

The Ethics of Testimony: Trauma, Body and Justice in Sarah Kofman's Autobiography

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Parce qu'il était juif, mon père est mort à Auschwitz
Sarah Kofman

1. Maternal love



Leonardo da Vinci, *The Virgin and Child with St. Anne and St. John the Baptist* (1499-1500), charcoal, black and white chalk on tinted paper mounted on canvas, National Gallery, London.

In Leonardo da Vinci's cartoon *The Virgin and Child with St. Anne and St. John the Baptist* (1499-1500), the so-called 'Burlington House Cartoon', the Virgin Mary sits on the lap of her mother Saint Anne. Their widely spread knees form a firm ground on which Christ, who is held by the Virgin, rests. Christ blesses his cousin John the

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Baptist. In the background, there is a mountainous landscape. These two mothers smile blissfully. Their faces are turned towards each other. They mirror each other's eyes so that their gazes become one gaze. The gazes of Christ and John the Baptist repeat the gazes of their mothers. Saint Anne's finger points to heaven referring to Christ's destiny. The heads of the two mothers seem to arise from a single body.

In *Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of his Childhood*, Sigmund Freud analysed da Vinci's cartoon and his later oil painting *The Virgin and Child with Saint Anne* (1508) depicting the Virgin Mary, Saint Anne and Christ. Freud related these images to Leonardo's own childhood. Leonardo had two mothers, his biological mother, Caterina, from whom he was torn away, and a step-mother, Donna Albiera, who was his father's wife. In his father's house, Leonardo found not only Donna Albiera but also his father's mother, Monna Lucia. In the cartoon and the painting Saint Anne seems not to be Christ's grandmother. She is, as Freud points out, portrayed as not being more mature than the Virgin but as a young woman of unfaded beauty. According to Freud, Leonardo gave Christ two mothers, the Virgin Mary and Saint Anne, who are representations, respectively, of Leonardo's stepmother and his biological mother. (Freud 1957.)

French philosopher Sarah Kofman (1934-1994) chose the 'Burlington House Cartoon' for the cover of her first book, *L'Enfance de l'art* (The Childhood of Art). In her autobiographical work *Rue Ordener, rue Labat*, she describes this choice by quoting Freud's claim that Leonardo's childhood was remarkable in precisely the same way as this picture (Kofman 1994, 73-74/63. The first page number refers to the original French text, the second one, after the slash, to the English translation). What is more important for us now is that Leonardo's cartoon represents, not merely Leonardo's, but also Sarah's story. Her book *L'Enfance de l'art* is thus not merely about the infancy of modern art but about her own childhood. Therefore, her first book is already an autobiography. What bind Leonardo's life and cartoon together with Kofman's life and autobiography is not merely the presence of two mothers but also the absence of a father, a fact which not even two mothers can hide.

2. Justice in/as writing

I met Sarah Kofman only once at the Brasserie Balzar in Paris. During this brief encounter she made a strong impression on me. She seemed to be both extremely strong and fragile at the same time. When some years later I read Jacques Derrida's eulogy for her, I thought that Derrida caught, or more properly touched, her paradoxical nature as he writes about her 'irresistible joy of uncontrollable laughter on the verge of tears' (Derrida 2007, 7).

I have often wondered who Sarah Kofman was, on what experiences of living and writing this combination of joy, laughter and tears, which as irresistible and uncontrollable are not merely matters of either reason and thinking or emotions, either the symbolic or imaginary body, but of the real body, was based. This is my attempt to answer, an answer that is not a biography—I merely refer to Freud, who once wrote, that 'anyone turning biographer commits himself to lies, to concealment, to

hypocrisy, to flattery, and even to hiding his own lack of understanding' (Freud 1975a, 430; see also McDonald 1998, 185)—but merely a reading of her autobiographical texts.

For some reason, I have always connected her writing with the concept of justice, which may sound strange to those who know her work for she did not write explicitly about positive law and justice, about the relationship of law and justice as her friend Derrida did. Then again, the Jewish law and the paternal law, that is, the law of the father, were important concepts for her as was the question of the possibility of post-Holocaust ethics. Despite this 'absence' of the concept of justice, I would claim that, and this is my main argument, justice was present in her writing, especially, in her autobiographical texts. How justice presents itself in her writing? How justice speaks without speaking? Perhaps, it is related to joy, laughter and tears, or to what they testify. This is a story about the ethics of writing.

3. Life and work

On Nietzsche's birthday, on 15 October 1994, Sarah Kofman, then a professor of philosophy at the Sorbonne, took her own life. Before her death she, who described herself as one of the 1968 generation, had written twenty-two books on philosophy, psychoanalysis, deconstruction, feminism, art, and literature, texts on Plato, Rousseau, Kant, Comte, Blanchot, Shakespeare, Diderot and Nerval, just to mention a few names.

We cannot think of her work without Freud and Nietzsche. Derrida says that she had read both Nietzsche's and Freud's bodies of work inside and out. 'Like no one else in this century, I dare say. She loved them pitilessly and was implacable toward them (not to mention a few others) at the very moment when, giving them without mercy all that she could, and all that she had, she was inheriting from them and was keeping watch over what they had—what they still have—to tell us, especially regarding art and laughter' (Derrida 2007, 7). She set out her reading of Nietzsche in a series of works such as *Nietzsche et la métaphore* (1972), *Nietzsche et la scène philosophique* (1979), *Explosion I: De l'Ecce Homo de Nietzsche* (1992), *Explosion II: Les enfants de Nietzsche* (1993) and *Le mépris des Juifs: Nietzsche, les Juifs, l'antisémitisme* (1994), which are among the most important 20th Century philosophical treatises on Nietzsche. Her works on Freud include *L'enfance de l'art: Une interprétation de l'esthétique freudienne* (1970), *L'Énigme de la femme: La femme dans les textes de Freud* (1980) and *Pourquoi rit-on? Freud et le mot d'esprit* (1986).

She wrote her thesis under Gilles Deleuze. With her friends and colleagues, Jacques Derrida, Jean-Luc Nancy and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, she was the editor of a philosophy publishing series, *La Philosophie en effet* for over twenty years.

However, she had a marginal position in the French academic world. Even after having published nineteen books, she had no position as a tenured professor. She was merely *maître de conférences*. One of the reasons was that French universities as institutions marginalize women philosophers. She experienced the same situation in psychoanalytical circles. There are, Kofman points out, few original women

philosophers and psychoanalysts. As regards to women authors, all possible originality is too often repressed. The difference between men and women philosophers and psychoanalysts is not due to anatomy. Instead, she says, it comes from the education women have received. They are, she claims, ‘more submissive to what they have read, more repetitive than innovative, more imitative of the master whom they need to stimulate their research’ (Jardine & Menke 1991, 107).

Another reason for her marginal position in French psychoanalysis was her resistance to Jacques Lacan. In her readings of Freud, she seldom refers to Lacan. In an interview, Kofman said that Lacan himself recognized the originality and importance of her work, but he remained surprised that she did not attend his seminars and was not a Lacanian. However, she added, that the French Freudian school dominated by Lacan had enormous editorial power and it eliminated her works that did not quote Lacan or were not Lacanian enough. (Jardine & Menke 1991, 109-110.)

Even if she had feminist views and arguments, she distanced herself from the idea of *écriture féminine*, women’s writing as the inscription of the female difference in language and text, since she considered herself as a devotee of clarity, a partisan of rational and well-constructed texts, which *écriture féminine* aimed to subvert (Kofman 1986, 7). At the same time, she aimed to demonstrate how the rational thinking and writing, the logos, of the big names in philosophy—all men—was governed by their drive and desire, by their sexual economy, and not merely by their reason and rationality.

What she was after was thinking and writing that would undo the masculine authority and mastery, which were inherent in the philosophical tradition that pretended to possess ultimate truths (Liska 2000, 91). She wanted to discredit the tradition of metaphysics, which sustained the binary opposition between intelligible (associated with men) and sensible (associated with women), which male philosophy pretended to transcend. This is where her alternative conception of philosophical writing arose (Deutscher & Oliver 1999, 4). For her, writing was a rebellion against the authority of ultimate truths. The strange and uncanny disruption of writing effaces proper names and stable meanings. It undermines the tendency to speak once and for all. This is the reason why she praised Derrida’s writing as *écriture parricide*, which ‘indefatigably repeats the murder of the father’ (Kofman 1984a, 113; see Liska 2000, 95-96). She liked, as Ann Smock says, ‘to play the role of a mocking girl whose laughter interrupts the philosopher at his desk, scatters grave truths the better to greet in their stead beautiful fictions, uncanny signs, and figures “devilishly deceptive”’ (Smock 1996, x-xi).

In *L’Enigme de la femme*, this ‘laughing and dancing philosopher in the Nietzschean vein’ (Conley 1993, 704), shows how Freud’s theory of feminine sexuality, on the one hand, continues the masculine and metaphysical tradition that excludes women and, on the other hand, deconstructs this very same tradition with its hierarchical binary oppositions. According to her, Freud’s theory is based on the idea of a woman as a criminal, who knows the truth but does not reveal and confess it. Freud did confront the primacy and domination of the mother and this woman is

behind his psychoanalysis. However, she claims, that Freud's fear of the woman as a powerful and self-sufficient criminal compels Freud to define the woman as a being that is marked by a fundamental lack.

However, she continues to follow Freud as she identifies three different versions of female sexuality. In the normal feminine sexuality the phallic activity is partly repressed and the passive tendencies take precedence. If the phallic activity is repressed excessively, we confront the neurotic female sexuality, which may also turn into the repression of passive tendencies, in which case all sexuality is repressed and sexuality returns in the form of hysterical symptoms. Finally, there is the affirmative feminine sexuality. Instead of accepting the fact of castration and sexual difference, the woman refuses them and affirms that the penis is (active, masculine sexuality) and is not (passive, feminine sexuality) there. This affirmative woman, who refuses not merely the castration complex but castration itself, is, so Kofman claims, present in Freud's psychoanalysis. In this way, Kofman shows how women's sexuality is bisexual: she is able to enjoy (*jouir*) in both passive and active ways. Her enjoyment may be both feminine and masculine. Because of this, there is nothing proper to her, since woman is non-generic and inaccessible. As Lacan says, *the* woman does not exist.

When she reconsidered her own experience of psychoanalysis in “Ma vie” et la psychanalyse, she said that she always wanted to tell the story of her life. Alongside writing philosophy and theoretical texts about autobiography, she wrote her own autobiography *Rue Ordener, rue Labat*, which was next-to-last of the books written intensively from the beginning of 1993 to the autumn of the same year. Her autobiography tells of her life from the age of eight to eighteen. Mainly it is a story of a hidden Jewish girl in occupied France, which had been—Anne Frank's diaries being an exception—an untold story. She wrote an autobiography about her separations and losses, terror and scars, even though she had written in *Autobiogriffures*, that all ‘autobiographies are false [*mensongère*], written as retroactive illusions for the aim of idealisation’ (Kofman 1984b, 99), or as Freud wrote in a letter to Edward L. Bernays (10 August 1929): ‘What makes all autobiographies worthless is, after all, their mendacity’ (Freud 1975a, 391). We'll come back to this paradoxical possibility of the impossibility of writing an autobiography.

4. Jewish law as the law of the father

Rue Ordener, rue Labat starts on the last day Sarah, then eight years old, ever saw her father, Berek Kofman, a forty-two-year old rabbi of a Parisian synagogue. Caught by the Vichy police at their home at the Rue Ordener on 16 July 1942, he was taken to the Vélodrome d'hiver together with thirteen thousand other French Jews. From there the deportees were transported to Drancy, and from there they were sent to concentration camps. Berek Kofman was deported to Auschwitz, to ‘the place where no eternal rest would or could ever be granted’ (Kofman 1994, 16/10). He stayed alive a year. As one survivor told Sarah after the war, he refused to work on one Sabbath, since he wanted to pray to God for all of those people in the camp, victims

and murderers alike. Because of his refusal, he was beaten to the ground and buried alive by a Jewish *kapo*. This is how he died. His death—dying at Auschwitz—was, in Sarah's words, *violence infinie*, 'infinite violence' (Kofman 1994, 16/10).

In *Paroles suffoquées*, a prelude to *Rue Ordener, rue Labat*, Kofman writes: 'Because he was a Jew, my father died in Auschwitz.' 'My father: Berek Kofman, born October 10, 1900 at Sobin (Poland)' is written, she continues, in 'these columns of unending names' (Kofman 1987, 16). The columns to which she refers, and some of which are reproduced in her book, are Serge Klarsfeld's textual memorial to the French deportees killed in the concentration camps.

KALISZTEJN	CHAJATILLA	03.08.00	ANNAPOL	P	LEWINE	OSKAR	14.07.85	BIALYSTOK	R
KALMAN	JOSEPH	04.04.01	BUDAPEST	IND	LEWKOWICZ	RUCHLA	.90	KARZIMIEZ	P
KALMIC	SAMUELE	22.03.23	BELGRADE	Y	LEWKOWICK	SIMON	14.12.97	FRZEBGRZ	P
KANZ	ABRAK	25.01.03	STAROBE	F	LEWY	BENCJAN	15.07.92	DRCBIN	P
KANTOR	ABRAHAM	21.08.83	TANDOW	T	LEWY	ESTHER	.06	DROBIN	P
KANTOROWICZ	JOSEPH	23.11.85	VARSOVIE	P	LICHTBLAU	CHASKEL	03.09.08	TARNOV	IND
KAPLON	SZEJWA	06.03.03	VARSOVIE	P	LIEBEN	SARAH	16.11.91	FLHINGEN	A
KARF	FRANIA	03.11.96	VARSOVIE	AUT	LINA	SURAH	24.10.94	VARSOVIE	P
KARSTEIN	EVA	06.03.88	STRASBOURG	A	LINDENBERG	ANNA	09.07.00	TYPLIS	A
KAUFMAN	EURA	.14	ZYRADOW	P	LIPIEC	MIRLA	.13	PARZBON	IND
KAUFMANN	JANKA	11.07.06	BRATISLAVA	TC	LIPCHUTZ	MATZA	23.05.01	TOMATROW	P
KELBERG	EVE	19.04.96	KIEW	R	LIPNITZKY	BONNIA	14.04.04	OSEFER	R
KERN	SABINA	15.07.97	KROSNO	P	LIRUE	AHARON	30.08.00	WOLOGDA	R
KELTER	FANNI	20.09.00	VARSOVIE	P	LITCHES	ALINE	20.10.91	PAVONSKY	P
KIERSZ	MESCCZ	23.11.89	SALAGOW	P	LITMANOVITCH	RACHEL	24.04.91	KIEW	R
KIERZ	ESTHER	18.03.23	SULAGOW	P	LITWAK	JOSEPH	12.12.00	CHELM	P
KIERZ	FAYMET	18.05.95	SULAGOW	P	LITWAK	SYLVIA	21.09.20	KEDZIN	IND
KIERZ	JURA	10.06.24	SULAGOW	P	LOBERSZTAJN	ICEK	.00	YELLSOW	IND
KIERZ	SZEGNALA	.20	SULAGOW	P	LOEBINGER	GERDA	22.11.13	WROKLAW	P
KLAJMAN	CHANA	31.12.02	VARSOVIE	P	LOEFF	ALPRED	15.58.04	HOLLESEW	T
KLARFELD	ABIRA	26.05.26	HAIFA	P	LOGAK	DEBORA	09.12.96	MISGURZY	R
KLARFELD	CHANA	26.12.00	POLOGNE	P	MAIZMER	HELENE	06.11.92	WLACTANEK	R
KLARFELD	ICEK	31.01.99	GUSULMINKA	P	MALIC	NOEMIE	16.05.05	DWINK	R
KLEIMANN	MOISE	17.10.95	KAMENETS	P	MALNIAK	SALOME	20.08.98	VARSOVIE	P
KLEMPEN	SIMONE	15.08.02	SHBSTECHEWA	R	MALMED	CHANA	.11	BREST LITOSK	P
KOFMAN	BEREK	10.10.00	SOBIN	IND	MALMED	JOSEPH	.11	BREST LITOSK	P
KOHN	GRANGE	03.09.03	ZEMOON	YU	MALMED	MADELEINE	.05	VARSOVIE	P
KOLCZYN	MONOLA	01.04.23	VARSOVIE	P	MALMED	SOREL	13.05.06	BREST LITOSK	P
KOLSKA	SARA	27.08.22	VARSOVIE	P	MANIS	ZELMAN	28.01.83	KAMENETS	R
KONSTANTINER	CHAIM	05.03.05	ESKAROPF	P	MANSFELD	LISA	10.07.05	KALISK	P
KOPELMAN	GISLA	22.02.96		P	MARGOLINER	DIVONIA	05.06.03	FLOCH	P
KOPELMAN	JESSA	26.10.21	PARIS	P	MARTINKER	ANNA	17.05.89	VARSOVIE	P
KOPELMAN	MICHEL	09.06.99	VARSOVIE	IND	LOPATIM	ABRAHAM	20.10.85	KOSSOW	P
KOPER	FAJDA	15.02.00	ZAMVAF	P	LORINCZ	DESIRE	14.04.01	BUDAPEST	IND
KORENBLUM	JOEL	17.07.02	VARSOVIE	IND	LORINCZ	GUIDI	.07	KEDAIMAI	IND
KORNGALD	NESLA	20.03.12	VARSOVIE	P	LUBLINSKY	BERTHE	06.10.95	MOSCOW	R
KORN	ABRAHAM	14.03.86	WIELUN	P	LUBRANTECKI	LIWETA	08.08.04	TOMASOW	P
KORN	MEDEL	12.09.84	LASK	P	LUKS	RACHEL	15.12.12	SOUNOVICE	R
KORNBERG	ELIE	15.05.96	LENENZO	IND	LURIE	JEANNE	01.09.27	LENINGRAD	R
KOUCHES	MERA	29.09.89	VILNA	R	LUST	MARIE	20.12.09	PETROGRAD	R
KOUMER	MHILIA	20.05.89		R	LUSTMAN	FRAULA	07.09.05	VARSOVIE	P
KRAMER	SAMUEL	28.07.26	ZOLKIEW	P	LWOWA	CHAIM	05.05.96	BARANOV	R
KRANOWSKI	MALA	01.03.07	VARSOVIE	P	MACHONBAUM	ROSALIE	21.05.91	RISTCHIFF	R
KRAVETZKI	ROSE	26.03.23	PARIS	IND	MAI	ESTHER	.99	VARSOVIE	P
KREMSKI	RUCHLA	17.11.95	LODZ	P		SOPHIE	10.04.88	VELICH	P

A part of Serge Klarsfeld's textual memorial.

At home Sarah's father carried out religious ceremonies and practised shofar. A religious and sacred atmosphere prevailed and Sarah's family rigorously observed Jewish law and all the kosher prohibitions. 'My father, a rabbi slaughterer, killed chickens in the toilet according to the ritual' (Kofman 1997c, 167). Sarah loved Jewish feasts, singing the traditional Hebrew songs, listening to the reasons for the kosher rules, her father dancing in the synagogue and lifting high the Torah scrolls, which she kissed afterwards. Her father functioned as the representative of Jewish law. This law can also be considered as the law of the father, the paternal law, which defined and sanctioned the symbolic order of Sarah's family. Moreover, it was a founding element of Sarah's identity, of her becoming a subject.

There was another conflict between paternal and maternal edicts. Her mother demanded 'you must eat' and she stuffed and stuffed the children. At the same time, her father, following the norms of Jewish law, commanded: 'you must not eat

everything'. She was not supposed to mix milk and meat or to eat just any meat, as she relates in 'Sacree nourriture' (Kofman 1997c, 167). After the deportation of her father, she confesses, she had hardly any appetite, since she was afraid of transgressing the paternal law. 'I [...] resisted with all my might the maternal categorical imperative' (Kofman 1997c, 167).

However, the paternal law was also something that she was afraid of. She tells that the family lived in terror of breaking the norms of Jewish law. She also associated her father's razor, with which he slaughtered chickens in accordance with the law, with Abraham's knife, and the guttural sounds of shofar with the cries from the severed throats of the chickens. The sacrifice of Isaac often worried her since she thought of herself as occupying Isaac's place and that in doing so she too would be in the risk of being sacrificed by her own father.

On 16 July 1942 her father had left home early to warn Jews of the synagogue to go into hiding immediately because he knew that there was going to be a raid. Instead of going and hiding himself, even though he knew that the police were after him, he returned home to pray to God that he be taken as long as his wife and children were spared. He did not lose faith in God and Jewish law. When the police came, her mother lied to the police telling them that her husband was not at home and that she was pregnant, which she was not. However, he gave himself up: 'Yes, I'm here. Take me!' (Kofman 1994, 11/5). Her father turned out to be Isaac or, more properly, both Abraham and Isaac, but unlike Isaac he was not to be saved by an angel. He sacrificed himself so that his family would not be taken. Sarah compared the purity of her father's act of self-sacrifice to her mother's lies, which filled her with shame. Sarah had chosen sides: instead of the maternal pragmatic reasoning represented by justified lies, she turned to the father, the representative of Jewish law.

At Auschwitz, her father died because 'he was a Jew' (Kofman 1987, 15), which can be read as: he died, because he respected and followed Jewish law, which includes not merely the 613 commandments, *mitzvot*, that God gave in the Torah (the Written Law), but also the Rabbinic law, the Talmudic literature, the post-Talmudic codificatory literature, regulations promulgated by rabbis and communal bodies, customs and customary law.

Then again, Jewish law does not require this kind of self-sacrifice. On the contrary, the principle of *pikuach nefesh* demands that one should save a life in jeopardy (Stanislowski 2004, 57). This principle of saving life is based on the commandment in the Torah which demands that one *live* by the statutes and rules of God (Leviticus 18:5). Thus, Jewish law does not demand that anyone die because of obedience to the commandments. In the Talmudic literature there are many examples where the commandments of the Scriptures become inapplicable and where the laws of the Sabbath can, and even ought to, be broken to save life. One is allowed to eat non-kosher food, when there is no kosher food available, to avoid starvation or when non-kosher food is needed because of illness or pregnancy. If one must choose between saving one's own life and that of another, Rabbi Akiva says that it is permissible to save one's own life. There are some commandments that cannot

be violated. The act of murder is prohibited, even though Jewish law permits killing in self-defence and in wartime. The defamation of God's name is not allowed even to save one's life. Thus, one should offer one's life instead of bowing to any other god than YHWH. Perhaps Sarah's father even considered that obeying the commands of the camp guards would be bowing to the Nazis, who believed 'themselves gods / In their insane will to power' (Kofman 2007a, 246).

Even though Kofman did not mention this principle, her father, as a rabbi, must have known it. One example Kofman mentions confirms this. During the war it was difficult to find any food and even more difficult to continue eating kosher. In a train, the Red Cross distributed ham and butter sandwiches. Her mother ordered, 'don't eat', but her father intervened, 'let the children eat, its wartime'. These sandwiches 'once decreed impure, I found delicious, now purified by circumstances and paternal authority'. (Kofman, 1997c, 168.)

In a more general sense, Jewish law cannot be considered as formal and categorical legalism. According to Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein, ethics is included within the *halakhah*, Jewish jurisprudence, as a supra legal imperative: *lifnim mishurat hadin*, 'beyond the line of the law', according to which one must not take in consideration only the formal and strict commands and statutes of the law (Lichtenstein 1975). According to Emmanuel Levinas, this principle, which he translates as *derrière la ligne droit de la loi*, is about justice that summons one to go behind the straight line of the law, since behind it there is the land of goodness that extends infinitely and is unexplored (Levinas 1979, 245).

Thus, it is not Jewish law represented by her father that is unconditional and categorical. Instead, the maternal authority is, at least for Sarah, the categorical imperative, at one moment, a categorical prohibition (don't eat!), at another moment, a categorical demand (eat!), which does not allow any exceptions or interpretation.

What is more, even if her father's prayers for both victims and murderers may sound strange, it is in accordance with Jewish law, which is intimately linked to love (*ahavah*), to mercy (*rahamim*) and forgiveness (*selihah*). The duty of loving kindness holds for every other human being, since *rea*, neighbour, is not merely an Israelite but also every stranger, since the whole of humanity must be respected in its fundamental dignity. According to a rabbinic principle, the dignity of all human beings (*habriyot*) overrides every prohibition in the Torah. For Moses Maimonides, 'every single man among all creatures in the world' is sanctified as the Holy of Holies (Schwarzchild 1976).

Jewish law and the affirmation of life belong together. In her autobiographical texts Kofman does not speak of this connection but in her reading of Nietzsche, she stresses the common belonging of Jews and law to the affirmative and aggressive forces of life, because Nietzsche saw Jewish people at the same time both as the most affirmative of all people and the very people of the law. Law is not a reactive and inhibiting force but immanent to life. For Nietzsche, law is, she says, 'an inhibitor not of desire as an affirmative force but of forces of death and resentment', which the law dominates and holds at its mercy. The order of the law institutes the just

and the prohibited ‘in relation to, and in conformity with, its own degree of power.’ (Kofman 2007b, 130.) The Jewish law that her father followed seems to come close to Nietzsche’s idea of law as the affirmation of life.

5. Torn between two streets, two mothers

After July 1942, the round-ups in Paris got worse, Sarah tells in *Rue Ordener, rue Labat*. No longer was anyone starved spared. Sarah’s mother undertook to hide the family. Sarah, together with one of her sisters and brothers, was sent to Merville to be cared for by peasants. Sarah could not stand to be separated from her mother. She cried and refused to eat most of the time. She was taken back to Paris, where she stayed at home with her mother because she was no longer able to go to school. When the round-ups intensified, Sarah was once again sent to the countryside, to Picardy. After two days, she had to be taken back to Paris. There she was hidden in different places, but over and over again her mother had to take her back.

On 9 February 1943, a man warned them that their family was on the list for that night’s round-ups. They ran away to Mémé’s apartment that was on the Rue Labat. Mémé, ‘the lady on the Rue Labat’, who offered them a haven, had once been Sarah’s parents’ neighbour, who loved children, as Sarah’s mother said. During the night, the Gestapo—six men, one for each child—came to their home. Next day they visited their home at the Rue Ordener for the last time. Never again, except in her dreams, was she ever to go back there.

In ‘*Sacrée nourriture*’ Kofman relates how she was saved just in time by a woman who kept Sarah in her home in the middle of Paris until the end of war (Kofman, 1997c, 168). The woman asked Sarah to call her Mémé, while she christened Sarah Suzanne. At first Sarah stayed with her mother, but after a while Mémé took more and more care of her. She showed tenderness toward Sarah, hugged and kissed her frequently, took her out, changed her kosher diet, which she declared to be unhealthy, changed her hair, revamped her wardrobe. She only sent Sarah to her mother for evenings and nights. ‘She undertook to reform me from head to toe and to complete my education’ (Kofman 1994, 58/47). On Sundays, Sarah went to L’Haÿ where she met the rest of Mémé’s family.

Mémé had saved Sarah and her family, but she was not without anti-Semitic prejudices. She gave her a Christian name and taught Sarah that she had a Jewish nose and even made her feel the little bump that was the sign of it. According to her, the Jews had crucified Jesus Christ and they were all stingy and loved only money. She repeated over and over again that Sarah had been badly brought up. Instead of having moral principles, she obeyed ridiculous religious prohibitions. Mémé decreed her childhood food bad for her health and put her on a totally different diet, as Sarah tells in ‘*Sacrée nourriture*’. Since she was ‘[s]ubmitted to “a real double bind”’, she could no longer swallow and she vomited after each meal (Kofman, 1997c, 168).

Her mother had no power to prevent Mémé from transforming her, ‘detaching me from myself and from Judaism. I had, it seemed, buried the entire past: I started loving rare steak cooked in butter and parsley. I didn’t think at all any more about my

father, and I couldn't pronounce a single word in Yiddish' (Kofman 1994, 67/57).

There was not merely a conflict between the paternal law and the maternal imperative, but also between two mothers, one Jewish, one Christian. Mémé took the place of Sarah's mother and became the object of her desire instead of her mother. At the same time, Sarah became the object of Mémé's desire. There is a split between the good and the bad mother. Sarah identified with the good one, which she also invested with all that is positive. The bad one was associated with everything bad and corrupt. She could be discarded as easily as the food she vomited.

Then again, Mémé also said that Jewish people were very intelligent and that no other people had as many geniuses at music and philosophy. From Mémé's lips she first heard the names which were to become so familiar to her: Spinoza, Bergson, Einstein, and Marx. Thus, Mémé leads Sarah to her life as a philosopher, to her close reading of the great names in philosophy and her mimetic writing, in which she was able to identify herself with them.

One Mother's day, Sarah bought two postcards. The one she found more beautiful she gave to Mémé, but she immediately felt ashamed, because she had made her choice and declared her preference. One evening Sarah and Mémé missed the last metro. They had to stay at a hotel overnight. Her mother was waiting for them to come home, sick with worry, but Sarah had completely forgotten about her, as she was, quite simply, happy. Sarah confesses that Mémé had thus managed to detach Sarah from her mother right under her nose.

After the liberation, her mother decided to get all her children back. Sarah had to move with her mother to a hotel. Now she refused to eat and spent her time crying, because she had to be away from Mémé whom she loved more than her own mother. Because of these tantrums, her mother let Sarah visit Mémé, but only for one hour a day. She wished to get Sarah to get accustomed to the separation. Every time Sarah came back late, her mother beat her with a strap.

After a while, her mother prohibited Sarah to see Mémé. She ran away and decided to stay with Mémé. But French law required that she return to her mother—and her mother knew that law. Sarah's mother brought a suit against Mémé. In the trial, her mother accused Mémé of trying to take advantage of Sarah. In turn, Sarah accused her mother of beating her, which one witness confirmed. The court decided to entrust Sarah to Mémé. After the trial, Sarah felt uneasy, neither triumphant nor completely happy. Her stomach was in a knot; she was afraid and felt as if she had committed a crime. On their way back to Mémé's apartment, her mother, with the help of two men, tore her violently from Mémé. Her mother hit her and shouted in Yiddish, 'I am your mother! I don't care what the court decided, you belong to me!' Sarah's reaction was paradoxical: 'I struggled, cried, sobbed. Deep down, I was relieved.' (Kofman 1994, 71/61.)

Later, when her mother had to go to Nonancourt to bring Sarah's brothers and sisters back, she, despite everything, entrusted Sarah to Mémé. However, one day her mother came to take her to Nonancourt without giving Sarah the opportunity to say her goodbyes. She also prohibited Sarah from having any kind of contact with

Mémé. Before they got a tiny apartment, they had to live in a terrible hospital used as a hospice in Nonancourt. Sarah was sick all the time and was taken to hospital, where she was not too unhappy since she was away from her mother and could enter into correspondence with Mémé.

When they moved back to Paris, Sarah started to see Mémé again. She was sent to a Jewish establishment for the children of deportees in order to renew her attachment to Judaism. She stayed there for five years and learned Hebrew again and started to obey all the religious prohibitions of her childhood. When she came back from the establishment to stay with her mother, there were terrible fights. She often went on hunger strike. Her mother cut off her electricity early in the evening and she remembers reading Sartre's *Roads to Freedom* under her bed sheets by flashlight. Once again she gave up all forms of religious practice. Finally, she managed to move to a dormitory for high-school girls on the Rue du Docteur-Blanche.

Sarah's autobiography ends when she enrolls at the Sorbonne, where 'another life begins', which explains why she started to distance herself from Mémé, who represented her previous life as a Jewish girl, who had adopted a gentile family as her own. During this conflict between two mothers, Mémé wanted her to bury her entire Jewish past, not merely her father and mother, but also the Jewish law that guaranteed her identity as a subject. (Kofman 1994, 99/84.)

The saviour turned out to be a figure of prohibition too. After this, she severed all contact with Mémé for several years because she couldn't stand hearing her talk about the past and calling her 'little darling' and 'little bunny'. Even later, she always visited her with a friend. When Mémé died seriously disabled in a hospice in Les Sables, Sarah recalls that 'I was unable to attend her funeral. But I know that at her grave the priest recalled how she had saved a little Jewish girl during the war' (Kofman 1994, 99/85).

Ultimately, Sarah also turns away from Mémé to become, once again, something else, to be able to create fictional genealogy in a Nietzschean way. 'Here another life begins', which means that from now on philosophical speculation was for her a mirror which deflected the all too horrifying and unbearable images of her time as a hidden child (Kofman 1985, 20). She turned away from her past to become what she was to be 'a secular intellectual celebrating Nietzsche and *écriture parricide*' (Liska 2000, 98).

6. Autobiography as a testimony

After reading her autobiography, we have to come back to the possibility of autobiography. For Kofman, there is no coherent and linear autobiography. Instead of a master subject, who would retrospectively reveal and represent the truth of one's life and self, there is the impossibility of consistent and coherent self-representation. This impossibility does not mean that autobiography is impossible. Instead, in its impossibility there is its possibility. Let us see what this possibility of the impossible means.

For Kofman, Nietzsche's 'autobiography' *Ecce Homo* is 'the most depersonalized

autobiography' (McDonald 1998, 185-186; Kofman 1992). Nietzsche turns against biological origins and genealogical determinations by an act of active forgetting and through the creation of a fantastic genealogy. Hence, Nietzsche succeeds in going beyond those elements that normally determine the identity of the subject. It makes an unfinished self-creation and a multiplicity of identities possible. This leads to the death of the stable and substantial subject of metaphysics, the *autos* (self), and to the end of the bios of the self.

Kofman also praises E.T.A. Hoffmann's *The Life and Opinions of Tomcat Murr*, a story of a vain and self-taught bourgeois tomcat, which sets out to write his own autobiography. Because of an error by the printer, Murr's story is accidentally mixed up with a book about the composer Johannes Kreisler. Two different characters are intermingled: Murr, who is a brawler, vain lover and confident scholar, and Kreisler, who is a moody and hypochondriac genius. For Kofman, Hoffman's story transgresses the law of the autobiography, subverts the coherence and unity of autobiographical narrative and disrupts the linear-progressive chronology and order of the authorial logos. (Kofman 1984b).

In her 'another life'—as she calls her life as a philosopher—she seems to be a combination of Nietzsche and Murr. From now on, her story seems to be an assemblage of the citations of diverse authors. It would be an illusion to believe that her autobiography could be anything other than that which emerges from those whom she had read and written about. Hence, 'there was no self "Kofman" except for the multiple authors with whom she identified and aligned herself', Penelope Deutscher claims (Deutscher 1999, 159). Her identity, according to Joanne Faulkner, is a 'pastiche lacking a substantial core', 'an accretion of identification with others' (Faulkner 2009, 43). This explains her preference for close readings, since she is able to lose herself in her interpretations but, at the same time, find her 'identity'. According to Faulkner, Kofman attempted to manage her anxiety about her Jewish identity 'by means of her interpretation of Nietzsche'. Because of Nietzsche's 'equivocal use of the trope of the Jew', he became for her 'a figure through which she could negotiate her own conflicted identification with Judaism'. (Faulkner 2008, 42.) This is not all. Through Nietzsche's conception of law as an affirmative force of life Kofman also negotiates her relationship with Jewish law that her absent father represents. Submitting to this law, she is able to, on the one hand, hang on to her Jewish identity, on the other hand, not to forget her absent father, who is internalized as law.

In her other life, philosophy protects her, gives her a voice and fluctuating identity as she identifies with the writers and philosophers she reads. Philosophy offers a protective discursive system that makes it possible *not* to confront the trauma that the memory of the body carries. In 'Tombeau pour un nom propre', she recounts a dream, where on the cover of a book read: KAFKA, translated by Sar...Ko(a)f. Kof made her think of *Kopf*, the head, which dissimulates what is low and dirty, her Jewish body, the anal ('a', which is enclosed in parentheses). This would give her a proper name as a philosopher and as a translator. She could hold her head high. But the last syllables of her surname that were cut off resist this possibility of sublimation. *Ah*,

which in Hebrew designates the feminine, and *Man*, which designates the masculine, signifies her double castration as a punishment for her denial of her blood and her body. Sar...Kof becomes a sarcophagus for her name, where 'I devour my own flesh (*propre chair*)' (Kofman 1997b, 170).

Rue Ordener, rue Labat begins with these words: *De lui, il me reste seulement le stylo*. The only thing she had from her father was a fountain pen, which she had in fact stolen from her mother's purse. She used this pen all through school, but it broke and thus failed her before she could bring herself to give it up. She still has it, patched up with Scotch tape: 'it is in front of my eyes on my worktable and it makes me write, write [*écrire, écrire*]' (Kofman 1994, 9/3). She has to write but cannot do that with the broken pen. The broken pen stands for the absent father, both of which would guarantee her an identity in the symbolic order if they functioned. Because of this, she is unable to put down in words the traumatic events of the loss of her father and being forced to dismiss the paternal law and her Jewish identity. The only words she has is a breathless cry between sobs: 'oh papa, papa, papa' (Kofman 1994, 14/7).

According to Ann Smock, an opportunity to tell her story allowed her to turn towards a knot in her past. This autobiographical book, to which all her other texts had been leading her, was, according to Smock, an opening for her, 'a sense of unexpected renewal' (Smock 1996, xi). Suddenly, it became possible for her to untie the knot in her heart. Thus, her philosophical texts were a preparation for the autobiography, in which she returns from 'another life', the life of the university and philosophy, to the earlier life dominated by the paternal law, the absence of her father and the fight between her two mothers.

Yet, one may wonder whether the realization of the impossible autobiography, the translation of her life, her body touched by this life, into language, was a cause of her suicide. Françoise Duroux claims that her suicide was somehow related to her move from philosophy to autobiography. Philosophy protects, but the 'autobiographical plunge, practised *in vivo*, undoubtedly provokes an earthquake', which explodes the philosophical position. This led to her suicidal plunge into her own melancholy and a creative block (Duroux 1993, 101). Having survived by, through and in writing philosophy, was Sarah Kofman now, after putting her story to words, compelled to give up surviving, finally wake up and escape from the nightmare by dying?

I would argue that her autobiography was an explosion that untied several knots. Perhaps *Rue Ordener, rue Labat* is a retrospective telling of her own becoming and identity formation, the idea and possibility of which both her philosophical considerations concerning autobiography and her life in philosophy resisted. Did she cave in at the end as she took the final step from philosophy to autobiography that gave voice to her life and her identity? This is not true because beyond the seemingly coherent narrative, *Rue Ordener, rue Labat* deconstructs the law of autobiography.

On the one hand, she is able to construct her story from the first person position, tell of her experiences, which cannot be replaced by experiences others have gone through, and talk about what happened to her in an autobiographical voice. On the other hand, even though the autobiography seems to be a coherent narrative, it is

not the authoritative voice of the narrator recounting a singular experience. It is the trauma of her father's absence that speaks or tells its story. It is the paternal law that tells its story through her body as she desperately aims to hold on to Jewish law and her Jewish identity and yet give it up in the fight between two mothers. As her autobiography speaks of the experience of a trauma that is beyond symbolization, it provides testimony to that experience, which cannot—as non-symbolizable—ever be owned by an authoritative ego. To be truthful the testimony of an autobiography cannot claim to be truthful as the story of the ego, which would function as the guarantor of the truth of the testimony. As Jennifer Yusin says, testimony cannot assert its own truth, but rather 'announces its own inability to tell the truth' (Yusin 2004 142). Thus, it is not she that deconstructs the autobiography but the text deconstructs itself as a story.

In her philosophical texts, there are multiple voices that speak as she reads Freud, Nietzsche and others. In the autobiography too, there are others who speak: her father, two mothers, a witness recounting the fate of her father, her body and Jewish law. Even though she was, as an adult female philosopher, able to integrate her traumatic events into a narration, she was, at the same time, unable to do so. But it is exactly here where the possibility of the impossible rests. And not only that, the responsibility, the ethics of testimony is confronted the moment that instead of merely following the rules of law or autobiography, one chooses to do the impossible, to testify without being able to narrate one's own story. 'If no story is possible after Auschwitz', Kofman says, there remains a duty to speak, 'to speak endlessly for those who could not speak because to the end they wanted to safeguard true speech against betrayal. To speak, in order to witness, but how? How is testimony able to escape the idyllic law of the story? How to speak "the unimaginable?"' (Kofman 1987, 43).

7. The body never forgets

In "Ma vie" et la psychanalyse, a title which she takes from Freud but in which she puts 'my life' in inverted commas, she recounts that at the beginning of her psychoanalysis she never lost the thread as she was telling a linear and continuous story. There were no breaks, gaps or slips of tongue in her speech. Nothing happened, since this kind of reassuring narrative was merely an attempt to master her life. 'Everything "started" when I had nothing more to say, when I no longer knew how to start or where to end' (Kofman 1997a, 171). After this, everything she had recounted came back to her in a discontinuous way and in different forms, as memories, slips, dreams and repetitions. She did not recognize herself. This uncontrolled discourse, where the body is allowed to speak, is not about truth or meaning. The body that speaks resists narration as it spills 'its offerings of semen', that is, externalizes what had been enclosed within (Kofman 1997a, 172). Her generous and closed mouth did not form meaningful signifiers but was 'a cave from which more or less articulate and intelligible words burst forth' (Kofman 1997a, 172). She gave her gifts to the analyst from her stomach and her merchandise was shit. Her imperious need was not that the analyst give meaning to and interpret her words but to establish an exchange

that would turn 'caca', shit, into gold, 'This allows me to get up, remain standing, and leave' (Kofman 1997a, 172).

As Kathryn Robson says, her story does not 'emerge from lived experience *per se*, but from the difficulties of articulating that experience' (Robson 2004a, 613). The broken pen, Robson says, refers to the fact that the story of the loss of her father and his death can only be told brokenly. Moreover, the figure of the broken pen stands in for a wounded body. The pain of loss and trauma 'emerges not from the story itself, but from the recurring bodily imagery through which its story unfolds' (Robson 2004a, 608). The story is told through bodily ingestion and expulsion, through eating and vomiting. Then again, she gives words and voice to her traumatic childhood memories rather through bodily imagery than through the body as such.

Her trauma—as all traumatic emotional blows or wounds—is the loss of words. Instead of becoming part of language and signification processes, instead of being assimilated by the subject as a speaking being, instead of being integrated into an autobiographical narration, traumatic events remain inscribed in the body. The after-effects of the emotional wounds, which resist being resolved, are the silent cries of the body. Because of the lack of a resolution to the trauma, it continues to linger. However, it does not return as stories and words, but as bodily reactions and sensations. It is not confronted in the symbolic order. The body acts the trauma out and as it does so it repeats it again and again. Not being able to swallow and vomiting repeatedly bring Kofman back to the absence of her father. She has a compulsion to repeat the loss in and through her body. It overrides the pleasure she would get from eating, from forgetting, from enjoying the care of her two mothers. Thus, her act 'disregards the pleasure principle in *every way*' (Freud 1975b, 36). At the same time, she attempts to master the trauma by turning the passive situation in which she found herself when her father was taken away into activity. By repeating this event—even though it is unpleasurable—she took an active part in it since she was able to vomit and to refuse to swallow.

The realm of the trauma and its after-effects is not the symbolic or imaginary order, but the real of the body. For Kofman, the story of these traumatic events is the story of her body. Her autobiography seems to be a story about two addresses, two mothers, but actually it is the story of one person who disappears from the story almost immediately: the father. Her journey from the Rue Ordener (where her family had lived) to the Rue Labat (where they moved after fleeing from their home), separated by only one metro stop, is an infinite journey of the body. When they had to flee from their home, the Rue Marcadet, which was between the Rue Ordener and the Rue Labat, seemed endless for her and she vomited the whole way. The loss of the father is told as the loss of food: 'A few years later my father was deported. We would no longer find anything to eat' (Kofman, 1997c, 168). Later Mémé put her on a Gentile diet of red meat. She was now caught between two mothers representing different rules and practices. Eating this nourishing food would mean to forget her mother. But this is not all. It would also mean accepting her father's death, which her body refuses to do. She cannot swallow anything and what she ate she vomited.

Eating would be the renouncement of the law of the father and her Jewish identity. Moreover, by refusing to eat her body imitates the fate of her father at Auschwitz.

According to Robson, her body is a site of resistance. Her bodily rejection of food is a refusal and inability to forget the loss and law of her father. Robson claims that vomiting highlights the difference between remembering and not forgetting. For Sarah, remembering, retaining the past, even if only in the form of partial memories, is impossible. What she vomits is neither preserved nor externalized as meaningful internalized memories and stories. Vomit is what is discarded as unrecognizable and fragmentary in form. (Robson 2004a, 614-615.) Tensions between the need to accept the loss and the impossibility of doing so, between ingestion and expulsion, between her two mothers, between her Jewish and non-Jewish identity, are figured through her body. Instead of remembering the loss of her father as something belonging to the past, she, as Freud writes, 'is obliged to *repeat* the repressed material as a contemporary experience' (Freud 1975b, 18). She cannot remember the trauma as something belonging to the past. Still, she is not able or allowed to forget it. The truth of trauma is in her symptoms. The body cannot forget and in this sense it is the embodiment of the ethics of testimony.

Rue Ordener, rue Labat is thus a story of the body, or more precisely the bodily memory, the body that does not forget since it *must* return, again and again, to the loss of the father, to the event that cannot be remembered through language and narration, to which her father's broken pen, her breathless words, her vomiting body testify. Her—or her body's—autobiography discloses the after-touch of the loss and absence persisting in the darkness of the immanency of her singular body. It opens up the silent, but painfully loudly resonating, memory of her body. The absence of the father is not the absence of absence, but the unbearable pressure of the presence of absence.

As an autobiography of bodily functions and sensations, it is not merely the repetition of the traumatic events in and through the body. Instead, as Robson says, it is about the adult Kofman giving 'voice to her childhood memories through bodily imagery', as she tells of her eating disorders, and thus, she has succeeded 'to some degree in figuring her loss through language' (Robson 2004a, 616). She is now able to remember how her body could not forget, feel the immanent touch that suffocates and translates her vomit to writing. The first steps in this remembering had already taken place in her psychoanalysis, when she stopped telling stories and gave her traumatic events a fragmented and discontinuous voice as her opening and closing mouth vomited words and devoured the silence of the analyst. Below the surface of her story about the war between two mothers, she tells the story of her body that could not forget.

In her last text, she analyzed Rembrandt's *The Anatomy Lesson of Doctor Nicolas Tulip*. She shows how the book, wide open at the foot of the deceased, replaces the body (Kofman 1995b).



Rembrandt, *The Anatomy Lesson of Doctor Nicolaus Tulip* (1632). Oil on canvas, Royal Picture Gallery Mauritshuis, The Hague.

This did not take place in her case. Her autobiography did not displace her body. On the one hand, it was a moment of *ekstasis*, standing outside oneself. She, at last, stood outside her body and testified to its story, but, on the other hand, as she translated her wounded body into language, she affirmed that the body never forgets. For her, there was no way out of the immanency of the body even if she was able to tell its story. We could say that *Rue Ordener, rue Labat* is between the body and the book. It is, if I may use Derrida's words, 'the third, the witness, the *terstis*, testimony, attestation, and testament—but in the form of protest or protestation' (Derrida 2007, 2). The autobiography of her body is a protest that testifies to both the loss of the father that one cannot forget and the body that resists giving up the father.

8. Duty to speak

Her testimony—and her testament—in the form of a protest was made possible by a philosophical text, in which she prepared the ground for the possibility of writing about the bodily trauma that had resisted symbolization. Kofman's *Paroles suffoquées* (1987) is dedicated to three people: her father, Maurice Blanchot and Robert Antelme. Originally, the book was supposed to be a homage by a Jewish girl to Maurice Blanchot. Kofman reads Blanchot's writings on the possibility of writing after Auschwitz. However, she turns to an analysis of Robert Antelme's concentration camp memoir, *L'Espèce humaine* (1947), in which Antelme outlines a vision of human species that is based on his concentration camp experiences.

Antelme, a member of the French Resistance, was arrested and deported on July 1, 1944. He was at Buchenwald, then at Bad Gandersheim and finally at Dachau. During the liberation of the camps Jacques Morland (François Mitterrand's nom de guerre) found his old comrade in the Resistance suffering from typhus. Mitterrand arranged for his return to Paris. In *La douleur* (1985), Marguerite Duras, Antelme's wife, describes his return.

Kofman does not merely read Antelme's book but reads it through Blanchot's reading of it, which he had set out in his *L'Entretien infini* (1969) and *L'Écriture du désastre* (1980). At the same time, her book recounts the story of her father's death. Kofman's intertextual book includes multiple voices and layers, her own narration, citations, analysis, close-readings and a part of Klarsfeld's columns of names.

Kofman herself describes *Paroles suffoquées* as partly an autobiography. This may be peculiar, Eilene Hoft-March says, if one considers how little of it represents her life. Instead, she uses second- and third-hand narrations (Antelme and Blanchot) to authenticate her father's vacated position (Hoft-March 2000-2001, 110). Thus, it seems to be more like a philosophical treatise about the narration of survival. However, I would argue that *Paroles suffoquées* is an autobiography. It is her narration of survival, her story 'as a Jewish woman intellectual who has survived the Holocaust', even though she confronts her traumatic past through Antelme and Blanchot (Kofman 1987, 13). On the one hand, it deconstructs the idea of an autobiography of a subject with a stable identity that would turn its life, its wounds and traumas, into a consistent and coherent narration. The subject is always already split, divided, and it owes its position as a subject to the other. 'Through its fragmentary structure and numerous citations—or the introduction of different voices which are not often clearly differentiated—*Paroles suffoquées* continually displaces itself, becoming "other" to itself' (Dobie 1997, 336; see Robson 2004b, 152). On the other hand, it is a desperate attempt to address the trauma of the loss of her father by translating that loss to philosophical language. It is impossible to give voice to the atrocities of the Holocaust, so this is the only possible way. Her writing repeats Antelme's situation as he told how the survivors of the camps were seized by delirium: they wished to speak and to be heard, but spoken words were impossible for them, because soon after they had begun to speak they began to choke. She has to mediate her testimony through other discourses on the Holocaust: 'Her individual loss cannot be articulated or defined without mediation or deviation. This suggests that the text cannot contain loss within its limits, but can only point outwards, towards other discourses' (Robson 2004b, 152). This testimony through other discourses was a 'failure' that forced her to write her 'real' autobiography. According to Kofman, after *Paroles suffoquées* she could no longer write didactically and philosophically. She had to turn to quasi-poetic language (Kofman 1995a, 5).

Let us return to Klarsfeld's columns of names. This sublime memorial, with its lack of pathos, its sobriety, the neutrality of information, takes, as Kofman says, her breath away and obliquely summons her. These columns make you doubt not merely your common sense but all sense. It makes you 'suffocate [*suffoquer*] in silence'. The

French verb *suffoquer* refers both to suffocating and to choking, so the silence is also due to the fact that all words choke in one's throat. (Kofman 1987, 17). She is left without a voice in a silence which is like a cry without words. It is a mute cry, a body that cries endlessly (Kofman 1987, 16-17).

Still, she must repeat her father's act: even though he was buried alive, even though he lost his breath, even though his words stuck in his throat as he was suffocating, his refusal to work, his protest in the name of the law on which his identity, not merely as a Jewish person, but as a human being, was rooted, lasted out as an ethical act that resisted the annihilating desire of Nazis. The reason why Kofman found it impossible not to forget the loss of her father and her inability to express this deep emotional wound otherwise than in and through the body is not merely melancholia, in which she is unable to finish with the loved object, her father, and release herself as a subject, which is the result of the lack of a proper work of mourning. It is also related to the ethics which Elie Wiesel spoke of in his Nobel Peace Prize Lecture. 'When day breaks after a sleepless night, one's ghosts must withdraw; the dead are ordered back to their graves. But for the first time in history, we could not bury our dead. We bear their graves within ourselves. For us, forgetting was never an option,' even though 'language failed us' (Wiesel 1986). For Kofman, forgetting was not an option even though language failed her. Instead, not forgetting was an ethical act that repeated her father's protest.

The Holocaust inflicted a decisive blow on the whole of humanity which left nothing intact. According to Kofman, the Holocaust produced knotted words, words, which are both demanded and forbidden, since they have been internalized and withheld for too long. These words asphyxiate one, since they stick in the throat and cause one to suffocate. They take away the possibility of even beginning. She wonders how one is able to speak of the Holocaust before which all possibility of speech ceases. There, nonetheless, remains the duty to speak out, to speak endlessly for those who could not speak since they wanted to safeguard true speech against betrayal to the very end, as Sarah's father did. One feels 'a strange *double bind*: an infinite demand to speak, the *duty to speak infinitely* [*un devoir parler à l'infini*], imposing itself with irrepressible force—and, at the same time, almost a physical impossibility to speak, a *suffocation*' (Kofman 1987, 46). For her, as for Blanchot, there is an obligation to speak especially at times, when one lacks the power to speak. She adopts Blanchot's double question: how can it not be said and how can it be said? As a survivor, she has an infinite duty not to forget the infinite violence her father suffered. To be able to present her testimony, she has to survive, to live on and to affirm life. It is her duty to continue, to go on. This testimony she finally manages to bring into language and translate into words in *Rue Ordener, rue Labat*. The impossibility of speaking has turned into the possibility of speaking the impossible. She had fought with the abyss which Hannah Arendt referred to when she learned about Auschwitz in 1943: 'It was really as if an abyss had opened. [...] Something happened there to which we cannot reconcile ourselves. None of us ever can' (Arendt 1994a, 13). What is tragic is that at this very moment of testimony that remembers and brings this trauma into words,

she is no longer able to survive, to go on.

Her poem 'Shoah' begins with a citation from Hegel's *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, where he speaks of the right to pardon criminals that derives from sovereign power; 'for it alone can realize this power of the spirit that makes what has happened un-happened and nullify the crime by forgiving (*Vergeben*) and forgetting (*Vergessen*) it'. For Kofman, Shoah compels us to silence. Scha!, one says in Yiddish; Schh!, one says in French. 'Shoah makes all voices stop speaking.' It 'bears witness, while suffocating / To the unnamable, to the ignoble immensity / Of this event without precedent, Auschwitz'. In 'their insane will to power' the Nazis, who believed they were gods, aimed at 'elimination without trace', at the final solution, *Vernichtung*, which is 'the diabolical will': 'It is wanting to make the Jew's existence null, to make them / un-happened / ... / It is wanting to erase, as fast / As a gas jet.' 'We will not pardon the Nazis for this crime. / Render it null, make it un-happened, / Nullify it in forgiveness and forgetting.' 'Let us not forget this event', she demands, so that the memory of those who died at Auschwitz 'may not be murdered'. (Kofman 2007a, 245-246.)

9. Humanism after Auschwitz

Paroles suffoquées begins with suffocation. From this suffocation, no words, no testimony, no community and no ethics seem to be able to emerge. The evil of the murderous Nazi system and ideology is a rupture with the European juridical, political and philosophical tradition, which, at least from the Enlightenment, had praised human dignity. Neither the idea of universal human rights nor the fundamental rights of the Weimar Constitution could do anything to prevent the Holocaust. Moreover, morality and ethics were powerless in the face of this unprecedented evil. There was a total collapse of moral standards in public and private life, as Hannah Arendt points out (see Arendt 1994b).

One cannot avoid the provocative question whether humanism and human rights were destroyed at Auschwitz, whether ethics is impossible after Auschwitz. 'Can we speak of morality after the failure of morality', Emmanuel Levinas asks in an interview (Levinas 1988,176). Should we merely accept nihilism after the disastrous events of Nazi totalitarianism, after such disillusion with European humanist tradition?

I do not consider nihilism as a satisfactory ethical and political answer, even though we are not able to return to a pre-Auschwitz humanism, because Auschwitz gives its name to the caesura in European legal, moral and political history. Instead of the end of humanism, the infinite duty is to address the possibility of a post-Auschwitz humanism. According to Levinas, 'It still cannot be concluded that after Auschwitz there is no longer a moral law, as if moral or ethical law were impossible, without promise' (Levinas 1988,176). There is—still—an urgent duty to speak, to write, to think and to 'found' a new humanism. What is it to be a human being sharing the world with others? One must do something that seems impossible: not to disavow humanism but to affirm it.

This is what Kofman attempted to do. She wants to conserve humanism and its ethical task by transforming and displacing it, by giving it a completely different meaning. For her, it is necessary to invent and to open a new space for a new humanism to come after Auschwitz. Humanism must be something other than the metaphysics of the subject of the old humanism, which turned out to be the regime of violence, exclusion and negativity. As John Dalton puts it: 'Between the old and the new humanism lies the monstrosity of the inhuman', the Holocaust, the camps, the crimes against humanity (Dalton 2005, 151). This new humanism may be merely 'a cry of need or protest, a cry without words, without silence, an ignoble cry', which is at the most 'a written cry' (*le cri écrit*), according to Blanchot (Blanchot 1969, 392). Dionysos Mascolo, who was accompanying Antelme back to Paris from the camp, witnessed this cry as he listened to Antelme's almost non-audible voice, his testimony, where his residual humanity resonated, where he, in a small voice, affirmed *I* who had survived (Crowley 2002, 480).

For Kofman, Robert Antelme opens a path towards a new humanism. He founds the possibility of a new humanism and a new ethics. In *L'Espèce humaine*, Antelme did something unimaginable. He did not merely describe his own experience but also presented how the murdered and the SS murderers were part of the same humanity. Against the dehumanization that was taking place in the concentration and death camps, Antelme adhered to the indivisibility of the human race, which Kofman's father had also done when he prayed for victims and murderers alike. Antelme's story becomes a testimony to Kofman's father's death.

How can this ever be possible, since the victims of the Nazis suffered abject dispossession. They were not even considered as the subjects under Nazi law but reduced to non-human filth that was not considered to be part of the human race. According to Antelme, as they ate peelings in order to survive, their status as human beings was confirmed. Even torture did not destroy them, but instead reinforced their humanity. As Blanchot says, even if a human being can be destroyed, he is indestructible (Blanchot 1969, 192). The SS may kill, Antelme testifies, but their violence reveals at the same time the humanity they attempt to destroy: *on est encore là* (Antelme 1978, 57). It is still there. Humanity is an irreducible residue that remains even when everything else is taken away.

For Antelme, 'there are not several human races, there is only one human race' (Antelme 1998, 219). One morning, an SS guard from the Rhineland approached Antelme and another inmate in the factory basement storeroom and held out his hand to them. They shook his hand. The handshake was a sign of humanity that was shared by Antelme and the SS guard. It was a singular event, a singular testimony and statement of the universality of human existence. Against this handshake, Antelme writes, the whole apparatus of ovens, the SS troops, dogs, and barbed wire could not prevail. 'We had become accomplices' in breaking Nazi rules. This kind of human relationship, which the handshake represented, was a deliberate rebellion against the SS order, which had denied the status of the inmates as human beings and thus their being the subjects of ordinary human relations (Antelme 1998, 75).

This event showed that there was no substantial difference between prisoners and guards, since they were both part of the human race. What they share in their biological oneness is their belonging to humanity, their being together as finite beings in the world. Because ‘we’re men like them the SS will finally stand powerless before us’ (Antelme 1998, 219). All exploitation and subjugation imply the existence of various species of mankind. The enormous destruction machine was built on the wish that ‘*thou shalt not be*’ (Antelme 1998, 74). Nevertheless, the SS can never alter the human race and ‘the executioner’s power cannot be other than one of the powers that men have, the power to murder. He can kill a man, but he cannot change him into something else’ (Antelme 1998, 220). Therefore, the absolute evil of these crimes against humanity affirms the indestructible humanity that the Nazi ideology and laws, its murderous technocratic, political, juridical and military practices aimed to destroy.

This does not exculpate the SS. ‘But we cannot have it that the SS does not exist or has not existed. They shall have burned children; they shall have done it willingly. We cannot have it that they did not wish to do it. They are a force, just as the man walking down the road is one. And as we are, too; for even now they cannot stop us from exerting our power’ (Antelme 1998, 74).

Antelme’s testimony testifies to the indestructibility of alterity and the absolute character of otherness on which the possibility of a shared human race is based. For Kofman—at this point she follows Blanchot—Antelme’s idea of humanity is based on a relation to the other, which is a relation that is not based on power and cannot even be measured in terms of power. This relation that cannot be overpowered by legal norms or police violence, by oppression and murder takes place both in Kofman’s father’s prayer and in the handshake between the inmate and the guard.

This relation to the other does not found a community based on oneness, similarity and identity, on being-in-common. It is not a relation like the one that is based on the same blood, race, religion or ethnicity that justifies the exclusion of others, those who do not share the ‘purity’ of ‘our’ being. It does not create the identity of ‘we’ based on our difference from ‘them’. It is beyond the divisions between friend and enemy that Carl Schmitt spoke about (see Schmitt 1963). And yet, even today, not merely nation states but also the European Union is an essentialist community based on identity, on inclusion and exclusion and thus there is an absolute urgency to think about relations that would be more just, more inclusive, in other words, relations that would be non-essential, since essentialism always includes the possibility of racism.

The relation to the other, about which Kofman is speaking in her reading of Antelme, is about an open, untied and destabilised community of *we*, of the being-together of singular human beings in their singularity. *We* are in relation to each other through irreducible difference, otherness and alterity. This *we* is founded without founding, since as a community it is dissolved as it is founded. By responding to the suffering and horror and by establishing the possibility of a new kind of ‘we’, Antelme founds without founding a community, where ‘we’ is always already undone and destabilized. If the old humanism reduces differences in the name of universality,

then the new humanism, which comes forth in the face of disaster and suffering, may include the possibility to write and imagine a community without assimilation, a community of those without a community, a community based on irreducible difference. This community is something other than an idyllic community, which would erase all traces of discord, difference and, which rests on a fusion that confers immediate unity. This community is not haunted by totalitarianism, where prisoners construct their prisons themselves and which is the place of dying, of 'the forgetfulness of death' (Blanchot 1986, 17). If for Derrida, ash is a figure of trace, which undoes all ontology by its impossible relation to presence, for Antelme, it figures the paradoxical foundation of ontological solidarity in fragility and calls for a response from the future, which would affirm the humanity of which it is the last index (Crowley 2002, 479).

As I have already said, Kofman reads Anthelme through Blanchot, who defined the Jew as the emblematic figure, the Other—even if he is not only that, Kofman adds—and Jewish monotheism as 'the revelation of the word as the place in which men maintain a relation to that which excludes all relation: the infinitely Distant, the absolutely Foreign' (*l'infiniment Distant, l'absolument Étranger*) (Kofman 1987, 42; Blanchot 1969, 187). We could see her father as the emblematic figure, for whom Jewish law was the place in which he affirmed his relation with the absolutely Foreign, which is not merely a relation to a transcendent God but to the otherness of the other that is immanent in this world. This kind of relation was something that the Nazis could not stand, because no form of power could overcome this relation, which cannot be measured in terms of power.

Kofman's reading includes a risk, since Blanchot gives more importance to alterity than Antelme. Because of this, Blanchot's reading risks, as Colin Davis says, denying the importance of Antelme's book as a testimony of his concentration camp experience (Davis 1997, 173). Moreover, Kofman, traces how to use this fundamental alterity and relation to otherness as the basis of an ethical testimony to the Holocaust. Her reading of Antelme, however, is closer to Antelme's testimony than Blanchot's, since, as Kathryn Robson says, Kofman does not lose sight of this testimonial function and blur the question of how to bear witness to the unthinkable atrocity of the Holocaust. Rather, she uses Blanchot's reading 'in order to rethink the possibility of testifying to atrocity through a relation of alterity and difference' (Robson 2004b, 150-151). *We* of the humanist universals is, as Dalton says, attested to a critical responsibility, to an appeal to the instance that resist subordination: 'The figure of the "human" is the figure of justice, "humanism", before it is the determination of a taxonomy (race, species, a political group, etc)' (Dalton 2005, 155).

Therefore, I would argue, that the new ethics (*nouvelle éthique*) Kofman brings forth, which is based on this rethought *we*, is 'based' on Antelme's testimony, which she reads not merely through Blanchot but also through her own experiences of the Holocaust. The new post-Auschwitz ethics provides neither a model for the new humanism and its ethics nor a coherent system of universal moral norms on which one could found human rights or base her actions. This kind of system collapses as

it is founded. The ethical task of the new humanism is the responsibility of/towards being-human. I would say that this is the only possibility for the European Union if it is true to its founding principles of respect for human dignity and justice.

Actually, Kofman brings forth two ethical possibilities. On the one hand, there is the possibility of the community of *we*, who live on to testify about a shared humanity. On the other hand, there is the path of Sarah's father, who resisted the laws and orders of the totalitarian state in the name of Jewish law, which is a place where human beings hold themselves in relation to 'the infinitely Distant, the absolutely Foreign'.

Then again, the act of the father is an affirmation of a shared humanity that cannot be destroyed even in the concentration camps. It is a demand to speak and remember infinitely not merely the atrocities of Auschwitz but also, and more importantly, the possibility of being human. Moreover, his act did not merely follow the law. It was a singular decision to realize the law by sacrificing himself in the name of the law that reminds us of our humanity, that is, in the name of justice. This path is 'never traced in advance, always erasable, always to be retraced in an unprecedented way' (Kofman 1983, 18). Thus, these two versions of humanism and its ethics intertwine.

10. Laugh, Sarah!

According to Françoise Proust, Kofman's philosophy was a philosophy of life, of surviving. She had to turn, again and again, against the forces of death—melancholy, anxiety, agony and distress—, which menaced her persistently. For her, philosophy, as the superior way of existence, as the intensification of the forces of life, made it possible to oppose life against death. (Proust 1997, 5.)

'Sarah *wrote for living*', Nancy writes, in his text 'Cours, Sarah!' (Run, Sarah!) (Nancy 1997, 29). According to Nancy, writing for one's living is how we describe those who make a profession out of writing, whether as an intellectual, a university professor, a poet, a novelist or a journalist. For Kofman, however, writing was never merely a question of ensuring subsistence but of attesting an existence. She truly wrote for living, since writing was her means to survive, to live on. 'For Sarah, writing was what it should be', since before being the inscription and transmission of a thought, it was 'an attestation of existence' (Nancy 1997, 29).

Thus, it was not merely her philosophical reading and writing but also her autobiographical texts that made it possible to oppose life against death. Her autobiographical texts that I have discussed here were not so much a narration of her life story. They give voice to her father and all those others—herself included—who were made voiceless, speechless by the machinery of infinite violence. They are refusals to forget. These testimonies are ethical acts, which do justice to those whose humanity the Nazis attempted to destroy. Her written testimonies are about survival, or more properly, they are surviving. Those who were murdered survive as long as they are not forgotten. Moreover, her autobiographical texts bear witness to the survival of humanity, of the impossible survival of human beings as hidden

children on the run or prisoners in the concentration camps. Her autobiography, like all her writing, was, as Nancy says, 'an attestation of existence' (Nancy 1997, 29), an attestation of surviving as a human being. And as such her writing is not merely a call for a new humanism and a post-Auschwitz ethics but also a realization of it.

This is why I see her autobiographical texts as announcements of justice to come, justice that is not powerless but beyond power, beyond positive laws backed by threats, sanctions and violence. This justice is not merely always yet to come, but it may have its singular realizations in various ways. Her autobiographies, her writing in general, is one way of bringing forth justice. We have to be careful here. Her writing is not *about* justice. The subject of her writing is not justice. Justice is what takes place in her affirmation of surviving, in her attestation of existence, in her insisting and affirmative laugh. Justice is not something given to the victims—in the form of human rights, compensations or punishments of the offenders—but an affirmative force that insists on surviving. This justice comes closer to Nietzsche's conception of law as an affirmative force of life than Derrida's justice-to-come.

She survived to laugh and cry, to testify, to do justice in, through and as her writing. When the testimony was finally written in *Rue Ordener, rue Labat*, she who wrote for living, had nothing more to write. Perhaps, philosophy did not protect her anymore when she had been able to bring her trauma in words, when she had made justice to the affirmative forces of life. However, at the very same time, the forces of life declined, because her writing declined (see Proust 1997, 5). Her running had come to end. I would like to share Derrida's touching words: 'I want to believe that she laughed right up to the end, right up to the very last second' (Derrida 2007, 7).

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