

INTRODUCTION

The Lifework of Sarah Kofman

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What interests me in Sarah's work, and what knitted much of the friendship between us, is this manner of relating "works" to "life," rather than the converse. . . . That writing relates to life, and relates it, does not mean the absence of thought nor even its secondary importance. It means that thought does not begin without this gesture of writing and also that, just as it is transmitted by it, so thought ends up with this gesture. But also that "thought," finally, is caught up in life and relates to it, ending in it and therefore capable of ending it: there is no life after thought. A life of thought is perhaps a life that does not already live enough, or that lives too much, or again, quite simply, it is a life that attests itself, inscribing that it took place.

—Jean-Luc Nancy

It is difficult, indeed impossible, to discuss Kofman's vast interdisciplinary corpus, which includes nearly thirty books and numerous articles on philosophical, psychoanalytic, literary, feminist, and Jewish subjects, without telling Kofman's own story. Of course, Kofman would have rightly resisted the reduction of her sophisticated and complex body of work, which treats thinkers and writers as diverse as Empedocles and Plato, Diderot and Nerval, Comte and Kant, and Blanchot and Derrida to mere biography. In fact, she insisted that her own life-narrative, her own biography, can and should be found in her bibliography. Perhaps, this declaration is not so much a gesture of self-effacing modesty or of the impulse to reduce the life of the thinker to his or her work; rather, as Nancy argues, Kofman's writing, her extensive bibliography, is itself a profound attestation to life, to a life, to her life. Although Nancy is correct to say that Kofman, who saw herself as a philosopher first and foremost, related "works" to "life," perhaps he oversimplifies the matter. Kofman, an incisive reader of Nietzsche and Freud, "whose bodies of work," Derrida claims, "she had read . . . [l]ike no one else in this century" (Derrida 1997, 137)

and to whom she devoted over ten books, developed, as the chapters in this collection show, a new form of textual analysis, one in which philosophy and psychoanalysis mingle together and the conceptual and the biographical cannot be separated.

Although Kofman's readings always attend to the desires and lives of authors, she claims, as Nancy points out, that "it is not a question of my attempting . . . to reduce philosophy to pathology or system to biography. It is rather a certain relationship of system to life which interests me: to see, not what work *owes* to life but what the work *brings* to life" (Nancy 1999, viii). Nonetheless, Kofman was fascinated by the question of autobiography from the beginning to the end of her career, ranging from *Autobiogriffures* (1989a), a reading of Hoffmann's *Cat Murr*, to *Explosion I* (1992), an interpretation of Nietzsche's *Ecce Homo*. In her later works, Kofman pays increasing attention to the writing of her own life and publishes more explicitly autobiographical texts, from several short essays (Collin and Proust 1997) to two starkly different book-length autobiographies.¹ The first work, *Smothered Words*, which is more theoretical in nature, tries to give voice to the unspeakable experience of the Holocaust by juxtaposing readings of several *récits* by Blanchot, including "The Idyll," and Antelme's *The Human Race* with brief, almost "neutral," accounts of her father's deportation to Drancy in 1942 and his subsequent death at Auschwitz. Her own ruptured life-narrative is addressed once again, one final time, in her haunting work, *Rue Ordener, rue Labat*, in which she provides an account of her childhood and adolescence as a Holocaust survivor in France.

Sarah Kofman's Corpus takes seriously the lessons that Kofman's rich body of work teaches us, among them that the work and life of a thinker are inextricably bound together. Thus, each of the essays in this collection navigates this complex economy of thought and desire, of the book and the body, of the corpus and the corpse. The provocative and in-depth analyses offered by each author in this collection explores and expounds upon the central themes—art, affirmation, laughter, aporia, the intolerable, Jewishness, and femininity—that link together Kofman's oeuvre. At the same time as clarifying and deepening our understanding of the essential motifs and ideas in Kofman's writings, this collection sketches a portrait, even begins a biography, of a thinker who was so many things—affirmative, contrary, playful, profound, duplicitous, nuanced, fiery, and determined.

Despite the awe-inspiring breadth and depth of Kofman's corpus, her work has not been widely commented upon in the English-speaking world and, hence, has not been adequately read and studied by Anglophone audiences.² Thus this collection brings together Kofman scholars and translators, from various disciplines such as French and German literature, philosophy, and Women's Studies, who are dedicated to the development of "Kofman studies."

This collection aims to consolidate Kofman's reputation as a philosopher whose originality, range, and verve stand as exemplary. It is to be hoped that the chapters that constitute this particular body of writing will open the way for further translations and studies of Kofman's corpus.

In part 1 of the book, "Art, Affirmation and Laughter," the relationship between the economy of life and work is broached through Kofman's analyses of art. Duncan Large, Pleshette DeArmitt and Ann Smock find in Kofman's writing not only a thought that affirms the uniqueness of the work of art but also a thought that transforms itself into an art of affirmation. In the book's first chapter, Large details how the visual arts and "the question of art" in general preoccupied Sarah Kofman throughout her career—from her first book, on Freud's aesthetics (*The Childhood of Art*), to her last, unfinished essay on Rembrandt ("Conjuring Death: Remarks on *The Anatomy Lesson of Doctor Nicolas Tulp*"). Large's chapter focuses in particular on Kofman's *Mélancolie de l'art* and more broadly addresses the issues at stake in her aesthetic writings, by locating them at the intersection of psychoanalysis, deconstruction, and Nietzschean affirmation. Large argues that for Kofman philosophical aesthetics—Platonic, Hegelian, Heideggerian—is a "garrulous" discourse that interrogates the art object only in order to sublimate it. The mirror of speculative textuality serves to shield philosophy from the mortifying or maddening potential of the Medusa-like image, even though any attempted denegation of its troubling, uncanny potency is bound to fail.

In *Mélancolie de l'art*, Kofman discusses Diderot's analysis of a portrait by Greuze and develops her own Freudian interpretation of it, which she pushes to the breaking point ("beauty is in mourning for philosophy"), before mimicking Diderot and turning dialogically on the over-elaborated speculation of her own discourse. The caesura thus created is the space of indeterminacy, madness, and play—precisely the space that will be occupied and exploited by the non-mimetic art of modernity (Kandinsky, Magritte, Bacon), the "stifled eloquence" of which Kofman celebrates in the final section of her essay. Large concludes that for Kofman the gap between the figurative and discursive orders cannot be filled, even by a concept as ingenious as "the melancholy of art." "The question of art," as she formulates it—like "the question of woman"—has no definitive, univocal answer, but functions instead as a disruptive operation, unsettling any theoretical discourse that would master it—including, ultimately, Kofman's own.

In the following chapter, DeArmitt also undertakes to clarify Kofman's demystification of art and beauty by specifically examining art's cathartic or pharmaceutical function. She does so by offering a close reading of a dense passage by Kofman that appears on the back cover of *Mélancolie de l'art*, a passage that DeArmitt reads as a reformulation of Freud's "On Transience." DeArmitt, first, turns to *L'imposture de la beauté* to analyze the

role of narcissism in the aesthetic experience; to further comprehend the salutary nature of art, she examines Kofman's reworking of the categories of the Apollonian and Dionysian in her 1979 text *Nietzsche et la scène philosophique*. There, Kofman reveals the duplicitous nature of beauty's Apollonian mask, which is both the face of and a veil over the Dionysian. Dionysus is, on Kofman's reading, a figure of that which is utterly unbearable to behold or, as she describes it, "the intolerable." Thus, the beauty, or the Apollonian, that renders the intolerable tolerable is already self-divided, harboring its double within itself.

Nonetheless, Kofman recognizes that the mask of beauty that is worn by all works of art, as they transform intolerable "realities" into tolerable "illusions," offers the spectator the reassuring face of eternity, that is, the illusion of immortality. The artistic image, be it of Medusa's head or a cadaver on the dissection table, has the power of occultation, bringing about "forgetting" or, in psychoanalytic language, "repression." Although Kofman will call for art to break with its "desire for eternity," a call that simultaneously demands mourning and melancholy (the impossibility of mourning), she does not negate the illusion of art and beauty, but, as DeArmitt argues, affirms another light, which still possesses pharmaceutical powers and provides serenity without salvation.

In the final chapter of part 1, Smock addresses the duplicitous and affirmative power of laughter and wit in the writings of Kofman. This chapter is inspired by Kofman's pleasure in jokes and word-play of all kinds. On the one hand, it links this delight of hers to an irreverent determination to get the better of the authorities, to outdo the censors, to get around everyone and everything that is liable to hem you in and ultimately defeat you, including death. On the other hand, the chapter connects Kofman's love of jokes to her engagement in a double game, played on two terrains at once. For she found herself hemmed in on many fronts and was always inventing and borrowing expedients. Unwilling to lament her fate, Kofman did not believe there was a way out, ultimately, and was disinclined to be consoled by illusions. Unwilling to believe, then, or not believe—unwilling to be duped or disenchanting either—she played on the terrain of confidence and on the terrain of despair, uncompromisingly.

Smock cleverly demonstrates how Kofman cultivated the love of illusions, as only those strong enough to do without them can. Jokes, as Freud emphasized, are Janus-faced, and those best suited to joking are double themselves: both exuding self-confidence and willing to turn their humor on themselves. Humor guarantees a happily imperturbable subject-position, which it simultaneously reveals to be non-existent. Thus it muddies up the simple oppositions between victory and defeat, mastery and abjection; it dwells gaily in despair. By the same token, humor is an ally of Eros, the intermediary and

thus daimonic being whom Kofman describes in *Comment s'en sortir?* as neither rich nor poor, male nor female, foolish nor wise, and as foreign to the logic of identity—a devilish philosopher, not unlike Kofman.

Although all the readings of Kofman in this collection negotiate the relationship between work and life, the essays in part 2, “Philosophical Fires: Autobiography, Femininity, and Jewishness,” explore in depth the relationship between philosophy and autobiography. In the opening essay of part 2, Naas reveals Kofman to be an exemplary reader and teacher of Plato’s work, despite the fact that Kofman wrote only one short book and a handful of texts on Plato. Naas’ essay examines the importance of Kofman’s work on Plato not only for Plato scholarship, but also for an understanding of Kofman’s entire oeuvre. His essay begins with a close reading of Kofman’s *Comment s'en sortir?* in order to show that Kofman’s thesis concerning the way in which Plato had to use the very elements he wished to overcome in order to establish philosophy—elements such as sophistry, myth, and aporia—constitutes a paradigm for what Kofman believes philosophy has done and must continue to do. So as to “make the intolerable tolerable”—a phrase Naas follows from *Comment s'en sortir?* through many of Kofman’s most important works—philosophy cannot help but adopt a kind of “fire wall” strategy to define and affirm itself; that is, in order to exclude certain discourses it must use even more sophisticated forms of those discourses to protect itself effectively from their influence. What is intolerable to philosophy is thus never simply excluded from it, but is always transformed and integrated, displaced and incorporated, in a word, repressed.

It is through this notion of repression that Naas turns, in the final part of his essay, to an interpretation of Kofman’s appendix to *Comment s'en sortir?*, which is a short dream and dream analysis simply entitled “Nightmare.” This autobiographical appendix, Naas contends, indicates that the entire text needs to be reread “autobiographically,” that is, as a displacement of Kofman’s “family scene” onto the family scene she spends most of the book interpreting: Socrates’ account of Diotima’s speech about the origins of Eros in the *Symposium*. On the basis of this, Naas suggests that almost all of Kofman’s work can be read as the inevitable reflection or displacement of her own complex family scene (which includes a father arrested and deported by the Nazis, two mothers—one Jewish, one Christian—competing for Sarah’s loyalty and affection, and a number of sibling rivalries). He concludes by demonstrating that as late as her two volumes on Nietzsche’s *Ecce Homo* published in the early 1990s, Kofman is attempting to develop a novel form of philosophical autobiography, which explains why and how both philosophy and those who practice it must work to “make the intolerable tolerable.”

In the fifth chapter, Schrift examines the final of Sarah Kofman’s five books on Nietzsche, entitled *Le mépris des Juifs: Nietzsche, les Juifs, l'antisémitisme*.

Schrift discusses and critically assesses Kofman's defense of Nietzsche against the charge of anti-Semitism. While he agrees with Kofman that Nietzsche was not the *reichsdeutsch* anti-Semite that his sister and others wanted him to be, and that too many readers on both sides of the English Channel have thought him to be, Schrift is not persuaded by Kofman's account that "in order for Nietzsche to become-Nietzsche, he had to become a Jew." She may be correct in suggesting that ultimately Nietzsche becomes who and what he is by settling accounts, once and for all, "with the Germany of the Reich, with his mother and his sister, and with the paternal substitutes who had been, among others, Wagner and Schopenhauer." And she may be right as well to conclude that to settle these accounts meant settling accounts with the anti-Semitism that was perhaps their central unifying feature. Yet, Schrift remains skeptical of Kofman's general conclusion that Nietzsche's anti-Semitism can be regarded as a youthful excess that he eventually outgrew. Instead, Schrift offers several alternatives to this conclusion that suggest that while Nietzsche is not the racist anti-Semite that the Nazi ideologists tried to make him out to be, it is a mistake to read Nietzsche's anti-Semitism as pro- or philo-Semitism.

Chapter 6 further develops the Jewish question that is central to Kofman's oeuvre. Tina Chanter examines the relationship between Kofman's earlier, more scholarly work on Freud and her later, more autobiographical and literary works, in which she talks about, among other things, her father, who died at Auschwitz. In doing so, Chanter traces the motif of homosexuality through Kofman works (especially those on Freud) and suggests that it is connected in a fundamental way to the feminine and Judaism. Freud, in an essay on the acquisition of fire, makes some striking claims about homosexuality, which also inform key texts such as *Civilization and Its Discontents*. This little read essay, "The Acquisition and Control of Fire," together with some other better-known texts, such as Freud's case history of Dora, and his essay on the uncanny, form some of the reference points for this paper. Other reference points include Kofman's autobiographical texts—*Rue Ordener, rue Labat* and *Smothered Words*. In the spirit of Kofman's own manner of writing and philosophizing, Chanter perceptively relates Kofman's own work to her life following through the ways in which Kofman's writing reflects the coping strategies she adopted in order to deal not only with the death of her father but also with the feelings that arose in relation to the substitute mother she was granted as a result of her wartime evacuation. The loss of Kofman's father, together with the uncanny doubling of her mother, finds an echo in the religio-political circumstances that shaped both Kofman's life, and her writing. Chanter follows through a suggestion she finds in Kofman's last works, works that can be read as a mourning of her father. The scholarly mastery of Kofman's earlier work gives way to a writing that flows more freely, a style that is no less artful for being less, strictly speaking, philosophical. In her autobiographical works,

Kofman's writing finally comes into its own. It is as if she lets go of the intensely masterful, scholarly style that marks her earlier work, a letting go that would not be what it is without the care and discipline of that mastery, a release that stands in tension with her more overtly philosophical style. A breaking through of death, one might say. This breakthrough is intimately connected, in Chanter's reading, with the enigma of homosexuality that Kofman writes into her life, as if its passing, too, were being mourned.

In the final essay of the collection, Deutscher also investigates the question of woman and femininity in Sarah Kofman's corpus. Deutscher traces the term "becoming-woman" in Kofman's writings from her book on Comte (*Aberrations*), two years after Deleuze's discussion of becoming-woman in his interviews with Claire Parnet, Kofman employs the term in her subsequent interpretations of Rousseau, Freud, Sartre, and Diderot, among others. Unlike many of the other concepts she transformed, this term was not attributed to another philosopher (one might have expected an acknowledgment to Deleuze) until an interview Kofman gave in 1991, in which she suggested that the term "becoming-woman" had actually been inspired by Simone de Beauvoir's concept that "one is not born a woman, one becomes one." Kofman, a former student of Deleuze, was rerouting a term uniquely associated with the work of Deleuze and Guattari to Beauvoir—giving the latter a theoretical place in association with Nietzsche, Derrida, Deleuze etc. Kofman neither offers a close reading of Beauvoir nor Deleuze, nor stages an intersection of their work, rather she proposes a problematic that arises only once a term belonging to the one is attributed to the other.

Deutscher's chapter then looks at Kofman's depictions of the becoming-woman of Sartre, Rousseau, Comte and Freud. The philosophers interpreted by Kofman love the women with whom they cannot, though do, identify, as they try to hold onto rigid gender opposition, as they are afraid of (and desirous of) becoming women. Becoming-woman, Kofman argues, nonetheless does take place. Further, Deutscher argues that Kofman's alliance with Beauvoir highlights her interest in what is being transformed in these processes of becoming: not just Rousseau, Comte, Freud or Sartre, that is, not only in the men who become women. She is interested in the transformation of the "woman" in her becoming woman. The notion of woman becomes displaced amongst the diverse and inconsistent resonances of being modest, seductive, frivolous, fertilizable, manipulable, maternal, appropriative of man's place, narcissistically self-sufficient, self-protective, penis envying, bourgeois, missed, mourned, regretted, sickly, mad, degraded, death-like, stimulating, rejuvenating, moral, tender. In conclusion, Deutscher claims that for Kofman we are all, women and men, becoming-woman.

Notes

1. For two biographical sources on Kofman, see Saghafi 2001, 2003, and DeArmitt 2006.
2. See, however, Deutscher and Oliver 1999.