



PROJECT MUSE®

Holocaust Mothers and Daughters

Federica K. Clementi

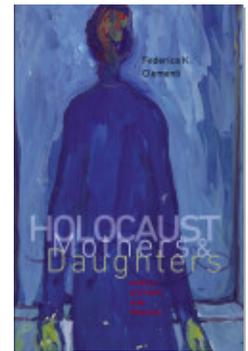
Published by Brandeis University Press

Clementi, K..

Holocaust Mothers and Daughters: Family, History, and Trauma.

Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2013.

Project MUSE., <https://muse.jhu.edu/>.



➔ For additional information about this book

<https://muse.jhu.edu/book/27591>

CHAPTER 3

AUTO DA FÉ

Sarah Kofman's Totemic Memoir

At the time of the shortest, sleepy winter days, edged on both sides with the furry dusk of mornings and evenings, when the city reached out deeper and deeper into the labyrinth of winter nights, and was shaken reluctantly into consciousness by the short dawn, my father was already lost, sold and surrendered to the other sphere.

 BRUNO SCHULZ, *Cinnamon Shops*

In the present work on Holocaust mothers and daughters, Sarah Kofman's biography offers perhaps the most complex variant. Hers is not only a life devastated by the impact of the war she survived in hiding with her mother, but also a life torn between two mothers who remained symbolically irreconcilable for this daughter: the Jewish victim mother, whom the child eventually rejected, and a Christian mother figure, her wartime savior, who "colonized" the Jewish girl's identity, won her over, and separated her from her biological mother, her family, and her past.

Born in 1934, Kofman was one of six children of a Polish Orthodox rabbi, Berek Kofman, who had emigrated with his wife to France in 1929. For the first years of Kofman's life, the family lived in a house on Rue Ordener in Paris, where her father was the leader and *shokhet* (ritual slaughterer) of a small Jewish community. During the Nazi occupation, Berek Kofman was arrested and deported to Auschwitz, where another prisoner beat him and buried him alive because he refused to work on the holy day of Shabbat.

Sarah and her siblings remained under the sole care of their mother (Fineza Kofman, née Koenig) who lacked money and connections in her adoptive country and spoke very little French. Despite these obstacles, Fineza Kofman, helped by anti-Vichy underground partisans, managed to save her children by placing them with various protectors in the French countryside. However, Sarah, then eight years old, refused to be separated from her, and the two hid together in the apartment of a Christian acquaintance, on rue Labat, in the very heart of occupied Paris. Claire Chemitre, or Mémé (grandma) as she is referred to by Sarah Kofman, treated the girl as her own daughter and occasionally passed her off as

such. The girl discovers herself to be no longer emotionally attached to her biological mother (the *rebbetzin* from Poland, the foreigner with an accent, alone in a world inimical to her as foreigner, Jew, and woman). Instead, Sarah finds her love is deeper for Mémé, who—in the act of saving her—condemns her to a new exile that begins with her abandonment of the paternal territory and continues with her banishment of the maternal one. In twenty-three short chapters, Kofman’s memoir *Rue Ordener, Rue Labat* tells the story of a girl’s strong initial attachment to a father who disappears forever from her life and to a mother who is forcibly eclipsed by the presence of the new mother; finally, the book recounts the girl’s detachment from both mothers as she becomes a woman and an artist whose numerous works (both texts and artworks) were, as she herself declared, an indirect way of working through this traumatic childhood.¹

There are very clear boundaries between the different geographical, historical, and psychological spaces revisited in *Rue Ordener, Rue Labat*. The title itself indicates no diapothesis as to which street to choose: there’s no “and” or “or,” just one joint street name, the literal and symbolic location of the lost childhood on one side of the comma, the site of life beyond or in spite of the Shoah on the other side. Because this text inhabits a child’s perspective, it maintains from the very start a radical separation between spheres (paternal and maternal, Jewish and non-Jewish, adulthood and childhood, truth and fiction), a separation that reflects, in part, the child’s unambiguous and compartmental way of understanding the world. The comma between the names of the two streets in the book’s title is like the thin rim of a coin with two faces: on one side, Rue Ordener; on the other, Rue Labat. The two sides of the coin coexist but never face each other, although neither can be read without the other. The logic of the *bildungsroman* or *Künstlerroman* would have produced a title like “From Rue Ordener to Rue Labat,” but this true coming-of-age story does not follow such developmental trajectories. The painful path from Rue Ordener (Judaism, the father, mother-daughter unity) to Rue Labat (Frenchness, de-Judaization, symbolic matricide) passes through two metro stops, two homes, two mothers, and many deaths. Rue Ordener and Rue Labat are the two faces of the currency of a childhood bearing the imprimatur of two mothers, and in Kofman’s identity these two aspects are not separable. She does not really move from one to the other; she owns them both but can face only one at a time.

Before *Rue Ordener, Rue Labat*, Kofman had only sporadically written about her private life. A collection of her personal essays was published in English in the journal *Sub-Stance* as “Autobiographical Writings” (1986) and later in the volume *Selected Writings*, while an earlier book, *Paroles suffoquées* (*Smothered Words*) grafted the autobiographical (the story of her father’s murder) onto an analysis

of the writings of Maurice Blanchot and Robert Antelme on the Shoah. Kofman theorized about the genre of autobiography in two works—*Autobiogriffures* and *Explosion I: De l’“Ecce Homo” de Nietzsche*. Finally, in *Rue Ordener, Rue Labat* she applied all the philosophical, psychoanalytical, and feminist tools she had used as a scholar in the composition of her own autobiography—and with it, Kofman ended her writing career.²

This memoir about mothers is quite anomalous for a writer like Kofman, whose entire career centered on the interpretation, albeit through a feminist lens, of the great “fathers” of Western civilization (Plato, Rousseau, Kant, Lacan, Derrida, Nietzsche, and so on). In particular, she had an intellectual fixation on Sigmund Freud, to whom her most influential works were devoted, and in his eulogy for Kofman, Jacques Derrida rightly pointed out that she had understood Freud and interpreted him for us all as no one else in the twentieth century had done.³

In the opening lines of *Rue Ordener, Rue Labat*, Kofman declares that her personal experience—as a Jewish war survivor whose life was saved and shaped by two mothers, and whose universe remained tainted by the death of her father—influenced everything she ever wrote. Therefore, I will look at *Rue Ordener, Rue Labat* as a piece of a larger autobiographical project Kofman was writing throughout her intellectual career, in which she tried to reconcile herself to the past and make sense of the complex relational dynamics between a child and the adult world around her, between conflicting identities and an entire nation’s dark past. In analyzing the ambiguity of the mother-daughter story depicted in her autobiography, I discuss how Kofman applies to the writing of her memoir various analytical tools that she had already tested in her dissections of other authors’ texts, tools that derived from the critical language of philosophy, literary theory, or psychoanalysis. The resulting book is an unexampled mixture of real and screen memories, full of deceptive pitfalls and hidden clues that Kofman tacitly invites the reader to sort out. She once said that all readers are *lecteurs policiers* (text detectives), who like to discover who has committed the crime before the plot reveals it.⁴ I offer an interpretation of *Rue Ordener, Rue Labat* as a confession, a book of public penance and intimate sacrifice(s): Kofman’s *auto da fé*.

I borrow this term from Kofman herself, who entitled a chapter “Auto-da-fé” in *Pourquoi rit-on?*, which was devoted to Freud’s *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* and in which she declared that this text was the son’s (Freud’s) self-defensive way of reenacting the father’s murder.⁵ In her very first book, *L’Enfance de l’art*, Kofman called Freud the “new iconoclast” because of his innovative idea of linking the problem of art to that of the father and of recasting the artist as

a parricidal son.⁶ In *Totem and Taboo*, Freud had conceived of the totem as the monument erected by the parricidal sons to the dead father, whose power was thus symbolically reinstated. He postulated that the first poet was a hero who distanced himself from the community of men and took upon himself the collective murder of the father. Furthermore, Freud argued, the main factor determining our aesthetic pleasure in the artistic product is its enactment of our own subconscious dream, one we share with the rest of the audience, to be ourselves the father's murderer. Far from being a gift from the gods, the artist's genius is thus a curse arising from the artist's past. By replacing religion, art repeatedly performs the primal totemic rite of parricide, which, in eliminating the father, sacralizes him at the same time.⁷ The questions that Kofman's work raises and that this chapter addresses are the following: What does it mean for a Shoah daughter to be an artist? If we believe in the patricidal drive of art, can a Jewish survivor and daughter of a Shoah victim be an artist? Can the collective guilt for the father's murder be lifted by an artist such as Kofman, whose father had been literally murdered in a collective crime that went grossly unpunished? Since the symbolic collective murder of the father has been made real by the Shoah, is it possible, if even only theoretically, for the daughter of the Shoah victim to conceive of another, ritual killing of this father? I will argue that Kofman imagines a memoir that, although "totemic," must avoid performing the symbolic murder of the father. The question, then, is how to eschew this ritualistic task? The answer appears to be by killing the mother (two mothers) instead. The memoir is thus a "totemic memoir" in a way that only a daughter could conceive of it. If patricide is followed by the erection of a totem, so is matricide for Kofman: like the primal son for his father, this daughter erects a monument to the murdered mother, and by doing so she acknowledges the maternal power and her personal debt to the disappeared woman. (And as Nietzsche reminds us, there are no *Schulden* [debts] without *Schuld* [guilt].)⁸ Ultimately, the artist herself pays the highest price for the act of making art: Kofman took her life on October 15, 1994, shortly after the publication of *Rue Ordener, Rue Labat*.

WRITING ÇA : WITH AND AGAINST THE MOTHER

The opening of *Rue Ordener, Rue Labat* reveals an important truth about the genesis of the text we hold in our hands. Simultaneously it obscures a relevant side of this truth, leaving us face to face with an insoluble enigma, the enigma of life—or, better yet, the enigma of death, since as Derrida has shown us, when we talk of life "the trait that relates to the graphical must also be working between the biological and biographical, the thanatological and the thanatographical."⁹ Here is the opening:

A fountain pen, that's all I have left of him. One day I took it from my mother's purse, where she kept it together with other mementos of my father. It's the kind of fountain pen they don't make any more and that you had to keep filling with ink . . . I still have it, all patched up with Scotch tape; it lies on my desk before my eyes, it compels me to write, to write.

My many books, perhaps, were all indirect routes necessary to get me to tell about "this" [ça].¹⁰

Kofman puts the important word—ça (this)—in quotation marks. To what does "this" refer? And why bracket it off that way? Grammatical and syntactic logic indicates that "this" refers to everything that has been said thus far, which is very little considering that we are on the first page of the book. And yet in the eyes of the narrator, this short chapter constitutes the essence of all she had to write, and in fact of all she ever wrote. That is, what has compelled her to live so far has been to fill the void between presence and absence (of the father), between desire and death, through words.

Could ça also refer to a crime to which she is confessing? All that is left of her father (the pen) is being guarded by the mother, and the daughter reaches into her mother's forbidden place and steals a piece of her father away from her. The pen is a paternal relic and a phallic symbol: it ejects ink (its semen) onto the page, making it pregnant with the daughter's art; however, it is also an old pen, which continuously dries up (or dies) as it creates and needs to be refilled (fed) by the daughter. Lastly, the father's pen allows the daughter to birth books with and about him. The old pen is a transversal voice, a voice that Kofman uses to speak of her father in an attempt to repossess him—to possess, in other words, the impossible: both the father (precluded to the daughter by the Oedipal prohibition) and writing (precluded to the woman by male culture). Ça is, among other things, this act of rebellion against culture (a woman who dares to write), nature (Oedipal incest), and the mother (deprived by the daughter of the last remnant of her husband). In order to salvage the father, the daughter must commit a crime against the mother, who is the custodian of the pen, the symbolic phallus.

Rue Ordener, Rue Labat is the memory of this crime. The daughter-artist-murderer first replaces the father with a surrogate, Mémé, the Christian savior of Rue Labat; then Mémé, like the patriarchal Father she symbolically represents, overpowers the mother and annuls her. The mother is thus twice sacrificed for the sake of keeping the father symbolically alive. In spite of herself, the daughter kills the father as well through turning to Mémé. The girl sides with Mémé against her biological mother, assuaging the unbearable pain of losing her father

in the loving embrace of a woman who represents everything the girl's family is not: French, Christian, alive. She subconsciously casts Mémé as her new father, the person who leads her to triumph (survival) and who is the bearer of a culture not threatened by annihilation. However, Mémé, though symbolically a father, is literally a new mother figure: she wants to have Sarah all for herself, to the point that after the war, she obtains legal custody of her.¹¹ As a mother, Mémé will also have to be rejected, but rejecting Mémé means killing once again the father she symbolically has resuscitated. A true double bind: Kofman resolves it by eventually substituting for the maternal world of her childhood the paternal and patriarchal world of her academic life. After high school, she enters a university and binds her professional life to the life and thought of a set of symbolic fathers, the subjects of her vast scholarly production, by way of offering to them her artistic and analytical gifts—that is, her art—to expiate her guilt.

If *Rue Ordener, Rue Labat* is Kofman's auto da fé, then *ça* is the incriminating, if maddeningly indeterminate, evidence: *ça* cannot simply refer to the father or the father's story, as the opening chapter seems to imply. Rather, it refers to Kofman's coming to terms with the victimhood of everybody involved, herself included. *Ça* is the psychological burden the guilty daughter has to live with, the multiple losses and betrayals. *Ça* is trauma, one in need of a willing audience. After decades of psychoanalysis, Kofman realized that her story had not been heard in the way she needed it to be heard. "I've always wanted to tell about my life," she wrote in an essay, but the analyst to whom she told her story remained quiet, indifferent to her telling.¹² As she explained in an interview, "I turned the corner in my analysis when I ceased to talk, to tell my story in a rational and sustained fashion; when it became possible for me to talk without expecting a reply from the analyst; when I stopped trying to communicate a meaning, expecting to get one by means of frenetic demand. In short, when I became able to just speak; in other words, when I gave myself up to the play of language, that is, writing."¹³ *Rue Ordener, Rue Labat* is the result of Kofman's newfound way of "speaking."

The free-associative style in which the war memories are reconstructed in *Rue Ordener, Rue Labat* keeps the paternal and maternal realms starkly separated. The father and his surroundings conjure up the romantic atmosphere of Hasidic *maysel*. Once he vanishes, the world takes on all its usual prosaic qualities, and the mother's realpolitik and resourcefulness hold no charm or poetry for the daughter. The father's office is described as bathed in an aura of sacredness. The mother's kitchen, where meats are left to bleed in the sink according to Jewish laws, makes the girl sick to her stomach. The father prays, leading the family in Shabbat and Havdalah songs, and his only vice, smoking cigarettes, is

remembered by the daughter tenderly and indulgently. The same indulgence, however, is not granted to the mother. The first description of her is offered in relation to the story of the father's capture. According to the daughter's version, a round of arrests had been announced for July 16, 1942, and Rabbi Kofman had hoped that by giving himself up to the authorities, his family would be spared. He thus stayed in Paris and warned as many Jews in his community as possible about the imminent danger so that they could flee, while he sat at home waiting for the ominous knock on the door that would signal his arrest: "He waited and prayed to God that they may come to take him but save his wife and children" (RO/RL, 11). The image of the praying father, Kofman tells us, resembled the *Akedah*, the binding of Isaac, which she had encountered in her Hebrew Bible. When the French policeman finally does arrive, the mother opens the door:

"Rabbi Berek Kofman?"

"He's not here," says my mother. "He's at the synagogue."

The policeman does not insist. He is about to leave. But my father comes out of his room . . . and says:

"Yes, here I am. Take me!"

"But this is impossible, the baby I'm holding is not two yet!" says my mother pointing at my brother Isaac, and adds: "I'm pregnant with another child!" . . .

My mother lies! (RO/RL, 12)

"Here I am," says the father—the same words (in Hebrew, *hineni*) with which another father, Abraham, always answers God's call.

On one side is a father who insists on immolating himself even though his wife's strategy might have gained him time to work out a plan to save himself and his family. On the other side is a mother who outsmarts the policeman and could have saved her husband were it not for the latter's intervention, which annuls her courageous act. She succeeds instead only at embarrassing her daughter, who is appalled by the discovery that her mother is capable of lying (and willing to do so). That was the last day Kofman saw her father; his family heard from him again only once more in a postcard from Drancy written in French (therefore not in the father's handwriting, but dictated by him to a native speaker), in which he requested cigarettes and sent his love to everybody. Apparently, the mother kept that card safe through the years, but "when my mother died it was impossible to find anywhere that postcard which I had re-read so many times and which I myself wanted to keep now. It was as if I had lost my father a second time. From then on there was nothing left of him, not even that lone postcard which he hadn't even written himself" (RO/RL, 16). The

daughter's only words about the death of her mother are thus overshadowed by the more important loss (for the "second time") of the father. We are not told anything else about the mother's death. Kofman seems to be able or willing to mourn only the loss of the father. Probably it did not escape Kofman that the lost postcard figures in her story as the mother's subconscious revenge for the pen the daughter had stolen for herself.

We are not told when or how Kofman's mother dies, but we do receive the story of Rabbi Kofman's death in at least two of his daughter's texts: *Paroles suffoquées* and *Rue Ordener, Rue Labat*. "They beat him with a pickaxe and buried him alive one day because he had refused to work," Kofman writes in her memoir. "It was Shabbat: he had done no harm . . . he was simply praying to God for them all, victims and victimizers alike" (RO/RL, 16). In *Paroles suffoquées*, we read: "One must talk about it, *sans pouvoir* [literally, "without power"; without being able to] . . . And how can one not talk about it, when all those who returned—and he did not return—vowed to tell, to tell endlessly, as if only an 'infinite conversation' could equal out the infinite *dénouement*?" Kofman goes on to ask herself: "To speak in order to witness, but how? How can witnessing escape the idyllic law of storytelling? How can one speak of the 'unimaginable' . . . without the help of imagination?"¹⁴

The storytelling of her father's life is indeed idyllic. The father emerges from the daughter's pages as an allegorical model of righteousness and justice, the perfect mixture of the divine and the human. Ancient mythology teaches us that when the divine is grafted onto the human, the resulting character always ends up feeding some tragic plot. These characters, be it Prometheus or Jesus, are not fit for life—they are usually destined for an exemplary, if tragic, end that turns them from personal and familiar figures into transpersonal and universal ones. Kofman negotiates the story of her father in her texts in just such a mythical mode. He becomes not only the paradigm of victimhood, but also the embodiment of that place (Auschwitz, *sensu stricto* and *largo*) about which the "powerless" daughter (*sans pouvoir*) is compelled to write without any experience of it except through the untellable and unknowable experience of her father. The memoir seemingly starts out as a book about the father: the father's pen and its injunction to write; the father's marvelous study, the site of great mysteries (marriages, circumcisions, and ritual killings); the story of the father's arrest and his heroic self-sacrifice (*kadosh haShem*); the father whose smallest gestures are the object of the daughter's undivided fascination ("I observed his every move in awe" [RO/RL, 12]). But amid this "infinite conversation," where does the rest of the story—the traumatic survival of the mother and daughter—fit? *Rue Ordener, Rue Labat* grapples with precisely this conundrum: how to integrate

a finite story into the infinite story, what can be said into what can't be said, and a daughter's biography into a father's thanatography.

Michael Stanislawski poignantly remarks that apart from the question of “whether or not it is credible that a rabbi at Auschwitz would pray to God on behalf of the Nazis . . . [Rabbi Kofman's] self-sacrifice was . . . in a profound sense transgressive of his faith rather than demanded by it” because it disregarded the duty of *pikuah nefesh*, the obligation to suspend the observance of a mitzvah when one's life or someone else's may depend on it.¹⁵ It is obvious then, that in this story, which Kofman took so long to express, the father's two acts of self-sacrifice—one of which defies logic and the other religious law—need to be retold not in the rational language of history but in the creative and imaginative language of literature:

In the house, there reigned a religious and sacred atmosphere. My father was a rabbi and we maintained the strictest observance of the dietary laws . . . On Rosh Hashanah . . . we listened to father blow the shofar. Mother was very proud of him . . . He practiced at home and I observed him take the shofar out and then put it back in its drawer next to his tallis, his teffilin, and the knife with which he slit the chickens' throats according to the ritual. Every Friday evening, women stood in our foyer, carrying one or two chickens in their shopping bags . . . All this was full of mystery and filled me with fear. I associated the razor of the *shokhet* with the knife of Abraham and the guttural sounds of the shofar with the cries of the slaughtered chickens . . . I also loved . . . the holiday of Simchat Torah when I saw my father dance in the synagogue with the other Hasidim lifting up in the air the Torah scrolls which we all kissed. (RO/RL, 19–21)

Is it due to a Freudian slip that some of the terminology related to Jewish practice and traditions (well known to a girl raised in strict orthodoxy) are either spelled incorrectly or mistakenly referred to by the author? Stanislawski points out that “she refers to the Havdalah prayer on Saturday night as ‘kiddush,’ refers to Sukkot as ‘Shoukkott,’ and even more curiously, recalls only ‘seven plagues’ at the Passover seder.”¹⁶ Are these due to a *lapsus linguae* or perhaps a *lapsus calami*—a slip of the pen, the father's pen?

Through the eyes of the child, the father is powerful, presiding over mysterious ceremonies in his mysterious study, where magic things happen and secret rites are performed. Does this idealized life of ritual constitute the *ça*? Or does *ça* refer to something more than this enchanted paternal space?

The real autobiography, the story of one's history, cannot remain in the ahistorical or antihistorical atmosphere of magic and mysticism: it is not there

that *ça* takes place. Rather, *ça* is to be found beyond what remains of Kofman's childhood illusions and daydreams; it is rooted in what happens once the daydreams are shattered, once repression erects barriers against memory. Once the father is forever removed from the child's life, the historical takes the place of the mythological, and *Rue Ordener*, *Rue Labat* is consequently taken over by the two mothers.

At first, we experience this memoir as a book about the father: a phantasmic, incomplete mosaic, as the talking of analysis that operates by free association: a pen that demands a flow of ink (blood or semen) in order to work, the blood of the father about to be spilled, the blood of the animals killed according to the rules of *kashrut*, the blood of the son Isaac in *extremis* replaced by the blood of a lamb. Then, slowly, the whirlwind of images takes a more organized form as history forces its way into the narration and a new story emerges: the story of the mother. The rest of the book will be devoted to the syncretic, equivocal, duplicitous maternal presence in a daughter's life. Understanding the ambiguity of the mother-daughter relationship is the key to the complex space of *Rue Ordener*, *Rue Labat*.

TO EAT OR NOT TO EAT

In 1987 Kofman published a short autobiographical essay titled "Sacrée nourriture"¹⁷ (translated into English as "Damned Food")¹⁸ in which she sketched the triangular relationship among mother, father, and child in connection to food, which functions as the force that both holds the triangle together and simultaneously tears it apart. In that essay, Kofman recalls the origins of her own rather unhealthy relationship with food as influenced by ancient Jewish dietary laws.

Because of its subject and the extremely poetic quality of the prose, this brief essay could easily have been incorporated into *Rue Ordener*, *Rue Labat*; in any case, it can be read as utterly complementary to the book. The essay is a compact yet complete summary of Kofman's early life. *Rue Ordener*, *Rue Labat* could almost be seen as an expansion of this original kernel.

"Sacrée nourriture! Et deux fois sacrée!" ("Damned food! And twice so!")—the essay opens with these sibylline exclamations. This overture sets the tone for the entire piece, which is full of puns and subconscious parapraxes. The English translation ("Damned Food!") of this opening sentence fails to capture the double-entendre of the original French: idiomatically, *sacrée* means "damned," but its literal meaning is the exact opposite: "sacred." Interestingly, we also find this meaningful play, or play on meaning, in the all-important Hebrew *qadosh*, as Stanislawski notes.¹⁹ Is the food to which she refers in her essay sacred or damned? It is both: and it is so twice over (*deux fois*). The text announces:

Damned food! And twice damned.

—You must eat, my mother used to say . . .

—You mustn't eat everything, my father used to say.²⁰

The food is sacred in that it is Jewish food, permitted (kosher) and therefore implicitly blessed by divine law. In this Jewish household, the food's sacredness is guaranteed by both mother and father. It is prepared by the Jewish mother in the kitchen according to the laws of kashrut, but the father—a rabbi and *shokhet*—must perform the ritual killing (sacred blood) and recite prayers for the food to become sacred. “*Sacrée nourriture*” is also partly about the Kofman family's wartime experience, and therefore the food is also in a sense damned, the food of trauma and death.

The first part of the essay sketches a portrait of the prewar Kofman family's dynamics through its relationship to food. Kofman stages the house as the temple where, as she reminds us in *Rue Ordener*, *Rue Labat*, everything is made sacred by the presence of a holy father. In this temple, mother and father share the priestly functions related to the administration of food. The father makes sure that only permitted foods are admitted to the table; he ensures that plates for dairy foods and meats are kept separate, and that they are properly purified “once a year for Passover, in the eventuality that some mistake was committed inadvertently (*par mégarde*).”²¹ “*Sacrée nourriture*” is the most Jewish of Kofman's writings: the memories of these domestic scenes, full of commands and interdictions, are suffused in a Yiddishkeit-colored atmosphere. Kofman even uses the proper terminology from the *mameloshen* of her childhood for unmixable foods—*milchig* (dairy) and *fleishig* (meats)—as she recalls how her father and mother both obsessed over keeping them apart. She reports that her father incessantly repeated that one is not allowed to eat just any kind of meat, or eat on just any plate, or use the same silverware with all the dishes. The mother is in charge of the process of kosherization itself and the preparation of food: “My mother, high priestess, officiated in the kitchen, where not infrequently one would see a cut of salted beef left bleeding for hours or a carp wiggling in a basin while my father, rabbi and *shokhet*, slaughtered chickens in his den according to the law.” The ritual food processing that goes on in the mother's kitchen kills the little girl's appetite and makes her stomach queasy. In “*Sacrée nourriture*,” the mother is typecast as the *yiddishe mame*, the obsessive feeder, the persistent nagger, a relentless source of annoyance: “And she stuffed us and stuffed us. No risk of being deprived of dessert with her.” The daughter's sarcasm turns the nurturing and loving mother into an overprotective and anxious Jewish mother. Arising either from the fear of transgressing a religious prohibition or from the

mother's overfeeding, the girl stops being hungry and "resisted with all [her] forces the maternal categorical imperative." If one could, *par mégarde*, commit sacrilege and contravene the laws of kashrut, one can hardly escape the *garde* of the mother who hovers over her children, making sure they eat more than enough of the permitted foods. The mother cannot be accused of *mégarde*—the failure to guard over those in her charge. Since Sarah refused to eat, we are told, the mother would run after her all the way to her school's gate holding a bowl of café au lait. Then she would animatedly declare to the teacher, "She has not eaten this morning!!!"²² The comedy of this scene is evident, and thus satirized, the mother is kept at an emotional distance by the narrator's irony.

Were we to translate the title of this essay into English (translations are unfortunately always treacherous), we could call it "Bloody Food" rather than "Damned Food" because the former reminds us of the blood drained out in the kosherization process, of the blood left in by the nonkosher preparations of Mémé and, perhaps more important, of the blood lines that exist between those who give food and those who receive it. *Sacrée nourriture*: the father makes the food *sacré* (sacred) and the mother makes it *sacré* (damned)—or is it the other way around? The father also makes it bloody (he slits the chickens' throat according to the ritual), and so does the mother (she leaves pieces of beef bleeding in the kitchen). The prohibitions against food are the way in which the father puts himself between the bodies of the child and the mother. "Thus, the maternal body is used in the service of a paternal law," postulates Kelly Oliver, "that outlaws the very body whose authority is invoked in order to enforce the law."²³ Therefore the maternal body must be rejected as well.

Kofman ties her nausea and eating problems to her mother's suffocating solicitousness. The fact that the entire essay is devoted to food clearly underscores the role of eating (and the mouth) as a place of discomfort (the sight of blood), ambivalence (mother or father), nonnegotiable rules (kashrut), and the fear of transgression and of breaking a taboo. Food also connects the body to society and is a metaphor for a psychological desire (drive) and its sublimated fulfillment. In women's literature, particularly women's autobiographies, the girl or woman often negotiates her identity vis-à-vis the surrounding world and her family through her relationship to food (see also chapter 5). The subject of food often inspires metaphors connected to ingestion, penetration, and invasion: from the outside, food carries something inside the body of the eater and lodges it there. Here, it is a Jewish identity that is being forged through the act of eating. Consequently, as soon as the task of feeding Sarah is taken over by Mémé, the girl absorbs a new identity, a French one. The child described by Kofman often demonstrates her resistance to threats from the outside world by

rejecting food (either refusing to eat or vomiting up what she is forced to eat); alternatively, at times she welcomes the outside world by accepting its alimentary offerings (Mémé's French cuisine).

One wartime episode illustrates Kofman's complex and highly symbolic relationship with food. Between July 1942 and February 1943, after Kofman's father had been deported, her mother took on the dangerous enterprise of hiding her many children among various protectors inside and outside of Paris (RO/RL, 29). Kofman's brothers Isaac, whose name was Francophonized to Jacquot, and Joseph (the youngest) were put in a nursery in northern France; her sister Annette was left in Nonancourt with a Jewish communist married to a non-Jew; Rachel (renamed Jacqueline), Aaron (now Henri), and Sarah are hidden in Merville, where these city children are happily exposed to the beauty of the countryside. Ironically, the name of this safe and salvific town is one letter short of the French word *merveille* (marvel or wonder)—and is pronounced as if it were written *mère ville* (mother town). In Merville, Sarah makes new friends and enjoys the farm animals, nature, and the novelty of walking to school in her heavy sabots. But her fraught relationship to food intervenes to spoil the idyllic picture. Wonderfully fresh produce abounds, but unfortunately for her, so do a lot of pork-based dishes. Only pork is mentioned as a problematic food, though of course even without pork, practically all of the foods in the French, nonkosher farm kitchen would have violated Jewish dietary rules. "School was the only place where I felt 'well' or where I was able to bear the separation from my mother a little better," Kofman recalls. The rest of the time, she would cry and refuse to eat what "had always been forbidden to me" (RO/RL, 30). Is it the nonkosher diet or the separation from her mother that makes the girl miserable? Regardless, it is through her resistance to this new food that she effects a reunion with her mother. Her refusal to eat nonkosher foods is a mortally dangerous behavior that risks betraying her, her siblings, and their protectors to the unsympathetic local collaborators, so dangerous that her sister Rachel asks their mother to take Sarah back. Sarah's method proves successful: her obedience to the father's law allows her to return home, to Paris, with her mother. Parenthetically, by abiding by Jewish law at a time when doing so might cost her and other people's life mirrors the father's supererogatory self-sacrifice.

In Kofman's case, therefore, rejecting her mother's food offerings cannot be interpreted simply as a rejection of the mother but rather as a complex strategy for expelling those fears that her mother has instilled in her: fear of starvation, sickness, and de-Judaization. The maternal categorical imperative that the girl tries to resist is *Eat!*—that is, *Live! Be healthy! Be Jewish!* However, it would be misleading to read this act of resistance as carried out solely against the mother,

as Tina Chanter seems to do.²⁴ The categorical imperative of the mother is only one aspect of the Jewish categorical imperative, whose holder is always and ultimately the father. After all, it is the father who decrees the Jewish law and the way in which kashrut marks each Jew by controlling what he can introduce inside his body and what he can't. Sarah realizes as soon as she starts living in the French world that kashrut is also a set of laws that, by delimiting what a Jew should and should not eat, further separates the Jews from their surrounding society. The Jews obey 613 commandments, 248 of which are positive (*mitzvot aseh*) and 365 of which are prohibitory (*mitzvot taaseh*): "do" and "do not" mingle together in the legal code. Understood this way, the opening paragraph of Kofman's alimentary essay does not simply demonstrate the author's rejection of the mother as much as confirms the author's inability to explicitly articulate her rejection of the father. Kelly Oliver asks: "Might the rejection of the mother cover up the rejection of the paternal law?"²⁵ I argue that it does.

Il faut manger (one must eat) and il ne faut pas tout manger (one cannot eat everything) are part of one single order: be Jewish. The privileged altar on which the ceremony of Judaism is performed in the house is the table. Around the table, there is a perfect convergence of the maternal and paternal roles in the nourishing rituals: the mother serves and the father blesses the foods. But first, the mother officiates in the kitchen, the father in his den. The priest and the priestess work in unison, yet the priestess is more of a vestal, an executioner of the priest's commands; and it is the latter whose order, as I'm about to show, reigns supreme for the entire family.

This paternal, priestly power becomes evident in the second part of the essay, in which we witness an unexpected reversal of roles (or rules). The war has already begun, and during their "exodus" (Kofman's word) to Brittany, the family runs into Red Cross volunteers who are distributing ham and butter sandwiches to the famished French population at the train station; the mother instinctively says to her children, "Don't take them." Surprisingly, the father intervenes and nullifies her order. "Let the children eat," he says, "it's the war." Not only *milchig* and *fleishig* together, but what *fleishig*!—Of all meats, ham is the most impure, the most abominable. Kofman remembers how much she enjoyed the taste of the prohibited food, surmising that that pleasure derived not so much from the actual flavor of the *treyf* itself as from the victory of the father's word over the mother's: "I found that ham-and-butter sandwich, which until then had been decreed impure, to be delicious: purified by circumstances and paternal authority."²⁶ Suddenly, the priest and the priestess switch roles: she who used to say "do" now says "don't," and he who used to say "don't" now says "do." By narrating this reversal, is Kofman implying that the kosherization of food is

nothing but an act of permission? That behind Jewishness—as defined by what a Jew does or does not do—there is no transcendental truth or justice, but only the exercising of masculine power (its immanence)? The father’s privilege to verbally impose or lift a ban? That kashrut, and perhaps Judaism itself, rests on the arbitrariness of the father’s word? The father’s power always wins out inside and even outside of his domestic temple. We could thus read Kofman’s essay as a feminist midrash that questions the very logic of Jewish identity.

Furthermore, we must ponder the disquieting nature of Kofman’s statement that the sandwich is “purified by circumstances and paternal authority” and its implication that father and war can purify impure food. Father and Nazism purify pork, expand the range of the edible beyond the confines of Jewish law. Is this same man who applies *pikuah nefesh* when completely unnecessary? The same Rabbi Kofman who, as a prisoner in Auschwitz, goes beyond the call of religious duty to observe the Shabbat and pays for it with his life? Therefore his act is again transgressive rather than respectful of his own law. Kofman seems to be suppressing a subconscious knowledge that the father’s authority is a dangerous delusion.

Though the war is initially described as a positive circumstance because it lets her father overrule the mother’s uncharacteristic order not to eat, it eventually changes everything for the worse. “A few years later,” Kofman understatedly remarks, “my father was deported.” And at that point “we couldn’t find anything to eat anymore.”²⁷ The ham sandwich, though it made no difference between life and death, did open a breach in Sarah’s sense of herself as a Jew. Furthermore, after her father is gone, the mother’s word never regains its former authority. While hiding in the apartment of the Christian savior, the mother will have to yield to Mémé, who feeds Sarah her *treyf* in order to save her, to make her healthy in body and spirit—that is, to de-Judaize her by depriving her of Jewish traditions, of which food is a central one. In a way, Mémé mirrors the well-meaning Red Cross nurses who could save children only if they are willing to eat ham and butter. “After countless turns of fortune, I was ‘saved’ just in time by a woman who kept me with her, in the very heart of Paris, until the end of the war,” writes Kofman, surprisingly editing out of this recollection her mother, who, as we know, was also saved by Mémé.²⁸ And why does she put “saved” in quotation marks? Perhaps it is to highlight the fact that something else was sacrificed. If Mémé’s heroism in saving the Jewish girl and her mother is undeniable, it is also true that her intervention caused a rift not only between the two victims but also between the girl and her Jewish identity. Mémé saved the girl, but not the Jew.

There exists a close connection between food (nurture) and the maternal (be it biological or symbolic). The moment Mémé replaces Jewish food with non-

Jewish food, Sarah's mother is also replaced by Mémé, and the former's defeat is completed:

At the same time as she [Mémé] was teaching me what we mean by "having a Jewish nose," she also submitted me to a completely different diet (*régime*): she declared the food of my childhood harmful to my health . . . red meat cooked rare (like raw horsemeat in broth) was supposed to "restore me to health" . . . From then on, this was my daily ration (until the day when we finally had nothing left to eat and had to go begging at the soup kitchen for a canteen cup of macaroni or beans).

Put in a real "double bind," I couldn't swallow anything anymore and I vomited after each meal.²⁹

Is the daughter's persistent vomiting the somatization of her subconscious recognition of the mother's victimhood? Is the daughter subconsciously enacting through her body the rejection (vomiting out) of a state of things, or a circumstance, that does not make the accessible world delicious (like the ham-and-butter sandwich) but unbearable and deadly?

Mémé changes the girl's diet as a way of saving her: the Nazi occupation and the final solution require a change of identity that Mémé interprets very literally. Similarly, the father on the train had interpreted the change in circumstances (the war) to require that the children be now allowed to eat pork. For Mémé, it is not enough to give shelter to the Jewish girl; she must also de-Judaize her. Kofman talks about her change of diet as a new *régime*, a word that carries a political undercurrent. A change of regime certainly occurs alongside the new diet, not only in the larger sense of the Nazi occupation but also with Mémé taking over the father's role, his priestly officiating over foods and the stewardship of the family. Thus Kofman refers back not only to the *régime* of Mémé, or the previous one of her mother and father, but also to an entire life of having food forced on her. The girl must submit to each dietary regime, but she responds to it with vomiting: her body rejects what her voice cannot refuse. "Sacrée nourriture! Et deux fois sacrée," exclaims Kofman. The food of her memory is twice sacred (or bloody) because it is associated with two victims (her mother and father) as well as two saviors (her two mothers), and because there are two ways of conceiving food and nutrition (Christian and Jewish, maternal and paternal or legal). Finally, food is twice damned because of its constantly duplicitous role. Before the war, food had been a problem in that one had to master the dietary laws in order not to break any taboo. But during and immediately after the war, food had turned into a different problem due to the fact that there was none left for anybody; around food there occurred a split between paternal and maternal

control; and food was the backdrop against which the maternal rivalry for Sarah's affections took place.

Here's another pivotal scene that connects food with death as well as with life. One night, after the father's deportation, an unknown man knocks at the door and warns Madame Kofman to run away because a roundup has been scheduled for their building. "Without finishing our vegetable soup, and without fully comprehending what the stranger had just told us, we went to [Mémé's] house . . . I threw up all along the way," Kofman recalls in her memoir (RO/RL, 40). The escape from the certain to the uncertain is marked by a painful somatization of fear by vomiting. However, as soon as they reach safety in the apartment on Rue Labat, the French lady has a calming effect on the terrified child: "I found her very beautiful, sweet and affectionate. I almost forgot what had brought us there that night" (RO/RL, 40). So reassuring is Mémé that despite her upset stomach, Sarah manages to eat the rich dessert, *œufs à la neige*, that this stranger prepares for them. This marks their entrance into Rue Labat: from this moment on, Kofman will revisit the apartment on Rue Ordener only in her dreams—or rather in her nightmares, she tells us.

Once settled in Rue Labat, Kofman's mother looks powerlessly on as her daughter is fed nonkosher foods and exposed to the licentious behavior of Mémé, who once a week receives a nighttime visit from her boyfriend. She feels that the affection Mémé shows the girl is immoderate (RO/RL, 49). Kofman confesses: "My mother suffered in silence . . . no news from my father, no way of going to see my brothers and sisters, no power to stop Mémé from transforming me, from detaching me from her and from Judaism. I had, it would seem, buried my entire past: I had begun to adore those beefsteaks cooked rare with butter and parsley" (RO/RL, 67).

The scene describing Sarah's tonsillectomy, in chapter 12 of *Rue Ordener, Rue Labat*, dramatizes the symbolic detachment from one food turned indigestible (mother, Judaism) to another source of food now desirable (Mémé, Frenchness): "When I was ill, unlike my mother, Mémé did not panic . . . I cry and scream in pain. My mother starts speaking louder, pitying me in Yiddish and wants to alert the doctor. Mémé stays very calm, smiles and says: 'It's nothing, and you're going to eat a lot of ice cream!' I immediately stop crying. That day I vaguely began to realize that I was detaching myself from my mother and attaching myself more and more to the other woman" (RO/RL, 52–53). The girl leaves behind the *yiddishe mame* and her smothering apprehension and embraces the French mother and her promises of self-fulfillment and happiness. Yet despite her ecstatic acceptance of the French lady, Kofman also recalls

that Mémé is neurasthenic (RO/RL, 48) and obsessed with her own stomach and digestion problems (RO/RL, 52). And despite Mémé's excellent cooking, the girl "frequently vomited and Mémé would get angry . . . my body in its own way was refusing this diet that was foreign to me and a source of anxiety" (RO/RL, 51).

Throughout *Rue Ordener*, *Rue Labat*, Kofman associates the goodness displayed by maternal figures with the bitterness of her childhood memories. For example, she adored her elementary school teacher, Madame Fagnard, who vocally resisted the Vichy regime, taught her students to give to the poor and feed the hungry, and took care of Sarah and her siblings in various occasions. Sarah had a true veneration for Madame Fagnard, her first surrogate mother (RO/RL, 25). The teacher grew so close to the girl that Sarah chose to call herself by the surname Fagnard on the fake Aryan documents the resistance fighters provided to her, her siblings, and her mother. Yet even a person as good as Madame Fagnard risks imposing her alterity on Sarah; this danger arrives, not surprisingly, in the form of food, through the mouth, reaching deep into her body, which promptly somatizes the frightening alterity and spits it out: "In the school courtyard, when she distributed dietetic cakes and skim milk, [Madame Fagnard] always overserved me, well beyond the allotted portions. One day . . . I had drunk so much milk during recess that I threw up in the middle of class: I was sent to the corner and made to kneel. I was all the more upset by this incident because my family had always forbidden Christian-style genuflections, which were way too Christian" (RO/RL, 28). Madame Fagnard has pushed too far, and the girl's adoration of this teacher suddenly dries up. "What can be more maternal an image than feeding a child milk," asks Stanislawski.³⁰ Yet the girl had overfed on this maternal figure to the point of self-endangerment. The law of the father forbids such acts of worship of pagan idols, and going against this law means pain and death. Again, food and the mother are connected, one leading to (or away from) the other. The girl's subconscious works out a strategy (the refusal or acceptance of food) to negotiate the boundaries with the people around her and to exercise power. Kofman, certainly conscious of their significance, works her memories about food and vomit into oral metaphors that become key to her formulations on the impotence of witnessing.

BETWEEN SEDUCTION AND CONVERSION, KOFMAN'S MORTE BLANCHE

An expert on Lacan, Kofman knew the psychoanalytical meaning of ζa , and Lacan's definition of "it" (ζa , Es, id) can be extremely helpful to us in understanding Kofman's as well:

Let us think of a mailbox and of the inner cavity of some Baal-like idol; let us now think of the *bocca di leone* which, in combining them, acquired its fearsome function in Venice. A reservoir, yes, as it were, that is what the id [Ça] is, and even a reserve; but what is produced in it, missives of prayer or denunciation, comes from the outside, and if it accumulates inside, it is in order to sleep there. The opacity of the text stating that silence reigns in the id [Ça] is thereby dispelled: the silence is not metaphorical, but relates to an antithesis that must be pursued in the subject's relation to the signifier, which is expressly designated to us as the death drive.³¹

Lacan's *bocca di leone* and Kofman's own formulation, *bocca della verità*—by which she means her mouth—are significant images. *Bocca della verità* is connected not only to truth but also to prophecy. By contrast, Lacan's *bocca di leone* conflates two central concepts: truth (the act of denouncing) and guilt (the exposure of the person who is being denounced). In Venice, the *bocche di leone* were special mailboxes marked with the effigy of the lion of Saint Mark, the symbol of *la Serenissima* (the Republic of Venice), and were scattered all over the city. Passers-by could drop in anonymous denunciations to which only the magistrates had access. However, the lion, with its wide-open mouth, is also a symbol of voracity; therefore, a link between eating (devouring, or being devoured) and guilt (of the accuser and of the denounced) is created in Kofman's subconscious topography.³² In her obsession with psychoanalysis, Kofman would position the mouth (a biological cavity and repository of dark drives) at the center of many associations. In talking about her psychoanalytical experience, Kofman describes the process of telling as a linear, uninterrupted flow that passes through her mouth and is released and expelled out of this orifice: a cavern of darkness and knowledge not unlike Plato's cave. This knowledge, however, emerges only through the encounter with the Other's ear. "Everything 'started' when I had nothing to say anymore," Kofman declares. She describes her disappointment in the analytical process: "The first period of my analysis was me reciting my long story. A linear, uninterrupted story . . . never the slightest rupture, the slightest gap, the slightest mistake . . . From the other side of the couch, nothing. 'My life' was met with indifference."³³ In the psychoanalytical encounter, the therapy works when the patient becomes her own witness, when she hears her own story in a different way, through (and thanks to) the ear of the Other. "So my mouth," writes Kofman, "stopped being a place from which a reassuring discourse was being emitted—*bocca della verità*—and turned into the cave from where there burst forth cries, more or less articulate, more or less intelligible words, whose tone, extremely variable (thunderous, eva-

nescent, hardly audible, jerky, melodious, etc.), shocked even me.”³⁴ We think immediately of Kafka’s *Die Verwandlung* (The Metamorphosis)³⁵ and the moment when, awakening from his unsettling dreams, the protagonist Gregor Samsa’s terrifying transformation is revealed to his family—who is attempting to talk to him through his closed door—through the loss of his human voice. I’ll return to Kofman’s connection with Kafka shortly, but for the moment I wish to point out that in Kofman’s conception of analysis, a new person is speaking, in words that are at once foreign and recognizable, through a new mouth: “My mouth, enclosed, sewn, tight-lipped, shut (*fermée*). Constipated.”³⁶ The mouth is the metaphor for all orifices, genital (“generous mouth that dispenses its . . . semen”) and anal (it is a constipated mouth):

I knew for example that if I was constipated on a given day I wouldn’t be able to “talk” on the couch either, that ça would not dispense anything, that nothing would pass through . . . What passes through my mouth, during analysis, has nothing to do, then, with either truth or meaning. It emerges from my guts to be offered as a gift (*cadeau*) for the other to appreciate. Hence, the silence of the analyst is intolerable. It is a sign not of indifference to the events of my life but of a depreciation of my most intimate possession. A refusal . . . of my presents, of what comes out of my womb, of what I produce: my merchandise, then, is shit! I might as well not give anything, not tell anything. At least silence is golden. But this silence, too, is intolerable for me, from which comes the driving need to hear my words . . . not in order for them to be given meaning or be interpreted, but in order for an exchange to subsist, one that transmutes “poop” (“*caca*”) into gold.³⁷

When the Other (the analyst here) refuses the gift (*cadeau*) the analysand is dispensing—out of her entrails—this gift, her “baby,” becomes *caca*. However, as Kofman has already said on various occasions, silence is not an option. In truth, silence is not golden but intolerable. If we follow her metaphor, gold is synonymous with sperm, the fluid endowed with life that also comes through the speaking mouth when it (*Es, ça*) is properly being heard.

In her book *Conversions*, Kofman analyzes in depth the theme of the three caskets in *The Merchant of Venice*, starting with the premise that Freud had only partially understood or had only been partially willing to hear that drama’s powerful implications. Kofman criticizes Freud for confining his analysis of the choice of the three caskets to a discussion of love and for not pushing the discussion further, as she does, to account for temporal ambivalence: “the duplicitousness (*double face*) of time, premise of all conversions and of all reversals.”³⁸ The transformation of gold into *caca*, of good into bad and vice versa, is the central

concern of Kofman's *Conversions*, and, as I discuss later in this section, this fascination for doubles and duplicity will come up explicitly in *Rue Ordener*, *Rue Labat* in a discussion of her favorite Hitchcock movie, *The Lady Vanishes*. Time itself, Kofman hypothesizes, is ambivalent because it has two faces, like Janus Bifrons (the ancient god who guarded the entrance to Roman homes; the god of transitions, beginnings, and endings): one face is melancholic-depressive, the other manic. The face looking toward the future smiles, the face looking backward frowns. Ambivalence leads to conversion (reversal), which in turn is governed by time. And what purpose, Kofman asks, does ambivalence serve? Ambivalence, she answers, is at the service of desire. "The only thing that matters to us, in the end, is the ambivalence of love (its identification with death)," she concludes.³⁹ The heart of the matter is not Shylock's forced conversion but the fluidity of ambivalent things; the conversion that interests Kofman is that of lead (a vulgar metal, a symbolic excrement) into gold (the noble metal that hides its base origins), "the transmutation of something base into something perfect" and, ultimately, the conversion of life into death.⁴⁰

"The theme of the choice among three metals, in fact, cannot be replaced by the theme of the choice among three women," writes Kofman, "because the three metals are not constitutive only of the caskets, which are the alleged symbols of the women; each one of them, with its ambivalence, embodies one of the three main characters: Antonio, Bassanio, Shylock . . . and because one of them, Shylock the Jew, like lead (despite the fact that Shylock represents silver [money]), the true scapegoat, is accused of all sorts of crimes."⁴¹ Could Kofman be identifying her mother with Shylock in *Rue Ordener*, *Rue Labat*, her own conversion of theory into memoir?

The problems of false appearances, transmutability (of bad into good and vice versa), and the ambivalence at the root of love—which is one with death and means both exaltation and despair—become the main theme of one of two important entr'actes nested within *Rue Ordener*, *Rue Labat*. After the plot reaches a tragic climax in a chapter titled "Liberations" (note the plural), the narration comes to a sudden halt. Kofman has just told us that after the war, her mother brought a suit against Mémé in order to separate Sarah from the Frenchwoman for good. "Mémé was accused in court," Kofman recalls, "of having 'taken advantage' of me and of having mistreated my mother. I did not quite understand what she [mother] meant by 'taking advantage,' but I was convinced that she was lying. I was outraged to see her falsely accuse the person to whom we owed the fact that we weren't dead and whom I loved so much! So, in turn, I accused my mother" (RO/RL, 70). The mother's plan backfires as the daughter betrays her (again). She is yet another Jessica, another Shylock's daughter, who—as

Ruth Klüger does in *Still Alive*—carries the guilt of having betrayed her parent. Thanks to Sarah’s testimony against her own mother, the tribunal (improvised in a school courtyard by the Forces Françaises de l’Intérieur) decides in favor of Mémé. For the second time, the mother loses the daughter’s respect because of her lies, although the girl does not even fully understand what these lies are, and the adult narrator does not intervene to clarify this crucial issue: the truth about whether the mother lies or not—was the girl sexually abused by Mémé?—remains inaccessible to us. From the daughter’s perspective, whenever the mother attempts to save someone, she lies. Although the mother had to resign herself to her husband’s capture, she combats her daughter’s capture by Mémé; she kidnaps her back after the trial, hitting her and screaming in Yiddish: “I am your mother! I am your mother! . . . you belong to me!” Kofman remembers trying “to wiggle free. I cried and sobbed. Deep down, I was relieved” (RO/RL, 71). Here is the maternal “sentence”—as opposed to the French (patriarchal) one of the tribunal—and it’s delivered in Yiddish. The buried language has reemerged. The past returns via the mother, who tries to bring Sarah back into the Jewish fold. (Later in the memoir, we learn that during the postwar years, when she was living again with her mother, Sarah returns to Judaism, relearning Hebrew and observing all the laws and interdictions of her childhood before once again leaving all of it behind once she finishes school.)

Before Kofman resumes the childhood memoir proper with a few anticlimactic chapters, she composes two anomalous entr’actes: one devoted almost entirely to a quote from Freud on Leonardo da Vinci’s *The Virgin and Child with Saint Anne and St. John* (titled “Leonardo’s Two Mothers”), and another centered on *The Lady Vanishes*. It is as if a hole opens up in the middle of the text after the traumatic trial and has to be filled with artistic meditations rather than childhood memories. I have analyzed elsewhere the entr’acte about Freud and Leonardo,⁴² so here I will devote my attention exclusively to the one about Hitchcock. The Polish writer, painter, and Shoah victim Bruno Schulz once wrote the following in a letter to his friend Ignacy Witkiewicz:

I do not know just how in childhood we arrive at certain images, images of crucial significance to us. They are like filaments in a solution around which the sense of the world crystallizes for us . . . They are meanings that seem predestined for us, ready and waiting at the very entrance of our life . . . It seems to me that the rest of our life passes in the interpretation of those insights . . . These early images mark the boundaries of an artist’s creativity . . . But art will never unravel that secret completely. The secret remains insoluble. The knot in which the soul was bound is no trick knot, coming

apart with a tug at its end. On the contrary, it grows tighter and tighter. We work at it, untying, tracing the path of the string, seeking the end, and out of this manipulating comes art.⁴³

The Hitchcock entr'acte in Kofman's memoir contains one such tightly knotted string that, following Schulz's insight, we can see that Kofman worked at untying all her life and out of which not a solution but only more art comes forth.

Hitchcock's movie is a classic of the switched identity plot, or as Slavoj Žižek describes it, "the most beautiful and effective variation on the theme of the 'disappearance that everybody denies.'"⁴⁴ On a train, the heroine of the film (Iris) meets a lovely old governess (Miss Froy) with a maternal face and with whom she happily shares the compartment; when Iris dozes off momentarily, the place of the old lady is taken over by another woman dressed exactly like Miss Froy, who in the meantime has disappeared. But this "new" Miss Froy has a disagreeable face, and Iris is sure this is not the same kind lady she had been traveling with. The protagonist goes on a frantic search for the disappeared lady with the likable face and refuses to believe that she never existed, as a series of people on the train insist. Undeterred by the conspiratorial coverup, Iris looks for the vanished lady everywhere. The replacement of the real Miss Froy causes Kofman great anxiety when she watches the film: "It is always unbearable for me when brutally in place of the benevolent, 'maternal' face of the old lady . . . suddenly I see the face of her replacement . . . a face frightfully harsh, fake, shifty, menacing, in place of the sweet and smiling good lady, just when one was expecting to see that one again" (RO/RL, 76–77). The uncanny effect in the movie is produced precisely by this substitution of the motherly figure with the uncanny figure, "the one perfectly separate from the other, the one morphing into the other" (RO/RL, 77). But how do we know that the good lady is in fact good? Not surprisingly, the answer brings us back to the issue of food: "she [the maternal lady in the film] always has food provisions" (RO/RL, 77), writes Kofman. Just like in her life, good maternal figures are connected with food, but a shift in their attitude might turn them into unpleasant figures and make their food intolerable to her.

Hitchcock's film returns in the "Angoisse et Catharsis" chapter of Kofman's *L'Imposture de la beauté*, published posthumously: "In fact, Miss Froy is not as 'good' or perfect as she appears."⁴⁵ The vanished lady is a British secret agent (espionne) working against the Nazis. She is thus not that "good" because she has lied about her identity, and this moral contamination is reflected in her replacement, the bad lady. Purity and contamination are two central leitmotifs of Kofman's texts. We think back to the scene in "Sacrée nourriture" (which

also takes place on a train) when her father allows the children to eat pork, thus “purifying” what had been previously been impure—or, to put it differently, contaminating what had previously been sacred. We also think back to the scene in *Rue Ordener, Rue Labat* in which the mother’s lie (an attempt to save her husband from deportation) contaminates the perfection of the father’s world. Kofman sees the same contamination at work in Hitchcock’s film: “She [Miss Froy] does not have any more the purity of the ideal or its perfection.” According to Kofman, “it had been necessary for her to die, and, in the course of the journey, she loses her protective power. On the contrary, it’s the young woman [Iris] who saves her from the hands of the *comploteurs*.”⁴⁶ If *maman* is Shylock, is *Mémé* a *comploteur*?

In Kofman’s childhood, in order for *Mémé* to keep being good, the mother has to keep being bad; the biological mother has to pay the price of the daughter’s need for disambiguation by maintaining the plausibility of her hallucination. Kofman sees the same premise at work in *The Lady Vanishes*: “turning ‘badness’ into the generalized feature of all the faces [that Iris sees on the train] is a ‘ruse’ of the film director and of the heroine’s psyche in order to convince her that the original good image was . . . exclusively of a hallucinatory type.” Kofman raises a central question about Hitchcock’s film, one that we can redirect toward our analysis of *Rue Ordener, Rue Labat*: “Isn’t the young woman involved . . . in the disappearance of the ‘good’ lady and in her transformation?” The subconscious guilt of Iris and Sarah is the unifying thread running through these two narratives. In both stories the heroine is as duplicitous as the ladies or mothers on whom her life depends and whom she alternately loves and hates; moreover, she displays a good side as well as a bad one. In the film, Iris at first behaves unpleasantly; she is unreasonable, unkind, and difficult, and thus not *sans tache* (free of stain or fault): “On the eve of the trip . . . [Iris] was detestable, intolerant . . . She bribed the *maître* at the hotel . . . behaving like a rich ‘spoiled’ brat who always gets her way.”⁴⁷ Sarah too (the daughter who rejects her mother, who accuses her in front of the tribunal) is far from angelic (*sans tache*).

Kofman’s analysis of Hitchcock provides interesting clues to help the reader understand her own text: “Her [Iris’s] death drive, projected onto the outside world, makes the other travelers in the train compartment appear to her as threatening persecutors, plotting against her well-being. This projection is responsible for the transformation of the ‘good’ lady into the ‘bad’ mother, an imagined metamorphosis that is sanctioned by reality, for Miss Froy is not perfect.”⁴⁸ However, unlike in the classic tragic or comedic plots of fiction, in *Rue Ordener, Rue Labat* anagnorisis does not fundamentally alter the course of the text. It is in the nature of a memoir that the heroine’s blindness remains

unaffected by the awareness the narrator gains of her situation and of other characters in her story.

In Hitchcock's film, the heroine meets a bohemian musicologist who initially seems to be her antagonist but who ends up becoming her ally and guardian angel. In fact, the two fall in love and, it is implied, will marry. Kofman finds the equivalent of Iris's helpful paramour in the guardian fathers of Western culture through whom—via rewriting them, de- and reconstructing their thought—she searches for the good mother who has vanished. Applying Žižek's interpretation of *The Lady Vanishes* to Kofman, we can say that through *Rue Ordener*, *Rue Labat* and all her writings, she affirms that Woman—who, according to Lacan, does not exist—in fact exists. But despite this affirmation, there is no happy ending to the story. As Žižek writes of all stories, "The happy ending is never pure, it always implies a kind of renunciation—an acceptance of the fact that the woman with whom we live is never Woman, that there is a permanent threat of disharmony, that at any moment another woman might appear who will embody what seems to be lacking the marital [maternal, in our case] relation."⁴⁹ Kofman's many "fathers" (Freud, Nietzsche, Rousseau, and so on—the cultural substitutes for the biological father) are like oracles: she interrogates them in order to solve the enigma of the disappearance of the good face of motherhood. All she receives in return are more enigmas, riddles, and paradoxes along with clues that are impossible to decipher. Male patriarchal culture is ill equipped to address the blind spot that it has assigned to woman, to the mother.

Nonetheless, Kofman loved riddles and knew that the pleasure (*jouissance*) is in discovering, and not in solving, an impenetrable conundrum. Her dreams provided her with plenty of interesting riddles. She once woke up from an anxiety dream and jotted it down on a piece of paper, which was later found and published in the journal *Fusée* in 2009. In this dream, she saw herself on a country road surrounded by mountains: a landscape that infused her with "absolute joy" (*jouissance*).⁵⁰ However, in order to contemplate the splendor of this landscape, the dreamer has to climb a winding ladder, at the top of which she sees an enormous wave full of white foam, which turns into an angel robed in white holding a scythe. Grabbing her from behind, the angel starts scratching her with the scythe and knocks her dead: "Awakened by the anxiety, not at all sure that it was just a dream, I whisper: 'my death milk [*lait de ma mort*].'" A milk of death like that of Madame Fagnard or Mémé, or a milk of life turned deathly like that of Kofman's father and mother? Kofman decides that the title for this dream should be *la mort blanche* (white death).⁵¹ The death she dreams of might be white or innocent (*morte blanche* can refer either to the death of infants in their

sleep or to death by lack of oxygen), but the death milk is probably not white but black, like the Shoah milk that Paul Celan writes about in his famous poem “Deathfugue” (“Todesfuge”): “Black milk of daybreak we drink it at evening / we drink it at midday and morning we drink it at night / we drink and we drink.”⁵²

Another dream that Kofman, at once a Freudian and an anti-Freudian reader, interprets for us deals with her Jewish identity through the metamorphosis of a name. This dream reinforces Chanter’s suggestion that Kofman strongly identified with Freud not only because they both had a conflicted relationship to Jewishness but also because they both had humble origins.⁵³ In the essay “Tombeau pour un nom propre,” we read:

Dream: on a book cover, ‘I’ read:
Kafka
translated by
Sar . . . Ko(a)f . . .⁵⁴

Kofman tries to interpret this enigmatic dream by digging into the origins of her own family name, which was the result of a bureaucratic mistake by an unknown city employee who had Gallicized the German Ashkenazi original, Kaufmann, “which cannot but evoke commerce, money, caca [kaka], the Jew.”⁵⁵ Kofman interprets this as a guilt dream because she links her name with the anal orifice, claiming that this connection between name and anus is guilt ridden (*culpabilisant*) or at least points to a guilt. Standing between Ka(f)ka and Kaufmann (equally synonymous with poop) in her cryptic dream is Kofman. The dream is doubly cryptic: *kryptos* in Greek means cavern or grotto—here, that inner cavern in which the *caca* is stored and expelled, as well as sperm, and words (of memory):

Isn’t though the severing “elision” the equivalent of a double castration, chastisement of she who meant to deny her blood, erase her lowly origins, to hold her head high?

Sar . . . Kof . . . Sarkof?

(S)he gets mutilated of two sexes, cat-rat (*chat-rat*), I devour my own flesh: *sarcophagus*.⁵⁶

The spelling “mistake” restores her “head” (Kof—*Kopf* means head in German) and allows her to hold it high. She signs this dream “Sar . . . Ko(a)f . . .” and points out that in Hebrew, the “a” elided from her first name in the dream indicates the feminine gender of a noun, while the German suffix “Man(n)” in her family name reestablishes the male presence. Hence *sarcophagus* becomes *sar-kof-phagus*, or she who feeds on Sarah’s head.

And how can one ignore that, as Kofman must have known, *kof* is also the name of the Hebrew letter *k* and that the bad lady in Hitchcock's movie, Miss Kummer, has a name also starting with *kof* and it contains the letter *mem* (*m*) (like Kofman, but also twice like *maman* and *Mémé*). It also contains one of two important Indo-European lexemes (*mer* and *mar*) to which Kofman attaches great importance in another dream-related essay, titled "Cauchemar" ("Nightmare"),⁵⁷ a lexeme that is an utterance of misfortune and whose traces are still found in a few modern words of common usage—such as *cauchemar*.

Kofman is the autophagous woman with an obsession for the mouth, the organ Lacan identified as "l'objet primitif par excellence" (the primitive object par excellence).⁵⁸ There is a *régime* (both dietary and political) that is ruled through the mouth and that rules the mouth, and at the head of this *régime* are the father and the patriarchal mother. The idea of the mouth from which words, vomit, sperm, and *caca* can erupt connects Kofman the Freudian scholar to another famous woman whose therapy (like Kofman's) also failed: Irma—who like Sarah, had a propensity to vomit. As Freud notes about Irma's case, "the first organ to emerge as an erotogenic zone and to make libidinal demands on the mind is, from the time of birth onwards, the mouth."⁵⁹ The mouth was at the very center of Freud's famous dream about Irma—a semi-successful (and thus also semi-failed) psychoanalytical case of a woman who had refused his prescriptions. "A large hall—numerous guests . . . Among them was Irma," Freud writes about his dream. The woman complains of pain in her throat, stomach, and abdomen, lamenting that the pain is choking her. Freud continues: "I took her to the window and looked down her throat, and she showed signs of recalcitrance, like women with artificial dentures . . . She then opened her mouth properly . . . I at once called in Dr. M., and he repeated the examination . . . My friend Otto was now standing beside her as well, and my friend Leopold was percussing her through her bodice."⁶⁰ The men proceed to give Irma an injection with an infected syringe. This dream, one that in my opinion hints at a group rape fantasy, may be even more unsettling for those who read it now than it was for Freud, who dreamed it. It is, as Lacan points out, a terrifying image that turns Irma into a Medusa, one who holds in the depth of her oral cavity, hidden or stuck in her throat, something unnamable, unpronounceable. The mouth is a symbol of the female sexual organ but also, as Lacan says, "the gulf . . . in which everything gets swallowed . . . the image of death where everything ends."⁶¹ Behind the composite imago of Irma are three men (either Breuer, Fleischl, and Emanuel or Otto, Leopold, and Fliess),⁶² but also three women (Irma, the patient Freud fails to cure, Irma's friend that Freud would like to have as a patient, and Freud's wife, Martha). Chanter has written of Freud that he

“is working through his relation to his father’s death at the same time as he confronts his incestuous desire for his mother. Death and female sexuality have in common the fact that neither of them ‘can be faced directly.’”⁶³ The symbol that conflates Death and Woman and that makes it impossible to face either of them directly, lest one dies, is the head of Medusa (which Ovid had already understood as a sexual symbol). The Gorgon Medusa was one of three chthonic sisters, whose effigy was used on shields and amulets for protection—female protection: although the Medusa herself is mortal to man, her double or effigy can be vital, a good-luck charm. This means that Medusa can be looked at only as reflection, as double. Kofman tells us that she has a special apotropaic amulet thanks to which her writing and her life were safe: the father’s pen. Hence, the father’s pen is cast in *Rue Ordener*, *Rue Labat* as the double or reflection of the deadly face of the mother or Medusa. Although facing the mother(s) is deadly to the daughter, using the mother(s)’ double, the pen, is life saving. I will show in a moment, though, how the ambiguity of the double spoils this otherwise straightforward postulate.

Kofman draws an important distinction between ambiguity, which is equivocal, pointing to one thing or another, and ambivalence, which affirms simultaneously two opposing things, “sense and nonsense.”⁶⁴ She stipulates that ambivalence is a maternal figure, with its roots not in the Oedipus myth but in the original connection of Love and Death, their convertibility.⁶⁵ Death can never be figured, says Kofman, other than as its double (Love). She goes on to explain that “despite appearances, gold . . . is not the opposite of lead”; in other words, “ambivalence is the condition . . . of [these metals’] convertibility or transmutability.”⁶⁶ Kofman places this same ambivalence at the heart of the mother-daughter bond, noting: “At a certain point in [the daughter’s] development there occurs a double transformation . . . the daughter goes from loving to hating [the mother]. On the other hand, she also changes the love object: she goes from a fixation for the mother to a fixation for the father.”⁶⁷ I will venture to say that Mother is Medusa and Father is Janus. Kofman writes about Janus, whose effigy the Romans imprinted on their coins, that he is the “emblem, in virtue of his double face, of vigilance as well as of a limitless imperialism: essentially, he is the god of entries and exits, who guards the inside as attentively as he guards the outside, the right and the left, front and back, above and below . . . he is the god of transitions and passages: from a state to another, from the past to the future, from one vision to the next, from one universe to a different one.”⁶⁸ We must therefore conclude that Medusa, the face that one cannot love without dying, is to Janus, the face that does not exist because it is always double, what ambiguity is to ambivalence. In Marcia Ian’s compelling study of

literary modernism and its relation to language, at whose center she positions the powerful image or fetish of the “phallic mother,” we read the following paragraph which provides further support to my reading of the character of Mémé in Kofman as phallic mother: “The phallic mother, seemingly all productivity and reproductivity, flows with milk and semen, and yet stands like a screen between us and our prehistory as ‘inanimate things’; she stands at the beginning of our psychic, cultural, and specific history as Death’s mirror image as well as death’s symbolic negation.”⁶⁹ As Rome defeats Jerusalem in the ancient world, so in Kofman’s story a Christian substitute, Mémé, replaces the Jewish father: the double devours its matrix. In *Rue Ordener*, *Rue Labat* Mémé is the passageway to French culture for the small girl: she introduces Sarah to books, crossword puzzles, dictionaries and encyclopedias, “la grande musique” (in particular Beethoven), and charming *chansonniers*—as well as the geniuses of Western civilization such as Spinoza, Marx, Bergson, and Einstein, whom she uses as paradigms of Jewish people’s exceptional intelligence. However, she also undermines Jewish people’s worth by describing the entire race as stingy, pushy, physically ugly deicides. Mémé embodies the promise of life, of a future, while the mother embodies a past lost for good—a past that the memoirist cannot look straight in the eyes (like Medusa) lest she be petrified.

WRITING LIKE A CAT : KOFMAN’S IDENTIFICATION WITH E. T. A. HOFFMANN’S MURR

Rue Ordener, *Rue Labat* is Kofman’s last text of and on ambivalence—a theme that preoccupied her all her life. In the memoir, she borrows from a famous Prussian writer—E. T. A. Hoffmann—the idea of doubling a text and the metaphor of writing as a scratching that leaves profound, devastating marks on the page. Kofman deeply identified with Hoffmann’s bizarre *The Life and Opinions of the Tomcat Murr*. Hoffmann’s novel deals with a pompous, self-taught tomcat who writes his autobiography by scratching the page with his claws, using as blotting paper the biography of a hypochondriac, grumpy, antisocial musician, Johannes Kreisler (Hoffmann in *fabula*). By mistake the two texts get spliced together, and out of this error—committed by a painter—is born an uncanny (though highly humorous) double narrative. Based on this fantastic double text, Kofman draws a general rule, according to which there is not only internal heterogeneity in a text, an inner *griffure* (scratch) proper to each book, but different books end up scratching one another, altering reciprocally every text.⁷⁰ Kofman loved Hoffmann’s fantasy about a cat who writes his autobiography. According to her, Cat Murr’s writing is a “double writing . . . one contradicting the other, in a complex way: at times the scratching of the cat tears to pieces the book

of man; at times, on the contrary, it creates a book . . . more ‘human’ than the one written by Kreisler’s biographer . . . Double writing, double biography—at the very least.”⁷¹ This “double writing” speaks to a more general truth about autobiography: these texts are internally heterogeneous and texts reciprocally mark each other with their *griffures* (scratches).

I am aware that I am splicing together Kofman-the-scholar with Kofman-the-autobiographer, but I believe that as her readers and interpreters, we have Kofman’s tacit permission to do so. In using Kofman’s own reading method to read Kofman, I therefore return to what she wrote about Cat Murr to shed light on her autobiographical project: “The text . . . had to be for Murr a way to be loved, to obtain the recognition of the superiority of his nature, to showcase his genius . . . If on the one hand writing is supposed to ‘elevate’ the cat to the level of humanity, on the other, it also runs the risk of leading him to ‘madness’: a double madness, inscribed into the text . . . the first one written into Murr’s text, the second into the text of Kreisler’s biographer.”⁷² Is Kofman guilty, as Cat Murr is, of being a “plagiarizer,” of using the intellectual property of others for her own profit? “The plagiarisms of the cat turn the cat’s writing into a text of quotations,” says Kofman; these quotations “underline, through parody, the quotability of all texts and the absence of paternity.”⁷³ The cat represents Woman for Kofman. She reads the story of Tomcat Murr through the (scratchy) irony of a feminist lens and concludes: “Almost unanimous incredulity surrounds the idea that a cat should write. Indeed, hostility: to write means to claim a human privilege, it means to deal a hard blow to man’s narcissism and dethrone his kingship over the universe. To allow a cat to write means to inscribe writing into life itself and it means . . . to condemn the Cartesian principle by taking a position different from that of intellect and science.”⁷⁴ In Kofman’s essay, Hoffmann loses paternity over his text,⁷⁵ which is grafted on the older and illustrious cat story by Ludwig Tieck, *Puss in Boots*. By the same token, does Kofman in a sense lose maternity over her memoir? After all, hers is a story that must take the form of a well-established genre (subvert that genre though she does), and that uses multiple quotes from a lifetime’s accumulation of intellectual knowledge from Western culture as a whole. Moreover, her memoir splices together her personal history and the historical events of the Shoah. Is *Rue Ordener, Rue Labat*, then, an impostor text like Hoffmann’s? Again, as we have seen with Ruth Klüger (chapter 2), the Shoah memoirist finds herself questioning the viability of the mirror of memory. To what extent can the truth be represented, and can the author profess to know this truth? Klüger draws into her text the at times contradictory voices of other protagonists, witnesses, and historical experts; Kofman refers to the entire corpus of Western thought, literature, and art. These

postmodern Shoah autobiographers choose hybridity as the only reliable way of speaking (*sans pouvoir*). And Kofman has learned the power of hybridity from an ingenious, postmodern work *avant la lettre* such as Hofmann's *Cat Murr*: a "hybrid text . . . effaces ownership . . . through authorial pluralism . . . annuls any effort to guarantee *maîtrise* [ownership; literally, mastery] of it. A writing that freezes like Medusa."⁷⁶ As a result, Kofman's book of memory is no longer autobiography but *auto-bio-griffure*, a text not peacefully inked onto the page but scratched into it, a book full of quotations and a representation of life borrowed from various sources and one that "is no longer a complete object peacefully resting in the closed space of a library." She adds: "The cat—a bookworm (*rat de bibliothèque*)—gnaws at the volumes, undoes their enclosures, and . . . becomes the murderer of the author as father of an *œuvre*."⁷⁷ Thus to replace paternity with maternity means to become mother to the son or text that, in turn, will become matricidal—out of love and in self-defense—when it turns on its creator.

The act of autobiographical writing, notes Kofman, is an act of self-love committed to affirm oneself and be admired.⁷⁸ In a letter to Edward Bernays dated August 10, 1929, Freud wrote that an autobiography should meet two conditions: the subject of the autobiography should have participated in some important events and be of some importance for the entire world; and the autobiography should be a psychological study—which, according to Freud, would put at grave risk the autobiographer's relationship with those people close to him or her whose private lives would be exposed to the world. This, Freud explained, is why he refused, despite the endless requests from publishers and friends, to write his autobiography. Of course, he added that "what makes all autobiographies worthless is, after all, their mendacity."⁷⁹ Kofman certainly might have agreed, but she found that it is precisely this "mendacity" that makes autobiographies worth our while. And hence the need for the reader to be a *lecteur policier*. In the end, perhaps ironically confirming Freud's fear, *Cat Murr's* project fails. Are all autobiographical projects ill fated?

Kofman shatters the autobiographical project that traditionally has been predicated on the reader's identification with the great man—the imago of the father, God, the writer.⁸⁰ If Hoffmann had already punctured this inflated sense of the autobiographical subject, Kofman emulates him in her traumatic memoir. She writes of Hoffmann's work: "The desire to set oneself up as an example . . . means to deny the bestiality (*animalité*) within humanity . . . to deny the plagiarisms. And yet, whoever mistakes himself for a god cannot succeed except by showing very strong claws. Only these claws can protect from the censorship of the editors, against the rigor of criticisms . . . Behind the apparent sweetness of a cat . . . behind the 'divinity' of genius, hide the animal's claws: the animal will

reveal his true nature to whomever will dare to pluck his feathers (*déplumer*), or to dispossess him.”⁸¹ Not only does *déplumer* mean to pluck an animal’s feathers, but *plume* is also the archaic word for pen, quill pen (*calamus* in Latin); to extend the metaphor, to defeather is to take the pen away from the autobiographer, to dispossess her of her story. Neither Tomcat Murr nor Kofman deny their own animality in protecting their stories.

The frontispiece of Hoffmann’s book is a droll picture of a cat holding a quill pen that Hoffmann himself painted. Kofman writes of this drawing that the cat it represents is not Murr but his double, and she compares this double to an intimidating penis: Murr’s double has sucked, like a vampire, the soul of Murr, who, therefore, is entitled to steal back the pen (*plume*) in order to recuperate the blood that has been lost. Murr’s task is to avenge himself for the blood his double has sucked away from him, to avenge the murder committed at his expense. If, as Kofman affirms, doubles are always vampires, then we must also revise my earlier analysis, according to which her apotropaic amulet (the father’s pen)—being the safe projection of the deadly Medusa head, her double—is a salvific force. Ambiguity intervenes to rob us of this hope: instead, the double, which we have presumed saves the daughter’s life, is actually a vampire, too, and as such it sucks the daughter’s life. Pushing this idea of the deadliness of the double even further, Kofman postulates that in drawing an image of a sweet, friendly cat, Hoffmann is hiding the real, diabolical nature of the memoirist. An autobiography is the portrait of the author that, like the mirror (which always diabolically doubles) held in front of Medusa’s face by Perseus, kills the onlooker: who is the onlooker in the mirror of memory if not the author herself? Kofman’s double writing does away with the reassuring portrait of greatness we expect to receive from an autobiography. Instead, painted the way Kofman (or Hoffmann) does, the text offers us the unsettling image of a murder. With *Rue Ordener*, *Rue Labat* Kofman has claimed her right to pen her memoir in a demystifying way by murdering the author and depriving her text of paternity.

Freud himself had recognized in Medusa’s head a signifier for the mother’s sex.⁸² In unpacking Kofman’s understanding of Freud’s penis envy, Oliver writes: “Freud learns too well the maternal lesson that the gift of life must be repaid with death.” In Oedipal terms, since the satisfaction of the forbidden incest with the mother would bring about the mother’s death, the son must avoid at all costs this body and this sex and avert his gaze from the petrifying Medusa. “So he [the son, Freud] tries to sublimate his incestuous desire into a desire for scientific research on sexuality, which leaves the fundamental riddle of feminine sexuality unanswered . . . [In this way] he repays his mother’s gift of life with death; he sacrifices her out of gratitude. He kills her so that she won’t die.”⁸³ In

Freudian theory, the woman's lack of phallus guarantees the man's power. So, too, Kofman's repossession of the phallic pen at the beginning of her memoir guarantees the death of the father: it enacts her loving act of patricide. But, paradoxically, it is through this phallus that the mother's story emerges in *Rue Ordener, Rue Labat*. A phallus that does not work any longer: it's a patched-up pen, lacking the lymph (ink) necessary for it to exercise its power. The real (not symbolic) father has been murdered, independently of the daughter's act. The daughter can only hallucinate that she is keeping him alive through her creative act: that she is paying back the gift of death with life. Perhaps Kofman realizes in this last self-analytical memoir that for the father and Mémé (his double) to subsist, the death of the real mother (ça, it) was required. In the same way Freud's science had saved the mother through killing her, out of love, Kofman's feminism had come at the expense of the mother.

This mystifying process takes us back to the equally mystifying subject of Kofman's memoir: ça. Stanislawski contends that "'it,' the ça . . . is clearly the story of her relationship with mémé, not that of her father's death."⁸⁴ Oliver reads the "it" at the opening (the mouth?) of *Rue Ordener, Rue Labat* as "the story of her [Kofman] father's death and her relationship with her mother during the war."⁸⁵ I argue that ça encompasses all three solutions: it is Kofman's love story with Mémé, and it is the story of the father and the story of the mother. But that ça is first and foremost, I believe, Kofman's realization of how this story had to be retold, of how she had been able to assimilate the (indigestible) story of her father only through the symbolic killing of the mother—only at the price of (s)mothering her. Her "crime" is ça: and ça demanded an auto-da-fé.

In that rarely used room reigned an exemplary order since Father's death . . .

Only a sheaf of peacock's feathers standing in a vase . . . had not submitted to regimentation. They were a frivolous, dangerous element, untenably revolutionary, like a class of high-school boys, all devotion in their eyes, but full of unbridled impertinence behind those looks. Those eyes on the feathers never stopped looking . . . Even in my mother's presence, while she lied on the sofa . . . "I was not lying," my mother said, while her mouth started swelling and at the same time becoming smaller. I could feel that she was flirting with me, like a woman with a man.



BRUNO SCHULZ, "Cockroaches"