



And

Other

Essays

Michael Cohen

Glass House Books

And Other Essays

For the last couple of decades, Michael Cohen has been publishing personal and topical essays in a variety of magazines from the *Harvard Review* to *Birding*. IP published a collection of them, *A Place to Read*, in 2014. Here is another collection, *And Other Essays*.

Before he retired from teaching, Cohen wrote an introductory poetry text, *The Poem in Question* (Harcourt Brace, 1983) and an award winning Shakespeare study, *Hamlet in My Mind's Eye* (Georgia, 1989).

Michael Cohen lives in Lincoln, Nebraska.





And Other Essays

Michael Cohen



Glass House Books
Brisbane

Glass House Books

an imprint of IP (Interactive Publications Pty Ltd)

Treetop Studio • 9 Kuhler Court

Carindale, Queensland, Australia 4152

sales@ipoz.biz

<http://ipoz.biz>

© 2020, IP and Michael Cohen

eBook versions © 2020

All rights reserved. Without limiting the rights under copyright reserved above, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise), without the prior written permission of the copyright owner and the publisher of this book.

Printed in 12 pt Adobe Caslon Pro on 16 pt Avenir Book.

ISBN: 9781922332257 (PB); 9781922332264 (eBk)



a catalogue record of this book is available
from the National Library of Australia

Contents

Acknowledgements	vii
Preface	ix
Don't Read the Whole Thing	1
The Cross and the Windmills	3
Talking to Myself	6
Why Didn't Our Big Brains Save Us?	13
Just a Note in Haste	21
Almost Enough Caviar	22
Getting Past the ABCs	35
Agonists	37
Certificates	54
Sorry, But I Enjoy Air Travel	65
The God Damners	68
Trains, Ships, and Trucks	86
The Canyon, the Collision, and the Kid Who Liked to Fly	88
The Materialist in Her Bathtub	94
<i>The Maltese Falcon</i> and The Great American Novel	101
Travels with Pat	112
Plato's Handbook	119
Learning Ancient Greek at the Downtown Y	132
Playing Golf <i>versus</i> Reading About It	140
Advice on Writing Your Suicide Note	142
A Chance Conversation	149
Paris from the Terrace	159
The Road to Beatrice	165

And Other Essays

South Texas Diary, 2006	167
At the Gym	174
Tucson Time	183
References	189

Acknowledgements

Cover image: Dan Cohen. "Muir Woods"

Book design: David Reiter

A list of acknowledgements of the books I've cited or discussed follows these essays. The list also acknowledges the magazines that first published my essays. But here I happily acknowledge with love those who've given my writing the critical look it sorely needed: Katharine Weston Cohen, Matt Cohen, Nicole Gray, and Dan Cohen, all good writers themselves, who have worked hard to save me from the unintelligible, the badly argued, and the dumb.

Preface

This is an unapologetically bookish sort of book. Scores of books are mentioned here, and I discuss quite a few in detail. I don't have much patience with people who believe the only real knowledge comes from experience and not from books. Most of what I've learned in almost eight decades has been mediated by my reading if it hasn't come directly from the printed page. Reading is, in the final analysis, but another, more condensed and organized form of experience. Keats's reading took him to "realms of gold," and Borges said reading a book was "no less an experience than traveling or falling in love." Reading expands life experience, and life experience improves reading.

Most of the essays I write seem to follow the standard advice to write about what I know: the fun of flying small planes, the joys and jolts of family, writing itself, playing golf, eating good food, going often to the gym, traveling—but the greatest extender of what I know is reading. And sometimes reading takes me way beyond the sphere of my other experiences. In the essay below called "The God Damners," for example, I'm looking at the more outspoken atheists and their attack, not just on fundamentalism and radical extremist religion, but on theism itself. I was particularly trying to understand why the books of the so-called "New Atheists" so resonated with the American reading public in the first decade of the twenty-first century; these writers produced at least six best sellers between 2004 and 2007.

Also literally out of my comfort zone was the subject matter of "Agonists"; namely, writers who perform their own grief and suffering on the page. Nancy Mairs wrote of her readers, "I want them to wince." Had I not happened to read Joan Didion's *The Year of Magical Thinking*, I would probably never have read works by Mairs, Dubus, and others included in my essay.

Even my new experiences that do not begin with reading have a way of moving quickly toward the written word. I describe encounters with southern border crossers in “South Texas Diary, 2006.” And my brother’s suicide led me through grief and self-doubt and eventually to the slightly odd tone of “Advice on Writing Your Suicide Note.” Surprise encounters with illegal immigrants are mulled over in the form of a diary; a tragic suicide gets transformed into an ironic writing prompt. For me reading is a form of doing, but the other side of that is the constant transformation of nonverbal experience into words, sentences, essays. Writing is also experience. I read to know and write to discover what I think about it all.

Don't Read the Whole Thing

John Rawls, introducing his influential *A Theory of Justice*, does a remarkable thing for an author. “This is a long book,” he writes, and then proceeds to explain how you can get the theory he presents along with explanations of terms and pertinent examples by reading sections of the book that amount to only about a third of his 600 pages! It would be churlish not to take this advice, I thought, choosing the 200-page option. Plenty of other books, in my opinion—famous ones, classics, and supposed must-reads—should be preceded by Rawls-like advice about how to read them without reading all of them.

According to Sir Francis Bacon, “Some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and some few to be chewed and digested.” Yes, even the classics may need some selective tasting. By all means read every word of *The Odyssey*, the master narrative of Western literature, because it will entertain, and, if you are a storyteller, train you as well. But *The Iliad* is another matter. When Homer describes encounters between Paris and Hector or Hector and Andromache, still more when he turns his merciless attention to Trojans and Greeks killing each other, he will keep anyone’s interest. But if you read every item in his catalogues of which country sent how many ships to Troy, only if you have a map of ancient city-states before you and a passion for ancient geography will you stay awake. By all means, skim Homer’s lists as you would the begats in Genesis. Just keep in mind that Homer’s catalogues really did interest his first readers and still command the attention of students of the ancient world.

The Aeneid requires cutting on a different plan. Here it’s pretty much a matter of checking out after the councils of the gods in Book 1, the escape from Troy in 2, Aeneas’s travels in 3, the romance of Dido and Aeneas in 4, and the

trip to the Underworld in 6. In 6 we get a prophecy of what happens until the founding of Rome, but we don't have to actually live through the enactment of the prophecy.

Authors may not be as helpful as John Rawls, but they do sometimes signal where your attention can wander. When a shepherd in *Don Quixote* begins to tell a story peopled by no one we've yet met but rather folks with conventional Romantic names, it's safe to skip the rest of that chapter and possibly the next; the chapter titles will tell us when the main narrative resumes.

The point is that life is short and some books—even some very good books—are too long. A lot of selective reading is just taste, of course. At the halfway point in *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* I realized that Hitler's monomaniacal hobbling of his generals' freedom to act and other aspects of the war's progress were going to be far less interesting to me than the story of Hitler's complicated and politically astute climb to power had been, and I just stopped reading. It's your reading life, after all, and no one else's; find the good parts and leave the rest unread.

The Cross and the Windmills

Drivers on Interstate 40, coming over a low hill on the Texas plains east of Amarillo, see on the horizon a white cross. The town nearby is Groom, with about six hundred residents, located on a bypass from the interstate, a little piece of the old Route 66. The cross, when it suddenly appeared on the horizon and grew gradually bigger as I approached, was until recently an imposing and isolated sight, dominating an otherwise empty landscape. Since the cross is visible for nearly ten miles, there is a lot of time to wonder at its presence, to speculate on exactly how big it is and who erected it. I discovered the answers to these questions by pulling into the small park next to the cross and reading the information posted there.

The cross is almost sixty meters high—190 feet to be exact, or as tall as a 15-story building. Its arms stretch 110 feet. For comparison, the statue of *Christ the Redeemer* that looks out over Rio de Janeiro from the top of Corcovado Mountain is only 30 meters tall, though it has the advantage of Corcovado's 700-meter height to give it prominence. The stylized corrugations representing folds in the robe in Paul Landowski's Art Deco design for *Cristo Redentor* may possibly have suggested the fluting or channeling in the skin of the Groom cross. Two Texas millionaires are responsible for the cross. Chris Britten, who owned the large, now defunct gas station, curio shop, and restaurant nearby, donated the land, and Steve Thomas had the cross built in sections in Pampa, Texas, before it was transported and assembled at this site in 1995. Bronze statues representing the stations of the cross and other sacred subjects ring the white metal cross. These include a *pietà* copied from Michelangelo, a St. Michael and Lucifer that could be mistaken for St. George and the Dragon, a fountain, an empty tomb, an anti-abortion

monument, and the ten commandments. But the main player is the cross, dwarfing all the bronze below. Yet it is almost an anticlimax to arrive at the cross, since we can only imagine its size, with nothing to provide scale, during our approach to it, and it could, for all we could guess from ten or five miles away, be four hundred feet tall.

Not long ago as I drove on I-40, approaching the cross at Groom, I saw on the horizon white shapes of a very different sort, dozens of them, and all larger than the Groom cross. They were the huge three-bladed windmills or wind turbines that we have become accustomed to seeing over the last few years on the windy plains of America. Cross and turbines have in common a certain mysteriousness of scale: I find it difficult, even when I am within a few hundred yards, to guess how large they are. But I have often seen on the road trucks transporting the blades of turbines, and with cars for comparison I have no trouble comprehending that each blade is over a hundred feet long.

In fact the blades are 130 feet long, and the tower that supports them is over two hundred fifty feet high, so the structure, when a blade is pointing straight up, is easily four hundred feet tall, or more than twice the height of the Groom cross, and there are dozens of them in view as one approaches and drives by the cross. The wind turbines (so-called even though they are not actually turbines but simple generators powered by the geared-up turning of a wind fan) are often arranged along the fronts of mesas so that they look like modern equivalents of the windmills of La Mancha, and I can imagine that some wizard—Frestón, for instance—had replaced the old landmarks with these three-armed white giants. Wind farms, they call these collections, and some in America have almost five thousand of the turbines.

I have to think that at least part of the intent and effort of the two millionaires who put up the cross has been frustrated. The intent, I imagine, was at least partly to create a particular moment of contemplation of Christianity's central symbol and of what it means to those speeding toward it over the plains of the Texas Panhandle at seventy-five miles an hour.

Whether our thoughts were contemplative and religious, or whether, like me, you were merely marveling at the scale of the cross, it captured your thoughts for the time it took to reach it. It gestured upward from a terrain of flatness and clear views to a far horizon. Like Wallace Stevens's jar in Tennessee, the cross organized a natural landscape with the insertion of a man-made object and perhaps pointed thoughts toward a third realm beyond the physical.

But no more. What has happened here is partly dilution and partly distraction. Attention that once had been trained solely on the cross is now divided among a number of monumental shapes on the plain. An added distraction is the movement of the new shapes. An aesthetic question arises: is the cross more beautiful than the windmills, or vice versa? And beyond aesthetics is the question of meaning and meaningful activity: the cross does symbolic work while the wind turbines do real work. The many questions the turbines raise do not touch the metaphysical. Who put them up? Where does the electricity they generate get distributed, and how much juice is there? Does the wind always blow here? How long does it take for the electricity generated to pay off the cost of these huge machines? Wind turbines call us to the things of this world.

You've Just Finished your Free Sample

Enjoyed the preview?

Buy: <http://www.ebooks2go.com>