaning based on clothes, conversations, and meals. In a manner of speaking, they revitalize cultural capital by flouting cultural conventions.

Cohen intensifies his satire of League of Nations civil servants through the repeated depiction of the Valiants' ethical and political stance, of which diplomats are bereft. Saltiel explains the different governments as follows: "They make wars. When they have finished one they get ready for another. And that gets them into debt. And they are furious at having no more money. And then they beat us to console themselves, and say it is all our fault if things go wrong" (*Nailcruncher* 112). Seen against the backdrop of the League of Nations civil servants, the Valiants have strong convictions, which distinguishes them from the diplomatic caricatures with whom they mingle. Their conversations, covering all manner of subjects, provide a counterpoint to the empty conversations of diplomats. Their conversations often culminate in fierce declarations of love for nations, particularly France, England, and Switzerland (*Nailcruncher* 6, 53–4, 73, 77, 85; *Valeureux* 19, 25, 64, 75–7). Whereas diplomats dawdle, the Valiants act. They send missives



far and wide, to the most influential and important individuals they can fathom having a relationship with, such as English ministers (*Nailcruncher* 47), the prime minister (*Valeureux* 84), the president of the Republic (*Valeureux* 187, 206–13), or the queen of England (*Valeureux* 294–337). Their mode of communication could not be more different from that of civil servants and diplomats. Their speech assumes polemical dimensions. Implicating the subjective investment of the speaker and the listener, speech itself becomes a performance. For this reason, the cousins contemplate, in their typical heroic-comedic vein, solutions which, tragically, are condemned never to be realized. They propose attacking Hitler (*Valeureux* 252), cursing the Germans in a letter campaign (*Nailcruncher* 210), or praying that God transform Hitler into a Polish Jew without papers – or, better yet, to argue the Law with Hitler until he becomes a rabbi (*Nailcruncher* 101). Whether their solutions are realizable or not, by proposing them, the Valiants condemn the attitude of the Comte de Surville and the other civil servants. Cohen’s writing brings to life a splendid dream performance in an active, joyful, honest, generous language, which portrays in depth a social and human ideal, and a model of literary speech. Cohen achieves this feat by subverting the mechanisms of diplomatic language, which is in itself one of the most specific, secret, and powerful languages created by modern society and institutions.

## NOTES

- 1 From 1926 to 1931, with some interruptions, Cohen was a civil servant attached to the diplomatic division of the International Labour Organization in Geneva. Prior to that, he worked for the World Zionist Association. While maintaining his legal and administrative functions, he founded and edited *La Revue Juive* in 1925. Liaison work with the members of the League of Nations provided him with key elements for the description of bureaucracy in his novels. In 1939–40, Chaim Weizmann asked Cohen to create a “Jewish Legion” to help Jewish refugees bound for different destinations and to support Zionism through a committee made up of intellectuals. In September 1944, he took up work for the Intergovernmental Committee for Refugees as an attorney. On 15 October 1946, at the Committee for Refugees conference, an agreement was passed to provide refugees with an international passport that granted them official status. On 14 June 1949, Cohen left that position to return to the International Labour Organization, where he worked until 31 December 1951. From that date, at the age of fifty-six,

he pursued his literary career exclusively (Goitein-Galpérin 17–31; Nicault 99–118).

- 2 Because characters migrate from one novel to another in Cohen's oeuvre, and because translators have their ways with words, the name *Mangeclous* is translated as "Nailcruncher" in the novel of that name but as "Nailbiter" in *Her Lover*. With its association of infantile fixation and anxiety, "nail-biter" does not capture the meaning of "clous" in French. Similarly, "les Valeureux" is translated in *Her Lover* as "the Valiants," but as "the Gallants" in *Nailcruncher*. The former, being more accurate, has been used throughout this essay. In a further complication, *Mangeclous* was translated into English by Vyvyan Holland in 1940, but for reasons that are not explained, he did not translate chapters 39–47 of the French text; it merely stops at the end of chapter 38. For this reason, citations from the novel appear either as *Nailcruncher*, the English version, or as *Mangeclous*, the French version. All translations from *Mangeclous* beyond chapter 38 are ours.
- 3 Schaffner provides further analysis of this animalization (59–67).
- 4 In *Nailcruncher*, Adrien takes great pains not to give even the slightest offence in a memo: "Put down that the mandate committee would surely use this piece of paper for its report to the Council. Careful, though, not to compromise oneself. He thought for a long time and crafted this careful phrase, 'This report seems to' ('would seem' might be less compromising but it did not work in terms of style") (437).
- 5 A scene in *Her Lover* recalls this theme of war and diplomacy (81–3). The Comte's equivocation in *Nailcruncher* could also be a nod to a passage in Proust: "To give an anticipatory idea of the Italian incident, let us show how M. de Norpois made use of this paper in 1870, to no purpose, it may be thought, since war broke out nevertheless – but most efficaciously, according to M. de Norpois, whose axiom was that we ought first and foremost to prepare public opinion" (*Remembrance* 3:652).
- 6 For another perspective on this issue, see Daunais's study, "Albert Cohen, du côté de Guermantes."
- 7 For a full treatment of the carnivalesque in Cohen's novels, see Kauffmann.