L'amour, la mort, la mère

Works of Mourning and Labors of Love between Bella Cohen and Albert Cohen

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In loving memory of my mother,
Irmgard Leo-Grunwald ,
a woman of the word
who taught me the love of language.

Le livre de ma mère has been said to be the most beautiful love story in Albert Cohen's eccentric, excessive, exuberant work. First published under the title *Chant de mort* (*Song of Death*) as a four-part serial in the London-based, French-language journal *La France libre*, during the Second World War (1943–44), the book mourns the death of his mother in January 1943,[1] crying out raw emotions of pain and love in a tone pregnant with biblical language. Ten years later, in 1953, reworking his earlier journal fragments for a book publication that would appear with Gallimard in 1954, Albert Cohen literally dictated the text to his then-companion and later wife Bella Berkovich. According to his own words, he wanted her to meet his dead mother in the space of literature, so that they could "love her together."[2] In this sense, *Le livre de ma mère* is very much Bella's book: written for Bella, dictated to Bella, and typed by Bella. And it was Bella Cohen née Berkovich, his third wife, introduced to Albert as "une

1 For biographical details, see Médioni (200, 201, 209).

2 In *Magazine littéraire* (Apr. 1979), Cohen states: "Le livre de ma mère, je l'ai écrit pour ma femme qui n'a pas connu mon admirable mère à qui je voulais la faire connaître afin que nous l'aimions l'ensemble" (qtd. in Médioni 211).

jeune Anglaise […] bilingue" in the year of his mother's death (Médioni 194),[3] who would translate this most intimate book of his into English. By the time she translated her husband's *Livre de ma mère*, he was long dead. Albert Cohen passed away in 1981; his wife's translation of *Le livre de ma mère* appeared in England in 1997, under the title *Book of My Mother*.[4]

The mother of *Le livre de ma mère* is a figure of otherness. Her manners and her speech are marked by strange rituals and unfamiliar gestures, by a foreign accent and faulty language.[5] Even her kiss is foreign and unique, "un baiser étranger, un baiser à elle" (*Carnets 1978* 36). Bella Cohen translates her husband's book that is all about the mother's foreign French into eclectic English. For this reason, her *Book of My Mother* has been first ignored, and then harshly criticized.[6] In fact, it is not what one would commonly consider a "good" translation. It is clumsy, awkward, and unidiomatic; it contains many grammatical and orthographic errors and numerous mistakes. In particular, Bella Cohen's many Gallicisms sometimes make it difficult to grasp the content in English without comparing it to the original French.[7]

I will, in what follows, offer detailed, comparative close readings of a few passages in Albert Cohen's French *Le livre de ma mère* and Bella Cohen's English *Book of My Mother*. Rather than pointing out shortcomings and failures of the English translation, my aim is to consider the courageous, painful, loving act of translation as a work of mourning: a space of transmissions and transfers.

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3 Beila (Bella) would become Albert's third wife in February 1955 (aged thirty-five, he was sixty years old). In contrast to his two previous, Protestant wives, Bella is, according to Albert, "l'épouse juive parfaite" (Médioni 216).

4 The German translation was made—coincidence or not?—by Lilly von Sauter, in the year of my birth. See Cohen, *Das Buch meiner Mutter* (referenced with the abbreviation *BuM*). Even if it seems so, "Sauter" is not, strictly speaking, "my" name, but my husband's; it is neither my maiden name, the name of my father (Grunwald), nor the name of my deceased mother (Leo). Incidentally, *leo*, the lioness, is a leitmotif associated with the mother in Cohen's *Livre de ma mère*: "elle me bénissait […] presque animalement, avec une attention de lionne…" (22).

5 See Sauter (165–79, esp. 173–78).

6 See, for instance, Langille (191–93).

7 For a detailed (even if petty) list of Gallicisms in Bella Cohen's *Book of My Mother*, see Langille (193).

"Accent oriental": Translation and (M)Othering

French is the language that Albert Cohen uses as his mother tongue, even though it never was his mother's mother tongue. Throughout her life, his mother, "the eternal foreigner" (*Book of My Mother* 70), spoke (as the narrator says in Bella's incorrect English) "incorrect French" (73).[8] Again and again, the narrator emphasizes his mother's strong "foreign accent" (56)—a great source of embarrassment for the young man who wants to belong to the "vile tribe of the well-bred" (72), "cette sale bande de bien elevés" (*Livre de ma mère* 83). The mother admires her son's "fables" (*BM* 70), as she calls his published work in French, but claims that she herself is unable to find "des mots profonds" (71) in French. The narrator relates how his mother writes a few pages of a book of his "at [his] dictation" ("sous ma dictée") that come out "with so many spelling mistakes and so much goodwill" (*BM* 86; *LM* 97–98). French is the language that mother and son speak throughout the narrative, but it is never really a language that mother and son share.[9]

For the narrator, his mother's French is "sententious," and her "awkward, poetic" gestures "hailed from our Orient" (*BM* 76). The cakes she baked for him are "poèmes d'amour" (*LM* 80), but he leaves her waiting and sewing all alone in his apartment while he himself goes from "grand reception[s]" to "smart dinners" (*BM* 72), attempting to hide his mother, her foreign accent, her "oriental" gestures from his acquaintances. And only belatedly, only after her death, does his embarrassment at her foreignness end. Now he proudly presents his deceased mother to the crowd, albeit transformed into a literary figure: "Ma bien-aimée, je te présente à tous maintenant, fier de toi, fier de ton accent oriental, fier de tes fautes de français [...]" (*LM* 83).

Bella Cohen translates: "My darling, I am introducing you to everyone now, proud of you, proud of your accent, proud of your incorrect French [...]" (*BM*, 73). Tellingly, her English translation omits the very word that is at the heart of

8 Quotes from Bella Cohen's translation are taken from Cohen, *Book of My Mother*, and will be referenced with the abbreviation *BM* and page numbers. The French version is quoted according to Cohen, *Le livre de ma mère*, and will be referenced with the abbreviation *LM* and page numbers.

9 With my mother, who was a translator and author, I shared a precarious home in (foreign) language(s). In my early childhood, she read her translations of Japanese children's books to me; we also shared a lifelong at-homeness in French, and later, I learned Hebrew together with my mother.

the mother-son relation: "oriental."[10] In Albert Cohen's French version, the narrator declares himself proud of her "accent *oriental*" (my emphasis), while the narrator in the English version is simply "proud of her accent." In the French version of *Le livre de ma mère*, the mother is the embodiment of "the Orient." Observing her arrive on a train from Marseille to Geneva, the narrator beholds his mother as "[…] Jérusalem vivante. Elle est déguisée en dame convenable d'Occident mais c'est d'un antique Chanaan qu'elle arrive et elle ne le sait pas" (*LM* 79).[11] As the embodiment of a long-gone, ancient, "oriental" past, even her own origin is marked by a permanent crossing between different times and different worlds: a daughter of Venetian Jewish immigrants to Corfu, Louise Judith Coen née Ferro becomes a Greek Jewish immigrant to France.[12] Before migrating to Marseille in 1900, the Coen family lived in the Jewish ghetto of the island of Corfu, at the "oriental" margins of Western Europe.[13] Albert Cohen was born

10 I am of course aware of the offensiveness of the term "oriental," its colonial, othering, racializing, and exoticizing undertones, and its deeply problematic history, especially when relating the term "oriental" to a person's Jewishness. For a cultural history of "the Jew in the history of Orientalism" (2) that also engages with prominent readings such as Edward Said's, Susannah Heschel's, and Jonathan Boyarin's and "questions the way we understand the construction of otherness, particularly as this pertains to Jews" (9), see Kalman (3–10). In my reading, I am using the term "oriental" merely as a quotation from Cohen's work; whenever it is used, it appears in quotation marks. It nevertheless features very prominently in my analysis, because I am focusing on a mother-son(-wife) relationship in which the term "oriental" is central. Applying it to the narrator, the mother, and the relationship itself in *Le livre de ma mère*, Cohen uses it in a self-conscious and self-ironic gesture—as he does in other works of his. Prominently using this term and all the colonial, othering, racializing stereotypes associated with it—especially in regard to the Sephardic Jewish Cephalonian relatives, "les Valeureux," who appear frequently in most of his other novels—, Cohen exposes the othering, racializing, anti-semitic viewpoint associated with it.

11 "[…] —living Jerusalem! She is disguised as a respectable lady of the West, but she hails from Canaan of ancient days and she does not know it" (*BM* 70).

12 For a detailed family history of the Coen family in Corfu, see Médioni (25–29).

13 The Jewish history of Corfu is long and turbulent. Geographically located between East and West, the island of Corfu was, in the course of history, conquered or occupied by the Byzantine Kingdom, Sicily, Venice, Anjou, Naples, France, and England, and finally (re-)annexed to Greece. The Jewish population consisted mostly of refugees from Spain and Portugal, Italy, and mainland Greece, and it was divided into two strictly distinct Jewish communities on the island, Greek Romaniote and Italian. Albert Cohen's Corfu-born parents represent those two communities: his mother, Louise Judith Coen née Ferro, originated from an Italian-speaking family; his father, Marco Coen, from a Romaniote, Greek-speaking background. Corfu had a substantial and thriving Jewish

on the island of Corfu in 1895 as Alberto Abraham Caliman Coen, and would return only once to Corfu, in the summer of 1908, after his bar mitzvah (Médioni 69–72). Even if it was a short stay of only two weeks, Corfu plays a decisive role in all his novels' imagery. Quite a number of his novel chapters are set entirely in "Céphalonie" (Corfu), and many chapters set in Western Europe feature "les Valeureux," Solal's Cephalonian relatives.[14] In *Le livre de ma mère*, the mother's stories from "the ghetto where I was born" (*BM* 83) are the greatest source of comfort and imagination for the narrator.[15] It is only in his student years in Geneva that Alberto Abraham Caliman Coen would change his name to Albert Cohen.[16] In 1919, he obtained Swiss citizenship in exchange for his Ottoman passport.

Within the narrative, we never hear or read the actual common (m)other tongue[17] of mother and son. French is the language that mother and son use throughout the narrative, but it is actually not the language they speak. We read their dialogues in translation. The actual common mother tongue of mother and son—an age-old dialect, imported by Venetian Jews to Corfu, which then migrated with the Cohen family to 20th century France—is secretly, silently, mournfully haunting the novel's French. This (m)other tongue remains unspoken, hidden, secret, private. And it is only after his mother's death that the narrator begins speaking "the Venetian dialect of the Jews of Corfu, which I sometimes used to speak with my mother" (*BM* 71), again—yet he only ever uses

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population in the mid-nineteenth century. In an outburst of considerable hostility, a dramatic pogrom arose in 1891, not long before Albert Cohen's birth in 1895, which led many Jewish families (among them the Cohens) to migrate in the early-twentieth century. The remaining Jewish population was almost entirely deported and murdered by the Nazis in 1944. See Médioni (29–31), as well as "Corfu, Greece."

14 For details, see Zard (16–17).

15 "Parfois, comme je voudrais returner dans ce ghetto, y vivre entouré de rabbins, […] y vivre cette vie aimante, passionnée, ergoteuse, un peu […] folle" (*LM* 93).

16 See Médioni (27–28).

17 On the otherness inherent in any tongue, even or especially those that are supposedly one's mother tongue, see Prade (2–4; 5–7). Juliane Prade points out that a "mother tongue always remains an 'other' tongue, comprising forms other than the familiar ones" (2); she emphasizes the "irreducible need to differentiate between the mother tongue and other tongues" (3–4), remarks that "every language is linked to other tongues" (5), and raises awareness of the fact that a "language only becomes a mother tongue by way of altering it, by creating new forms, by making it an 'other' tongue" (6). The irreducible otherness of the so-called mother tongue is embodied in the figure of the mother in Cohen's work, who is a figure of (not least linguistic) "otherness."

it "in secret," and only with his cat, "mon ersatz de mère" (*LM* 81). This is, as the narrator states, "the only fake happiness left to me" (*BM* 71), "le seul faux bonheur qui me reste" (*LM* 81). The "original" language of mother and son is a dialect marked by a threefold difference: "Venetian" in then-Greek Corfu, "Jewish" among the Orthodox in Corfu, the Catholics in Marseille, and the Protestants in Geneva, and "from Corfu" in France, Switzerland, and England. Mother and son share a language without a home, a non-original language, a language of loss, an un-homely language of lost origins, an "accent oriental".

Bella Cohen's *Book of My Mother* omits or suppresses references to the "oriental" aspect of otherness that is so pronounced in the French version. During one of his mother's visits to Geneva, the narrator observes:

> Je me faisais tout oriental avec elle. Il nous est même peut-être arrivé de manger subrepticement des pistaches salées dans la rue, comme deux bons frangins méditerranéens qui n'avaient pas besoin, pour s'aimer, d'avoir une conversation élevée […]. (*LM* 69)

Bella Cohen's English version renders this passage as:

> I would become quite Balkan when I was with her. We may even have eaten salted pistachio nuts surreptitiously in the street, like a couple of cronies from the Mediterranean whose affection did not need high-minded talk […]. (*BM* 61)

In the French version, the narrator is willfully *making* himself oriental with his mother: "je me faisais tout oriental." In the English version, however, the narrator is not "oriental," but rather "Balkan,"[18] and the agency of this willful act of making himself entirely oriental is not his own: the speaking self "would" passively "become Balkan" in the company of his mother, rather than willfully turning *himself* oriental ("je *me* faisais…"). It also seems that there is a bit of a reservation towards "becoming Balkan" in Bella Cohen's English version: the narrator would only turn "*quite* Balkan," whereas in the French version, he is making himself "*tout* oriental," *entirely* "oriental." Slowly walking the streets of Geneva with his aging mother, Albert Cohen's French-speaking narrator transforms his entire being into his Mediterranean, "oriental" other.

18 This omission of the very word "oriental" can be observed throughout Bella Cohen's *Book of My Mother*. For instance, "splendeurs orientales" (*LM* 46) becomes "Eastern wonders" (*BM* 40).

In this "oriental" otherness, love is not dependent on eloquence: "pas besoin, pour s'aimer, d'avoir une conversation élevée." This almost sentence-like wisdom strongly opposes mutual love ("s'aimer") with highbrow conversation, reinforced by the rhyme *s'aimer – élevée*. Silent, non-intellectual, "oriental" love reigns over elevated, cultured, "occidental" eloquence.[19] In the French version, the verb *s'aimer* is reflexive, a form which grammatically constitutes a twofold pair that is mutually loving each other. Tellingly, Bella Cohen's English version omits the reflexive verb form as well as the very word "love," and replaces it with "affection." The translation inserts distance into the closeness of the dyadic mother-son couple. Or is their "oriental" love dyad so "other" that the translator-wife seems unable or unwilling to enter that space of the (m)other?

Is the translator inscribing herself in this intimate scene between mother and son? Her name, Bella, begins with a B, and the maiden name she still had when Albert Cohen dictated *Le livre de ma mère* to her is Berkovich. With "*b*ecoming *B*alkan" (my emphasis) instead of "se faire oriental," the translator is inscribing her own initials—a double B—into the translation. Moreover, Bella Cohen's translation lends her narrator *another* otherness—not an "oriental" one, but a "Balkan" one. Is it possibly her own? Bella's parents were Jewish migrants from Romania to England. Growing up, Bella Berkovich herself must

19 In an earlier episode, the narrator contrasts his mother's "amour biblique" with his own "passions occidentales" (*LM* 19; translated as "Western passions" by Bella Cohen; *BM* 15). The stark contrast between the silent, "oriental," motherly love and the narrator's eloquent, "occidental," erotic passion is striking when comparing *Le livre de ma mère* to Albert Cohen's later masterpiece, the novel *Belle du Seigneur*. The sheer length of *Belle du Seigneur* stems from the fact that the passionate adulterous love affair between Solal des Solal, the "oriental" Jew, and Ariane d'Auble, the "occidental" Protestant, is constantly talked through: temptation, seduction, and consummation of love are expressed in beautiful, elegant, excessive, well-phrased dialogues. In fact, the protagonists' love slowly withers as soon as they do not find a subject for *conversations élévées* anymore: Solal prolongs his kisses "parce qu'il ne trouvait rien à lui dire" (Cohen, *Belle du Seigneur* 618), he pretends to sleep "pour n'avoir plus besoin de poésie" (620), and he desperately tries to find subjects for conversation: "Eh bien, parler. Mai de quoi? Lui dire qu'il l'aimait ne lui apprendrait rien de nouveau. D'ailleurs, il le lui avait dit trois fois tout à l'heure, une fois avant le coït, une fois pendant, une fois après. Elle était au courant" (622). Slowly the lovers fall silent for lack of conversation topics, "toujours en silence, car il ne trouvait pas grand-chose à lui dire" (623), until their common suicide, and their joint silence in death, seems to be the only option to save their passionate love.

have felt "quite Balkan" in the London area. Whose voice is speaking in the translation?

Whose voice is speaking, indeed? The mother's displaced mother tongue, her "accent oriental" seems to be the secret, hidden, slightly shameful origin of the narrator's beautiful, powerful, generous French. In *Le livre de ma mère*, the narrator even imitates her accent to have a conversation with his dead mother that would turn into a book, the book of his mother: "Assis devant cette table, je fais la conversation avec elle […]. Mais ce n'est que moi qui radote, imitant son accent" (*LM* 162).[20] Is the entire book *Le livre de ma mère* indeed imitating the mother's accent?[21]

Speaking French with an "accent oriental," the narrator's mother might have pronounced *la mère* ("mother"), *l'amour* ("love"), and *la mort* ("death") exactly the same way, or at least very similarly. There is an episode in the famous *Derrida* film, by Amy Kofman and Kirby Dick, in which the director asks Jacques Derrida if he has anything to say about love (*l'amour*). Tellingly, Derrida "mishears" her at first, and asks back: *la mort* (instead of *l'amour*)?[22] *La mère, l'amour, la mort* are uncannily similar, if one is willing to listen to their reverberations in a foreign language, in an "accent oriental," perhaps. Is it in this French with an "accent oriental," in which *l'amour*, *la mort*, and *la mère* are almost indistinguishable, that the narrator chooses to write his book of the mother—*sa livre de la mère, sa livre de la mort, sa livre de l'amour*?

Albert Cohen's "song of death," his *chant de mort* (the original title of *Le livre de ma mère*) is composed around two *refrains* that painfully echo throughout the narrative: "Ma mère est morte, morte, morte, ma mère morte est morte, morte" (*LM* 174) and "Amour de ma mère, à nul autre pareil" (*LM* 88, 89, 90, 93, 94, 96, 98, 103).[23] Grave poems in and of themselves, those two leitmotifs gracefully and heartbreakingly interweave *la mère*, *l'amour*, and *la mort*. At the end of a dense and beautiful episode that could be called a hymn to motherhood, the narrator

20 Bella Cohen translates: "Seated at the table, I converse with her […]. But it is only me rambling on, imitating her accent" (*BM* 150).

21 The following section follows and at times quotes my earlier reading in Sauter (168); however, it is substantially revised here.

22 See Ben-Naftali (221–37). In fact, *la mort* and *l'amour* have an uncanny kinship in Derrida's philosophy. It is, for instance, not surprising that he devoted an aphoristic commentary to Shakespeare's tragedy of the "star-cross'd lovers," *Romeo and Juliet* (see Derrida, "Aphorism Countertime" 414–33).

23 "My mother is dead, dead, dead. My dead mother is dead, dead" (*BM* 161); "My mother's incomparable love" (*BM* 80, 81, 83, 84, 85, 86, 90, 92).

comes to a halt at the culminating point, a dream-like dialogue between the deceased mother and her living son, in a dream world, a dream mode, in which they would still call each other by name:

> Mon fils, se serait-elle dit avec foi. Eh bien, moi, je t'envoie, les yeux ennoblis par toi, je t'envoie à travers les espaces et les silences, ce même acte de foi, et je te dis gravement: ma Maman. (*LM* 105–06)

> "My son," she would have said trustingly to herself. And so, lifting up my eyes, which bear the noble mark of your goodness, and cutting through the immensity of space and silence, I reciprocate that act of faith, and I say to you gravely, "Maman." (*BM* 92) [24]

The English translation chooses to omit or suppress the possessive pronoun "*ma* maman" in "I say to you gravely, 'Maman.'" The translator distances herself, again, from the closeness between mother and son: "Maman" in the English translation is not "*ma* maman," as in the French version. *His* mother is not *my* mother, the "maman" evoked here is not *her* "maman." In fact, the translation seems to want to bury the mother anew. The English word "grave" in the adverb "gravely" literally points to the grave, to death. This word spoken gravely, with gravity, this grave word, "Maman," could be the inscription on the mother's tombstone. "Maman," a word coming from the first stages of language acquisition, is spoken with the gravity of the grave. "Ma maman": this grave babble, gravest of all acts of babbling, joyful yet painful syllables. First words, and last words: "Ma maman." "Ma maman" reposes, gravely, in her grave.

There is a substantial difference between the adverb "gravement," gravely, and the childish expression, almost indistinguishable from a baby's playful babble, that this gravity is ascribed to: "ma maman." The childish expression "ma maman" is the most eloquent, the gravest, in fact, the only possible utterance that an eminent, aging poet in 1953 can always and only and still find to address his deceased mother, many years after her death. Like a small child, the narrator pronounces what could be understood as being merely a string of resounding syllables: *mamaman*. In the instance of this repetition, their

24 Lilly von Sauter translates into German: "Mein Sohn, hätte sie voller Vertrauen gesagt. Die Augen von dir geadelt, sende ich nun durch Raum und Schweigen das gleiche Glaubensbekenntnis zu dir und sage in tiefem Ernst: meine Mama" (*BuM* 74). "Meine Mama" are the last words I remember myself (as an adult woman, a mother to two daughters of my own) uttering to my dying mother, whom I also used to call *maman*.

semantic quality becomes doubtful—are those two words, *ma maman*? One word, *mamaman*? Any word or words at all? Is it babble? Does it have meaning? Does it matter if it does or does not?

Is the narrator imagining going back to what is lost, the pre-linguistic babble of a child? Is this an attempt at re-finding his original mother tongue, in those grave words, buried under his powerful French? The mother tongue that was there before there was meaning? Possibly the first meaning-filled, meaningful words he ever uttered? But: Did he even ever say those words in French? After all, Albert Cohen did not live in France, but on the island of Corfu when he was a little child first learning to speak. And he certainly did not speak French, but "the Venetian dialect of the Jews of Corfu" (*BM* 71) with his mother. Did he ever call his mother "ma Maman" at all?

Labor of Love: Translation and Haunting

The blurb of Bella Cohen's translation of her late husband's *Livre de ma mère* states: "Her translation of *Book of My Mother* […] was a labor of love." "Labor" is a metaphor of childbirth, *Geburtsarbeit*, a metaphor that connects the most intimate love and the most intense pain, and a metaphor by which her, Bella Cohen's, motherhood claims the translated text as her own. Within the narrative, the narrator identifies the mother entirely with her motherhood. For him, the mother is literally nothing but a mother. Even her selfhood is denied for the sake of her motherhood—or rather, for the sake of her son: "Ma mère n'avait pas de moi, mais un fils" (*LM* 101); "My mother had no *me*: she had a son" (*BM* 89). Emphasizing the "*me*" in the English translation by setting it in italics, the speaking I of the translator, who imagines birthing the work, points to herself while denying the self on a semantic level. In other words, the "*me*" that is denied within the text ("my mother had no *me*") is simultaneously emphasized in the translation, by setting it in italics.

Is it the abusive conception of self-less motherhood ("no *me*") that the translator is claiming for herself by speaking of a "labor of love"? In real life, Bella Cohen née Berkovich never was a mother, she never had a child. But she was extremely devoted to her husband and his work, even beyond his death, pouring herself entirely into it, to the point of physical and emotional exhaustion.[25]

25 Apparently, an extreme form of devotion and submission was what Cohen tyrannically expected of all women in his life—mother, lovers, and wives. In a letter, Albert Cohen's

In the blurb, it is the translator who depicts herself as painfully laboring towards, and possibly eventually birthing, the translated text.

Bella Cohen's "labor of love" implies the agony of birth pangs. The metaphor of translation as labor is already used in Walter Benjamin's 1923 text, "The Task of the Translator." According to Benjamin, translation is "charged" with "the special mission of watching over the maturing process [Nachreife] of the foreign word and the birth pangs [Wehen] of its own [des eigenen]" (256).[26] At the moment of translation, the "foreign word" of the original is "still there"—it matures, grows, flourishes—, while "its own" word already announces itself painfully. Yet in translation, the "own" word is still in the process of being born. Translation is "in labor," but the birth of "its own word" has not taken place yet, it is still—and probably always—laboring towards the birth of "its own word." In "Conclusions," his reading of Walter Benjamin's "Task of the Translator," Paul de Man famously translates Benjamin's metaphor of "birth pangs" or labor pain into "death pangs," "and the stress," for him, "is perhaps more on death than on life" (25). De Man then goes on to say: "The process of translation, if we can call it a process, is one of change and of motion that has the appearance of life, but of life as an afterlife, because translation also reveals the death of the original" (25). In de Man's reading, translation is connected to a certain belatedness. In the moment of translation, the original is dead, or at least, "it is disarticulated in a way which imposes upon us a particular alienation, a particular suffering" (25).

There is indeed a particular disarticulation at work in *The Book of My Mother*, which sounds so strangely awkward in English. And, in fact, judging from the harsh resentment against Bella Cohen's translation, this "disarticulation" of a language that one might conceive as one's own also can bring about a certain

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second wife Marianne would justify their divorce (pronounced in October 1947) in quite drastic terms: "[…] ce n'est qu'au prix d'une soumission, d'un écrasement total qu'on peut être heureux avec lui. […] On n'a aucun droit auprès de lui à être un être humain" (qtd. in Médioni 197). This abusive, dictatorial, excessive, tyrannical demand of total devotion casts a dark shadow on Cohen's entire work, which revolves around, craves, demands, and praises love in the most lyrical, hymnic, biblical tone.

26 The German original reads: "[…] auf jene Nachreife des fremden Wortes, auf die Wehen des eigenen zu merken" (Benjamin, "Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers" 13). Harry Zohn's English translation, quoted above, is problematic in so far as he suppresses the foreignness, rendering "foreign words" as "original language"; my own paraphrase, quoted above, re-inserts the "foreign words." The German "Wehen," translated as "birth pangs" by Zohn, could also be rendered as "labor pain."

"suffering" (to paraphrase de Man again). Readers and critics have indeed "suffered" from Bella's English. One reviewer, in fact, articulates that his—very detailed and harsh—criticism is quite painful for himself: "It is not pleasant to criticize the work of a widow of a favourite author […]. It is even more difficult to give only mitigated praise when the work in question is so obviously a labour of love" (Langille 193).

A "labor of love"? Bella Cohen, the translator of *Book of My Mother*, played a decisive role not only as the one laboring towards, and eventually possibly birthing the translation, but also as the one conceiving *Le livre de ma mère*. In fact, Bella Berkovich first served as his secretary before becoming Albert Cohen's lover, and then his wife. Their first encounter literally took place in the space of dictation—he dictated *Le livre de ma mère* to her. In fact, Albert Cohen dictated all his works, many of them several times, mostly to his wives or lovers (Médioni 159). A dictator in love relationships, the act of dictating his literary creations has a strongly erotic component for Albert Cohen. In his autofictional journal *Carnets 1978*, Cohen recalls dictating his first novel to "une femme aimée": "Tous les soirs, je lui dictais des pages […]. C'était un don à l'aimée. Certains offrent des fleurs. Moi, je lui offrais un livre […]. La bien-aimée se rejouissait du don dicté de chaque soir et elle m'en chérissait" (30–31) .[27] In the case of *Le livre de ma mère*, the eroticized ritual of lengthy dictation sessions, "jouissif à l'extrême" (Médioni 164–65), is a scene of "haunted writing."[28] The mother's specter is always there as Albert Cohen dictates *Le livre de ma mère* to Bella Berkovich. It is in the haunted, eroticized space of dictations that their love affair begins. The pain of the mother's death, the pleasure of writing, and

27 Cohen also calls his beloved "mère de mon premier roman," mother of my first novel, and continues in an almost caressing tone: "Notre enfant, nous l'avons fait ensemble […]." (*Carnets 1978* 30, 31). Begetting the text, conceiving a text, and birthing a text are eroticized metaphors of motherhood that are brought up in this equally eroticized phantasy of dictation.

28 On the notion of "haunted writing," see Ronell (xviii). In her book, Ronell applies the "ethics of haunting" that she is sketching out to the relation between Goethe and Eckermann, which is also defined by dictation: "Eckermann, who wrote under dictation, completed Goethe's oeuvre. The completion of Goethe however implies the sacrifice of another: the disaster of Eckermann" (xxvii). Her psychoanalytically informed reading of Goethe's writings in light of Eckermann's effacement is an uncanny gesture in itself. Albert Cohen's demand for an "écrasement total" (see n25 above) on the part of his wives or lovers, who are also the recipients of his dictations, is, in that sense, reminiscent of the Goethe/Eckermann relationship described by Ronell in terms of disaster and catastrophe.

the passion of the erotic merge in the haunted—and strangely oedipal—scene of dictation, this dictatorial scene.

Albert Cohen's act of dictation, haunted by the mother's specter, births *Le livre de ma mère* (and a love affair that would become a marriage) while mourning the death of his mother. Pain and pleasure, death and birth, the work of mourning and the work of creation, merge. The very first paragraph of *Le livre de ma mère* and *Book of my Mother* reads, in French and English respectively:

> Chaque homme est seul et tous se fichent de tous et nos douleurs sont une île déserte. Ce n'est pas une raison pour ne pas se consoler, ce soir, dans les bruits finissants de la rue, se consoler, ce soir, avec des mots. (*LM* 9)

> Every man is alone and no one cares a rap for anyone and our sorrows are a desert island. Yet why should I not seek comfort tonight as the sounds of the streets fade away, seek comfort tonight in words? (*BM* 3)

It seems that these opening lines of Albert Cohen's book of mourning defy the famous opening lines of John Donne's "Meditation XVII": "No man is an *Iland* intire of it self; euery man is a piece of the *Continent*, a part of the *maine*…" (394). In Cohen's conception, being alone is an essential part of the human condition ("Chaque homme est seul"), and it is pain—possibly conceived as too personal and too subjective to share—that is "une île déserte," "a desert island," isolating human beings from each other.[29] In which way are words a consolation ("se consoler") or a comfort ("seek comfort")? The answer differs considerably in the French and English versions.

Albert Cohen's French narrator does not use any personal pronouns. The only exception is a collective *nous* in "nos douleurs" ("our sorrows"), otherwise the narrator seems very careful to avoid saying "I." Impersonal, passive formulations are used instead: "Ce n'est pas une raison pour ne pas se consoler, ce soir, […]" The homophony of the reflexive pronoun "se" and the demonstrative pronoun "ce," as well as the strong pattern of hissing S-sounds (*s*eul, *s*ont, *ce*, *se*,

29 On the notion of the linguistic unsharability of pain, see Scarry (esp. 4: pain "does not simply resist language but actively destroys it," pain "ensures this unsharability through its resistance to language"); for a critique of Scarry, see Ferber (8–14). Rather than focusing on its isolating moments, Ferber points out the aspect of community in experiencing pain: for her, all human beings "share […] vulnerability to pain, regardless of linguistic or cultural differences," and hence, "it has an equal power to completely open us up to the possibility of sharing […]" (13).

soir, finissants, consoler), add to the impression that this soundscape is producing many words and phrases, only to arrive at the same sound patterns—patterns that avoid voicing personal pain. In Cohen's voicing of words, they are a material, used with skill, and it is their very beauty and harmony that might be a "consolation": the pain of death turns into the pleasure of artistic, literary creation.

Bella Cohen's translation, in contrast, does inscribe a personal speaker, a self, an "I" from the very beginning. And, in contrast to the French, the I in the English version asks a question: "Yet why should *I* not seek comfort tonight […]?," thus implying a "you" that this question is directed at: a dialogic situation. The English version opens a conversation, a dialogue, whereas the impersonal, sentence-like formulations of the French original ("ce n'est pas une raison…") avoid one. Yet this personal, dialogic self stands in contrast to the sentence-like, impersonal opening formula, "Every man is alone […]." The speaking voice is not "every man," it is a distinguishable, a personal self, an "I" that voices her pain. It seems as if Bella Cohen, the translator who is the author's widow as well as the recipient of his first dictations, is insisting on her right to voice her own sorrow and pain, and to find consolation in translating the very book of his that her husband loved most: Why should *I*, Bella Cohen, not seek comfort in (translating) his, Albert's, words? After all, she is reviving his voice, long silenced by death, with her translation. The pain of death turns into the pleasure of creation—but that creation speaks in the voice of the dead.

For Albert Cohen, it is the physical aspect of the activity of writing that turns pain into pleasure and suffering into beauty. In that sense, there is joy and jouissance in writing, even if it is writing in pain, and hence, there is a meaning behind suffering: it can be turned into something beautiful.[30] In the act of writing, "douleur" is turned into "jouissance." Hubert Nyssen, an eminent French editor and founder of Actes Sud, who published his *Lectures d'Albert Cohen* with Actes Sud in 1987, recalls a conversation he had with Cohen after *Le livre de ma mère* was published, well-received, and highly praised: "Et il [Albert Cohen] me disait: 'Hubert, quelle jouissance j'ai eu d'écrire sur la mort de ma mère avec ma belle plume en or!'" (Médioni 210). It is the beauty of the physical object, the golden fountain pen, that makes the act of writing about his

30 Myriam Champigny-Cohen, Albert Cohen's daughter, stated in an interview that her father saw the power of turning pain into pleasure as the heart of artistic creation: "il fallait souffrir utile ou aimer utile grâce à la création artistique. La souffrance, autrement, elle est insupportable" (qtd. in Médioni 209–10).

mother's death pleasurable—even to the point of erotic pleasure ("jouissance"). And it is this very fountain pen—golden, eroticized, phallic—that the narrator addresses lovingly on the very first pages of *Le livre de ma mère*, almost caressing it with words as he is touching it with his writing hand, holding it gently:

> Somptueuse, toi, ma plume d'or, va sur la feuille, va au hasard tandis que j'ai quelque jeunesse […]. Va, je t'aime, ma seule consolation, va sur les pages où tristement je me complais et dont le strabisme morosement me délecte. Oui, les mots, ma patrie, les mots, ça console et ça venge. Mais ils ne me rendront pas ma mère. Si remplis de sanguine passé battant aux tempes et tout odorant qu'ils puissent être, les mots que j'écris ne me rendront pas ma mère morte. Sujet interdit dans la nuit. Arrière, image de ma mère vivante lorsque je la vis pour la dernière fois en France, arrière, maternel fantôme. (*LM* 10)

> Sumptuous, O my golden pen, roam over the page, roam at random while I yet have some youth […]. Roam on, pen, I love you, my sole consolation; roam through the pages which give me dismal delight and in whose squinting eye I gloomily revel. Yes, words are my homeland, words console and avenge. But words will not bring back my mother. Brimful though they be of the vibrant past drumming at my temples and distilling its fragrance, the words I write will not bring back my dead mother. That subject is banned in the night. Begone, vision of my mother living when I saw her for the last time in France. Begone, maternal wraith. (*BM* 8)

The golden, eroticized, phallic fountain pen, a source of pleasure, jouissance, and even love ("je t'aime"), paradoxically conjures up visions and produces specters and nightmares in this eroticized scene of writing. In the French version, the narrator weaves a dense carpet of motherly M-sounds around the apparition of his mother, the "maternal"—or, perhaps, motherly—"wraith," which is haunting the narrative: *m*ais, *m*e, *m*a, *m*ère. He wraps the words "mère" in a fabric of words that also contains the possessive pronoun "ma," and the reflexive pronoun "me"—words connected to a speaking "I," a personal self who is voicing his pain and claiming the right to speak of "*my* mother," "*ma* mère." In the repeated M-sounds, "*m*a *m*ère *m*orte" appears (all emphases mine).

In the English version, the soundscape is completely different, and the "motherly wraith" turns into another ghost, by insisting on B-sounds: "*B*ut words will not *b*ring *b*ack my mother" (my emphasis). Bella Cohen omits the

reflexive pronoun ("ils ne *me* rendront pas ma mère") as if she would say: this mother of *his* cannot be brought back to *me*. Instead, her sentence (again) insists on B-sounds: *b*ut, *b*ring, *b*ack, *b*rimful, *b*egone. Is it a coincidence? Is Bella Berkovich (again) inscribing her own initials into this intimate scene of mourning that gives rise to an actual apparition of the mother's ghost? In other words, is Bella's name—Bella's maiden name: Bella Berkovich, the recipient of Albert Cohen's dictations—haunting the *Book of My Mother*? Is it the ghost of the translator-wife rather than that of the mother that haunts the pages of the English translation?

Translation could indeed be read as a haunted space, and the language of translation could be read as a ghostly, spectral language. This has to do with its essential belatedness. Every translation must come after the "original." For Benjamin, translation therefore is "a continued life," an "afterlife" ("Task of the Translator" 254). Like a revenant, translation continues the life of the original beyond death. However, for Benjamin, translation is entangled not only with the past, but also with the future: it is to-come, or in-coming, *à-venir*, it anticipates a future insofar as it is an "anticipative, intimating realization" of the expression of "the innermost relationship of languages" (255). In that sense, translation has a double commitment to both the future and the past. Intertwining different layers of time, in translation the simultaneity of past (in the afterlife or survival of the original) and future (in the directedness of the translation) is enacted. In that sense, translation suspends temporal linearity and operates in an in-between time.

The in-between time of translation is the uncanny time of ghosts, revenants, who belong to past and future simultaneously. Having lived already, ghosts are at the same time ahead of presence and lagging behind; they are *re-venants*, "again-comers." In *Specters of Marx*, Derrida speaks of the "deferred time" of ghosts, and states:

> If there is something like spectrality, there are reasons to doubt this reassuring order of presents, and, especially, the border between the present, the actual or present reality of the present, and everything that can be opposed to it: absence, non-presence, non-effectivity, inactuality, virtuality […] (39).

The "border" between past, present, and future, and between "reality" and non-reality becomes doubtful once the ghost enters the stage—as he does, famously, in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, another work of mourning and melancholy. Similarly, in the act of translating, a past (the original) points to what

is to come (the translation), yet it merges those two times without establishing a clear-cut "reality" of its own. On the contrary: Walter Benjamin calls translation "only a somewhat provisional way" of coming to terms with "the foreignness of languages" ("Task of the Translator" 257), and Derrida speaks of "a non-present present" of ghosts (*Specters of Marx* 6).

In this sense, every translation is the revenant of the original, for it materializes—without ever being able to be present—a disembodied original that no longer exists (it is in this sense that Derrida speaks of the "non-presence" of spectral apparitions). The form of translation is a ghostly visitation of language. Avital Ronell remarks that "hauntedness allows for visitations without making itself at home" (xviii). Similarly, a translation is a form of un-homely (an uncanny "translation" of the German *unheimlich*) transience: it is never a "final rather than temporary and provisional solution" (Benjamin, "Task of the Translator" 257). The complex temporal structure of translation, its transience and belatedness, is a ghostly time which is "out of joint," as Hamlet famously has it in a ghostly play of Shakespeare's.[31] Translation, then, could be seen as haunted language. It opens time and inscribes an uncanny, spectral other, the revenant of a foreign text, into itself.

Bella Cohen's *Book of My Mother* is a piece of haunted writing: "Haunted writing writes on this limit, which is that of our time" (Ronell xviii). In fact, Bella Cohen only published her translation long after her husband's death, about forty years after the "original." Is her translation a work of mourning? And the belatedness a sort of symptom? Belatedness is not only an essential temporal quality of translation, but also the most decisive narrative feature of *Le livre de ma mère.* Its narrative situation is belated because death has silenced all protagonists (including the narrator). Throughout the narrative, again and again, the narrator reiterates that it is too late to express his regrets, make up for past hurts, or continue an interrupted conversation. This gives way to what one could call the "spectrality" of the narrative situation.

Similarly, on the protagonist level, it is undecidable whether both the narrator and his mother dwell in the realm of the living or the dead—"Moi, un peu mort parmi les vivants, toi, un peu vivante parmi les morts" (*LM* 32); "I am part dead among the living, you are part alive among the dead" (*BM* 27)—, just as "one does not know if it is living or if it is dead" in the case of ghosts and specters (Derrida, *Specters of Marx* 6). In the translation, even the narrator is dead: in

31 For a detailed reading focusing on the difficulty of translating the expression "out of joint" in *Hamlet*, see Derrida (*Specters of Marx* 19–29).

Bella Cohen's *Book of My Mother*, everyone speaking in the book—apart from the translator—is long dead, and their speech is gone (and from our vantage point, even the translator's voice has been silenced by death).[32] All voices—apart from the translator's at the time of translation—are voices from the grave. And in this sense, birth pangs might indeed be death pangs, and the "labor of love" might never lead to motherhood, but remain in labor, painfully and permanently.

Sink, Sank, Sonk: Translation and Song

In a decisive scene of *Le livre de ma mère*, the narrator looks in a mirror and sees himself reflected not as himself, but as a reflection of his mother:[33]

> Je me regarde dans la glace, mais c'est ma mère qui est dans la glace. J'ai un chagrin qui devient ce corps, je suis blanc et tout moite. Sur ma joue, ce ne sont pas des larmes, ce privilège des peu malheureux, mais des gouttes qui coulent du front. Ces sueurs de la mort de ma mère sont glacées […]. Il me reste une glace et mon égarement que j'y regarde […]. (*LM* 129–30)[34]

> I stare in the mirror, but it is my mother who is in the mirror. My grief becomes physical, and I am pale and clammy. My cheeks are wet not with tears—the privilege of those who suffer little—but with drops trickling down from my forehead. The sweat of the death of my mother is ice-cold […]. What is left to me is a mirror and the bewilderment which I contemplate in it […]. (*BM* 117–18)

32 The idea of a conversation with the (voices of) the dead—his mother and father, his friend Marcel Pagnol, his lovers and wives—runs as a red thread through *Carnets 1978*, a late diary of Cohen's, and sometimes the narrator includes himself in their symphony: "En mon vieil âge, je retourne vers toi, Maman morte, […] à qui absurdement j'aime parler. J'ai quatre-vingt-deux ans et je vais bientôt mourir. Vite me redire […]" (9).

33 I have commented extensively on this scene in an earlier publication of mine (Sauter 169–71). I am drawing on my earlier analysis here, yet I am also pointing out different aspects.

34 This uncanny reflection of the dead mother in the mirror is reflected in his *Carnets 1978* as a reflection of Marcel Pagnol, Cohen's close friend, who died in 1974. Almost literally, the narrator here repeats the words of *Le livre de ma mère*, albeit with very distinctive and significant modifications: "Jamais plus Marcel, jamais plus, et j'ai une douleur qui devient ce corps. Ce ne sont pas des larmes mais une sueur dans le dos et j'ai un égarement dans la glace que je regarde pour me tenir compagnie" (*Carnets 1978* 51).

The mirror reflects something uncanny—the narrator looks at himself in the mirror, but he sees his mother:[35] "Je me regarde dans la glace, mais c'est ma mère qui est dans la glace." Bella Cohen translates: "I stare in the mirror, but it is my mother who is in the mirror." In the French, the narrator here uses "glace," instead of "miroir," for mirror.[36] The word "glace" is echoed later in the adjective "glacée": "Ces sueurs de la mort de ma mère sont glacées," the narrator says, and he continues again: "Il me reste une glace […]." In French, "glacées" ("ice-cold") and "glace" ("mirror") are almost the same word, yet "glace" is missing an *accent* to spell "glacée." In other words, "glace" is "glacé" minus an *accent*. "Glace" is what is left after the *accent* is taken away. "Glace," the mirror, might be what is left of the narrator's language after his mother's ("foreign," "oriental") accent has forever been silenced and taken away. It is spelled and pronounced slightly differently. This simultaneity of identification and difference, epitomized in "glace" and "glacé," captures the experience of the narrator, who sees his mother's mirror image: "glacée," ice-cold as her death drops is the mirror;[37] "la glace," whose reflection is mirroring not his own body, but hers.

And this spectral body of his mother's becomes the narrator's own grief embodied. "J'ai un chagrin qui devient ce corps." My grief, my sorrow, my affliction become "*this* body" ("*ce* corps"; my emphasis), the narrator says: his "chagrin" turns into the very body that stares at him in the mirror—his mother's (French) "corps" that is now a corpse (English). Bella Cohen translates: "My grief becomes physical." The act of merging with a lifeless body, which the French emphasizes, is kept at a distance by omitting the demonstrative pronoun *ce* and inserting the almost technical term "physical" in the English version. It seems to be impossible for the translator to capture *this* body, the very body in the

35 In Freud's "The Uncanny," a telling—and actually the last—footnote relates an uncanny experience of Freud's that involves looking at his own reflection in a mirror: "I soon realized to my dismay that the intruder was my own image, reflected in the mirror on the connecting door. I can still recall that I found his appearance thoroughly unpleasant" (162). The uncanny in Freud's experience consists in failing to recognize his own double, while for Cohen's narrator, the uncanny consists in seeing *not* his own double, but a reflection of an other: his (dead, or ghostly) mother. Or is he failing to recognize himself in her, as his own double?

36 In Cohen's later novel *Belle du Seigneur*, in which mirrors are a leitmotif, he usually uses the word "psyché" instead of "glace" or "miroir." The different choice of words for the identical object seems deliberate.

37 For an extensive reading of the Christian iconography of "sweating blood" and its relation to life in the Hebrew Bible, see Sauter (170–71).

mirror, and to have her own pain turned into the mother's body. After all, Bella never saw Albert's mother's body, neither dead nor alive.

"Ces sueurs de la mort de ma mère sont glacées," says the narrator; "the sweat of the death of my mother is ice-cold," says the translator. The demonstrative "ces" refers to the sweat drops flowing from his forehead that he has described before ("gouttes qui coulent du front," "drops trickling down from my forehead"). It is *those* sweat drops, the very sweat drops on his cheeks, that are the sweat drops of "ce corps," "this body," his mother's body that merges into his own.[38] And again, Bella Cohen's translation into English refuses to let that merging happen and distances the speaking voice from the dead body. For her, it is merely "*the* sweat drops of my mother's death" (my emphasis), not *those* drops—the very drops that are on the speaker's own forehead and cheeks. The translation keeps the mother's body at a distance.

What is left to the narrator, then, is a looking glass: "il me reste une glace et mon égarement que j'y regarde." Bella Cohen translates: "What is left to me is a mirror and the bewilderment which I contemplate in it." In a passage that I left out in my quote above, the narrator amuses himself in front of the mirror with creating an optical illusion by pressing his own eyeball: "ça fait une illusion d'optique et je vois dans la glace deux orphelins. Et avec moi, ça fait trois et ça tient compagnie" (*LM* 130); "this creates an optical illusion and I see two orphans in the mirror. And with me that makes three, which is company" (*BM* 117). "Mon égarement" refers most likely to those illusions: the creatures who are reflections of his own image, yet optically doubled or even tripled in his sight by his act of willfully inflicting physical pain upon himself, pressing hard on his eyeballs.

Perhaps symptomatically, it is "*mon* égarement" (my emphasis) in the French version, and "*the* bewilderment" (my emphasis) in English: the possessive pronoun pointing to the speaking self (*mon*) is replaced by a seemingly neutral definite article, *the*. In the French version, the narrator sees himself as his own *égarement*—his aberrance, aberration, errancy, or obliquity—in the

38 The body, perhaps, always stood between my mother and myself. Like Franz Rosenzweig, my mother suffered from Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis for the last sixteen years of her life; she—who used to be a vital, physically active person throughout my childhood—was confined to a wheelchair; a breathing machine and voice recognition software took the place of her own bodily functions and expressions. The motherly body of my earliest childhood memories was frail, motionless, speechless for most of my adult life. And it was only in my work with and on Rosenzweig, later on, that I was able to find words for how the power of speech and speechlessness can also belong together.

mirror. He sees a double or triple version of his own reflection, another self that does not really exist and that is a product of his willfully and painfully manipulating the clarity of his vision. In a way, by inflicting pain on himself, he is making himself clairvoyant: after pressing his fingertips against his eyeballs, he is seeing things that are not actually there. He sees another, purely illusory, non-embodied version of himself—he sees himself as a specter. Bella Cohen's translation, in contrast, only sees a neutral "bewilderment," with no optical illusion, no other of herself. Does the translator even see herself? "What is left to me is a mirror and *the* bewilderment which *I* contemplate in it" (my emphasis). There is a stark contrast between the bewilderment and the speaking I. The I is merely an observer of the bewilderment reflected in the mirror, she is not part of it, and it is not part of her. Where is this bewilderment coming from? What does it reflect? Or whom? Something uncanny is lurking behind the translation.

The uncanny reflection in the looking glass, the "glace," artificially created by the narrator's act of willfully inflicting pain on himself, manipulating and twisting his eyeballs, reflects itself in an uncanny, twisted language. A strange presence appears in his words, and it is inserted in the form of a musical quote. "Il me reste une glace et mon égarement que j'y regarde," writes the narrator, and he continues:

> […] que je regarde en souriant pour avoir envie de faire semblant de vivre, tout en murmurant avec un petit rire un peu fou que tout va très bien, Madame la Marquise, et que je suis perdu. Perdu, perdi, perdo, perda. (*LM* 129–30)

> What is left to me is a mirror and the bewilderment which I contemplate in it, which I contemplate with a smile so as to want to simulate living, while I murmur with a slightly mad little laugh that everything in the garden is lovely and that I am sunk. Sunk, sank, sink, sonk. (*BM* 118–19)

The phrase "avoir envie de" in the rather complex French phrase "pour avoir envie de faire semblant de vivre" bristles with life: it literally entails the words *en vie*, "in life." Yet this literal meaning is already taken back right after pronouncing it, because "envie" is refering to "faire semblant de vivre," "to simulate living." To be *en vie*, to—literally—be "in life," is only a semblance, a simulation of life. The reality lurking behind life is still death. Life is nothing but a dissimulation of death. The ever-present death in his own life makes the narrator "un

peu fou," "slightly mad," and he murmurs something that sounds completely nonsensical at first: "tout va très bien, Madame la Marquise."

"Tout va très bien, Madame la Marquise" is a musical quote: a famous line from a very popular 1935 chanson written by Paul Misraki, a songwriter, pianist, singer, comedian, and filmmaker, who happens to be the son of Jewish immigrants from the Ottoman Empire to France, like Albert Cohen himself. Popularized as a musical sketch by Ray Ventura—a classmate and colleague of Misraki's, incidentally also of Sephardic Jewish origin—and his band, the Collégiens (which Misraki was part of), the chanson "Tout va très bien (Madame la marquise)," was, almost immediately, very popular in France and abroad (there was a Russian version of the chanson in 1935 and a Hebrew one in 1938).

The chanson's content seems to be pure slapstick: A worried noblewoman repeatedly calls her butler James at home ("Allô, allô James! Quelle nouvelle?") and learns about a series of calamities that occurred during her two-week absence—from her favorite horse's death to her castle's complete destruction in fire, the loss of her entire fortune, and finally her husband's despair and suicide. All those horrible facts are called "un tout petit rien," "un incident, une bêtise" by her butler James, who reassures her each time she calls: "Cela n'est rien, Madame la Marquise, / Cela n'est rien, tout va très bien," and continues cheerfully and happily:

> Tout va très bien, Madame la Marquise,
> Tout va très bien, tout va très bien.
> Pourtant il faut, il faut que l'on vous dise,
> On déplore un tout petit rien:
> Si l'écurie brûla, Madame,
> C'est qu'le château était en flammes.
> Mais à part ca, Madame la Marquise,
> Tout va très bien, tout va très bien.[39]

In Misraki's chanson, form and content consciously clash: the series of deaths and catastrophes is recounted and sung in a cheerful, upbeat mode, and the line "Tout va très bien, Madame la Marquise" is constantly repeated, sounding more and more absurd as the catastrophes pile up, getting more and more serious. The foolish and not-at-all-reassuring harmlessness of the phrase "Tout

39 All quotations for "Tout va très bien (Madame la Marquise)" are from Misraki et al.

va très bien, Madame la Marquise," together with the music's annoying, almost unnerving cheerfulness, stands in sharp contrast to the horrible facts that are being recounted. It is therefore unsurprising that the line from Misraki's 1935 chanson was already a proverbial phrase in the late 1930s, used to describe the attempt to consciously blind oneself for the realities of a desperate situation—most obviously, the deliberate blindness in regard to Nazi Germany in pre-war France. In the 1940s, there were headlines like *Tout va très bien Monsieur Mussolini* in leading French-speaking newspapers, radio broadcasts, and magazines, and finally *Tout va très bien mon Führer* in 1944 on Radio Londres, a French-language, London-based radio broadcast to Nazi-occupied France (Klein 185). Albert Cohen lived in London between 1940 and 1946, working for the Jewish Agency, and was actively involved in Free French and Résistance circles—he would most likely have known about this usage of the phrase while reworking his 1943 version of *Chant de Mort* (first published in the London-based, French-language journal *La France libre*) for and with Bella in 1953.

The line from Paul Misraki's chanson therefore introduces an element of instability into Cohen's already instable haunted mirror scene. The protagonist seems to be losing himself in the reverberations of what the musical quote might (not) or could (not) mean. With a "slightly mad little laugh," "un petit rire un peu fou," he murmurs "que tout va très bien, Madame la Marquise, et que je suis perdu. Perdu, perdi, perdo, perda" (*LM* 129–30). In the playful yet uncanny closing phrase of the mirror scene, even the meaning of *perdre*, losing, is *perdu*, lost. The narrator feels lost ("perdu") because his mother's loss (*perte*) might resound in his head in an accent that might resemble his mother's. In a famous recording of "Tout va très bien (Madame la Marquise)" by Ray Ventura et ses Collégiens, over the course of the song, the butler develops an accent that is getting stronger and stronger—more "oriental" perhaps— every time the indeed more and more meaningless line "Tout va très bien, Madame la Marquise" is repeated. The Rs are increasingly rolled and the nasals are increasingly hard, until the singers all sing in strong "foreign accents." Might Louise Judith Coen have had a similar accent, in her unique, distinctive, and singular "foreign French"? Conjuring up Misraki's ghost, and blurring it with the "maternel fantôme," the mother's foreign accent is, again, haunting *Le livre de ma mère*—even if we cannot literally hear it or read it within the narrative—through the echo and the implications of Misraki's chanson.

Albert Cohen's proverbial musical quote "tout va très bien, Madame la marquise" is translated as "everything in the garden is lovely" in Bella Cohen's version. Her English translation also quotes a popular piece of music—yet it is a

musical allusion that stems not from Albert Cohen's world, but from Bella Cohen's world and her own life experience. "Everything in the garden is lovely" is a line from a song by the music-hall artist Miss Marie Lloyd (1870–1922) that had become a catchphrase in early-twentieth-century London—the London Bella Berkovich grew up in. In this song, written by J. P. Harrington and composed by Georges Le Brun, perfect outward appearances gradually reveal their true, ugly character: a "dossy youth in all his extra best" with "a pair of patents, a pair of kids, and a lovely flowered vest" is soiled by a painter's pot flying down a ladder; a "young maiden" confesses "with blushes on her face": the "lad who said he would marry me, [who] bought presents and pressed me to his breast," merely impregnated her; a lady "on her Gee-Gee canters down a country lane," "but suddenly her horse takes fright" and she has a serious accident while her "smart young groom" only laughs at her "till tears fall from his eye"; and finally, corrupt "powers" decide about the destiny of a beautiful piece of China—or the fate of the poor country of China: "They want sixteen million cash / Else the China goes to smash / And everything in the garden's lovely."[40]

Similarly to "Tout va très bien, Madame la Marquise," the line "Everything in the garden's lovely" is repeated almost annoyingly often, literally in every second line of the song, and the chorus goes: "Everything in the garden is absolutely grand / Everything in the garden is great, you'll understand." The image of a beautiful, idyllic garden in which "everything is lovely" and "absolutely grand" stands in sharp contrast to the emotional suffering (and the serious political threats) contained in the song's lyrics.

This piece of music was written for as well as performed and popularized by Marie Lloyd. One of the most famous and highest-paid female variety artists of her time, Marie Lloyd was known for the sexual innuendo of her performances, giving suggestive interpretations to seemingly innocent lyrics in her distinctive Cockney accent. Born in the London area in 1919, Bella Cohen would have been familiar with the popularity of Marie Lloyd's "Everything in the Garden's Lovely," first performed in 1898, and its later proverbial use. She would most likely also have known that Marie Lloyd first performed under the stage name "Bella Delmere." Quoting one of the most famous lines of Marie Lloyd's, it seems that Bella Cohen née Berkovich is entering the stage here through the back door of translation: Bella Cohen might be performing under a pseudonym, as Bella Delmere. The French word for mother, *mère*, is literally

40 All quotations for "Everything in the Garden's Lovely" are from Harrington.

inscribed into the (or her) (fake) stage name, "Delmere." Yet it is clearly "Bella" who is speaking, even if under a fake name, a pseudonym.

Like Marie Lloyd's performances, the translation here becomes erotically charged. The quote "everything in the garden is lovely" in Bella Cohen's translation is—unlike in the French original, which makes no mention of a garden—directly related to the narrative context. Within the narrative, after uttering the phrase "everything in the garden is lovely," the narrator literally steps out into the garden:

> […] while I murmur with a slightly mad little laugh that everything in the garden is lovely and that I am sunk. Sunk, sank, sink, sonk […]. Night has fallen. To stop thinking of my mother I went into the garden […]. A stray dog looked at me with the eyes of my mother and I came back inside. (*BM* 118–19)

> […] tout en murmurant avec un petit rire un peu fou que tout va très bien, Madame la Marquise, et que je suis perdu. Perdu, perdi, perdo, perda […]. Maintenant, c'est la nuit. Pour ne plus penser à ma mère, je suis sorti dans le jardin […]. Un chien errant m'a regardé avec les yeux de ma mère, et je suis rentré. (*LM* 131)

Just like in Marie Lloyd's song, the garden here is a fake idyll. It does not offer solace and comfort, let alone loveliness. On the contrary, the garden becomes an uncanny place haunted by "a stray dog," or, in French, "un chien errant," clearly reminiscent of the problematic topos of *le Juif errant*, with the eyes of the dead mother. Literally a *juive errante*—a Jewish woman erring between the living and the dead, haunting the narrator's nightly visions—the mother's un-dead eyes watch the narrator stumble out into the garden. In the English version, the garden's hauntedness seems to shake the ground under the translator's feet and lets her sink deep: "[…] I murmur with a slightly mad little laugh that everything in the garden is lovely and that I am sunk. Sunk, sank, sink, sonk."

In the words the narrator utters in French, we can hear echoes of the father (*père*) and not the mother (*la mère—l'amour—la mort*). Again and again, the father figure that is so strikingly absent within the narrative appears, insisting, in the repeated, broken line "perdu [*père*-du], perdi [*père*-di], perdo [*père*-do], perda [*père*-da]." In the absence of the dead mother, the lost son seems to be haunted by the living father, who—in contrast to the mother—is still *da* [*père-da*], alive, still "en vie" (at least in the 1943 version of his work; Marco Cohen died

in June 1952). And yet the father is almost entirely absent, narratively speaking, as if the son were trying to take revenge for the death of his mother by killing the father as well by erasing him entirely from the narrative. In contrast, Bella Cohen's English translation literally and strikingly inscribes the son instead of the father: "Sunk, sank, sink, *sonk*" (my emphasis).

While the narrator in the French version does not even attempt to create semantic sense or coherence ("Perdu, perdi, perdo, perda"), the English translation here uses correct grammatical verb forms of the verb "(to) sink": except for "sonk," all other words uttered here are correct conjugations of "(to) sink." But the fake and faked verb "sonk" is phonologically very close to an existing English word, namely the word *song*. With this, echoes of the title of the first published version of *Le livre de ma mère* in *La France libre*, in 1943–44, reappear: *Chant de mort*, Song of Death. This Song of Death might resound in the nightly garden, yet it is uncannily distorted in Bella Cohen's translation and comes out as an almost violent sound: *sonk*.

In biblical tradition—a tradition that Albert Cohen is very familiar with—the song and the garden are closely connected. In the biblical book Song of Songs, the garden is a major leitmotif, a famous and prominent metaphor for erotic love, usually read as an allegory of the beloved woman's body: "A garden enclosed is my sister, my bride; a spring shut up, a fountain sealed" (*King James Version*, Song 4.12). The biblical Song of Songs has a decisive place within Albert Cohen's entire oeuvre. In 1969, Albert Cohen answered the famous "questionnaire de Proust" for *Journal de Genève*, and lists as his favorite poets: "King David, *the author of Song of Songs*, Ronsard, Baudelaire, Rimbaud" (qtd. in Médioni 246; my emphasis). Most famously and prominently, the language of his 1968 masterpiece *Belle du Seigneur* (dedicated to his wife Bella, whose name is resounding in the *Belle* of the title) is overflowing with allusions to this heartbreakingly beautiful erotic poem from the Hebrew Bible. But, perhaps quite surprisingly, it is equally prominent within *Le livre de ma mère*. Even on the very first pages, the sleep of the mother's death is guarded with words quoted from the Song of Songs: "Chut, ne la réveillez pas, filles de Jérusalem, ne la réveillez pas pendant qu'elle dort" (*LM* 12); "Hush, do not awaken her, daughters of Jerusalem. Do not awaken her while she sleeps" (*BM* 9). Towards the end, the narrator twists the rose metaphor that the Song so famously unfolds ("I am the rose of Sharon, and the lily of the valleys. As a lily among thorns, so is my love among the daughters"; Song 2.1–2; *King James Version*) and turns it into an image of death: "ces roses sont des bouts de cadavres qu'on force à faire semblant de vivre trois jours de plus dans de l'eau" (*LM* 134); "those

roses […] are precorpses forced to simulate life three days longer in water" (*BM* 122). Exasperated, he throws the bouquet of fragrant roses "out of the window on a beribboned old lady with a shopping bag" (*BM* 122), an image that could very well be part of the series of mishaps and accidents in Marie Lloyd's "Everything in the Garden's Lovely."

Bella Cohen's translation picks up on the Song and its erotically loaded garden imagery in the passage quoted above. The translation connects the garden image directly to the Song in a twofold way—first, by literally quoting a line from a literal song ("Everything in the garden is lovely"), and second, by linking the fake verb "sonk," very close to the existing word *song*, to the narrator's stepping out into the garden within the narrative: "I went out into the garden," almost a quote from, but at least an allusion to Song of Songs: "I am come into my garden, my sister, my spouse: I have gathered my myrrh with my spice; I have eaten my honeycomb with my honey; I have drunk my wine with my milk: eat, O friends; drink, yea, drink abundantly, O beloved" (Song. 5.1).

Linking the garden and the "sonk"/song, Bella Cohen's translation substitutes the praise of motherly affection that culminates in a bodily, physical identification between mother and son in the mirror scene—a love "as strong as death," as Song 8.4 has it—with an image of erotic love: the merging of the bodies of a man and a woman, husband and wife, in lovemaking. In Bella's translation, motherly affection and sexual attraction, the mother and the wife, constantly blur.[41] The translation might sing Bella's song of love, rather than a "song of death" (*chant de mort*) for a mother-in-law that she never knew. Inscribing erotically charged allusions into Albert Cohen's work of mourning, Bella Cohen's translation seems to rule out the mother (symptomatically implied by her

41 From the beginning of the first "dictations," the wife and the mother, erotic love and motherly affection, blur in Bella, and towards the end of his life, in his last will (1977), Albert Cohen declares: "ma femme [Bella] a été pour moi la meilleure et la plus dévouée des épouses, et je puis ajouter la meilleure des mères […]" (qtd. in Médioni 203–04). Again, I do not wish to follow the psychoanalytic implications of that highly dubious statement here, but I would like to point out the closeness between erotic and motherly love in Cohen that the translation reinforces. Albert Cohen, in fact, explicitly spelled out the connection between erotic and motherly love in a 1974 interview. For him, sexual attraction is only the first step to "true," motherly love: "Et cet amour-là […] est très proche de l'amour maternel, […] celle qui a été au début attiré par la passion et par les charmes et les gloires de la sexualité […] devienne à la fois la mère […]" (Médioni 203–04).

omission of all personal and possessive pronouns pertaining to the mother figure), instead claiming Albert as the biblical lover from the Song of Songs—the one who may "enter the garden" of her body, and "gather her myrrh and her spice" (Song 5.1). In that sense, the translation would turn the Song of Death, *Chant de Mort*, into a belated love song.

Translation as a Work of Mourning

Bella Cohen's *Book of My Mother*, her translation of her late husband's *Le livre de ma mère*, decades after his death, experiments with language and with the form of translation; her translation twists and turns the English language, othering it, inflicting pain. Inscribing and reviving the voices of the dead in her translation, her work is a form of (m)othering language, a haunted space located in between life and death that resounds and echoes with strange, foreign voices.

In English—a language that is not my mother tongue, nor Albert Cohen's, but that is the language of Bella Cohen's translation—the "other" is uncannily inscribed into the very word *m-other*. To mourn his mother's death, Albert Cohen chose French: a language that was not his mother tongue, nor his mother's mother tongue.[42] The feeling of linguistic foreignness and estrangement is thematized in the original and enacted in the translation. The figure of the (dead) mother is the epitome of linguistic strangeness and foreignness. She says things differently. In a way, this makes her a figure of translation. Translating *Le livre de ma mère* into English, Bella Cohen engages with the otherness of the mother figure, making Albert Cohen's book of his mother, literally, *an other* book, a different book.

By adopting an English language that has been termed "unidiomatic," "infelicitous," "awkward," "problematic," and "unfortunate" (Langille 193), Bella Cohen occupies the speaker position of the mother within the translation: she speaks English strangely, with unidiomatic words and phrases, with a "foreign accent," if you will. It is highly unlikely that Bella just "could not do it any better"—after all, she was a professional interpreter, and perfectly bilingual in French and English (Médioni 274). In fact, it seems that her own "faulty" speech

42 The horror of not speaking any word of French at all ("pas un mot de français") upon arriving in Marseille is described very powerfully in *Le livre de ma mère*: "épouvanté, ahuri"—"in a state of horror and bewilderment"—, the boy is left alone at school, bereft of language (*LM* 34; *BM* 30).

emulates the "foreign accent" of the mother-in-law that she never knew. At times, it is hard to understand Bella Cohen's English without comparing it to the French of her husband. It is her English translation's incompleteness, its incapacity to speak for itself, its deliberate strangeness, clumsiness, and awkwardness, that makes it "faithful" to her late husband's "original," because the mother that Albert Cohen's *Le livre de ma mère* mourns is returning in it, speaking her (m)other tongue.

Book of My Mother, translated by Bella Cohen née Berkovich, is a work of mourning—a work that is mourning the absence of the voice that is mourning the absence of his mother. Both the writer and the translator are voicing their pain of loss in (translated) language while reviving the language of the dead other: Albert Cohen is quoting his mother's "foreign French," her "accent oriental" throughout the narrative, and Bella Cohen's "awkward" English possibly reflects her husband's foreign, "Gallicised" English—and his mother's "foreign French." The work therefore mourns the death of a certain kind of language—an *other* language, a (m)other tongue, a strange language, a foreign accent—while enacting it: it mourns and revives the way the mother talks, the way a husband used to shape his own language by way of distorting the English language of the translation. Translation as a form lends itself to the process of mourning, because of its essential "un-finishedness."

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