Traces of War

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Sarah Kofman’s father was arrested in Paris on 16 July 1942, when she was seven. He had emigrated to France from Poland in 1929, and all his six children were French-born. His family never saw him again. After his arrest, he was deported to Auschwitz where, a year later, a Kapo beat him to death because he refused to work on the Sabbath. Kofman survived the war thanks to the protection of a non-Jewish woman, to whom she refers as mémé, and who became a kind of surrogate parent and a sometimes bitter rival with her real mother. As an adult Kofman became a noted philosopher; her thesis was supervised by Gilles Deleuze and she became a close associate of Jacques Derrida. She published over 20 books covering a vast range of philosophical issues and authors, with a particular interest in the work of Nietzsche and Freud. Derrida said that no one in the century had read all the folds of the work of Nietzsche and Freud with such pitiless, implacable love (Chaque fois unique, p. 214). In 1994, she published Rue Ordener, rue Labat, a short memoir describing the arrest of her father and her subsequent wartime experiences. On 15 October 1994, she took her own life.

Is there a connection between what happened to Kofman and her family during the war, the publication of her memoir and her suicide? Some readers have suspected that there is a direct link between these events. Kofman’s biographer, Karoline Feyertag, reports comments by Kofman’s colleague Jean-Luc Nancy, who lists the publication of Rue Ordener, rue Labat as one of the factors which led to her death (Sarah Kofman, p. 29). It has been suggested that Kofman’s memoir made her traumatic experiences all too present to her again. As Françoise Duroux puts it, ‘The autobiographical plunge, practiced in vivo, undoubtedly induces an earthquake. Philosophy protects. The plunge causes the
philosophical position to explode: Sarah Kofman’s suicidal plunge into her own melancholy’ (‘How a Woman Philosophizes’, p. 138; quoted in Robson, ‘Bodily Detours’, p. 616). Others have shared the sense of a link between Kofman’s wartime traumas and her suicide, as discussed by Penelope Deutscher and Kelly Oliver:

At an homage to Kofman held by her colleagues at the Sorbonne, Elisabeth de Fontenay suggested that it is precisely Kofman’s suicide that provokes one to reflect on the relationship between her life and work, or between her life and her two deaths, the one that she narrowly escaped as a child, the other of 1994. Françoise Armengaud suggests that Kofman’s death in 1994 could be thought of as the Holocaust having finally caught up with her, killing her with the delayed action of a time bomb. (‘Sarah Kofman’s Skirts’, p. 8)

Taken together, these accounts suggest that Kofman’s suicide was a delayed response to the Second World War: the trauma of war, unleashed by the memoir, caught up with her half a century after the event. In this light, Kofman can be seen as belonging to a doomed group of brilliant thinkers and writers whose suicides have been linked to their experiences of war and the Holocaust, including figures such as Jean Améry, Paul Celan, Bruno Bettelheim, Tadeusz Borowski and Primo Levi.

To take just one of these important writers, Kofman’s suicide might, then, be compared to the death of Primo Levi. Levi was found dead on the ground floor of the Turin apartment block where he lived on 11 April 1987. The police enquiry confirmed the assumption that he had deliberately jumped to his death. This was rapidly amplified by the belief that his suicide was related to his experiences in Auschwitz. Days after his death, fellow survivor Elie Wiesel said that ‘Primo Levi died at Auschwitz forty years later’ (quoted Gambetta, ‘Primo Levi’s Last Moments’, p. 2); or, as he put it later, Levi’s death is ‘proof that one can die at Auschwitz after Auschwitz’ (‘Bearing Witness’). Levi’s biographer, Myriam Anissimov, describes Levi’s death as a suicide from her opening pages (see Primo Levi ou la tragédie d’un optimiste), and subsequent biographers have followed suit. Likewise, in the chapter of his L’Ecriture ou la vie entitled ‘Le Jour de la mort de Primo Levi’, Jorge Semprun does not doubt that Levi deliberately took his own life. Moreover, Semprun points out that the day of Levi’s death was the anniversary of the liberation of Buchenwald, the camp in which he (but not Levi) had been interned. Semprun assimilates Levi’s situation to his own, surviving only as a kind of ghost after the living death of Auschwitz and Buchenwald.
He writes twice that ‘la mort avait rattrapé Primo Levi’ (pp. 257, 260), the use of rattrapé suggesting that death had not just claimed him, but reclaimed him: since Auschwitz, Levi had belonged more to the dead than to the living. So why, Semprun wonders, was it suddenly impossible for Levi to bear his terrible memories? He quickly answers his own question: ‘Une ultime fois, sans recours ni remède, l’angoisse s’était imposée, tout simplement. Sans esquive ni espoir possibles’ (L’Ecriture ou la vie, p. 260). Semprun, like Wiesel and others, takes for granted, first, that Levi’s death was suicide, and second, that it was related to his experience of Auschwitz.

The suicide of Levi, like those of Kofman, Améry and Celan, may appear to be the final victory of Nazism over those who appeared to have survived it. Such a view is underpinned by two important features of Holocaust testimony and trauma studies. One is the widespread sense among Holocaust survivors that they have not in fact survived, that in reality they died in the camps alongside their companions despite the illusion of their return. As Mado, one of the speakers in Charlotte Delbo’s Mesure de nos jours, puts it, ‘Je ne suis pas vivante. Je suis morte à Auschwitz et personne ne le voit’ (p. 66). The other important feature is the operation of latency, which Freud described in his analysis of the victim of a train crash who walks away apparently unscathed, only to develop debilitating symptoms at a later date. According to the concept of latency, the consequences of a traumatic event may be felt long after the event itself; and in the intervening period the victim may appear to be unaffected by his or her experiences. So a friend could say of Levi that ‘Until the day of his death I was convinced he was the most serene person in the world’ (quoted Gambetta, ‘Primo Levi’s Last Moments’, p. 1), while Semprun could describe him as suddenly, overwhelmingly driven to suicide by unbearable memories.

Semprun’s rather rapid appropriation of Levi’s death might nevertheless give pause for thought. We might wonder on what basis he feels entitled to come to such a decisive interpretation of why Levi killed himself. In this and other accounts, although Levi’s death is terrible, at least it remains intelligible and narratable. It bears a meaning, even if that meaning is a depressing one. It is almost as if the Holocaust, which once was perceived as a radical challenge to our interpretive frameworks, how now been fitted out with concepts and paradigms which allow us to make sense of it a little too quickly. Some commentators, though, have doubted that Levi’s death was a suicide at all. Diego Gambetta, for example, has reviewed much of the evidence: Levi left behind no suicide
note, no one saw him jump (or fall) and he had made plans for the days after his death, which might suggest at the very least that it was not premeditated. Of course, the fact that he did not plan to kill himself does not mean that he did not commit suicide. Gambetta argues, though, that ‘the facts known to us arguably suggest an accident more strongly than they indicate suicide’ (p. 11).

Even if we assume that there is a watertight conceptual distinction between suicide and accident, that a suicide cannot be accidental and an accident cannot be suicidal (an assumption I do not make), the truth about Levi’s death will in all likelihood never be definitively settled. The case tells us more about the interpreter’s desire than it does about what really happened on 11 April 1987. For Semprun, Levi’s suicide confirms his view of the pent-up, self-destructive violence which lingers in the living dead who survived Auschwitz. For Gambetta, Levi’s (probably) accidental death confirms that ‘[his] last moments cannot be construed as an act of delayed resignation before the inhumanity of Nazism. He never yielded. At most he snapped. On that tragic Sunday only his body was smashed’ (p. 13).

A disturbing aspect of this disagreement is the readiness of some commentators – whatever their view of Levi’s death – to speak on behalf of the dead, to explain their experiences and to endow their final moments with a suitable meaning and narrative closure. As explained in Chapter 1, I find this appropriation of the other’s voice and experience to be, on the very best account, ethically questionable. In Kofman’s case, the chronological proximity of the publication of Rue Ordener, rue Labat to her suicide (which, so far as I am aware, has never been doubted as such) is certainly striking. It is less obvious that this entitles us to make a direct causal connection between them. The temptation to connect the life and the work is almost irresistible; and we might be encouraged in the attempt to find such a connection by the fact that Kofman herself was often exercised by the relation between life and work in the authors she studied. But is there anything in Kofman’s memoir which actually justifies making a link between her life during the 1940s, her autobiographical text and her suicide?

Kofman and autobiography

Kofman claimed or confessed that she wanted to tell the story of her life: ‘J’ai toujours eu envie de raconter ma vie’; but she also conceded
that her life was ‘inénarrable’ (quoted Robson, ‘Bodily Detours’, p. 608). She describes a tension between the desire to narrate and a bedrock of experience which is not susceptible to ordering through narrative. In the context of twentieth-century literature, and particularly the problems of narration raised by Holocaust literature and other experiences of trauma, there is nothing surprising about this kind of comment. The tension between the urgency and the impossibility of recounting is, one might hazard to say, a defining condition of much modern narrative. In other words, Kofman is certainly not alone in wanting to tell the story of her life while sensing that her life is not a story that can be told. Her scholarly writing on autobiography, however, adds another dimension to this. In her book Autobiogriffures (first edition 1976; second edition 1984), she analyses the German author E.T.A. Hoffmann’s fictional autobiography of a cat, published in English as The Life and Opinions of the Tomcat Murr (1819–1821). In this study, Kofman does not restrict herself to suggesting that the complexity of a life cannot be contained within narrative paradigms. She goes further, to say that all autobiography is necessarily mendacious: ‘Toute autobiographie est mensongère, écrite qu’elle est dans l’illusion rétroactive et à des fins d’idéalisation’ (p. 99).1 The error of readers, she argues, is to seek ‘derrière le texte un autre texte qui en serait la vérité’ (p. 22), attempting to explain the text in the light of the author’s pre-existing experience, intention and meaning. What if, she says, ‘l’auteur voulait justement ne rien dire? [...] Si chercher derrière le texte et la mise en scène le vouloir-dire de l’auteur était une manière d’effacer le texte et l’écriture [...]?’ (p. 22).

Methodologically, Kofman here proposes that we should read the text for what it is, not as the failed or impeded representation of something else: a ‘true’ experience which only partially appears. This is quite different from Kofman’s suggestion, quoted above, that her life is ‘inénarrable’. If life cannot be narrated, we may nevertheless be encouraged to try to understand how unnarrated, unnarratable experiences permeate the narrative text. Such a position still presumes that there is a truth behind the text, even if it is by its very nature unavailable to language and narration. But in Autobiogriffures Kofman suggests that this is itself a mistake: reading the text as it is means abandoning the assumption that

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1 Kofman may be alluding here to Freud’s comments on biographers in ‘Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of his Childhood’. Freud describes how biographers ‘devote their energies to a task of idealization’, and thereby ‘sacrifice truth to an illusion’ (p. 223). I am grateful to Patrick Hayes for drawing my attention to this passage.
it is a flawed mirror of an absent, perhaps impossible primary narrative which would convey the truth of experience.

So how should we read Kofman’s *Rue Ordener, rue Labat*, and how does it offer itself to be read? The book’s title appears to be referentially secure: it names two streets in Paris which will indeed turn out to be the key locations around which the story rotates, the first being where the narrator lives with her Jewish family, the second being where she takes refuge with her Catholic protector and surrogate mother after the deportation of her father. Readers unfamiliar with the streets of Paris might nevertheless be forgiven for speculating about these place names. As Verena Andermatt Conley has suggested, we might see in ‘Ordener’ either *ordonné* or *ordinaire*, and Labat may contain its homophone *là-bas*, an otherworldly elsewhere separate from the rules and conventions of the ordinary, familiar world (‘For Sarah Kofman’, p. 156). Huysmans’s great nineteenth-century novel *Là-bas* may be invoked as an intertext. And in fact these echoes fit what happens in the narrative just as well as the literal reality of the street names. The title of the book promises referentiality, but this soon becomes overlaid with further layers of meaning. *Rue Ordener, rue Labat* turns out to be harder to pin down than it might first appear. This is indicated by the variety of frameworks in which critics have attempted to place it: it has been discussed in the contexts of psychoanalysis, feminism, trauma studies and the deconstruction of the subject, and even related to the form of the fairy tale. The apparent literalness and geographical specificity of the title soon gives way to a complex, elusive, teasing text.

Before the book proper has even begun, then, the title of Kofman’s memoir seems to offer us a stable, referentially secure text while also potentially deliteralizing the very terms which name it. This work is, I suggest, both grounded and self-ungrounding. Even so, at the core of the text is the simple, heartbreaking story of the deportation and murder of the narrator’s father and its effects on her and her family. The first sentence of the second chapter states factually that ‘Le 16 juillet 1942, mon père savait qu’il allait être “ramassé”’ (p. 11; emphasis original); and the first sentence of the following chapter states with even more poignant simplicity, ‘Nous ne revîmes, en effet, jamais mon père’ (p. 15).

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However, nothing in this text remains simple for very long. Before we have even got to this point, a short first chapter of barely 100 words invites the reader to consider not only the literal events of the following narrative but also their emotional meaning. Kofman begins: ‘De lui, il me reste seulement le stylo. Je l’ai pris un jour dans le sac de ma mère où elle le gardait avec d’autres souvenirs de mon père’ (p. 9). She goes on to say that she used it during her school years, and that she still possesses it, held together with sticking tape: ‘il est devant mes yeux et il me contraint à écrire, écrire. Mes nombreux livres ont peut-être été des voies de traverse obligées pour parvenir à raconter “ça”’ (p. 9).

This opening passage has attracted the attention of everyone who has reflected seriously on Kofman’s memoir, and rightly so. It has been observed that the masculine personal pronouns here link the father to the pen; and the passage connects the desire to write with the paternal imperative. The pen can obviously be seen as phallic, and the psychoanalytic resonance is underscored by the final ‘ça’, this being the common French rendering of the Freudian id. It has also been pointed out that there is a tragic symmetry to the text, which begins with the loss of the father/pen and ends with the death of the surrogate mother, mémé, who, the priest recalls at her graveside, ‘avait sauvé une petite fille juive pendant la guerre’ (p. 99).

One part of the opening chapter which, to my knowledge, has not been thoroughly explored (and, indeed, which is sometimes elided when the passage is quoted) is its second sentence: ‘Je l’ai pris un jour dans le sac de ma mère où elle le gardait avec d’autres souvenirs de mon père’. This curiously overlooked sentence raises interesting issues about the narrator, about her ethics and the ethics of the text, from the very beginning. Although the French does not necessarily mean this, I presume that ‘je l’ai pris dans le sac de ma mère’ means that she stole the pen; she took it without permission from a collection of her father’s belongings retained by his widow. No other information is given: there is no indication, for example, of when the pen was taken other than the narrator’s statement that she used it ‘pendant toute [sa] scolarité’. The lack of further detail makes it impossible to know what the full circumstances are; but we might at least wonder whether taking the father’s pen from the mother’s bag wasn’t cruel, callous and vindictive. This may be overreading; but at the very least, the sentence opens the text with a

3 Conley also refers to taking the pen as a theft: ‘The child pilfers a pen that later becomes a fetish’ (‘Sarah Kofman’, p. 192).
reference to a possible theft. The father’s pen, and with it the right to authorship, may be stolen rather than legitimately owned.

This first chapter invites, entitles, almost forces the reader to interpret what is to follow not just as the literal recording of terrible events, but also as meaningful within parameters which, crucially, the authorial voice attempts to predetermine. If we cleverly observe that the paternal pen may be phallic, and that the word ça has psychoanalytical resonance, we are perhaps not being as clever as we might have hoped: we are being fed these interpretive leads from the very beginning. The text guides us towards seeing how it should be properly understood. So by the time we get to the first sentence of chapter two (‘Le 16 juillet 1942 mon père savait qu’il allait être “ramassé”’), facts and interpretations are already intertwined. The italicization of the date, 16 July 1942, is a nod and a wink to those of us who will immediately recognize it as a reference to the Rafle du Vel’ d’Hiv. The inverted commas around ramassé signal that the word is a euphemism and hint at its more terrible implications. Nothing here is as literal as it appears; everything is preinterpreted and laden with broader resonance. The text consistently anticipates and directs our attempts to make sense of it.

In this context, it is particularly important that, from its second chapter, the text makes an issue of the scandal of lying. The narrator’s father knows that he is going to be arrested. When a policeman arrives (it is important to note that this is a French policeman: the roundup was conducted by the French, not the occupying Germans), her mother claims that the father is not there (‘Il n’est pas là, dit ma mère. Il est à la synagogue’, p. 12). Her father nevertheless appears and contradicts the mother, allowing himself to be taken away (‘Si, je suis là. Prenez-moi!’ , p. 12). The mother then makes two more attempts to save him. First she says that her youngest child is under two years old. Fathers of children under two were not arrested at this stage of the Occupation, but the narrator insists that her brother had in fact had his second birthday two days earlier on 14 July (a date which itself invites further interpretation). Then the mother claims that she is currently pregnant once more, presumably hoping once again to win the policeman’s favour.

4 On 16 and 17 July 1942, a mass roundup of Jews was undertaken in Paris. Over 13,000 Jews were arrested, and many were held in the Winter Velodrome. They were subsequently deported, mainly to Auschwitz, where the huge majority of them were murdered.

5 For discussion, see Rizzuto, ‘Reading Sarah Kofman’s Testimony’, pp. 8–9.
The mother’s attempts to save her husband evoke a psychoanalytical scenario with which Kofman was fully familiar: the logic of the kettle, or in French *le raisonnement du chaudron*. In Freud’s account, a man borrows a kettle from a neighbour and returns it in a damaged state. When confronted about this, he replies that he never borrowed a kettle, that the kettle was already damaged when he borrowed it and that the kettle was undamaged when he returned it. Even though these different versions of events contradict one another, they have one crucial point in common: all versions confirm the desire of the speaker, in this case, the desire not to be held responsible. In the narrator’s mother’s version of this reasoning, the underlying desire is for the father to avoid arrest: you can’t arrest him because he is not here; you can’t arrest him because we have a child under two years of age; you can’t arrest him because I am pregnant. The narrator is shocked by her mother’s attempt to save her father by lying:

Ma mère ment! Mon frère venait d’avoir deux ans le 14 juillet. Et elle n’était pas enceinte, que je sache! Je ne pouvais, sur ce point, être aussi affirmative que sur le premier, mais je me sentais très mal à l’aise. Je ne savais pas encore ce qu’était un ‘mensonge pieux’ (l’on ne prenait pas à cette date les pères dont les enfants avait moins de deux ans, et si le flic avait été crédule, mon père aurait été sauvé) et je ne comprenais pas très bien ce qui se passait: que ma mère puisse mentir m’emplitissait de honte et je me disais, inquiète et tourmentée, qu’après tout, j’allais peut-être avoir encore un petit frère! (p. 13)

I suspect that all but the most rigorous, intransigent Kantians would forgive the mother for her lies here. In Kofman’s text, however, the mother’s lie has the status of an inaugural catastrophe, one which is perhaps as traumatic as the father’s deportation. It entails a clash between paternal and maternal orders, and between absolute and compromised values. The mother lies (‘Il n’est pas là’) in order to save her husband; the father insists on the truth (‘Si, je suis là’) even though it will lead to his death, leaving his wife a widow and his children fatherless.

*Rue Ordener, rue Labat* begins with two transgressions, narrated in reverse chronological order: in Chapter 1, the narrator steals a pen (‘Je l’ai pris un jour dans le sac de ma mère’) some time after the deportation of the father.

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6 For discussion in relation to Camus’s *La Peste*, see Chapter 5 of this book.

7 According to the Kantian categorical imperative, lying is always, unconditionally wrong, however much it might seem to be justified in individual circumstances.
of the father; in Chapter 2, the mother lies (‘Ma mère ment!’) on the day of the father’s arrest. These transgressions are small beer in comparison to the genocidal acts which define the context in which they occurred. Even so, they crucially inflect the meaning of Kofman’s memoir. Purely in terms of how it is presented in the text, the mother’s lying competes with and perhaps even outweighs the significance of the father’s deportation. The deportation is sad but expected (‘mon père savait qu’il allait être “ramassé”’), whereas the mother’s lying occasions a crisis of values and belief, preparing the ground for the (albeit ambiguous) replacement of the bad, biological, Jewish mother by the good, surrogate, Catholic mother: mémé, the woman who takes in the narrator, cares for her, saves her from deportation and severs her links with Judaism.

The inaugural scene of the mother’s lies has a further twist which has consequences for the memoir as a whole. The passage explicitly raises the issue – unknown to the narrator at the time – of when a lie may be a mensonge pieux: a white or benevolent lie. The Jewish tradition places great value on truthfulness, even though it acknowledges that sometimes circumstances might justify lying. But Kofman’s narrative of the mother’s raisonnement du chaudron raises the further problem of how to distinguish between lying and truth-telling. How do you know when a lie is a lie? In some cases, there is little difficulty. The mother’s claim that the father is not at home is shown to be a lie when he comes into the room and contradicts her. The narrator knows that the claim about her brother Isaac’s age is also untrue. But the mother’s declaration that she is pregnant is not so evidently and demonstrably true or false. The narrator appears to be particularly disturbed by this declaration: ‘Elle n’était pas enceinte, que je sache! Je ne pouvais, sur ce point, être aussi affirmative que sur le premier, mais je me sentais très mal à l’aise’ (p. 13). The mother’s lies cause shock and shame: ‘que ma mère puisse mentir m’emplissait de honte’; but the claim about her pregnancy seems even more disturbing, leaving the narrator ‘inquiète et tourmentée’ (p. 13). A lie is bad enough; a claim that cannot be shown to be either true or false appears to be even worse.

The arrest of the father in the second chapter of Rue Ordener, rue Labat is the text’s primal scene; and the mother’s actions here and the narrator’s response to them appear to be of at least equal importance to the actual loss of the father. From here on, the shifting sands of knowledge, belief and values are key drivers of the narrative. My suggestion here is that the narrator’s ‘torment’ over her mother’s possible pregnancy reveals not so much a concern about acquiring
another sibling (she already has five, after all) as an anxiety about the status of a declaration which is not ascertainably either true or false; and this in turn can be linked to a reflection on ambiguity and ambivalence which permeates the text. Even when mémé replaces the mother in the child’s affections, ambivalence still reigns in relation both to the ‘bad’, punitive, biological mother and the ‘good’, caring, surrogate mother. After the war, a tribunal decides to let the child stay with mémé rather than her real mother. Although this is what the narrator wanted, she finds that it also not entirely what she wanted: ‘Je ressens un étrange malaise. Sans comprendre pourquoi, je ne me sens ni triomphante, ni parfaitement heureuse ni tout à fait rassurée’ (p. 71). When the biological mother forces her to return to live with her family, she resists, but is also relieved: ‘Je me débattais, criais, sanglotais. Au fond, je me sentais soulagée’ (p. 71). Later, she maintains contact with mémé but then breaks with her for a long period: ‘Pendant plusieurs années, je coupe tout contact avec mémé: je ne supporte plus de l’entendre me parler du passé, ni qu’elle puisse continuer de m’appeler son “petit lapin” ou sa “petite cocotte”’ (p. 98); and in the final paragraph of the book she records curtly that she did not attend mémé’s funeral, without giving any account of what prevented her from being there: ‘Je n’ai pu me rendre à ses obsèques’ (p. 99).

The signs of ambivalence towards mémé complicate any simple opposition between the good mother and the bad mother in Kofman’s narrative. This opposition is one of a number of interpretive avenues which the text offers us but then does not entirely endorse. The implications of the opening chapter, describing the father’s broken pen which compels the narrator to write, are not picked up later in the text, leaving us to decide for ourselves whether it should be regarded as a key to the work or a red herring. Further clues for interpretation are offered towards the end of the text, as the narrator explicitly invites us to make a link between her memoir and Kofman’s later work. Chapter 18 describes the picture by Leonardo da Vinci which appears on the cover of Kofman’s first book, L’Enfance de l’art, followed by a long quotation from Freud which discusses Leonardo’s ‘two mothers’ (pp. 73–74). In Chapter 21, the narrator tells us that her mother sometimes locked her in a dark room, and then adds a footnote pointing out that she has written a book entitled Camera obscura (p. 85); and a further footnote refers us to her book Comment s’en sortir?, which discusses a witch-like figure from Jewish folklore invoked by her mother to terrify her in her childhood (p. 86). As the book draws to its close, then, it appears to be
positively encouraging us to interpret Kofman’s work in the light of her life and career.

Chapter 19 is particularly interesting in the context of this apparent invitation to interpretation. The chapter discusses Alfred Hitchcock’s film *The Lady Vanishes* (1938), which the narrator tells us is ‘l’un de [ses] films préférés’ (p. 75), and which (in her account) hinges on the distinction between good and bad maternal figures. The narrator describes how what she finds most powerful in the film is the sequence in which ‘la bonne petite vieille, miss Froy’ disappears and is ‘remplacée par une autre femme qui se fait passer pour la première’ (p. 75); the ‘bon visage “maternel” de la vieille’ is supplanted by a ‘visage effroyablement dur, faux, fuyant, menaçant’ (p. 76). The protagonist, Iris, is almost persuaded that she was hallucinating after a blow on the head, and that Miss Froy had never been on the train. However, Iris later discovers the truth, thwarts a wicked plot and saves Miss Froy, who is in fact a secret agent in the British Intelligence Service. This account of the film draws out its relevance to the narrator’s predicament of being torn between two mothers; and moreover, the concluding short paragraph places the analysis firmly within a psychoanalytical context: ‘Le mauvais sein à la place du bon sein, l’un parfaitement clivé de l’autre, l’un se transformant en l’autre’ (p. 77). This offers the reader instruction in how to interpret both the current chapter and the book as a whole. Critics have duly – obediently? – spotted the Kleinian vocabulary and used it to inform their readings of Kofman’s memoir.

The narrator’s self-interpretation might leave us dissatisfied, however. The Kleinian scheme may provide an explanation for some elements of the chapter and the work as a whole while failing to account for others. It is striking, for example, that the narrator makes nothing of the film’s political context. Although it is not explicit that the wicked foreign power plotting against Miss Froy represents the German Nazis, the hint is pretty unmistakeable. The disappearance of Miss Froy could therefore easily have been linked to the deportation and murder of the

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8 For discussion of Kofman’s chapter on *The Lady Vanishes* and the longer version of it in *L’Imposture de la beauté*, see Conley, ‘Sarah Kofman’.
10 This is made explicit in the 1979 remake of the film, directed by Anthony Page, which is set in pre-war Nazi Germany.
narrator’s father. Moreover, the reading of the film, and by implication Kofman’s book, in terms of good mothers and bad mothers, the good breast and the bad breast, simplifies the film and the book. As suggested above, the relation to both the biological mother and mémé is marked by ambivalence rather than being simply polarized into good and bad. And in the film, Miss Froy may appear to be a maternal ‘bonne petite vieille’ with a kindly face, contrasted with the ‘visage effroyablement dur, faux, fuyant, menaçant’ of the woman who replaces her; but in fact Miss Froy is also false; she masquerades as someone she is not. Rather than a benign, harmless old lady, she is actually a resourceful secret agent employing subterfuge and pretence. Everyone is double; appearances and reality can never be counted on to match each other, and no one can be trusted to be what they seem until the final resolution. Even so, in Rue Ordener, rue Labat the narrator’s concluding comments on the good breast and the bad breast effectively forestall the possible interpretations of the film and of Kofman’s book which such observations might open up.

This is all the more significant because a longer version of this chapter and its reading of The Lady Vanishes appears in Kofman’s posthumously published collection, L’Imposture de la beauté. It turns out that the chapter in Rue Ordener, rue Labat contains only the first two paragraphs of the longer version of the text. In her memoir Kofman ends the discussion of the film precisely at the point when, in the longer version, she is about to nuance – and perhaps even undermine – her Kleinian interpretation by acknowledging the ambivalence of Miss Froy: ‘Et pourtant Miss Froy n’est pas aussi “bonne” et parfait qu’il peut le sembler: l’on apprend qu’elle est une espionne (même si c’est pour la bonne cause, l’anglaise contre celle des Nazis) et qu’elle a donc menti sur son identité’ (L’Imposture de la beauté, p. 142). Kofman here concedes that the ‘belle image’ of the good mother is now ‘contaminée’ (p. 142); and in any case, she goes on to argue that the film’s knowledge of its own illusion-making means that ‘il déjoue, comme par avance, toute lecture réductrice, “psychanalytique” entre autres, qui se prendrait par trop au sérieux’ (p. 145). On Kofman’s account, her own reading should be taken with a pinch of salt. This continuation of her discussion of the film confuses the terms of her earlier comments, as the good mother turns out not to be so good after all; and it explicitly denies the authority of an over-serious psychoanalytical interpretation. The fact that Kofman doesn’t include these paragraphs in her memoir gives them the status of repressed self-knowledge. Rue Ordener, rue Labat allows the Kleinian
interpretation to stand unchallenged, as a provocation or perhaps a misleading guide to gullible readers. The text gives us guidance about how it should be read, while mocking us if we take it at its word too readily.

At moments, the Rue Ordener, rue Labat looks like a sparse testimonial work describing the experience of the Occupation and the threat of deportation; but this is largely forgotten as the text focuses instead on the psychological narrative of a girl caught between two mothers. Part of the problem here is that there is no reality behind the text which can be separated from its interpretation(s), no simple story which can be told independently of the possible meanings that it can be made to bear. What is presented here, rather, is a preinterpreted reality in which the reality cannot be disentangled from its preinterpretations. In other words, the whole text mirrors the mother’s declaration that she is pregnant: unverifiable, it hovers between event and meaning, between a desire for autobiographical literalness and a sense that no such literalness is available because facts are always already interpreted, always already experienced as meaningful.

Conclusion

In its second chapter Kofman’s memoir raises the question of its own truth and reference through the narrator’s anxious response to the mother’s lies. The father tells the truth, and dies for it. The mother lies, and survives. And her lies culminate in a declaration (‘J’attends un autre enfant’, p. 12) which for the moment can neither be verified nor falsified. The text then stages two responses to this situation. The daughter is left ‘mal à l’aise’, ‘inquiète et tourmentée’ (p. 13), and the policeman who has come to arrest the father simply does not know what to make of what he has heard: ‘Le flic, lui, paraît embarrassé. Il ne veut prendre sur lui aucune responsabilité’ (p. 13). Later in the text, the narrator will implicitly identify with her mother when she herself becomes a liar during an attempt to return to Paris and to mémé. ‘J’ai perdu ma mère’, she tells some men in a lorry, and they appear to believe her (though they subsequently hand her over to the police): ‘Je me crois “sauvée”. Je ne pensais pas que cela allait être si facile! Si facile de mentir, si facile de faire croire à d’autres mes mensonges!’ (p. 84).

Kant condemned all lies on the grounds that, once you accept that it is sometimes permissible to lie, it becomes impossible to know whether a
person is lying or not. Kofman’s memoir accepts that risk. The mensonge pieux may appear justified if it helps achieve a desired, desirable aim: in the mother’s case, to save the father from deportation; in the daughter’s case, to return to méme. In the process, though, the regime of truth is damaged. The reader may be left, like the narrator, anxious and tormented, or like the policeman, simply bemused and unwilling to accept responsibility. And we may be less likely to believe the liar in the future. At the post-war tribunal which decided who should have custody of the young child, the mother claims that méme had abused the narrator. The narrator does not know what she means by this, but disbelieves her anyway: ‘j’étais persuadée qu’elle mentait’ (p. 70); and the tribunal agrees with her.

The narrator’s shock at the mother’s lies comes from the child’s realization that a statement does not always or only mean what it says. It is bound up with fears and desires which underlie, perhaps even undermine, its literal truthfulness. Rue Ordener, rue Labat becomes a problematic example of the testimonial memoir insofar as it instantiates this insight. The simple, harrowing story of the Occupation, the deportation of the father and the subsequent effects of his loss on his surviving family, is knowingly filtered, before it has even begun, through a psychoanalytical grid which places everything in the context of a family drama involving absent fathers and punitive mothers. Events are preinterpreted, and presented as a function of the meanings we are invited to find in them. This does not mean that the facts of the narrative are not true; but it does suggest that the facts, such as we are given, are inseparable from the interpretive schemes which the text offers us.

So does Rue Ordener, rue Labat tell us anything which would help us to understand Kofman’s psychology and suicide? Does it offer any support to the view that publishing the account of her wartime experiences unleashed a trauma that led her to take her own life? On the basis of the memoir, might we say of Kofman what Semprun says of Levi: ‘Une ultime fois, sans recours ni remède, l’angoisse s’était imposée, tout simplement. Sans esquive ni espoir possibles’? In a nutshell, Kofman’s memoir refuses any such interpretation. This is a work which does not want us to make the leap from text to world or from text to author except within the preinterpreted parameters which it lays out for us. Wiesel thought that Levi died in Auschwitz 40 years after Auschwitz. I don’t know if he was right. But nothing in Kofman’s memoir justifies us in trying to make similar sense of her subsequent suicide. Kofman’s book actually attempts to prevent us from understanding her suicide in
the light of her traumatic memories. It both encourages and frustrates interpretation, and in the process it impedes any rapid linking of life and work. In fact, as we read the text, we might suspect that it is also reading us, offering us titbits for our own interpretive desires – the father’s broken pen, the two mothers, the traces of the life in the philosophical work – but never letting us feast off them to our fill. More than it tells us about the experience of the Occupation or about Kofman’s life and death, it plays upon and reveals to us our desire for interpretive schemas which will show us, however tragically, that there is some kind of sense to be made out of the shards of trauma. Perhaps we prefer tragic meaning to benign senselessness. To put it bluntly, though, nothing gives us the right to interpret Kofman’s suicide in the light of her memoir.