



Untying the Mother Tongue, ed. by Antonio Castore and Federico Dal Bo, Cultural Inquiry, 26 (Berlin: ICI Berlin Press, 2023), pp. 165–79

CAROLINE SAUTER

The Mother Tongue of Love and Loss

Albert Cohen's *Le Livre de ma mère*

CITE AS:

Caroline Sauter, 'The Mother Tongue of Love and Loss: Albert Cohen's *Le Livre de ma mère*', in *Untying the Mother Tongue*, ed. by Antonio Castore and Federico Dal Bo, Cultural Inquiry, 26 (Berlin: ICI Berlin Press, 2023), pp. 165–79 <https://doi.org/10.37050/ci-26_8>

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ABSTRACT: This article reads Albert Cohen's *Le Livre de ma mère*, which mourns the death of his mother, as a poetics of love and loss. It is a poetics of otherness that disavows the claim to expression and selfhood. The mother, being the paradigmatic figure of otherness, is a figure for literature, a form of language that is characterized by saying things differently. Literature itself is a motherly space insofar as it others the language of the self. This argument is developed along close readings of both the French original and the English translation of Cohen's work, following three thematic axes: first, the peculiar kinship of love and death; second, the mother as the other; third, literature as *filio-logy*: a logic of filiation that does not leave the self unchanged.

KEYWORDS: Albert Cohen; loss; mourning; mother; mother tongue; translation; death; love

The Mother Tongue of Love and Loss

Albert Cohen's *Le Livre de ma mère*

CAROLINE SAUTER

In loving memory of my mother

Irmgard Leo-Grunwald

Losing one's mother. No human expression will ever be able to capture the crude brutality of this experience. The pain of loss and the intensity of love coming together in the instant of my mother's death surpass my language capacity. Crying, whining, groaning, mourning — speech acts or speechless acts in the face of the most invincible, most undeniable human reality: death. My mother's death.

In his 1954 narrative *Le Livre de ma mère*, translated into English under the title *Book of my Mother* by his wife Bella Cohen, Albert Cohen, the French-Swiss-Greek-Jewish writer, attempts to come to terms with the reality of losing his mother, in occupied France, in 1943, while he is safely in London. (Incidentally, it is one of the last books I gave my mother before her death.) It is a book of love and loss: a book about his mother's love for him, and his love for his mother, for her who is now dead and lost forever. Yet this story of love and loss is as much about the life and death of the narrator's adored mother as it is about the process of writing the very book entitled *Le Livre de ma mère*,

or *Book of my Mother*. In what follows, I will read Albert Cohen's work as a poetics of love and loss. It is, however, a poetics that disavows the claim to expression and selfhood, a poetics of otherness. The mother, in Cohen's book, is the paradigmatic figure of otherness: she is an outcast of society, a Jewish woman in Vichy France, a foreigner in Switzerland, originating from Corfu, and the only woman in a household of men. Not least, her speech is marked by otherness — by a foreign accent, by funny phrases. She says things differently than others. The same is true for literature, a form of language that is characterized by figurality, that is, by saying things differently. Literature, I will argue, is a motherly space in the sense that it (m)others the language of the self. It is in this sense that I will read literature as a 'mother tongue' of love and loss.

My reading will proceed in three steps: First, I will trace the peculiar kinship of love and death, *l'amour et la mort*, in *Le Livre de ma mère*. Second, my close readings will analyse the mother as the other, the other literally inscribed in the 'm-other' of *Book of my Mother*. Third, and in conclusion, I will describe the notion of reading and writing literature as *filio-logy*, as a logic of filiation, of 'son-ship'.

LOVE AND DEATH

The power of love has always been described in terms of death. This is true, for instance, in *shir ha-shirim*, the Song of Songs — a collection of biblical love poetry that Albert Cohen extensively draws on in all his works. The only definition of love in the Song of Songs describes the power of love and passion with images of death: 'set me as a seal upon your heart, a seal upon your arm', it says, 'for love is strong as death, passion is cruel as the grave (*she'ol*). Its flashes are flashes of fire, a blazing flame' (Song of Songs 8. 6; Revised Standard Version (RSV)).

The only image that seems to be a possible expression of the intense experience of love is the ultimate, universal, and inescapable liminal experience, the utter unknown — death. Death can never be put into words that are *not* figures of speech, since one can express neither one's own nor another's experience of death. Similarly, the experience of love is often conceived as going beyond the clear-cut limits of referential speech. Death, therefore, just like love, must be expressed in figures of speech — in literature. As Julia Kristeva remarked so in-

sightfully in her *Tales of Love*, ‘the language of love’ — and the same is true for the expression of death — ‘is impossible, inadequate, immediately allusive when one would like it to be most straightforward; it is a flight of metaphors — it is literature.’¹ The ‘flight of metaphors’, the literary images that connect *love* and *death* here, in the biblical Song of Songs, are flash, flame, and fire: they refer to an all-consuming, potentially dangerous, and powerfully violent element that easily gets out of control and is enormously destructive.² This threatening potential is what connects love and death metaphorically.

Extending the metaphor, one could say: the strength, the force, the violence of both love and death set our language on fire. Fire, flash, and flame are images for the threatening potential that love and death have for language. In other words, language will be confronted with the threatening fact of its own limitations whenever it tries to put love or death into words. Therefore, writing a book of love and death, as Cohen does, is operating in a dangerous realm, on the verge of linguistic and literary expression.

The narrator in Albert Cohen’s *Le Livre de ma mère* is very much aware of this liminal position vis-à-vis language. Consider, for instance, the last sentence in episode XII. After a psalm-like, hymnic repetition and reverberation of the phrase ‘Amour de ma mère, à nul autre pareil’, translated into English by Bella Cohen as ‘my mother’s incomparable love’,³ the narrator comes to a halt at the hymn’s culminating point, and writes, in the French original: ‘Je te dis gravement: ma Maman’;⁴ in English: ‘I say to you gravely, “my Maman”.’⁵ And here, at this point,

1 Julia Kristeva, *Tales of Love*, trans. by Leon Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), p. 1. See also Julia Kristeva, *Histoires d’amour* (Paris: Denoël, 1983), p. 9: ‘Impossible, inadéquat, immédiatement allusive quand on le voudrait le plus direct, le langage amoureux est envol de métaphores: il est de la littérature.’

2 Michael Fishbane, in his *The JPS Bible Commentary: Song of Songs* (Philadelphia, PA: The Jewish Publication Society, 2015), p. 209, states: ‘Pounding in the maiden’s heart, love is all-consuming—vanquishing its victims like death.’

3 Albert Cohen, *Le Livre de ma mère* (Paris: Gallimard, 1954), pp. 88–106; Albert Cohen, *Book of my Mother*, trans. by Bella Cohen (New York: First Archipelago Books, 1997), pp. 79–92.

4 Cohen, *Le Livre de ma mère*, p. 106.

5 Cohen, *Book of my Mother*, p. 92; translation modified. The unmodified translation reads: ‘I say to you gravely, “Maman”’. It is quite telling that the translation by Cohen’s wife chooses to omit or suppress the possessive pronoun ‘*ma Maman*’, ‘*my mother*’, here. In the translator’s bio on the book jacket, Bella Cohen describes her translation

the text is cut off, and the episode is — *finie*. ‘Je te dis gravement: ma Maman.’⁶

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’. ‘[M]a Maman’ is the most eloquent, the gravest, in fact, the only possible utterance that an eminent, ageing poet can always and only and still find to address his long-deceased mother. Like a small child, enchanted and delighted with each new string of syllables learned, the narrator pronounces a string of resounding syllables, babbling: *mamaman*. In the instance of this repetition, their semantic quality becomes doubtful — are those two words? One word? 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, namely the pre-linguistic babble of a child that has just learned to master some first words? Is he attempting to re-find his mother tongue in those grave words? The tongue that was there before there was meaning? Possibly the first meaning-filled, meaningful words he ever uttered?

‘[M]a Maman’: this grave babble, gravest of all acts of babbling, those joyful yet painful syllables — *mamaman*, ‘ma Maman’ is what all attempts at creating a language of love for the dead mother can amount to. And tellingly, Cohen’s narrator pronounces those words ‘gravement’, as he says in French. In English, a language that was not Cohen’s mother tongue, nor his mother’s tongue (nor, for that matter, the mother tongue of his wife, who is his translator), the English ‘grave’ in the French *gravement* connects love and death. Those words spoken gravely, those grave words: ‘ma Maman’, they could be the inscription on her tombstone. ‘[M]a Maman’ reposes, gravely, in her grave. Words that are coming from far away, from the first stages of language acquisition, have always already been spoken with the gravity of the grave. First words, last words. The chapter must end here.

Or consider this section of episode XVIII. I am quoting part of it both in the French original and in Bella Cohen’s English version:

as a ‘labor of love’, thereby occupying the mother’s position in ‘birthing’ her love (‘labor’).

6 Cohen, *Le Livre de ma mère*, p. 106.

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, 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.

(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, 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.)⁷

The mirror gives way to an uncanny reflection, one that destabilizes the notion of selfhood and identity: 'Je me regarde [...] mais c'est *ma mère*.' I look at myself in the mirror, but what I see is not myself, even though I look at me, but her. 'Ma mère', not 'ma Maman', but my mother, the other, whom I am and am not a part of. Identities are as loosely connected to words as bodies are to life: 'J'ai un chagrin qui devient ce corps.' My grief, my sorrow, my affliction become *this* body (*ce corps*), the narrator says; grief does not simply 'become physical', as the translator has it. Rather, in the French original, the narrator's grief, his sorrow, his affliction become the very body that stares at him in the mirror — his mother's body, another body, the body of an other, a body that is not his own, a body that gave birth to his body, a body that protected, that nourished and cherished his tiny body. His mother's body: a body that is now a corpse.

In looking at himself and seeing his mother in the mirror, the narrator's own living body merges into his mother's cold, lifeless body:

7 Cohen, *Le Livre de ma mère*, pp. 129–30; Cohen, *Book of my Mother*, pp. 117–18.

Sur ma joue, ce ne sont pas des larmes, ce privilège des peu malheureux, mais des gouttes qui coulent du front.

(My cheeks are wet not with tears — the privilege of those who suffer little — but with drops trickling down from my forehead.)⁸

The sweat drops on the narrator's forehead that have or have not wetted his cheeks are reminiscent of Christ's agony on the Mount of Olives in the New Testament, immediately before his arrest and crucifixion. As the gospel of Luke has it: 'And being in an agony Jesus prayed more earnestly: and his sweat was, as it were, great drops of blood falling down to the ground' (Luke 22. 44; King James Version (KJV)). Cohen's narrator alludes to this image yet distorts it into what one could read as an inverted — mirrored — *pietà*. While the intensity of agony surpasses the possibility of tears ('the privilege of those who suffer little'), the body of his dead mother and his own living body merge, and death and life — her death and his life — fall together in the mirror image. He says: 'Ces sueurs de la mort de ma mère sont glacées.' The demonstrative *ces* refers to the sweat drops flowing from his forehead that he has described before as 'gouttes qui coulent du front' (drops trickling down from my forehead). The sweat drops on his cheek are the sweat drops of 'ce corps' (this body), his mother's body that merges into his own: 'those [not, as Bella Cohen has it, *the*] sweat drops of my mother's death'.

When Christ is sweating blood on the Mount of Olives, he is sweating the very liquid that the Hebrew Bible associates with life:

for the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I [the Lord] have given it to you upon the altar to make an atonement for your souls; for it is the blood that maketh an atonement for the soul (Leviticus 17. 11; KJV).

Cohen's narrator, however, sweats not life, but death. He prefigures his own impending death in identifying with his mother's. In the Hebrew Bible, sweat and death are closely linked: 'in the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread,' says God in cursing Adam after the Fall, 'till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art,

8 Ibid.

and unto dust shalt thou return' (Genesis 3. 19; KJV). The narrator is acutely aware of this connection between sweat and death. He is, paradoxically, imagining dying his mother's death and sweating her last, icy drops, but unlike her icy sweat of death, his sweat is of life, and this is what makes (or does not make) him cry.

'Ces sueurs de la mort de ma mère sont glacées', the narrator says. But he continues: 'Il me reste une glace' (What is left to me is a mirror). '[G]lacées' (ice-cold) and 'glace' (mirror) are almost the same word in French, the language that the narrator chooses to mourn his mother. Life and death come together in the mirror-image. As ice-cold as her death drops is the mirror whose reflection is mirroring not his own body, but hers. His drops are not the hot, life-filled blood drops of Christ, but the ice-cold sweat drops of Adam's death — a death that stares at him in the mirror through his mother's eyes. What is left to the narrator is the 'glace', the mirror, that displays his mother's 'glacée' agony. He is suffering her death in beholding himself as being her, in becoming her likeness.

Therefore, his greatest suffering is the necessity to stay alive. Being alive after his mother's passing is described as sin, the 'sin of living' (péché de vie). 'Let's face it', reads a passage from episode xx, 'I too am but one of the living, a sinner like all the living [...]. My mother is dead but I am hungry, and soon, despite my grief, I shall eat. Sin of living.'⁹ In the same episode, the narrator links poetic creation to the sin of living:

... et ma main bouge égoïstement en ce moment. Et si ma main dessine des mots qui disent ma douleur, c'est un mouvement de vie, c'est-à-dire de joie, en fin de compte, qui la fait bouger, cette main. Et ces feuilles, demain je les relirai, et j'ajouterai d'autres mots, et j'en aurai une sorte de plaisir. Péché de vie. Je corrigerai les épreuves, et ce sera un autre péché de vie.

(... my hand is moving selfishly now. And if my hand traces words which tell of my grief, it is a movement of life, that is of joy after all, which stirs that hand. And tomorrow I shall reread these words and that will give me a kind of pleasure. Sin of living. I shall correct the proofs, and that too will be sin of living.)¹⁰

9 Cohen, *Book of my Mother*, pp. 127–29.

10 Cohen, *Le Livre de ma mère*, p. 139; Cohen, *Book of my Mother*, p. 127.

The shame and guilt, the sin of living (*péché de vie*), which is at the heart of poetic creation, is exactly the 'égarement' he describes in the mirror scene discussed above: 'Il me reste une glace et mon égarement que j'y regarde' (what is left to me is a mirror and the bewilderment which I contemplate in it). What he sees when he beholds the mirror, after all, is himself — but he sees himself as an 'égarement', an aberrance, an aberration, or obliquity (and not only a 'bewilderment', as Bella Cohen has it), and it is this aberrance that he beholds ('*mon égarement que j'y regarde*'). In this sense, the notion of identity and selfhood is othered: he sees himself as other by seeing another than himself, namely his mother, in the mirror, instead of himself. And once the notion of identity, of selfhood and stability, is disavowed, disabled, and destroyed, language is let loose, and linguistic meaning becomes meaningless. This is exemplified in the continuation of this passage, which I am therefore quoting again, to comment on in more detail:

Il me reste une glace et mon égarement que j'y regarde, 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.¹¹

In Bella Cohen's English version, this passage reads:

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.¹²

The phrase 'avoir envie de...' bristles with life: it literally entails the words *en vie*, 'in life', alive, yet this liveliness is distorted by contrasting it with '*faire semblant de vivre*', 'to simulate living'. To be *en vie*, literally to be 'in life', is only a semblance of life after his mother's loss. There is no sense in living after and beyond her death, no meaning.

11 Cohen, *Le Livre de ma mère*, pp. 129–30. This passage from *Le Livre de ma mère* (1954) is repeated almost verbatim in Albert Cohen's later masterpiece, the novel *Belle du Seigneur* (Paris: Gallimard, 1968), p. 592, which incidentally was written in very close collaboration with Bella Cohen: 'Perdu, perdi, perda, perdo, murmurait-il...'

12 Cohen, *Book of my Mother*, p. 118.

This meaninglessness is expressed by a seemingly nonsensical murmur: ‘tout va très bien, Madame la Marquise’, or, in English: ‘everything in the garden is lovely.’ The narrators in both the French original and the English version choose to include a song line from popular culture here. The French is a quote from a 1935 *chanson* by Paul Misraki. Misraki’s song is a silly musical phone conversation in which a noblewoman calls her butler at home and learns about all the calamities that have befallen her household during her absence, from her favourite mare’s death to her castle’s complete destruction in fire and finally her husband’s suicide, each of them being a direct consequence of the previous one. This series of deaths and catastrophes is sung cheerfully, and repeatedly interrupted by the butler’s line: ‘tout va très bien, Madame la Marquise’ (all is very well, my lady, dear countess).¹³

This foolish and not-at-all-reassuring harmlessness, together with the music’s cheerfulness, stands in sharp contrast with the horrible, in fact gruesome, facts that are being recounted. Quoting this *chanson* line, Cohen’s narrative thus introduces an element of instability, in which form and content are at odds. Therefore, the closing phrase (‘je suis perdu. Perdu, perdi, perdo, perda’, or, in Bella Cohen’s English: ‘I am sunk. Sunk, sank, sink, sonk’) takes the meaning of a verb (a word of doing, a *Tu-Wort*, as a childish schoolboy German would have it) apart and literally *un-does* it.¹⁴ The meaning of *perdre*, ‘losing’, is lost, *perdu*.

(M)OTHER

But there is another *clin d’œil*, another allusion, here. (And I am very conscious of the echo of *deuil*, ‘mourning’ and ‘sorrow’, in *clin d’œil*.) The silly telephone conversation of popular culture that Cohen’s narrator quotes, with the line ‘tout va très bien, Madame la Marquise’, also refers to an actual telephone conversation with a noblewoman that the narrative obsessively comes back to. It is a scene that literally haunts

13 Bella Cohen’s English version chooses a line from a popular song by the music hall artist Marie Lloyd: ‘Everything in the garden is lovely.’

14 While Albert Cohen’s French echoes the father (*père*) in the insistence on loss (*perte*), within the repeated, broken line ‘perdu [*père-du*], perdi [*père-di*], perdo [*père-do*], perda’ (is a *père da*? Or might he be, to reference Freud, *fort?*), Bella Cohen’s English translation literally inscribes the son: ‘Sunk, sank, sink, *sonk*.’

the entire *Book of my Mother* and that is deeply entangled with feelings of guilt and shame and regret. I would even venture to say that it is being mourned throughout Cohen's narrative, since it is at the heart of the mother-son relationship. It is described in episode x, earlier in the book:

Je fus méchant avec elle, une fois, et elle ne le méritait pas. Cruauté des fils. Cruauté de cette absurde scène que je fis. Et pourquoi? Parce que, inquiète de ne pas me voir rentrer [...], elle avait téléphoné, à quatre heures du matin, à mes mondains inviteurs qui ne la valaient certes pas. Elle avait téléphoné pour être rassurée, pour être sûre que rien de mal ne m'était arrivé. De retour chez moi, je lui avais fait cette affreuse scène. Elle est tatouée dans mon cœur, cette scène. [...] Et pourquoi cette indigne colère? Peut-être parce que son accent étranger et ses fautes de français en téléphonant à ces crétins cultivés m'avaient gêné. Je ne les entendrai plus, ses fautes de français et son accent étranger.

(I was spiteful to her once, and she did not deserve it. Oh, the cruelty of sons! Oh, the cruelty of the absurd scene which I made! And for what reason? Because at four in the morning, worried that I had not yet come home [...], she had phoned the smart set who had invited me and who were certainly her inferiors. She had phoned to be reassured, to be sure I had come to no harm. On my return I made an abominable scene. That scene is tattooed on my heart. [...] And why was I so shamefully angry? Perhaps because her foreign accent (*son accent étranger*) and her incorrect French (*ses fautes de français*) when she phoned those cultured cretins had embarrassed me. Nevermore will I hear her incorrect French and her foreign accent.)¹⁵

In this telephone scene, the mother — the worried, caring, loving mother — is the incarnation of the other. The otherness of the narrator's mother is a leitmotif that runs as a red thread through the narrative, on the plot level as well as on a poetological level. This has, I think, a specific reason: In Cohen's *Le Livre de ma mère*, the search for a linguistic or more specifically literary expression of love and loss is inseparable from questions of origin. As a foreigner, as a Jew, as an author in Vichy France and Switzerland, the narrator is struggling with

15 Cohen, *Le Livre de ma mère*, pp. 73–74; Cohen, *Book of my Mother*, pp. 65–66.

questions of origin and belonging, and the emblematic figure of origin is the mother. The mother, however, is also the figure of being different, being-other. In English — a language that is not my mother tongue, nor Cohen's — the 'other' is uncannily inscribed into the very word *m-other*. In highlighting the literal 'other-ness' of the mother figure, Cohen's *Book of my Mother* gradually disavows the notion of origin and belonging and substitutes it with estrangement. *Le Livre de ma mère* is very much about the process of its own creation. But its poetics runs counter to what we think of as poetic. It is not about finding a language or a literary form of expression for the seemingly inexpressible, intense experiences of love and loss. It is, rather, about coming to terms with otherness — one's own otherness, one's mother's otherness, and the utter otherness, the cruel and unimaginable otherness of her death.

This otherness is displayed not only on the plot level, but also in the language Cohen's narrator chooses to employ. In one episode, the narrator fabricates a seemingly nonsensical text by taking bits and pieces of childhood ditties (supposedly songs that he learned from his mother) and arranging them anew.¹⁶ This strategy gives way to surprising — and possibly untranslatable — constellations:

Une vache éprise Chante dans l'église D'un air lascif. [...] Une vache blanche Danse sur la branche D'un air significatif. Une vache juive S'évente sur la rive D'un air craintif. [...] Voilà. La douleur, ça ne s'exprime pas toujours avec des mots nobles.

(A cow in night attire Sings in the church choir With a suggestive air. [...] A lily-white cow Prances on a bough With an expressive air. A small Jewish cow Fans her sweating brow With a fugitive air. [...] There. Grief is not always expressed in noble words.)¹⁷

16 Tellingly, this 'little pastime' (as Bella Cohen has translated it in *Book of my Mother*, p. 122) that the narrator desperately seeks in order to escape his obsession with death ('aujourd'hui, je suis fou de mort', p. 134) stands under the sign of untranslatability: 'M'amuser neurasthéniquement tout seul en inventant des vaches qui font des choses étranges et d'un air qui finit toujours en if' (Cohen, *Le Livre de ma mère*, p. 135). What if this *if* would be pointing to a potentiality of meaning? Bella Cohen's attempt at translating this more or less untranslatable series of wordplays reads: 'I shall amuse myself listlessly all alone by inventing cows which do strange things with a "something" air, the "something" has to and in -ive' (Cohen, *Book of my Mother*, p. 123).

17 Cohen, *Le Livre de ma mère*, p. 135; Cohen, *Book of my Mother*, pp. 123.

The non-noble words of grief and pain are laughable, estranged, out-of-place, othered words, and yet they are part of his book, and hence of literature. Literature *itself* becomes, for the narrator, a space of otherness, of estrangement and distortion. Literature is an act of othering language, othering speech. As such, it is perhaps a motherly space: the space of the other-as-the-mother (my own deceased mother was a woman of the word, an author and translator). In episode XIII, the narrator remarks in passing:

Étrange que je ne m'aperçoive que maintenant que ma mère
était un être humain, un autre être que moi [...].

(Strange that only now do I realize that my mother was a human
being, someone apart from myself [...].)¹⁸

The whole sentence stands under the sign of strangeness, estrangement, or foreignness: '[é]trange que...', '[s]trange that...'. Unlike the English, the French has a striking, sensual, uncanny similarity between 'autre' (other) and 'être' (being). It is as if being was always already an *other* being, being as another, being 'an other', being other. A strange kind of being, being as estrangement: *Autre être. Être autre.*

French is the language that Cohen uses as his mother tongue, even though it never was his mother's tongue. It is the language the narrator in Cohen's book chooses to sing the *chant de mort*, the 'song of death',¹⁹ in remembrance of his mother. Yet it was never really a language that mother and son shared. She spoke French strangely, estranged, *étranger*, with a strong 'foreign accent' (un accent étranger).²⁰ Perhaps she, with her accent, the foreign accent of the stranger — perhaps she pronounced *la mère* (mother), *l'amour* (love), and *la mort* (death) exactly the same. Perhaps not. In any case, the more attentively one listens, the more they are not different. There is an episode in the famous *Derrida* film by Amy Kofman, supposedly a documentary, in which the director asks Derrida if he has anything to say about love (*l'amour*). Tellingly, Derrida 'mishears' her at first, and he asks back: 'la mort',

18 Ibid., p. 108; p. 94.

19 Ibid., p. 169; p. 157.

20 Ibid., pp. 73–74; pp. 65–66.

death?²¹ *La mère, l'amour, la mort* — words that become distorted and estranged from what one could call their meaning, if one is willing to listen to their reverberations in a foreign language, an other language, in a strange accent, the accent of a stranger, 'my mother's incorrect French.'²²

The telephone scene that evokes and reveals the mother as the other is one that reiterates throughout the narrative — and it haunts not only the narrator, but also the narrator's dreams. Consider episode XIV:

Dans mon sommeil, qui est la musique des tombes, je viens de la voir encore, belle comme en sa jeunesse, mortellement belle et lasse, si tranquille et muette. [...] Elle m'a expliqué que ce n'était de sa faute si elle était morte et qu'elle tâcherait de venir me voir quelquefois. Puis elle m'a assuré qu'elle ne téléphonerait plus à la Comtesse. 'Je ne le ferai plus, je demande pardon', m'a-t-elle dit en regardant ses petites mains où des taches bleues étaient apparues. Je me suis réveillé et toute la nuit j'ai lu des livres pour qu'elle ne revienne pas. Mais je la rencontre dans tous les livres. Va-t'en, tu n'es pas vivante, va-t'en, tu es trop vivante.

(In my sleep, which is the music of tombs, I have just now seen her again, beautiful as in her youth, mortally beautiful and weary, so placid and mute. [...] She explained that it was not her fault that she was dead, and that she would try to come and see me sometimes. Then she assured me she would never again phone the countess. 'I'll never do it again. Please forgive me', she said, looking at her little hand on which blue marks had appeared. I woke and read books all night so that she would not come back. But I find her in all the books. Go away, you are not alive. Go away, you are too alive.)²³

The dreamer, in his dream, encounters an apparition, a spectre, a ghost. Unlike Hamlet, he encounters his mother's ghost, not his father's. And

21 This exchange is reported and commented on in Michal Ben-Naftali, "I Have an Empty Head on Love": The Theme of Love in Derrida, or Derrida and the Literary Space', *Oxford Literary Review*, 40.2 (2018), pp. 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 Jacques Derrida, 'Aphorism Countertime', trans. by Nicholas Royle, in *Acts of Literature*, ed. by Derek Attridge (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 414–33.

22 Cohen, *Book of my Mother*, p. 66.

23 Cohen, *Le Livre de ma mère*, pp. 113–14; Cohen, *Book of my Mother*, pp. 99–100.

unlike Hamlet's father, this ghost does not ask for revenge, but for forgiveness. A spectre is an *autre être*, a strange being (if it is one), in-between life and death.²⁴ The 'hauntology' of this indistinct state of being of an *autre être* is paradoxical: The narrator highlights that his mother's ghost is 'silent and mute' (*si tranquille et muette*) even as she speaks and has a voice. When she speaks, she asks for forgiveness for the telephone call to 'the countess' that haunts the narrator, and that never ceases to haunt him throughout the narrative: a haunted scene of haunting, or a scene of 'haunted writing'.²⁵

And tellingly, this dream scenario is then transferred or transformed into literature: The mother's hands have 'blue marks' (*taches bleues*) — blue like ink, the very ink that the narrator is spreading over his paper, the very ink that is conjuring up the haunted dream image of his dead mother that is in the process of being narrated. In a later episode, his own hands are stained with blue ink from his pen: 'I came back to my table and took up my pen. It leaked, and I have blue marks on my hands.'²⁶ Her hands, like his, have *stigmata*. Ink-stigmata. They are stigmatized as being made of ink, as being literature. Literature is not an escape from death, quite on the contrary. Literature is the residue of the dead. Thus, the scene of haunted writing continues and becomes a scene of haunted reading: 'I woke and read books all night so that she would not come back. But I find her in all the books. Go away, you are not alive. Go away, you are too alive.'²⁷ Literature is a haunted space. It is the space of the mother, 'not alive' and 'too alive' at once. Literature is the space of the mother and therefore of the other.

FILIO-LOGY

For the narrator in Cohen's *Le Livre de ma mère*, 'doing literature' is an act of son-ship. Writing, for him, is a *filio-logy*: the words of a son, *filius*. His

24 Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, trans. by Peggy Kamuf (London: Routledge, 1994).

25 Avital Ronell, *Dictations: On Haunted Writing* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2006).

26 Cohen, *Book of my Mother*, p. 155. The French original, in Cohen, *Le Livre de ma mère*, p. 168, reads: 'Je suis revenu à ma table, et j'ai repris mon stylo. Il a coulé et j'ai des taches bleues sur la main.'

27 Cohen, *Book of my Mother*, p. 100.

words are words of filiation. ‘Fils des mères encore vivantes’, the narrator implores towards the end of his book, ‘n’oubliez pas que vos mères sont mortelles.’²⁸ In Bella Cohen’s English version, this passage reads:

Sons of mothers who are still alive [*fils des mères encore vivantes*], never again forget that your mothers are mortal. I shall not have written in vain if one of you, after reading my song of death, is one evening gentler with his mother [...]. These words addressed to you, sons of mothers who are still alive, are the only condolences I can offer myself.²⁹

The son, *le fils*, is addressing his fellow sons, *les fils*. The narrator is inscribing himself and his work into a line of tradition, of filiation. In French, *les fils*, the plural form of *le fils*, the son, is a homology: *les fils* can also mean ‘the threads’: the threads that make up a texture, a *textum*, a text; the threads that weave a story, as Walter Benjamin would have it³⁰ — a story that is being told, and retold, and re-retold, and gains a life of its own. ‘Fils des mères encore vivantes’ could also be the threads of living mothers: the threads that weave the lives of those mothers who are still alive and still have stories to tell. Words spoken to *les fils* who have living mothers make his ‘song of death’ the narrator’s only comfort, because he knows that *les fils* — both the sons and the threads — will produce the afterlife of his own deceased mother. The weaving will continue.

Philology, like *filio-logy*, is an intense and intimate relation that reveals language’s (motherly) otherness. As Werner Hamacher — whose absent voice I am weaving into this text of mine — said so beautifully in his *95 Theses on Philology*: ‘Philology is inclination not only for another empirical or potentially empirical language but for the otherness of language, for linguisticity as otherness, for language itself as perpetual alteration.’³¹ Perhaps it is here, in the revelation of language’s utter otherness, in the mothering and othering of language, that we truly encounter our mother tongue.

28 Cohen, *Le Livre de ma mère*, p. 169.

29 Cohen, *Book of my Mother*, p. 157.

30 Walter Benjamin, ‘Der Erzähler. Betrachtungen zum Werk Nikolai Lesskows’, in Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser, 7 vols (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1972–91), II.2 (1977), pp. 438–65.

31 Werner Hamacher, ‘95 Theses on Philology’, trans. by Catharine Diehl, *diacritics*, 39.1 (2009), pp. 25–44 (p. 26).

Caroline Sauter, 'The Mother Tongue of Love and Loss: Albert Cohen's *Le Livre de ma mère*', in *Untying the Mother Tongue*, ed. by Antonio Castore and Federico Dal Bo, *Cultural Inquiry*, 26 (Berlin: ICI Berlin Press, 2023), pp. 165–79 <https://doi.org/10.37050/ci-26_8>

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