

17 Sept. 2015

11:30am – 12:30pm

PL 600F

The Outsider as Hero in the Novels of the Franco-Jewish Writer Albert Cohen

Dr Leonard Rosmarin
Professor Emeritus Brock University

Albert Cohen emigrated with his parents to France from the Greek island of Corfu in 1900 when he was five years old. He embraced his new country with an almost religious fervour. Then, on his tenth birthday, he experienced anti-Semitic hatred for the first time in his life.. From the anguish of a mere boy would one day emerge a fictional hero, Solal, first in the novel bearing his name, then in another, *Mangeclous*, finally in Cohen's masterpiece, *Belle du Seigneur*. My presentation will first show how the novelist turned his hero into a larger-than-life embodiment of two dominant tendencies that had been tearing apart the Jewish soul for centuries in the many countries where they were minorities: on the one hand, the yearning to belong, on the other, the striving to preserve a specific cultural and religious heritage. I will underscore the fact that Solal is also conflicted because he is propelled by the insatiable craving for power and amorous conquest so typical of Western civilization while experiencing a poignant nostalgia for the Jewish spirituality of his youth that represents the negation of such values. Then I will chart the oscillating trajectory of Solal through the novels in which he appears, leading him from a fascination with the paganism of Western civilization to the final acceptance, through tragedy, of his Jewish spiritual endowment. I will point out that in the process he exorcizes perhaps the four most powerful myths in Western culture, all dealing in one way or another with the quest for superhuman power: the myths of Theseus, Don Juan, Tristan and Faust.

Leonard Rosmarin has taught at universities in the U.S.A. (Yale, Wesleyan U), Canada (Brock University where he is Professor Emeritus), and France as a Visiting Professor at the School for Doctoral Studies at the Université de Perpignan. He has produced 12 books on French literature and Franco-Jewish literature including a translation into English of the work *Saint-Germain-des-Prés*. His latest work deals with the novels of the great Nobel Prize winner, Elie Wiesel. Dr Rosmarin has also published a novel, *Getting Enough* (2009). He has been a Pre-Performance Speaker at the Canadian Opera Company over the past five years . He has been decorated twice by the Government of France for outstanding service in the cause of French letters, and the late President of France, François Mitterrand, congratulated him for his book on the Franco-Jewish writer Albert Cohen

