

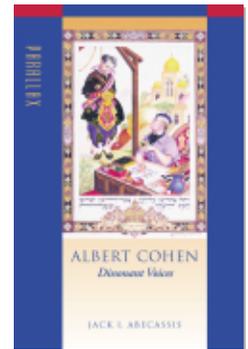


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The true subject of poetry is the loss of the beloved.

Faiz Ahmed Faiz

In 1954, after a literary hiatus of sixteen years, Cohen published his most widely read work, *Le Livre de ma mère*. Given the fact that this autobiographical essay is Cohen's most accessible book, most often quoted, commented upon, and translated, it is useful to understand its rhetorical structure and its historical role in reestablishing Cohen's literary career. This lyrical testimony in memory of his mother inaugurates the second half of his literary life, the first part spanning from *Paroles juives* in 1921 to *Mangeclous* in 1938, and the second part stretching from *Le Livre de ma mère* to *Carnets 1978*. In the interim war period, he published numerous essays in the London-based literary review *La France libre*, including a series of essays entitled "Chant de mort," which form the rough (and sometimes more revealing) draft of *Le Livre de ma mère*.

By making his *rentrée littéraire* via the figure of his dead mother, Cohen pays impassioned tribute to the memory of Louise Cohen, who died of a heart attack on January 10, 1943, four days after 5,000 SS troops entered Marseille. But other reasons for such a *rentrée* may also be surmised. With his usual cavalier self-fashioning, Cohen dictated the book to his new bride, Bella, as a means of sharing with her his filial love of a majestic matron. This is part of the standard Cohen self-mythology—the oriental seigneur dictating the word to his *belle/mère*. His biographers claim that he did not wish immediately to tackle the rewriting of the 3,500-page *Belle du Seigneur*. The sheer task of rewriting the monumental novel after such a long hiatus no doubt seemed daunting, and the work in its original form would surely have received a reception as ambivalent as those of his previous two works. The author of *Solal*

required a more manageable project to follow through on the immense literary promise universally bestowed upon him in 1930.

Cohen's previous two literary endeavors had both ended in either disaster or benign incomprehension. The one-act play *Ézéchiel* (1931–33) tells the story of Jérémie, an itinerant eastern European Jew who is entrusted with the mission of informing the noted banker Ézéchiel of the death of his only son, Solal, a minister in the British cabinet. Although at first well received, the play was soon denounced by many Jews and anti-Semites alike—a painful flop from which Cohen never fully recovered. (See Epilogue for a complete analysis of the play and its reception.)

In 1938, Cohen presented a more nuanced story with the novel *Mangeclous*. The novel *Solal* (1930) had portended such literary talent that Gallimard gave Cohen a long-term contract for eight novels, including a permanent monthly stipend. By 1938, the generous publisher had grown impatient, however, and insisted that Cohen publish something, hence *Mangeclous* was hastily extracted from the sprawling manuscript of *Belle du Seigneur*. As a stand-alone novel, it belies its fragmentary and compressed composition, and, despite certain brilliant episodes, it reads like a rough extract of a novel under construction. Although reviewers such as Marcel Pagnol, Joseph Kessel, and Arnold Mandel hailed *Mangeclous* as an unusually successful farcical novel, its reception rarely exceeded harmless indifference.¹ With Europe on the eve of World War II, Céline's hate-filled *Bagatelles pour un massacre* (1937) and *L'École des cadavres* (1938) resonated more with the reading public than a farcical Jewish self-laceration.

But leaving aside these biographical aspects, *Ézéchiel* and *Mangeclous* share the common feature of aggressive narratives that disallow productive transference on the part of even sympathetic readers. Their belligerence lies in their plots and characters; the reader is aggressively confronted with the horror of being Jewish, with all its masochistic self-deprecation, but without the real comic and romantic relief of seduction and ambition. For a typical reader, Gentile or Jew, a *Mangeclous* or a Jérémie does not represent a suitable object of transference, especially not in the aggressive manner in which he apostrophizes the reader. *Solal* displayed the same hostility, but it had enough sheer charismatic energy to arouse the reader's desire to continue and therefore to sustain transference with this dashing Mediterranean Estheric Joseph, notwithstanding the worms festering in the basement of Saint-Germain. Through its abundant representation of unfettered desire, *Solal* allowed an equilibrium between romantic and grotesque, enabling the reader to assimilate

the narrative into existing discourses. Some saw *Solal* as a Judeo-Mediterranean take on Stendhal and the Gospels, while others understood its darker sides, but all agreed on its inherent mythopoetic dynamism. Unlike *Ézéchiel* and *Mangeclous*, *Solal* was thus a very successful narratological transaction. With *Le Livre de ma mère*, Cohen's "golden quill" (*plume d'or*) again achieves proper stabilization, this time with essayistic rather than novelistic rhetoric, and, given the subject matter, the balancing act proves far more delicate—a task that only the mature Albert Cohen could have handled.

The gamble worked. Cohen's *rentrée littéraire* was a resounding success in France, and the critics conveyed a sense of relief, translated into sheer euphoria. Finally, after so many aggressively grotesque jeremiads and dissonant self-mutilating autos-da-fé, Albert Cohen delivers a lyrical and tender panegyric about filial love, the most readily efficient transference machine: All men are sons, most will bury their mothers, and more than a few harbor ambivalence toward them. All expect to mourn. Indeed, one can scarcely find a more universal topic. "The great success and audacity of Albert Cohen is to have written a chef-d'œuvre on the most common of commonplaces," Marcel Pagnol declared.² On a similarly triumphant note, Georges Altmann asserted that "André Gide, that petit-bourgeois Lucifer, proclaimed one day that one cannot make good literature with fine sentiments. Many works, past and present, disprove this sally. *Le Livre de ma mère* is one of them."³ While I agree that *Le Livre de ma mère* is a great literary achievement, I remain skeptical about rescuing "the most common of commonplaces" from banality and about the triumph of "fine sentiments" over the literature of suspicion and cruel redescription. I see *Le Livre de ma mère* as cut from the same cloth as the rest of Cohen's literary corpus: it remains dissonant, disturbing, and self-mutilating, and although Cohen here seduces readers into believing that they have identified with a tender, filial panegyric, they are in fact made to witness one of the most excruciatingly cruel mourning testimonies in the history of belles lettres. Why should this come as a surprise? *Le Livre de ma mère* is, after all, a book of mourning, and, except in the most propitious circumstances, dissonant ambivalence is the hallmark of incomplete mourning. That a great poet should give this searing experience its highest literary representation and insight should hardly seem surprising. What does come as a surprise, however, is the resistance on the part of most serious readers to reading the actual words on the page at the most literal level.

Incipit

The first sentence of this lyrical essay is unequivocal: "Every man is alone and no one gives a damn about anyone and our sorrows are a desert island."^{*4} The phrasing of the sentence is insistent and builds into a crescendo. "Every man," the subject, by definition excludes no one, from the worst SS butcher to the author. The particular melts into the general, and vice versa. An existential state, universal and permanent, it engulfs all subjectivity and intersubjectivity. The predicate of the universal subject "every man" is the state of isolation, "alone." Solidarity is therefore excluded. Moving from the subject's state of being to its intentional action, Cohen postulates that "no one gives a damn about anyone." Notice the overdetermination and powerful symmetry of the pronouns "*tous se fichent de tous*": "no one" and "anyone" articulated by the strong verb, "to give a damn." Again, empathy, sympathy, passion are all merely a lure—at heart we are all encrusted in our narcissistic shells, forever aggressive and egoistic. The third term of the proposition presents pain as incommunicable, and the one who suffers as separated from all others by a sea of indifference. This is indeed a surprising incipit for a lyrical panegyric on the theme of the mother; a rather gloomy metaphysical coefficient for a book supposedly pervaded by "fine sentiments"!

I can well imagine a more sympathetic reading of this incipit. An attentive reader of Cohen could intuit here another cry of rage against death, the indifference of nature, and the supposed absurdity of life. Pervasively, such sentences typify Cohen's cavalier metaphysical gestures. True, such a generic reading echoes Cohen's morbid and nihilistic metaphysics. However, it does not do justice to its relevance here. No generic dismissal will do, for the whole narrative is a function of this epigrammatic and programmatic proposition. Reduced to its elementary particles, *Le Livre de ma mère* tells the story of a subject and a predicate: the subject, "every man," includes the narrator (son) as well as the narratee (mother) and has the metaphysical predicate of "being alone" and "not giving a damn." Period. Such is the proposition that launches this essay and that, I argue, acts as a coefficient for all its seemingly benign and nostalgic content. But this inaugural sentence is merely the first of three crucial rhetorical moves that lay the foundation for the dynamic logic of the text.

Next follows one of Albert Cohen's most often cited *beaux mots*, the poetically cadenced apostrophizing of the author's pen:

*Chaque homme est seul et tous se fichent de tous et nos douleurs sont une île déserte. (*LM*, 701)

Magnificent, you, my golden quill, go over the page, go at random while I still have some youth, go your slow irregular way, hesitant as if in a dream, erratic but controlled wandering. Go, I love you, my sole consolation, go over the pages where sorrowfully I amuse myself and in whose cross-eye I gloomily revel.*

Writing alleviates the desolation of being. We may figuratively exist in a desert or on an isolated island; we may shut the door, cork the walls in the manner of Proust (and of the later Cohen)—writing remains our sole consolation. We can understand this in the very abstract Heideggerean sense in which poetry is the only authentic language of Being. But, more narrowly, the “golden quill” is the instrument of a literary *ruse*, an instrument of seduction. Through the revealing and hiding made possible by the protean golden quill, the painful truth of being is playfully represented. Desire abounds in this poetic playfulness: “hesitant as if in a dream, erratic but controlled wandering . . . I amuse myself . . . I gloomily revel [*morosement me délecte*].” The shattering truth of the initial metaphysical proposition must be mediated by a morosely magnificent golden quill, which both delights the author and woos the reader by pretending to speak the latter’s language. And yet the disturbing truth, this time told with even greater effect, lies in the sensual folds of subtle writing.

Gone are the days of Cohen the Cynic apostrophizer. The golden quill now softens the pain of recounting the story of his mother, so that the truth of Albert and Louise Cohen may be spoken in a double language: in his own and also in that of his readers. Henceforth, the golden quill mediates between the narcissistic and masochistic desire to tell it all *here and now* and the inherent limitations of the historical and rhetorical expectations of the reading public. The reality principle gains power over Cohen and propels him to a different aesthetics. He no longer drowns his readers in grotesque dissonance but instead refines his skills of concealment and disclosure, of doubling and masking, as a self-conscious poetic of writing.⁵

Cohen frankly admits to this doubling and conceit on the very first page. There are the diurnal Cohen and the nocturnal Cohen: “And in a general way, I tell each one that each one is charming. Such are my daytime manners. But during my nights and dawns, I do not think about it any less.”† Enlighten-

*Somptueuse, toi, ma plume d’or, va sur la feuille, va au hasard tandis que j’ai quelque jeunesse encore, va ton lent cheminement irrégulier, hésitant comme en rêve, cheminement gauche mais commandé. Va, je t’aime, ma seule consolation, va sur les pages où tristement je me complais et dont le strabisme morosement me délecte. (*LM*, 701–2)

†Et, d’une manière générale, je dis à chacun que chacun est charmant. Telles sont mes mœurs diurnes. Mais dans mes nuits et mes aubes je n’en pense pas moins. (*LM*, 701)

ment springs from obscurity: Light masks the necessary lies—and writing meshes truth and pretense in an eternal game of hide-and-seek. This willed doubleness and self-conscious concealment are paradigmatic to telling the truth in a rhetorically affective manner. The golden quill commands toward the end of the first chapter: “speak of your mother in *their serene manner*, whistle a bit to believe that things are not all that bad, and above all smile, don’t forget to smile.”* Thus a chapter that commences with a stark metaphysical proposition ends with rhetorical legerdemain. The truth will be told, but in *their* “calme manière,” digestible and gratifying, a bitter pill, to be sure, but coated with enough sugar to make it seem appetizing.

Louise and Her Husband

To tell his mother’s story, Cohen must start with the sordid family history. The Coens emigrated from Corfu to Marseille in 1900 when Albert was five years old. Upon their arrival, whatever money they had was lost to a fraudulent “blond businessman whose nose was not hooked” (*LM*, 712). They soon occupied a modest apartment three stories above their egg business, where Marc and Louise painfully eked out a meager existence. As an uneducated petty merchant, Cohen’s father cut a shabby figure, and he soon became the object of the little boy’s spite.⁶ In *Le Livre de ma mère*, Cohen remains negative but circumspect about his father, dismissing him primarily as “her husband” (*son mari*). But in his *Carnets 1978*, Albert Cohen loses all pity or mercy when describing his father. This passage warrants quoting in full, because it illuminates the specific nature of the bond uniting son and mother against the tyrannical father. This passage also points to the origin of Cohen’s lifelong phobia about all animal domination, the detestable natural order:

Yes, when he entered, he was the male and the tamer with a thick mustache that he loved to obscenely curl, and his curls upset me. He asked too much of my mother, too much of this servant without pay. . . .

Oh, the dreadful day when, having found that the moussaka was not authentic and not like that made by a celebrated great-aunt Rebecca, the picky gastronomist indignantly all of a sudden yanked the entire tablecloth toward himself to punish the imperfect moussaka. Oh, the verdict in the mute child’s unmoving gaze. And I still see my gentle mother on her knees, pale with guilt, picking up the debris of the dishes and scattered food, and the

**Raconte ta mère à leur calme manière, siffote un peu pour croire que tout ne va pas si mal que ça, et surtout souris, n’oublie pas de sourire.* (*LM*, 703; emphasis added)

pools of wine and oil, while the child silently watched the emperor of a defenseless woman.*

And even the few tender moments with the father could not be more pregnant with meaning. Albert plays the “barber” who styles and pretends to shear the hairy male, who obscenely caresses his “thick mustaches,” metonymy for his animalistic maleness and domination. This constitutes Albert’s first experience of the natural order, which he later repeatedly derides as the world of baboons. Like a submissive male, the little son grooms the dominant alpha to appease him so that he may steal a few minutes with a coveted female. Albert hated Marc Coen for being “the male and the tamer [*dompteur*] with a thick mustache” and “the emperor of a defenseless woman.” Cohen’s lifelong obsession with the evil of the natural order, the baboonery of the Social, was thus born very early in his own family, and not, as he sometimes pretends, in the pagan and/or Christian world of European wealth, power, and erotic ideals. The family romance opposition between the autobiographical real father and the fictional Rabbi Gamaliel is striking, for Marc Coen dominates like an alpha male, whereas Rabbi Gamaliel clearly admonishes against arbitrary physical power. Moreover, Cohen’s fictional identity-phantasm (Solal) endlessly oscillates between the two fathers, forever exercising alpha male power over Ariane while denouncing its use to her, as in the famous Ritz seduction scene in *Belle du Seigneur*. Marc Coen’s violence frequently surfaces in Solal’s imperious handling of his female captives, because the romantic protagonist remains forever caught between the father’s sadism and the son’s moral masochism. The ghost of the father does not easily vanish.

After his wife’s death in 1943, Marc Coen escaped from Marseille and hid with relatives in the south of France for the remainder of the war. All told, between 1930 and his father’s death in 1953, Cohen saw his father only once, for a few minutes, at a train station cafeteria.

*Oui, lorsqu’il entra, il était le mâle et dompteur aux fortes moustaches qu’il aimait obscènement retrousser, et ses retroussis bravaches me déplaisaient. Il demandait trop de ma mère, trop de travail de cette servante sans gages. . . .

Ô le jour affreux où, ayant trouvé que la moussaka servie n’était pas conforme et telle que la cuisinait une célèbre grand-tante Rebecca, le pointilleux gastronome avait, d’indignation, tiré à lui, d’un seul coup, toute la nappe à titre d’amende pour moussaka imparfaite. Ô la sentence dans le regard immobile de l’enfant muet. Et je revois encore ma douce mère à genoux, pâle de culpabilité, ramassant les débris d’assiettes et les nourritures étendues, et les flaques d’huile et de vin, pendant que l’enfant en silence regardait l’empereur d’une femme sans défense. (*Carnets 1978*, 1132)

The tyrant and his *belle*, these “[t]wo escapees from the Orient,”* were completely lost in France, excluded from all social orders, Jewish or Gentile, Greek or French. They did have some distant family relations in Marseille but soon avoided them altogether. Too proud and dignified (she was the daughter of a notable), Louise Coen could not suffer her relatives’ ostentatious display of wealth and hubris, which cruelly highlighted her own poverty. Marc Coen preferred evenings at a bridge club to cultivating social relationships of any sort, and so virtually no one was ever invited to the Coens’ apartment. And, besides, they settled in France while the Dreyfus Affair still raged, raising pervasive anti-Semitism to a paroxysm that only the Vichy regime would match. Two significant dates bracket Louise Coen’s “French” existence: in 1900, she disembarked, at a time when the Dreyfus Affair still aroused considerable passion, and in 1943, she expired, just when Vichy allowed thousands of SS to begin the “cleansing” of Marseille.

Albert spent most of his free time alone while Louise toiled in the shop from dawn to dusk, chaffing under the rule of the mustached tyrant. Every morning, the child followed a routine carefully orchestrated by her: first a long bath in a zinc basin, a careful getting dressed, then breakfast and a viewing of the daily “letter” left by Louise, usually containing drawings, such as the not too random image of “a boat carrying the little Albert, miniscule besides a giant nougat, all for him”†—substitute woman for “nougat” and you have the Solalic identity-phansm. The mother’s fantastic animal stories set the child’s mind adrift. He filled her absence with . . . himself. His best friend became Albert, and he spent many hours in front of the mirror contemplating this handsome, well-groomed friend.

But the precocious Narcissus also wrote. His eyes transfixed on his own image in the mirror, he traced letters in midair with his fingers, continuation of and responses to his mother’s drawings. The finger tracing letters in the air replaces the mother’s language, her endless stories, with which she tried to drown her despair. Absence and suffering engendered writing, both early on in his relation to Louise and, above all, after her death. Writing became a playful game of primal language, just as the mother’s drawings traced primal fantasies:

I need some minor entertainment at once. Doesn’t matter what. Yes, let’s hear some absurd little singing to the tune of that French song, the church

*[c]es deux échappés d’Orient (*LM*, 716)

†un bateau transportant le petit Albert, minuscule à côté d’un gigantesque nougat tout pour lui (*LM*, 712–13)

rooster or I don't know what. I have a depressingly good time by myself inventing cows who do strange things, and in terms that always end in "-ays." A cow in love in church lazily Bays. An Andalusian cow Dances like a good wife in sickly ways. An obese cow Plays on trapeze-trays in the most thoughtful of ways.*

This playful game of accumulation of pure signifiers, echoing the maternal morning pictograms of long ago, is the unformed magma of Cohen's Mangeclousian logorrhea. These stories are the mother's great gift to her child, and he spends the rest of his life writing both with and against and below and above his mother: "I had been placed on this earth to listen to my mother's interminable stories."† So many of her utterances are ever so slightly transposed into his writings, usually assigned to Saltiel and Mangeclous, when not directly to the prophet Solal.

The First Couple: Union unto Life

Albert's world is defined by the feminine. The father's tyrannical intrusions are nothing but that—intrusions, momentarily violating the fabric of real and imaginary femininity. Chapter 1 has alluded to Albert's early education in a convent of loving Catholic nuns, who not only taught him French but, perhaps equally important, made him conscious of his bearing; he learned to walk with studied poise, his eyes and gait all dignity and purpose. A first lesson in dandyism was thus thoroughly absorbed. But, alas, the sisters' love was not unconditional; they silently regretted his Jewishness, which made of him by definition a lost soul, albeit endearing and even seductive. We have also noted his imaginary blonde playmate Viviane, the perfect infantile *mise-en-abyme* of all the future fictional Arianes, who, like her, deflate as fantasies when Albert is undone by anti-Semitism. Only Louise's love would be real, enduring, and unconditional. An island of serenity for son and mother, this love was the only sliver of the real that both relished without any ambivalence, at least prior to Albert's tenth birthday, when he understood, humiliated and helpless, that his parents were unable to protect him.

*Il me faut un petit divertissement sur-le-champ. N'importe quoi. Oui, faire de petits chants absurdes sur l'air de cette chanson française, le coq de l'église ou je ne sais quoi. M'amuser neurasthéniquement tout seul en inventant des vaches qui font des choses étranges et d'un air qui finit toujours en if. Une vache éprise Chante dans l'église D'un air lascif. Une vache andalouse Danse en bonne épouse D'un air chétif. Une vache obèse S'élance en trapèze D'un air pensif. (*LM*, 756)

†J'ai été mis sur terre pour écouter les interminables histoires de ma mère. (*LM*, 750)

To call Albert and Louise a “couple” is hardly overreaching. (As with most complex psychological representations in Cohen’s autobiographical essays, readers need not resort here to the allegorical and the symbolic—all they need do is simply read the text at its most literal level.) Albert is Louise’s only friend, and she is his only friend. They form a perfectly symmetrical couple; two isolated strangers, bereft of any company except for each other. For these two awkward, oriental “simpletons” (*nigauds*), lost as they are in a world at best indifferent to their existence, the maternal-filial dimension is treated as purely incidental. An examination of a few of their outings is in order.

Louise is then (1900–1905) a ravishing young woman. Albert “remembers how [he] had found her beautiful, my young mother . . . [he] found the most beautiful mother in the world” when she came to pick him up from the convent.* In the street, Louise and Albert are now free of “her husband,” free of all constraints, but oppressed by all the other people in the street, in cafes, and in theaters, for whom the strange couple, the Jews, simply do not exist. No one recognizes them, acknowledges them, speaks to them. They insinuate themselves on the sly among these others, who are utterly oblivious of these oriental phantoms who want above all to belong (*en être*) to a crowd (like Albert in the street hawker scene). The most obvious space of communion is a movie theater, where they can laugh and cry with the crowd, yet remain invisible and anonymous in the dark: “We were social nothings, isolated ones without any contact with the exterior. So, in the winter, we would go every Sunday to the movies, my mother and I, two friends, two gentle, timid ones, seeking in the obscurity of these three hours at the theater a substitute [*succédané*] for this social life that had been refused to us. How this shared misfortune, and until now unavowed, could bind me to my mother.”†

I am struck by the Cohenian intratextual dimension of this text. Just transpose characters and tone, and instead of describing the autobiographical Albert and Louise circa 1902, we might be describing the fictional Solal and Ariane circa 1936, self-exiled from Geneva, in a sleazy small-town cinema in the south of France, pretending to be happy for a brief moment, a part of the Social, any Social:

*me rappelle comme [il] l’avai[t] trouvée belle, ma jeune maman . . . [il] l’avai[t] trouvée la plus belle maman du monde. (“Chant de mort,” *France libre* 2 [July 15, 1943]: 189)

†On était des rien du tout sociaux, des isolés sans nul contact avec l’extérieur. Alors, en hiver, nous allions tous les dimanches au théâtre, ma mère et moi, deux amis, deux doux et timides, cherchant obscurément dans ces trois heures de théâtre un succédané de cette vie sociale qui nous était refusée. Que ce malheur partagé, et jusqu’à présent inavoué, peut m’unir à ma mère. (*LM*, 717)

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw his unique society, so pure in profile, moving. What had they come to do in this dreadful cinema? . . . [T]he two lovers spoke about the film to escape the embarrassment of silence, spoke so artificially that a feeling of decay [*déchéance*] invaded Solal. There they were, the two of them, seated, commenting on the film in hushed voices, exceptional, elegant, disinherited among the joyous plebeians, [who] chattered fraternally and self-confidently, messily licking their Eskimo Pies. He realized that he was speaking in an ashamed voice, like a ghetto Jew fearful of drawing attention to himself. She also had become humble, whispered as he did, and he understood that the unconscious of this unhappy woman knew that they were outcasts.*

In fact, the last third of *Belle du Seigneur* portrays a tedious and comic social game where a couple that is excluded from the Social pretends to belong to it at all costs, by just sheer contiguity, just by being there, next to insiders who belong. Thus this pariahlike isolation within a hostile crowd—Cohen's signature early experience with his mother and then with the street hawker—replicates itself almost to the very details with Ariane in Agay and Nice, as it has in fact long before with Aude subsequent to Solal's demise in the first novel. (Ariane in fact becomes the Jewess that Aude resisted being at all cost.) Whatever the circumstances or rhetoric (novelistic or essayistic), the same narrative centered on "the depression of this dual solitude"† repeats itself in an intratextual web that violates chronological order and genre boundaries.

Excluded and lonely, but highly theatrical, the son and his mother play at being part of the Social, as if the social world were simply a costume ball, the right attire being the only prerequisite for admittance: "On this particular Sunday, my mother and I were ridiculously well dressed, and I reflect with pity on these two naïve people of yesteryear, so unnecessarily well dressed, for no one took any notice of them. They dressed themselves up so finely for no one."‡

*Du coin de l'œil, il regarda son unique société, si pure de profil, attendrissante. Qu'étaient-ils venus faire dans cet affreux cinéma. . . . [L]es deux amants parlèrent du film pour échapper à la gêne du silence, en parlèrent artificiellement cependant qu'un sentiment de déchéance envahissait Solal. Ils étaient là, tous deux, assis, commentant à voix basse le film, exceptionnels, élégants, déshérités parmi la plèbe joyeuse, fraternellement babillante et sûre d'elle, salement léchant ses esquimaux. Il s'aperçut qu'il parlait à voix honteuse, comme un Juif de ghetto craignant d'attirer l'attention. Elle aussi était devenue humble, chuchotait comme lui, et il comprit que l'inconscient de cette malheureuse savait qu'ils étaient des rejetés. (*BdS*, 762–63)

†La neurasthénie de cette solitude à deux (*LM*, 719)

‡En ce dimanche, ma mère et moi nous étions ridiculement bien habillés et je considère avec pitié ces deux naïfs d'antan, si inutilement bien habillés, car personne n'était avec eux, personne ne se préoccupait d'eux. Ils s'habillaient très bien pour personne. (*LM*, 717)

The social world becomes a mute theater where the two “orientals” operate as if they were invisible ghosts incapable of communicating with the living. The outside world exists only as a backdrop, or even a foil, for this *solitude à deux*, which the two pretend is an idyllic existence, despite their tacit admission of the contrary. Recall that in *Ô vous, frères humains*, Cohen refers to his childhood before the violent incident on his tenth birthday as idyllic. To be excluded tacitly is easier to bear than an explicit and violent exclusion. Even in its most hostile moment, tacit exclusion allows for hope, whereas violent exclusion, once things are publicly said and done, shuts out all possibilities. It makes the unsayable all too palpable. For Albert and Louise to continue with their happy courtship, blinders are necessary to prevent their noticing the graffiti on the walls: DEATH TO THE JEWS!

The pariah couple replaces the social world through verbal simulation, creating an “as if” society, a fiction, to chase away the demons of exclusion. Unable to speak to or with the others, they speak to each other about the others: “Simpletons [*nigauds*], yes, but who loved each other. And we talked, we talked, we made comments about the other patrons [of the café], we talked in low voices, so wise and well educated, we talked, happy. . . but with a certain hidden sadness, which perhaps came from the confused feeling that each was the other’s sole social company. Why be thus isolated?”*

But talk soon turns into silence, to the passivity of gazing and listening: never recognized, the pariahs are reduced to a purely specular and auditory position. They can gaze and listen, vicariously participate in the crowd, but never be of the crowd, not even on the most abstract level. The others are literally refractory to them, their impenetrable surface reflecting back to these *nigauds* the image of their social nullity. “Seated at this green table, we observed the other patrons, we tried to listen to what they said, not because of some vulgar curiosity but because of a thirst for human companionship, to be just a little, from afar, their friends. We would really have loved to belong.”†

These passages from *Le Livre de ma mère* clarify the prelude to the central episode of *Ô vous, frères humains* concerning Albert’s absolute yearning to be a part of the crowd that gathers around the street hawker. His only communion

*Nigauds, oui, mais on s’aimait. Et on parlait, on parlait, on faisait des commentaires sur les autres consommateurs, on parlait à voix basse, très sages et bien élevés, on parlait, heureux, . . . mais avec quelque tristesse secrète, qui venait peut-être du sentiment confus que chacun était l’unique société de l’autre. Pourquoi ainsi isolés? (*LM*, 718)

†Assis à cette table verte, nous observions les autres consommateurs, nous tâchions d’entendre ce qu’ils disaient, non par vulgaire curiosité mais par soif de compagnie humaine, pour être un peu, de loin, leurs amis. Nous aurions tant voulu en être. (*LM*, 718–19)

with the crowd takes place when he piously kneels at his altar of the Republic, gazing upon the portraits of Corneille and Hugo, hidden and protected well in the comfort and security of his room.

Yet amid all this hate and indifference the “neurosthénique” couple stubbornly persists in the phantasm of happiness. “I see myself at the age of ten. I had a girl’s wide eyes, cheeks flushed with iridescent peach, a suit in the style of La Belle Jardinière, a sailor suit with a white braid from which a whistle hung.”* Already mannered and somewhat feminine, the dashing boy basks in his mother’s presence, even if it is amid a sea of (as yet unspoken) hatred.⁷

Tender Interlude: Shabbath

Out in the streets, Louise and Albert were refugees—foreign, oriental, Jewish—but also free of the mustached tyrant. They were refugees twice over, as foreigners and as the son and wife of Marc Coen. Refugees as Jews and as (phantasmagorically speaking) lovers. The apartment is always potentially hostile territory, because Louise can at a moment’s notice be summoned to slave in the dungeon. The “neurosthénique” couple find temporary refuge in the streets, in cafés, and in theaters, ominous and passively hostile though they are (DEATH TO THE JEWS!). These were probably the settings of Albert Cohen’s happiest moments in that pre-tenth-birthday idyll. Yet there is Shabbath: a temporality when the reconciliation of the incongruent is possible.

Cohen’s description of Shabbath, both during his early childhood and during the 1920s (when he occasionally visited his parents), is the most lyrically touching description of the Coens’ home: all conflicts evaporate; sanctified serenity reigns, as if this singular day is exempt from the dreadful regime of the real:

On Friday afternoon, which for the Jews marks the beginning of the holy day of Shabbath, she would make herself beautiful and ornate, my mother. She would put on her solemn black silk dress and . . . her jewelry. . . . Having finished decorating her humble apartment for the Shabbath, which was her Jewish kingdom and her poor fatherland, she would be sitting, my mother, all alone, before the ceremonial table of the Shabbath, and, ceremonious, she would be waiting for her son and for her husband. Seated and forcing a wise immobility so as not to disturb her lovely ornaments . . . moved

*Je me revois en mes dix ans. J’avais de grands yeux de fille, des joues de pêches irisées, un costume de la Belle Jardinière, costume marin pourvu d’une tresse blanche qui retenait un sifflet. (“Le Jour de mes dix ans,” *France libre* 10, no. 57 [July 16, 1945]: 195)

by the idea of soon pleasing her two loves, her husband and her son . . . moved like a small girl during an awards ceremony.*

The topos of the home as a sanctuary and rampart against ambient hostility recurs often in Diaspora Jewish fiction: the Coens' Shabbath domesticity is a highly charged variation of this. More interesting for our purposes, the paradisiacal parenthetical lull that the Shabbath represents has theological underpinnings that are highly pertinent to many strands in Cohen's thought. In brief, Jews in biblical times did not much believe in the afterlife. Hebrew Scriptures make no mention of the afterlife ("Sheol" means a dark hole more than "afterlife") and its presence in Jewish liturgy, mysticism, and postbiblical theology is mostly derived from ambient Zoroastrianism, Neoplatonism, and Christianity. In classical Judaism, as in Cohen's oft-repeated assertion, death is final, no promise can remedy its irrevocability. "Dust unto dust"; "As they came from their mother's womb, so they shall go again, naked as they came" (Eccles. 5: 15).⁸ Classical Judaism focuses on the concrete *here and now*—whatever paradise there is or might be exists in this life, and principally during the Shabbath. Sparks of divine rapture occur weekly; paradise is not a posthistorical promise to come at the end of time. Unlike the Christian and Islamic postmortem heaven (or hell or postmessianic timelessness), Shabbath takes place in a real historical and psychological temporality. Mirroring the order of creation, it exists in opposition to the other six days of the week, which are characterized by agonistic toil. It is a weekly exodus from the regime of real into that of appeased, sanctified desire, sacred but only too immanent. The Shabbath is, then, a periodic suspension of the regime of necessity, suffering, and resentment. The egg shop closes, time slows down, and as the males pray, reconciled with each other in the presence of the divine, the son overcomes his categorical condemnation of his father ("Oh, the verdict in the mute child's unmoving gaze") and Louise becomes the sanctified queen of her own domain, seated between her two loves, who now face each other in the presence of Shabbath. Louise's life, most of all in the earlier period, was this Cinderella-like oscillation between humiliating work and royal sanctification, which so

*L'après-midi du vendredi, qui est chez les Juifs le commencement du saint jour de sabbat, elle se faisait belle et ornée, ma mère. Elle mettait sa solennelle robe de soie noire et . . . ses bijoux. . . . Ayant fini d'orner pour le sabbat son humble appartement qui était son juif royaume et sa pauvre patrie, elle était assise, ma mère, toute seule, devant la table cérémonieuse du sabbat et, cérémonieuse, elle attendait son fils et son mari. Assise et se forçant à une sage immobilité pour ne point déranger sa belle parure . . . émue de plaire bientôt à ses deux amours, son mari et son fils . . . émue comme une petite fille de distribution de prix. (*LM*, 703–4)

closely echoes the undulation in Cohen's main Jewish characters—be it Rachel in the underground (see Chapter 5) or Mangeclous on Cephalonia. The communion meals that are not quite eaten with the Valorous are consumed on the Shabbath eve; once a week, dissonance is suspended from sundown to sundown.

Cohen purposefully dovetails this elegy of the sabbatically sanctified Louise with a marked contrast to Ariane. Something axiomatic is at stake here. The difference between the two women is not reducible to sociological or historical categories. Rather, they point toward Cohen's moral and metaphysical themes:

This woman, who had been young and lovely, was a daughter of the Law of Moses, of the moral law, which to her was more important than God. Therefore, it was not a loving love, not a joke à la Anna Karenina. . . . She had not married for love. She had been married and had submissively accepted. And the biblical love had been born, so different from my Western passions. The saintly love of my mother has been born in the marriage, had grown with the birth of the baby that I was, blossomed in the alliance formed with her dear husband against unhappy life. There are whirling and sunny passions. There is no greater love.*

Louise is a daughter of the Law; Ariane is a devotee of salvation through romance. Whereas Louise is constrained in many tangible ways, including religious ostracism, hard labor, and patriarchal tyranny, Ariane pretends to live beyond the constraints of time, place, or scarcity. For Louise, the Shabbath exists in contrast to the other six days; Ariane seeks to live in a perpetual Shabbath where constraints are only exercised to engender yet more desire—the Law is superseded by salvation onto desire (the religion of romance, a variation on Christian theology). This is the regime of the “loving loves” (*amours amoureuses*), the “joke à la Anna Karenina”—an endless Shabbath, orgy of will, freed from any hint of the lower functions of the body, from any reference to money and scarcity, from the tension between prose and poetry, caught in the domestic comedy of keeping things permanently and poetically magical. Cohen would satirize this ad infinitum in *Belle du Seigneur*, as demonstrated in this particularly telling satire of Ariane's perpetual denial of prose: “If, by chance, the conversation related to some prosaic subject, the

*Cette femme, qui avait été jeune et jolie, était une fille de la Loi de Moïse, de la Loi morale qui avait pour elle plus d'importance que Dieu. Donc, pas d'amours amoureuses, pas de blagues à l'Anna Karénine. . . . Elle ne s'était pas mariée par amour. On l'avait mariée et elle avait docilement accepté. Et l'amour biblique était né, si différent de mes occidentales passions. Le saint amour de ma mère était né dans le mariage, avait crû avec la naissance du bébé que je fus, s'était épanoui dans l'alliance avec son cher mari contre la vie méchante. Il y a des passions tournoyantes et ensoleillées. Il n'y a pas de plus grand amour. (*LM*, 705–6)

guardian of values [Ariane] persisted in noble language. She would say 'photograph' and never 'photo,' 'cinematograph' and never 'cinema,' and 'movie' even less. She would also call her linen underwear 'angelics,' trousers being an unutterable word."^{*}

This Genevan mixture of salvation and spirituality coupled with pagan, albeit refined, carnal desire, this aristocratic ease in the world and sense of natural entitlement to the permanent Shabbath, is the complete antithesis of Louise's general dis-ease with everything except for her son and her home—a prosaic dis-ease illuminated perhaps by periodic sparks of sabbatical bliss, but that remains forever (under)grounded in the *agon* of estrangement, just as Louise's fictional kin (Solal's family, the Valorous, the dwarf Rachel) are under(grounded) in dis-ease in the cellars of Saint Germain and Berlin.

The Shabbath scene in particular would make highly evocative and palatable reading were it not for Cohen's "golden quill," which stains them with just enough bitterness-laced lyricism to render them unsettling. Yet even here, before it all collapsed on his tenth birthday, the reader senses in the essayist's description and attitude this hesitation between the *morality of nobility* and the *morality of resentment*, between the ridiculous and the sublime Louise, that dissonant oscillation so pervasive in the novelist's ambivalent attitude toward origin and destiny, between "the glory of Israel" and "the catastrophe of being Jewish." Such, then, is the description of the Shabbath scene, the least conflicted scene in *Le Livre de ma mère*. What follows takes a decidedly moribund turn, the signature rhetoric of an endless and ambivalent mourning.

The Second Couple: Separation

In 1914, Albert left Marseille to study law and literature in Geneva. As we have seen, he was naturalized Swiss in 1919 and married Elisabeth Brocher, daughter of a Protestant pastor. Two years later, Elisabeth gave birth to Myriam, Albert Cohen's only child. But in 1924, Elisabeth succumbed to lymphatic cancer and the three-year-old Myriam spent the following six years or so in the care of Cohen's in-laws. Cohen spent the next two years particularly active as a poet, essayist, and editor, before obtaining a post in the International Labor Organization in 1926. For the first time in his life, living in a

^{*}Si, d'aventure, la conversation portait sur quelque sujet prosaïque, la gardienne des valeurs [Ariane] persistait dans le langage noble. C'est ainsi qu'elle disait photographie et non photo, cinématographe et non cinéma et encore moins ciné. C'est ainsi encore qu'elle appelait des angéliques ses petits sous-vêtements de linon, pantalons étant un mot indicible. (*BdS*, 819)

comfortable apartment, he was economically and socially secure and seemed to lead a dashing social life. This situation formed the background for the second series of encounters with Louise in the mid to late 1920s. Older now and suffering from a bad heart condition, she visited Albert in Geneva once a year—alone, of course.

Between roughly 1905 and 1925, Albert and Louise naturally grew apart: he was now a dashing diplomat; she remained a timid shopkeeper's wife. Being with his mother now seemed more like work than heaven, more an exercise of will than the grace of mutual complicity. Even in the best of circumstances, attachment to one's mother at age thirty differs substantially from that of early to mid childhood. Yet the gulf between Albert and Louise transcended ordinary developmental logic. It involved Cohen's newly adopted European identity, the essence of which was its opposition to the Orient, greatly compounded in this case by the fact that Louise was not simply an oriental, but a semi-literate Jew who spoke poor French. A social liability, she was decidedly unpresentable in good society.

The oriental-occidental chiasmus, with all its multifaceted connotations, now defined their relationship and acted as the arena for an elaborate identity game. The newly minted European diplomat, lover of countesses and dazzling Dianas, and the aging Sephardic Jewess, wife of the egg merchant Marc Coen, sought to relieve each other's anxiety. First, Louise attempted to disguise her orientalisms: "She is disguised as a respectable occidental lady, but it is from ancient Canaan that she comes, and she does not know it."* Albert returns the favor by orientaling himself as much as he can: "To put her at ease, I made myself entirely oriental with her. On occasion we would perhaps even munch salted pistachios on the street surreptitiously, like two good old Mediterranean relatives."† But Louise always feared embarrassing her dashing European diplomat of a son: "Poor mother, you were so scared of upsetting me, of not being occidental enough for my liking."‡

Clearly, then, Albert Cohen had to manage his mother's presence, maneuvering around social land mines whenever she was in town. As we have seen in detail, his novels are replete with many possible permutations of "when

*Elle est déguisée en dame convenable d'Occident mais c'est d'un antique Canaan qu'elle arrive et elle ne le sait pas. (*LM*, 732)

†Pour la mettre à l'aise, 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. (*LM*, 727)

‡Pauvre Maman, tu avais si peur de me déplaire, de n'être pas assez occidentale à mon gré. (*LM*, 735)

Cephalonia comes calling.” Cohen’s case is more subtle than the usual one in which an assimilated Jew does his best to conceal his origin, when he does not outright convert to Christianity or to secular ideology—aestheticism, republicanism, or socialism. Cohen never hid his Jewishness. He was, on the contrary, already active in significant Jewish and Zionist causes in the early 1920s, serving inter alia as the chief editor of *La Revue juive*, for which Einstein and Freud both wrote. Yet the trauma of the street hawker made it clear to Albert Cohen that, to his eternal desolation, he was neither then nor could ever be French. Neutral, decentralized, cosmopolitan Switzerland, especially Geneva, therefore suited him perfectly. No need then to constantly define himself against a universal republican ideology.

Where then did this ambivalence about Judaism originate? Conceptually, it most certainly derived from the discrepancy Cohen perceived between the ancient glory and contemporary catastrophe of Jews. Going from the biblical matriarch Rachel to her modern descendents, be it the insane fictional mother in *Solal* or Rachel the vampire, the dwarf hunchback in the Berlin cellar in *Belle du Seigneur* (see Chapter 5), Cohen cannot but bitterly reflect on this abyssal difference. Three possible paths pointed toward “normalization”: assimilation into Gentile liberal democracies, socialist revolution, or Jewish nationalism. For Cohen, Zionism was the only realistic political path from the state of being pathological Jews to that of normalized Hebrews. Cohen’s equation of Jewish life in the Diaspora (in eastern Europe in particular) with a form of pathology is consistent with many Jewish writers of the late nineteenth century. This context best explains Cohen’s obsessive reiteration of his corrective desire to “show the glory of Israel to those who only see Jews,” a desire dating back to his 1921 lyrical poetry in *Paroles juives*.

But the idiosyncratic dimension here is more interesting. Although Louise viewed her successful son as purely occidental, his own identity montage was more complex: impeccably Western and virile in appearance, he concurrently and alternatively played the oriental tyrant and the narcissistic female, hence the perfectly hybrid name for this core Cohenian phantasm—*Belle du Seigneur*. Ardently Jewish in public, he remained ambivalent in private, especially in his writings, which served as his own private linguistic game to explore this searing dissonance, whatever the consequences. This complex hybrid identity, at once Jewish and secular, oriental and occidental, feminine and masculine, generates Cohen’s dynamic self-mythology, a construct that always plays *on* and *within* the difference between the fictionalized real and the realistic fiction. Thus, for example, through a classical family romance transposi-

tion in *Solal*, the egg merchant Marc Coen becomes the stately Rabbi Gamaliel, while Cohen's mother remains more or less the same. We sense the same Josephic/Estheric ambivalence in Cohen's fictional and essayistic construction. The dashing young diplomat would think to himself, "I am a Jew, but a Jew like no other; I am *in* the community but not *of* the community, as I am *of* my mother but not *like* my mother," while annually hosting his mother but keeping her away from the "blonde Dianas." Solal reflects to himself in stream-of-consciousness style about his ambivalent Judaism: "It is perhaps in order to be able to make believe that I am not a Jew like the others that I am an exceptional Jew to affirm myself to be different from the despised [*honnis*] since I make fun of them in order to make believe oh shame on me that that I am a Jew [who is] not Jewish."^{*} Louise's arrival triggered an always renewed and acute need to negotiate two separate realities, and when these mutually exclusive realities intersected, the unspeakable was finally articulated. As he writes after her death, he pointedly wonders about the repulsion that his mother provoked in him: "[F]or what mysterious reason did I often keep away from her, avoiding the kisses and the gaze, why and what was this cruel prudery?"[†]

On one fateful early morning, Louise's awkward anguish intersected with Albert's suave gallantry—the anxiety of the one wounds the narcissism of the other. Cohen mines the consequences of this event in his manifest *mea culpa*, the heart of his shame of her and of his shame of this shame—that is, at the heart of his mourning work:

I was malicious to her, once, and she did not deserve it. Cruelty of sons. Cruelty of this absurd scene that I made. And why? Because, worried that I had not come home, unable to sleep until her son came home, she had at four in the morning called my worldly hosts, who were certainly not worthy of her. She had called to be reassured, to be sure that nothing bad had happened to me. Upon returning, I made this dreadful scene. It is tattooed in my heart, this scene. I see her again, so humble, my saint, facing my stupid reproaches, heartbreaking in her humility, so conscious of her fault, of what she had been persuaded was her fault. So convinced of her culpability, the poor thing who had done no wrong. She sobbed, my little child. Oh,

^{*}C'est peut-être pour croire faire croire que je ne suis pas un Juif comme les autres que je suis un Juif exceptionnel pour m'affirmer différent des honnis puisque je les moque pour faire croire ô honte sur moi que je suis un Juif pas juif. (*BdS*, 895)

[†][P]ar quel mystère me suis-je tenu souvent loin d'elle, évitant les baisers et le regard, pourquoi et quelle fut cette cruelle pudeur? (*LM*, 739)

her tears, the flow of which I shall never now be able to avoid. Oh, her small desperate hands that had begun to show blotches of blue. Darling, you see, I try to make up for it by acknowledging.*

Cohen's insistence on the uniqueness ("I was malicious to her, once") of this event reveals its symbolic importance, for the event was singular not so much in terms of what happened as of what was finally said. Up to now, his mother's exclusion from his "blond zone" had remained unarticulated. When Albert expressed his rage against his mother for "violating" their game by anxiously calling his friends at four in the morning, that which had been tacitly understood and glossed over with apparent good humor by both mother and son was finally out in the open: "She knew . . . that my life had been separated from her humble life by an abyss, which I now despise."† Complicitous silence could no longer gloss over the breach between the mother and son.

The narrative sequence and underlying logic in the autobiographical essay remarkably echo what is parsed out in detail in the fictional work. As Chapter 3 has shown, Solal counterposes his Audes and Arianes to his oriental kin and operates in between them until the situation becomes unbearable and he breaks down in lacerating cruelty toward all, including himself. Moreover, this cruel scene in *Le Livre de ma mère* repeats the essential dynamic of the street hawker scene in the autobiographical *Ô vous, frères humains*, except that Cohen himself now becomes the *camelot* and Louise the victimized ten-year-old Albert. "And why this unfounded anger?" Cohen wonders, feigning innocence, "Perhaps because her foreign accent and difficulties with the French language while calling these cultivated cretins over the phone had embarrassed me."‡ Even Cohen the mature mourner deceives himself here, for Geneva teamed with foreign accents and even occasional mistakes in French syntax.

*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, ne pouvant jamais s'endormir avant que son fils ne fût rentré, 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. Je la revois, si humble, ma sainte, devant mes stupides reproches, bouleversante d'humilité, si consciente de sa faute, de ce qu'elle était persuadée être une faute. Si convaincue de sa culpabilité, la pauvre qui n'avait rien fait de mal. Elle sanglotait, ma petite enfant. Oh, ses pleurs que je ne pourrai jamais n'avoir pas fait couler. Oh, ses petites mains désespérées où des taches bleues étaient apparues. Chérie, tu vois, je tâche de me racheter en avouant. (*LM*, 730)

†Elle savait . . . que ma vie était séparée de son humble vie par un abîme que je hais maintenant. (*LM*, 745)

‡Et pourquoi cette indigne colère? Peut-être parce que son accent étranger et ses fautes de français en téléphonant à ces cretins cultivés m'avaient gêné. (*LM*, 730)

Surely, if Louise had been an English countess, and not a Jewish shopkeeper, her imperfect French would hardly have mattered. Rather, what was at stake was Albert's myth of origin, the integral part of his exquisite Jew identity montage, the misunderstanding of which lay at the root of his visceral hostility to his mother. That charismatic public persona—the predatory hunter armed with “dazzling sharp teeth”^{*}—could not possibly have originated from the womb of Louise Coen, whose voice as it came across the telephone to the ears of a countess certainly quivered with the memory of pogroms, fear, submission, and humiliation, even if defiant. There simply was no room for Louise in this montage.

This theme is a very raw nerve in Cohen's fiction: Solal is haunted by the specter of the hysterical Jewess, most notably the maternal figure in *Solal* and the dwarf Rachel in *Belle du Seigneur*. But, as “Chant de mort,” the earlier version of *Le Livre de ma mère*, makes amply clear, the essayist Cohen was haunted by the identical specter. Writing about Louise, he frankly admits that “her watchful eyes on my health and on my worries bothered me or, cruelly, indisposed me. Obscurely, I blamed her for watching and guessing too much. Which proves that one can be almost anti-Semitic even with one's own mother.”[†] This revealing “glitch” of being “almost anti-Semitic” was cleaned up by 1953, when he wrote the final version of *Le Livre de ma mère*: “Obscurely, I blamed her for watching and guessing too much.”[‡] Full stop! And again, thinking about her death, he is relieved that “she was no longer a Jew with eternally hunted eyes, with eyes animally set on the defensive, in carnal denial, frightening denial of culpability, a Jew with her mouth half-open in an obscure stupefaction inherited from fear and waiting.”[§] In this case, biography hardly illuminates fiction; on the contrary, the fictional stands on its own, but the autobiographical essays become much more penetrating when read against it, much like adding color, volume, and tone to a flat line drawing.

Unlike the Valorous in general, the mother cannot remain a collapsed metaphor, a figure brushed against, handled, managed, but never really unpacked.⁹ There is no escape from the mother. The urgent necessity palpable

^{*}d'éblouissantes dents acérées (*LM*, 704)

[†]ses yeux guetteurs de ma santé et de mes soucis me gênaient ou, cruel, m'indisposaient. Obscurément, je lui en voulais de trop surveiller et deviner. Comme quoi on peut être presque antisémite même avec sa mère. (“Chant de mort,” *France libre* 1 [June 15, 1943]: 103)

[‡]Obscurément, je lui en voulais de trop surveiller et deviner. (*LM*, 707)

[§]Selle n'est plus une Juive aux yeux éternellement traqués, aux yeux animalement sur la défensive, charnellement dénégateurs, effrayamment dénégateurs de culpabilité, une Juive à la bouche entr'ouverte par une obscure stupéfaction héritée de peur et d'attente. (“Chant de mort,” *France libre* 1 [June 15, 1943]: 105)

throughout *Le Livre de ma mère* is to finally write the mother; to unpack the maternal figure, so omnipresent in his fiction, but always obliquely. Whereas Gamaliel often recurs in Cohen's novels, the maternal figure receives only one scene in *Solal*. As we saw in the metaphysical bar mitzvah, her solitary appearance takes the form of a caricature of the hysterical Jewess, after which her affect and her discourse disappear altogether as those of a maternal figure perse, but reappear intermittently in the guise of other characters, such as the physical person of the dwarf Rachel and the ramblings of Uncle Saltiel.

Thus no easy management of Louise is possible. The tongue-lashing at five in the morning, the verbal breach, that moment when the definitive rupture with the idealized "first couple" made up of the boy and his beautiful young mother takes place, was not only remarkable in its trenchant cruelty, but also a primal scene of estrangement that would haunt the novelist as much as the mourner: "I am haunted by this scene that I inflicted on her. 'I'm so sorry,' sobbed my darling. She was so terrified by her sin of having dared to call the countess. . . . 'I won't do it again,' sobbed my darling."* But at five in the morning, the imperious son stood unmoved, towering over his panicked and exhausted mother, spite in his eyes, and lashed her with words that could never be taken back—"Which proves that one can be almost anti-Semitic even with one's own mother." In his rage, he told her that she was unworthy of phoning respectable people, that, in sum, she was to remain a pariah forever. But then came that familiar Cohenian moment when tenderness follows cruelty, when narcissism recognizes its depravity and recoils from it: "When I saw the blue spots on her hands, the tears came to me and I knelt, and I kissed her small hands madly and she kissed my hands and we looked at each other, son and mother forever. She took me on her knees and comforted me."† Louise's eloquence lay not in verbal platitudes—those made the son even more spiteful—but rather in her figuratively bleeding flesh, the somatic eloquence of the "blue stains" on her small quivering hands. Overcome with emotion, Albert begged forgiveness at her feet, exactly as his fictional protagonist does in *Solal* after humiliating Gamaliel by crossing himself in public. Yet despite the momentary reconciliation—the momentary lucidity of the

*Je suis hanté par cette scène que je lui fis. 'Je demande pardon', sanglotait mon adorable. Elle était si épouvantée par son péché d'avoir osé téléphoner à cette comtesse. . . . 'Je ne le ferai plus', sanglotait mon adorable. (*LM*, 733–34)

†Lorsque je vis les taches bleues sur ses mains, les larmes me vinrent et je m'agenouillai et je baisai follement ses petites mains et elle baisa mes mains et nous nous regardâmes, fils et mère à jamais. Elle me prit sur ses genoux et elle me consola. (*LM*, 734)

narcissist—the next day reverts to the familiar pattern: “But then, the following evening, I attended another grand reception, and I did not take my mother along with me.”* Contrition is followed by brief reunion with the carnal and maternal calling-reminding of origin, although further estrangement lies close at hand. Again, this trajectory of hard rejection, remorseful recognition, followed by soft rejection forms the repetitive procedure in Solal’s and Cohen’s dealings with “Cephalonia.”

The inscription of the truth in the flesh occurs even more dramatically in “Chant de mort,” where the mother’s presence becomes an almost palpable part of the very movement of Cohen’s somatic life, of his rhythmic inhalation and exhalation. He painfully imagines his mother’s reproaches for abandoning her in Marseille, alone with her husband, the Vichy police, and the Gestapo:

What I know is that my suffering does not lie in my feelings but in my throat and my organs and above all in this breathing which is difficult but sadly wants to live on and that, between inspiration and expiration, always contains my mother coming heavily toward me and telling me that it is not true and that she is alive or smiling weakly at me and saying that her darling whom she trusted could have saved her [*aurait pu la sauver*] and taken her from Europe and that, far from the Germans, she would have lived and we would have gone to the movies together in Leicester Square and strolled around Piccadilly.†

It seems very improbable that Cohen could have rescued his parents from Marseille, especially after June 1940, but only his somatization of this guilt is relevant here. Breathing is a struggle because the desire to die correlates with writing about his mother. Every inhalation and exhalation contains this hesitation between the desire to expire of sorrow and this sad longing to endure so that the penitent can further wound himself with his golden quill. “[H]er darling whom she trusted” certainly lets her down, and in spirit the mother comes back to exact her revenge. Such a failure recalls the repeated collapse of the Josephic Savior phantasm in *Solal* and *Belle du Seigneur*. Savior he is not—

*Mais lorsque, le lendemain soir, je m’en fus à une autre brillante réception, je n’emmenai pas ma mère avec moi. (*LM*, 734)

†Ce que je sais, c’est que ma souffrance n’est pas dans mes sentiments mais dans ma gorge et mes organes et surtout dans cette respiration difficile mais qui veut tristement vivre et qui, entre l’inspiration et l’expiration, contient toujours ma mère venant lourdement vers moi et me disant que ce n’est pas vrai et qu’elle est vivante ou me souriant faiblement que son chéri en qui elle avait confiance aurait pu la sauver et la sortir d’Europe et que, loin des Allemands, elle aurait vécu et nous serions allés ensemble aux cinémas de Leicester Square et nous aurions badaudé dans Piccadilly. (“Chant de mort,” *France libre* 2 [July 15, 1943]: 198)

not even of his mother, let alone of the Jewish people. But this Josephic failure is secondary in the context of the work of mourning. So the question remains: What does the maternal specter want? And why does it have this morbid effect on her son? The key to these questions lies in the banal train station scenes of the late 1920s where the mother's departure from Geneva is festive for the son and solemn for the mother. It is a funeral where the son's delight in the departure of the mother is all too conscious, all too Solalic in its sadism.

Here we finally arrive at the core chronotope in this mourning narrative: the *train as coffin*. To unpack the maternal figure, Cohen the mature writer can no longer give his mother the slip. The young poet, diplomat, and seducer turns his back on the train, but as a sober mourner he must—at last!—turn toward the train and follow it as if it were a funeral procession, which ends only in writing about it. The feelings of the departing mother could not contrast with those of her son more starkly:

Her tears at the station in Geneva, the night of her departure for Marseille. . . . At the coach door, she observed me so tenderly, with madness and unhappiness [*malheur*]. . . . Oh, her benediction in tears in the doorway, of her watching me so intently . . . somewhat mad with unhappiness, a bit inane with unhappiness [*malheur*].*

Yet Albert experiences only relief and even euphoric joy and triumph—at last she is gone, departed! As the train pulls away, he rushes off to see “the blonde demon named Diana.”† As the train carries away the old Louise, whom Cohen now, at the time of writing, views as “exposed, crestfallen, miserable, defeated, pariah,”‡ Albert, happy beyond measure to finally be rid of Louise, the dead weight that has collared him for weeks, “laughs with love in the taxi getting nearer to Diana.”§ Albert consciously dismisses himself as a libidinous socialite, a bit cruel to his mother, but not wanting her definitive departure. Yet he cannot but admit this disturbing truth: “Strange that I hadn't noticed to this day that my mother was a human being, a being different from myself and with genuine sufferings.”|| And in a later observation, almost clin-

*Ses larmes à la gare de Genève, le soir du départ pour Marseille. . . . À la portière du wagon, elle me considérait si tendrement, avec folie et malheur. . . . Oh, la bénédiction en larmes d'elle à la portière, d'elle me regardant tellement . . . un peu folle de malheur, un peu imbécile de malheur. (*LM*, 744–45)

†la blonde démonsse qui avait nom Diane (*LM*, 746)

‡exposée, déconfite, misérable, vaincue, paria (*LM*, 745)

§riaît d'amour dans le taxi qui le rapprochait de Diane. (*LM*, 745)

||Étrange que je ne m'aperçoive que maintenant que ma mère était un être humain, un être autre que moi et avec de vraies souffrances. (*LM*, 745)

ical in its acuity: “And this desperate lover who sobs in front of the tomb, beneath his pain there is perhaps a dreadful and involuntary joy, a sinful joy to still be alive, him, an unconscious joy, an organic joy of which he is not the master, an involuntary joy of contrast between this dead [woman] and this living [man] who speaks his pain in truth, all the same. To feel pain, is to live, is to still belong [*en être*], is to still be here.”*

Surely the mother’s identity with the child, her lack of otherness, was a by-product of their early two-against-all bond; but, now in the late 1920s, his inability to imagine Louise’s suffering suggests precisely the opposite, namely, that they were now so deeply split that only drawing on the amorous capital of their first “couplehood” could still make their incongruity bearable. Absorbed in his ambition, the affect of the other/mother is now invisible, inaudible.

Louise was imprisoned in Albert’s apartment, safely (for Albert) tucked away from the elegant world—especially from the elegant, sunny Dianas—just as, by way of simple transposition, Gamaliel is hidden in *Mangeclous* by Solal in a suburban house, completely isolated from the outer world, except for semi-clandestine nightly visits from his diplomat son.¹⁰ The hiding place where the unrepresentable pariah is kept becomes, for Louise, a “sabbatical” sanctuary, a sanctified domain, a space in memoriam of her first union with her son. However, her predicament is now much more confusing, for it is her son himself who exiles her from blond Gentiles and condemns her yet again to a sabbatical prison where the old oriental Jew is confined but crowned.

But as the train pulls away, the son promptly defiles even this sabbatical sanctuary: “The night of my mother’s departure. . . . Diana accompanied me home, and in the apartment that my mother had blessed before leaving, I dared to undress the impatient Diana.”† Against the mother stands Diana. Against sanctification stands nudity. And, above all, against the benediction of the quivering mother stands the denuding of the quivering Diana, impatient to be undressed and taken in a space that only a few hours before was saturated by the presence of that other lover, his first lover, Louise Coen. The two women, who were most likely cleverly separated from each other, intersect now on the son’s bed through his transgressive daring, his sadistic desire to defile and thus cleanse the apartment of his mother’s presence. The nudity of the

*Et cet amant désespéré qui sanglote devant la tombe, sous sa douleur il y a peut-être une affreuse involontaire joie, une pécheresse joie à vivre encore, lui, une inconsciente joie, une organique joie dont il n’est pas le maître, une involontaire joie de contraste entre cette morte et ce vivant qui dit sa douleur pourtant vraie. Avoir de la douleur, c’est vivre, c’est en être, c’est y être encore. (*LM*, 759)

†Cette nuit du départ de ma mère. . . . Diane me raccompagna chez moi, et dans l’appartement que ma mère avait béni avant de partir, j’osai dénuder Diane impatiente. (*LM*, 746)

one erases the presence of the other. Something very urgent is at work here, something stronger than pent-up desire. This defiling is not far from a post-funeral orgy fantasy. And as Cohen comes closer to articulating this fantasy, the text's cohesion splinters under the weight of such an insight.

Faced with the recognition of this desire for the permanent departure, the death of the mother, the first person narrative can no longer bear the pressure of such an avowal, and it splinters into a listening first person to whom another and distant son is speaking, or rather, pleading:

A son said to me, and it is he who speaks now. Me also, this son with dark circles under his eyes told me, I have lost my mother. Me also, I lived far away from her and she came to see me each year for a few weeks that were also the poor fairytales of her life. Me also, said this son, on the very night of her departure, instead of crying all night for my incomparable, I went, sad but quickly comforted, toward a comparable, one of the exquisite she-devils of my life and who was named Diana, Diana priestess of love.*

The hidden death wish eliminates any chance of identification with the earlier self. Cohen can no longer bear the first person narration even if the earlier "Albert" is understood to have been replaced by the mature Cohen, the actual narrator. The narrator becomes downright hostile toward his subject: "I hate him, this son."†

The shift from "I" to "this son" displaces moral responsibility from Albert Cohen the individual to a generic son, any son of any mother, as if Albert and Louise had simply experienced the universal mother/son conflict. Cohen repeatedly exploits this subtle shift, first in interjections in this scene: "Oh, shame. Sons and daughters, accursed bread . . . oh, cruelty of youth";‡ followed by more sustained exhortations toward the end of the book, which start with: "Sons of mothers who are still alive, never again forget that your mothers are mortal."§

To shift the onus to a universal son can diffuse Cohen's anguish, but cannot account for the cruelty in terms of the specific narrative in this essay. After all, however ambivalent sons may feel about their mothers, these mothers do *not* represent an automatic social death sentence if and when introduced to

*Un fils m'a dit, et c'est lui qui parle maintenant. Moi aussi, m'a dit ce fils aux yeux cernés, j'ai perdu ma mère. Moi aussi, je vivais loin d'elle et elle venait me voir chaque année pour quelques semaines qui étaient aussi la pauvre féerie de sa vie. Moi aussi, dit ce fils, le soir même de son départ, au lieu de pleurer toute la nuit mon incomparable, j'allais, triste mais vite consolé, vers une comparable, une des exquises diabesses de ma vie et qui avait nom Diane, Diane religieuse d'amour. (*LM*, 745)

†Je le hais, ce fils." (*LM*, 735)

‡Ô honte. Fils et filles, maudite engeance. . . . Ô cruauté de jeunesse. (*LM*, 746)

§Fils des mères encore vivantes, n'oubliez plus que vos mères sont mortelles. (*LM*, 771)

good company. But Louise Coen *does* represent that death sentence for Albert Cohen in Geneva of the interwar period. In his fiction, Cohen faces this truth directly; he endlessly conjugates and declines this psychological and social (inner) reality. In his essays, however, he recoils from explicitly articulating his ambivalent horror and fascination with his Jewish origin, which remains always in Cohen the privileged domain of the novel, and within the novel the deepest levels of the ambivalence are reserved for the recesses of long streams of consciousness.¹¹ But even this rhetorical slippage (from the first person “I” to the universal subject “mothers’ sons”) fails to constitute a convincing apology. Cohen may spin the narrative toward a benign interpretation; Cohen may program the reader toward a universal transference of affect into the text-screen, yet beneath the narration of events and situations, lies a discourse on the precise nature of his transgression, which constitutes the rawest nerve in the fiction, namely, his ambivalence about his origins, experienced as shame and guilt, and, above all, his shame of shame. This is why his mourning for his mother never ended, either in 1943, when she died and he wrote “Chant de mort,” or in 1953, when he produced the final edition of *Le Livre de ma mère*, or even in his final *Carnets* 1978.

Forever, he mourns his mother; forever, he is condemned to walk behind that train carrying Louise Coen away. Toward the very end of the book the metaphor that predominates remains that of the train/coffin/hearse: “[A]nd me I go behind the moving train . . . behind the moving train, bearing my dead and blessing mother.”* Mourning becomes the creative principle; writing, in its deepest level of discourse, echoes the rhythm of the funerary procession and the Sephardic shivah,¹² and it will unite him with his mother in their third “couplehood.”

The Third Couple: Mourning, Writing, and Dying

Having stripped the text of its most obvious and deceptive layers, we can mine the matrix metaphor that relentlessly recurs throughout it—marching behind the mother’s iron coffin and moaning regrets in a shivahlike stream of consciousness. Cohen endlessly lacerates himself with this cruel scene, whose symbolism seems to engulf him.¹³

Albert Cohen could not walk alongside Louise Coen’s actual coffin, because her funeral took place in German-occupied Vichy France. He thus could not

*[E]t moi je vais derrière le train qui va . . . derrière le train qui va, emportant ma mère morte et béniissante. (*LM*, 773)

vocalize his grief or lower her into death's dark pit and had to settle for writing these acts, transposing the physical into the scriptural. But even if circumstances had permitted the traditional burial, kaddish, and shivah, the self-creating charismatic poet would not have performed the year-long mourning ritual (with all its salutary rites); for him, this act belongs to the interminable realm of writing.¹⁴

The writer's point of view fixes on the train's movement, charging ever forward. Haltingly, he tries to accompany his mother, his gaze seeking to capture the fleeting funeral procession that will soon disappear forever beyond the horizon: "Thus, scanning the axles of the long train, always scanning, this train, my pain, always carrying away, this funeral train, my disheveled dead at the carriage door, and me, I follow behind the receding train, and I run out of breath, so utterly pale and perspiring and obsequious, behind the receding train, taking away my dead and blessing mother."^{*}

The blessing corpse is none other than Louise, who showered her son with the blessings at the Geneva train station, leaving him indifferent at best, joyful about her departure (death) at worst. Likewise, the cadaver's disheveled hair at the carriage door as the death train pulls away toward Sheol recalls the tousled, panicky Louise as the train to Marseille pulls away from Geneva. And as the corpse fades away from the mourner, Cohen—now in postmortem writing—chases it almost to the point of fainting. But the train rolls ever faster, and neither in dreams nor in inarticulate remorse will Cohen ever catch up with it. He can do so only in repeatedly rewriting the events, so that what had already been lost in reality might be restored and perhaps relived in stylized fantasy. But however he relives it, however he tries to restore Louise into his inner self, the funerary train reappears, like a ghostly apparition tracking a psychotic. Now only words redeem past acts and restore the lost mother to her rightful place.

Cohen saunters behind the coffin—mumbling reproaches, evocative memories, daydreams, and nightmares. The repetitive semantic and syntactic nature of the dreams holds far more relevance than their content, for the dreams fashion the text into a rhythmic incantation, as if it were a stream of mourning, a mumbling to oneself that the trauma of burial and mourning allows. Dwelling upon lost moments, he repeats "never again . . . never again"; recognizing the impossibility of reliving the past, he begins many successive para-

^{*}Ainsi scandent les essieux du long train, toujours scandant, ce train, ma douleur, toujours emportant, ce train de funérailles, ma morte décoiffée à la portière, et moi je vais derrière le train qui va, et je m'essouffle, tout pâle et transpirant et obséquieux, derrière le train qui va, emportant ma mère morte et bénissante. (*LM*, 772–73)

graphs with: “Finished . . . finished”; unable to escape his mother’s affectionate gaze, he belatedly acknowledges the uniqueness of Louise’s love: “love of my mother . . . love of my mother.” The lamentation climbs to its apex when the mother’s love is compared to all other past and present loves: “Love of my mother, comparable to no other . . . Love of my mother, comparable to no other”;^{*15} incapable of remaining in the depressed mourning position, he lacerates himself for the sinfulness of small joys he experiences while his mother turns to dust: “Sinfulness of life . . . sinfulness of life.” Finally, comes the inevitable recognition—whatever his thoughts, regrets, promises, or poetic genius might be—she is irremediably departed: “She is dead . . . she is dead.” On the penultimate page, despite all his repeated protestations, he strives to bring Louise back to life (or to an afterlife) by the sheer power of thought: “I don’t want her to be dead. I want hope, I demand hope.”† Cohen finally lacerates the truth into his consciousness: “My mother is dead, dead, dead, my dead mother is dead, dead.”‡ These repetitions replace the comforting year-long, daily repetition of the kaddish prayer (seven to ten times a day) that Judaism requires of the mourner. The golden quill replaces the rhythm of traditional mourning, if not its efficacy.

But soon enough the mourner reaches the edge of the dark pit where the corpse, already in rigor mortis, will decompose, become a skeleton and turn to dust, while future corpses pursue their petty ambitions and indulge in their foolish sorrows, indifferent to the dead and thus to their future nonselves. Death for Cohen is very palpable, concrete, even overwhelming in its materiality: “And you, mother, so white and yellow that I dare, in a blink of the eye, look into your already rotten coffin, my thin abandoned one . . . you so gloomy now and laconic in your soil-tinged melancholy, asleep in the black silence of the tomb, in the heavy wet soil-silence of the ground of the tomb . . . where only roots live and joyless and obscure creatures of the dark with incomprehensible going abouts and always silent though frightenedly busy?”§

“God, how absurd it all is,”|| he says toward the end of *Le Livre de ma mère*,

*Amour de ma mère, à nul autre pareil . . . Amour de ma mère, à nul autre pareil (*LM*, 743–44)

†Je ne veux pas qu’elle soit morte. Je veux un espoir, je demande un espoir (*LM*, 763),

‡Ma mère est morte, morte, morte, ma mère morte est morte, morte. (*LM*, 772)

§Et toi, mère si blanche et jaune que j’ose, en un battement de paupières, regarder dans ta caisse déjà pourrie, mon amaigrie abandonnée . . . toi si morose maintenant et laconique en ta terreuse mélancolie, couchée en ce silence noir de la tombe, en ce lourd humide silence de terre de la tombe . . . où ne vivent que des racines, des radicelles sans joie et de mornes créatures d’obscurité aux incompréhensibles démarches et toujours silencieuses quoique effrayamment affairées? (*LM*, 766)

||Dieu, que tout cela est absurde (*LM*, 765)

but he could have repeated this lament at the end of every paragraph. Now that the funeral is over, only a morbid retreat to the writing self can constitute a justified existence. The blue stains that blotted the hands of the aging mother bleed into the ink blots on the page—early signs of the mother's aging that made Cohen break down in theatrical remorse during the horrific "late-night phone call scene." Writing as entombment constitutes Cohen's mourning ritual. He writes himself onto death, drowning himself in inkblots, just as Louise slowly liquefies into nothingness. Both traffic now in the liquids of death, blots of existence and nonexistence.

To write the death of the beloved (and one's own death, if one completely identifies with the beloved) is then the task at hand. This funerary meditation therefore supplants all the letters that were not written due to the writer's cruel ego ("[this book] is my last letter"). But this writing requires a major displacement from the *vita activa* (diplomat, activist) to the *vita contemplativa* (writer, mourner). Cohen hints at that dislocation in his 1943 "Chant de mort," but in 1953, after his career shifts completely from international diplomacy to writing, this retreat becomes an essential correlative for this funerary meditation. Like Proust in his cork-lined apartment, Cohen permanently retreats into an isolated and insolent tomb of writing—an *écritoire morbide*—where son and mother, although one of them is dead, exist in analogous postures. "Enough, enough, no more mourning, ever. We are both quite alone, you in your soil, me in my room. Me, slightly dead among the living, you, slightly living among the dead."* The apartment door locked thrice over, shades drawn down, the *écritoire morbide* resembles a dark, quiet crypt. While worms consume his mother, the vermin of regret and remorse, secreted through the poison of writing that he savors above all else, consume him. Writing distills memories, just as worms reprocess the rotting flesh of cadavers. The golden quill becomes the death quill; Cohen now desires to embroider his death with the golden threads of Louise's presence, "I was put on earth to listen to my mother's interminable stories."† A symmetry thus forms between the two, for both are entombed, both listen and recount to each other, even in absentia, the same stories—and the mother's claim to life, even in dead letters, is a function of the son's self-execution through writing. Here at last we come to a deeper understanding of Cohen's likening of his mother to a parasite (*ma mère était mon gui*).

*Fini, fini, plus de Maman, jamais. Nous sommes bien seuls tous les deux, toi dans ta terre, moi dans ma chambre. Moi, un peu mort parmi les vivants, toi, un peu vivante parmi les morts. (*LM*, 711)

†J'ai été mis sur terre pour écouter les interminables histoires de ma mère. (*LM*, 750)

But there is more. The morbid entombment for the purpose of writing the mother represents just another repetition of the cellar nightmares of Saint-Germain and Berlin. All are symbolic spaces of exclusion, where laceration, whether inflicted by the *méchants* or self-inflicted, is the rule. To return to the mother, to the womb, is to slither through the crevices of memory and writing the way worms slither into the grave, feasting on the corpse. In writing his mother, Cohen places himself in an identical position to that of the Valorous and Rachel, prolonging life by bleeding oneself ever so slowly, and sometimes not without some perverse delectation:

Ever since her death, I've loved living alone, sometimes, for days and days, far from the absurdly busy living, alone just as she was alone in her apartment in Marseille, alone and the telephone unplugged so that the outside does not enter my home just as it did not enter hers, alone in this residence that has the perfection of death and where I ceaselessly set things in order to believe that all is well, alone in my room deliciously locked up, too well-ordered and too clean, mad with symmetry, pencils arranged by size on the small shining cemetery of the table.*

To be like his mother, Cohen must break with the world and make giving voice to Louise in writing his sole occupation. Everything in the room—papers, books, pencils—must be controlled, immaculate, symmetrical, exactly as in a mausoleum. The shining surface of the writing desk is explicitly equated with a cemetery. Once isolated in his *écritoire morbide*, he obsessively arranges and rearranges his room “to believe that all is well”—like an encased future mummy who perfectly arranges his dark sepulture to make believe that all is well. But all is not well. His days are spent daydreaming and writing, dreaming and awakening to his nightmares, all alone with his golden quill and, for sole companion, his mirror. Is this not identical to the world of the lonely child in Marseille who led a solitary imaginative life above the inferno of his father's detestable egg shop? Again, he is alone, lamenting his mother's absence, tracing letters in front of the mirror, letters that are inspired by her inventive pictograms and endless stories. This is Cohen's *Fort! Da!* game, supplanting his mother's pictures by tracing letters in the air and then wiping

*Depuis sa mort, j'aime vivre seul, parfois, pendant des jours et des jours, loin des vivants absurdement occupés, seul comme elle était seule dans son appartement de Marseille, seul et le téléphone décroché pour que le dehors n'entre pas chez moi comme il n'entrait pas chez elle, seul dans cette demeure qui a la perfection de la mort et où je fais sans cesse de l'ordre pour croire que tout va bien, seul dans ma chambre délicieusement fermée à clef, trop rangée et trop propre, folle de symétrie, crayons allongés par ordre de grandeur sur le petit cimetière luisant de la table. (*LM*, 767)

them away to cope with her absence. Childhood rejoins old age, except that as a mature artist, this game of *Fort! Da!* occasions an ever more complex identification with his mother, followed by fantasies of regression, only to be reversed at the end with yet another cruel betrayal. But before that last betrayal, the most cruel, the identification with Louise will become visceral.

“And unable to do anything else for you, mother, *I kiss my hand that came from you.*”^{*} Taken literally, this is a fantasized regression to the earliest infantile stages where the newborn makes no distinction between his own and his mother’s flesh.¹⁶ *Baiser*: in this context, to kiss, to lick, to suck . . . to swallow and penetrate the other that I am, or that I now fantasize being—such is Cohen’s desire as he lovingly contemplates his own hands, now stained with blue veins, just like the trembling hands of his mother pleading for mercy at four in the morning. And then the identification becomes sacred, devotional: “O you, the only one, mother, my mother and the mother of all men, you alone, our mother, deserve our confidence and our love. All the rest, wives, brothers, sisters, children, friends, all the rest is nothing but misery and a leaf carried away by the wind.”[†] Cohen deifies the (m)other: She exists above and beyond all others. The alibi of devotion to the Madonna allows the world to be cast aside in good conscience, thus directing all energy toward the conjuring up of this deity. Specular identification follows: “I look at myself in the mirror, but it is my mother who is in the mirror.”[‡] And when he wants even more company than just himself and himself-as-Louise, he physically presses on his eye in order to double the image in the mirror. Now two mothers stare at him from within the glass, and he is with himself thrice over (himself and his two doubles in the mirror). Cohen’s mirror stage reverses the classical scheme where the child learns to see himself as other; instead, he sees the (m)other as himself, and vice versa.¹⁷ This regression to the maternal whole is experienced through the narcissistic gaze and the lips that kiss the hand, one’s hand, given to one by the absent (m)other.

That immaculate *écritoire morbide* admits no lovers, friends, or family; only the golden quill to inscribe sin onto the flesh and the mirror accompany the author. Writing as dying. Writing as suicide:

^{*}Et ne pouvant rien faire d’autre pour toi, Maman, *je baise ma main qui vient de toi.* (*LM*, 721; emphasis added)

[†]Ô toi, la seule, mère, ma mère et de tous les hommes, toi seule, notre mère, mérites notre confiance et notre amour. Tout le reste, femmes, frères, sœurs, enfants, amis, tout le reste n’est que misère et feuille emportée par le vent. (*LM*, 742–43)

[‡]Je me regarde dans la glace, mais c’est ma mère qui est dans la glace. (*LM*, 754)

Sometimes, at night, having once again checked the dear lock of the door, I sit, hands flat on my knees and, the lamp turned off, I look in the mirror. Surrounded by various minotaurs of melancholy, I wait in front of the mirror, while on the floor slither shadows, like rats—the malicious of my life among men—while sudden glances also flash, noble glances . . . in front of the mirror, seated with the pharaonic hands lain flat, I wait for my mother, beneath the moon that is her message, to appear perhaps. But only memories come. Memories, this terrible life that is not life and that hurts.*

The mirror is the screen for the drama of mourning. Isolated in a room, lit only by the radiant moon, Cohen awaits the apparition of Louise. She does not appear; only phantoms move about, first the haunting silhouettes of street hawkers, then a few rays of warmth, followed by a stream of “[m]emories, this terrible life that is not life and that hurts.” No magic can bring back Louise, and no rhetorical chicanery or wishful thought can resolve the pain that she represents. The son’s memories resemble the act of writing: a substitute for presence that can neither revive the deceased nor restore her into an “unambivalent” inner object, but that can playfully (some games are masochistic) rework Ur-scenes, traumas suffered and inflicted. At present, writing (and mourning) the pain constitutes Cohen’s sole pleasure: that of dying after his own fashion, committing suicide by concentrating his whole existence on the inscription of his mother. Connecting writing, dying, and pleasure requires no “uncontrolled” metonymical conjectures of the “ceci n’est pas un cigar” variety. As usual, Cohen plainly articulates this complex psychoanalytical concept: “‘Tired of living,’ I write with my finger in the air. Then, I write the word ‘catalepsy.’ It’s a word that I read in a book, and I learned from the dictionary that it means that one does not move anymore, that one is like the dead.”† The *écritoire morbide* is Cohen’s “penal colony,” and the golden quill, his exquisite “execution instrument.” Writing the pain becomes a delectable pleasure, akin to the ecstasy experienced by the officer in Kafka’s *In the Penal Colony*, tortured by and for the Law, just as Cohen feels tortured by Louise who also stands for the Law.

*Parfois, la nuit, après avoir une fois de plus vérifié la chère fermeture de la porte, je m’assieds, les mains à plat sur les genoux et, la lampe éteinte, je regarde dans la glace. Entouré de certains minotaures de mélancolie, j’attends devant la glace, tandis que filent sur le plancher, comme des rats, des ombres qui furent les méchants de ma vie parmi les hommes, tandis que luisent aussi des regards subits, nobles regards . . . devant la glace, assis et les mains pharaoniques à plat, j’attends que ma mère, sous la lune qui est son message, apparaisse peut-être. Mais seuls les souvenirs arrivent. Les souvenirs, cette terrible vie qui n’est pas de la vie et qui fait mal. (*LM*, 768)

†“Fatigué de vivre”, écris-je avec mon doigt sur de l’air. Ensuite, j’écris le mot “catalepsie”. C’est un mot que j’ai lu dans un livre, et j’ai appris par le dictionnaire qu’il signifie qu’on ne bouge plus, qu’on est comme mort. (*Carnets 1978*, 1129)

Then, deep into the night of mourning, he falls asleep, wakes up abruptly, and recalls fragments of dreams:

Why did I take out of my pocket an enormous false cardboard nose? . . . Mom's bizarre fur hat is now a crown, but cardboard too, and a sick horse follows us. . . . An antique coach, golden and inlaid with small mirrors . . . behind the gentle tubercular horse that falls and stands up again and pulls the courtly carriage nodding wisely. . . . the laughing crowd throws rotten eggs at us while my mother shows them the sacred rolls of the Ten Commandments. . . . and I awake and I am terrified by my solitude.*

The dreams condense the most archaic and disturbing montage of Cohen's rich imagery. The enormous fake nose both signifies the evil Haman in the Purim carnival and disguises Solal as an old eastern European Jew. Cohen wonders upon awakening: "Why did I take out of my pocket an enormous false cardboard nose?" Having worked through the various metamorphoses of estrangement, we can hazard a well-grounded answer: to be with his mother (or the Valorous and Rachel), Cohen had to disguise himself as either a persecutor or a deformed Jew—either as victimizer or victim. Either way, his sleep in the *écritoire morbide* remains perturbed by these fragments of dreams, which he here in *Le Livre de ma mère* pretends not to understand, but that he fully develops in his fiction, especially in the dwarf Rachel episode in *Belle du Seigneur*, the subject of the next chapter. Louise's cylindrical fur hat metamorphoses into a crown, just as Rachel's hunchback metamorphoses into a crown; and just as with the dwarf Rachel, son and mother ride in a mirror-studded carriage pulled by sickly horses; the crowd derides them, but they hold fast to the Torah, notwithstanding the horse's repeated falls. This is the matrix chronotope in all of Cohen's fiction.

Cohen's question—which he never answers, at least in his essays—might be now specified as: "How is it that I could not imagine being with my mother face-to-face? How is it that I need these props? And to what end?" Cohen asks exactly the right question; in a dialectic of blindness and insight, he connects his mourning dream work with the most archaic and disturbing symbolic montage of his fiction—but leaves it to us to either turn away from its mean-

*Pourquoi ai-je sorti de ma poche un énorme faux nez de carton? . . . La bizarre toque de Maman est maintenant une couronne, mais de carton aussi, et un cheval malade nous suit. . . . Un antique carrosse, décoré et incrusté de petits miroirs . . . derrière le doux cheval poitrinaire qui tombe et se relève et tire le carrosse de cour avec des hochements sages. . . . la foule nous lance des œufs pourris tandis que ma mère lui montre les rouleaux sacrés des Dix Commandements. . . . et je me réveille et je m'épouvante de ma solitude. (*LM*, 748)

ing or face it. He invites us to connect the dots, while offering yet another regressive fantasy. Only in fantasies can he be reconciled with his mother, just as his protagonist Solal can reconcile himself with his kin and the dwarf Rachel only by playing Joseph or Purim.

But the ultimate identification comes through regressive fantasies. What is most appealing about Louise's love is its absolute unconditionality. This is important, because every woman that Cohen writes of falls short in this respect. "My mother was my mistletoe"*—in other words, a parasite, dependent on its host. His mother would stick by him even if he were to become a quadruple amputee (*un homme tronc*), but Ariane wouldn't. No wonder, then, that normal women would fall short of this infantile demand. Other women's desire is contingent; his mother's is absolute, parasitical in all respects. Yet Cohen knows that there is no return to childhood, even in fantasy. "Your child," he laments to his mother, "died at the same time that you did. Through your death, I was suddenly passed from childhood to old age."† In place of the dead child, the moribund old man, entombed in writing, fancies a new sisterly existence with Louise, which leads us to one of the most delirious hallucinations in Cohen's work of mourning:

Wide awake, I dream and speak to myself of what it would be like if she were still alive. I would live with her, *in a little way* [*petitement*], in solitude. A *little* house, beside the sea, far from men. The two of us, she and I, a *little* house a bit crooked, and no one else. A very quiet *little* life without talent. I would make myself a new soul, a *little* old lady's soul like hers so that she should not be bothered by me and so should be completely happy. . . . Two old sisters, she and I . . . two real *little* old ladies. . . . And this is how I imagine paradise.‡

At last, far away from the father and from Europe, the two old women will live in harmony. Gone, therefore, is the Oedipal drama, the tension between Europe and Asia, and, of course, the tension between Judaism and assimilation. The two old sisters will speak in Judeo-Venetian, leaving aside all the awk-

*Ma mère était mon gui. (*LM*, 743)

†Ton enfant est mort en même temps que toi. Par ta mort, me voici soudain de l'enfance à la vieillesse passé. (*LM*, 721)

‡Tout éveillé, je rêve et je me raconte comment ce serait si elle était en vie. Je vivrais avec elle, *petitement*, dans la solitude. Une *petite* maison, au bord de la mer, loin des hommes. Nous deux, elle et moi, une *petite* maison un peu tordue, et personne d'autre. Une *petite* vie très tranquille et sans talent. Je me ferais une âme nouvelle, une âme de *petite* vieille comme elle pour qu'elle ne soit pas gênée par moi et qu'elle soit tout à fait heureuse. . . . Deux vieilles sœurs, elle et moi. . . . deux vraies *petites* vieilles. . . . Et c'est ainsi que j'imagine le paradis. (*LM*, 751–52; emphasis added)

wardness of French. They will unconditionally nurse each other unto death. This bliss is made possible because the differences between them end; identities contract to the asexual feminine of the mother culture. The male-son becomes a woman-sister; the European intellectual trades his aggressive, skeptical masculine soul for that of a naïve old woman. Away from males and their phallic order—the rule of nature, as Cohen terms it—all aggression evaporates and sisterly bliss reigns, whence the repetition of the plural feminine adjective “little” (*petites*) five times. In a world free from the phallic gorilla, everything is lived “petitement.” Gone are the aggressive teeth of the castrating father; Louise is described as “an [unweaned] infant, all gums, childish and articulating poorly without her false teeth.”* This is finally the total emptying of the Solalic ego.

I am compelled to digress here to the essential and highlight (and foreshadow) the crucial link between this maternal-sisterly fantasy in *Le Livre de ma mère* and Solal’s true, but secret, desire in *Belle du Seigneur*. The chiseled, tall, powerful Solal, undersecretary-general of the League of Nations, seduces Ariane, the wife of an underling. Their liaison starts with a sexual frenzy. Yet even during the famous seduction scene at the Ritz, Solal is lucidly eloquent about his disdain of male sexuality: “All these gorilleries,” he thinks to himself, “while I would have loved [Ariane] to come sit beside my bed, she in an armchair, and I lying down and holding her hand or the bottom of her dress, and she singing me a lullaby.”† And much later in the novel, when sexual infatuation exhausts itself, the narrator confides in us that “[Solal] wanted to kiss her on the cheek. But no, they were lovers, condemned to the lips.”‡ Solal does not want to penetrate and devour Ariane. Rather, he wants to be with her in a sisterly and maternal manner, more like a cat, but feels himself condemned to play the part of a male gorilla. In other words, Solal wants to be with Ariane just as Cohen fantasizes about being with Louise: two older women, liberated from the phallic regime, nursing each toward death. Indeed, Solal would like to love Ariane the way she loved her first lover Varvara, whom she tenderly nursed toward a premature death. This is the one absolutely dignified death scene in Cohen’s writings. It is also the only true, and covert, love affair in *Belle du Seigneur*, and that feminine love is precisely what Cohen desired for

*un nourrisson tout en gencives, enfantine et prononçant mal sans ses fausses dents (*LM*, 744)

†“Toutes ces gorilleries, alors que j’aurais tant aimé qu’elle [Ariane] vienne s’asseoir auprès de mon lit, elle dans un fauteuil, moi couché et lui tenant la main ou le bas de la jupe, et elle me chantant une berceuse.” (*BdS*, 364)

‡[Solal] eut envie de la baiser sur la joue. Mais non, ils étaient des amants, condamnés aux lèvres. (*BdS*, 735)

Louise and himself, had she been among the living—and had the world not been what it was. Cohen's fantasy in *Le Livre de ma mère* is in fact achieved by Ariane in *Belle du Seigneur*, except that the “regime of the real” condemns Solal and Ariane to act out a tragicomic drama where each desires at heart the identical feminine existence but feels compelled to pretend the opposite—condemned to play their respective roles in *The Beauty and the Beast* when each really would like it to be *The Beauty and the Beauty*.

We thus see the dissonant oscillation between two desires: either become his mother's twin sister—a feminized male—or excel in the phallic order of domination and power. At the end of *Le Livre de ma mère*, Cohen seems to opt for the feminine and maternal, even if purely in fantasy. These senior sorority dreams parade deep into the night in his imagination, yet at dawn the specter of repetition comes knocking on the door. What is particularly striking here is Cohen's figurative self-understanding in terms of the Passion, where, in a reversal of the classical typology (so typical of his procedure), the mother is Jesus and the Son, Israel:

The hours have passed and it is morning, another morning without her. A knock at the door. I rose hastily and looked through the peephole [*le judas*]. But it was merely nothing more than a dreadful old woman collecting for charity, notebook in hand. I did not open the door, to punish her. I went back to my table and took up my pen. It ran and I have blue blotches on my hand. She wept, and she asked my forgiveness. “I'll never do it again,” she sobbed. Her little hands stained with blue. A woman old and so kind, crying like a little girl, overcome with sobs, is a dreadful thing. I imagine, for a few seconds, that I never caused this scene, that just before beginning my reproaches I took pity on her terrified eyes, and that there were no blue blotches. Alas. And yet I loved her. But I was a son. Sons do not know that their mothers are mortal.*

On the penultimate page of the book, Cohen betrays Louise yet again. He sees the old supplicant woman through the “Judas” in the door. Despite the gentle

*Les heures ont passé et c'est le matin, un autre matin sans elle. On a sonné à la porte. Je me suis levé en hâte et j'ai regardé par le judas. Mais ce n'était qu'une affreuse vieille de bienfaisance, avec son calepin à la main. Je ne lui ai pas ouvert, pour la punir. Je suis revenu à ma table et j'ai repris mon stylo. Il a coulé et j'ai des taches bleues sur la main. Elle pleurait, elle me demandait pardon. “Je ne le ferai plus,” sanglotait-elle. Ses petites mains tachées de bleu. Une femme âgée et si bonne, qui pleure comme une petite fille, toute secouée de sanglots, c'est affreux. J'imagine, pendant quelques secondes, que je n'ai pas fait cette scène, que juste avant de commencer mes reproches j'ai eu pitié de ses yeux effrayés, et qu'il n'y a pas eu les taches bleues. Hélas. Et pourtant je l'aimais. Mais j'étais un fils. Les fils ne savent pas que leurs mères sont mortelles. (*LM*, 770; emphasis added)

knocking, his door (heart) remains shut, insolent; he means to punish the supplicant not just avoid her. Meanwhile, on the *écritoire* his quill—instrument of truth and torture—is leaking, and when Cohen picks up the bleeding quill, it drips blue stains onto his hands, which are now tattooed blue just like his mother's. The identity between the respective blue stains (*taches bleues*) imposes itself. And then comes the inner monologue: I (Israel) loved Louise (Jesus), and yet I was simply a rebellious son (stiff-necked people) and did not know that my mother (Savior) was mortal; I looked at her through the Judas, that is, I betrayed her; I could have prevented her humiliation (his crucifixion), but I did not—and, since then, blue ink (red blood) is dripping on me, condemning me to an endless death by writing. *Le Livre de ma mère* concludes with this Christian typology, just like *Solal* and *Belle du Seigneur*.¹⁸

The only fitting conclusion to this is the first sentence of the book: “Every man is alone and no one gives a damn about anyone and our sorrows are a desert island.” Perhaps there are good books built on fine sentiments, but *Le Livre de ma mère* is not one of them.