

Immanence and Autobiography: Gilles Deleuze's *a life* and Sarah Kofman's *autobiogriffure**

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Abstract: How does the “I” of autobiography relate to the “I” of the philosopher? Is there an alternative to conceiving of this relation in terms of the opposition between the particular to the universal? This essay offers Deleuze’s notion of immanence as a fruitful way of approaching this question by staging an encounter between Sarah Kofman’s autobiographical work, *Rue Ordener, Rue Labat*, and Gilles Deleuze’s “Immanence: A Life.” In this textual encounter, Kofman’s autobiography is interpreted in light of Deleuze’s concept of “immanence” and Deleuze’s notion of “a life” is explicated through its application to autobiography.

Keywords: Kofman, Deleuze, immanence, autobiography

Sarah Kofman (1934–1994) and Gilles Deleuze (1925–1995) are not two names that are often linked to one another, but they were contemporaries. Kofman—a French philosopher known for her books on Nietzsche and Freud (and in the English-speaking world, particularly for her book on Freud’s account of femininity, *The Enigma of Woman*¹—was born nine years after Deleuze and died the year before his death.

Kofman has acknowledged her indebtedness to Deleuze in two of her books on Nietzsche; in *Explosion II (Les enfants de Nietzsche)*, Kofman notes that it was Deleuze’s course on the *Genealogy of Morals*, “which she followed when she was studying for the ‘agrégation’ examination, that first inspired

* This essay was delivered at the 6th *Deleuze & Guattari Studies in Asia International Conference/Philosophical Association of the Philippines National Conference* held at the Ateneo de Naga University in July 2018.

¹ Sarah Kofman, *The Enigma of Woman: Woman in Freud’s Writings*, trans. by Catherine Porter (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1980).

her interest in Nietzsche."² Notably, it was Deleuze who took over the supervision of Kofman's dissertation on "The Concept of Culture in Nietzsche and Freud" in 1971, when her mentor, Jean Hyppolite, died in 1968. While it would be interesting to undertake a study of the lines of influence connecting these two thinkers,³ in this essay, I wish to take the Deleuze and Kofman connection to a different direction. By staging an encounter between two of their texts, I hope to show that the Deleuzian concept of immanence, interpreted in the light of Kofman's notion and practice of autobiography, can shed light on the question of the relation between life and text.

I first discovered Kofman through her autobiographical work, *Rue Ordener, Rue Labat*, written in the last year of her life. A gem of a memoir about her childhood during and after the Nazi occupation of France, this slim book—written with such sparse simplicity, as if memory were pared down to nothing but the essential—begins with the arrest of her father, Rabbi Berek Kofman, who was later killed in a concentration camp, and narrates how Sarah and her mother were saved, thanks to a Christian woman who hid them in her apartment. In "saving" her, the woman, whom she calls Mémé, not only distanced her from her Jewish identity but also sought to take—and it seems, succeeded in taking—her mother's place.

One of the interesting, difficult, and confounding aspects of Kofman's work is the manner in which autobiography is so undeniably implicated in her corpus at multiple levels. In her interpretations of various philosophers, she uncovers suppressed or unrecognized autobiographical aspects of these authors' works, arguing for the status of these texts as autobiographical fictions. We can say that there is nothing particularly remarkable about such a psychoanalytic mode of reading. But what makes Kofman's readings particularly enigmatic—and also problematic—is that her readings of other thinkers serve not only to unmask the autobiographical aspect of their texts, but are also imprinted by her own autobiographical signatures, so to speak. She reads texts in a way that it is impossible to ignore the motifs that run through her own biography.

This fact was remarked upon by Jacques Derrida, in his memorial essay on Sarah Kofman. In the following passage, Derrida is revisiting Kofman's first book *The Childhood of Art (L'Enfance de l'art)* in light of her succeeding works:

... this first book—so rich, so sharp, so perfectly lucid in its reading of Freud—was also the childhood of the art,

² Duncan Large, Translator's Introduction to Sarah Kofman, *Nietzsche and Metaphor*, trans. by Duncan Large (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), x.

³ For instance, it would be worth examining how these two thinkers make use of and are connected by the concept of "becoming-woman."

the child's play, of Sarah Kofman. An autobiographical anamnesis, an *autobiogriffure*. All the places—of the father, of the mothers, of the substitution of mothers, of laughter and life as works of art—were there already acknowledged, rigorously assigned.⁴

What do we make of the incursions of the autobiographical in Kofman's philosophical texts? It might be all too easy to dismiss her work as being too confessional, as mere hysterical projections of a woman, but there is something courageous and transgressive in the way in which Kofman refused to disavow the particularity of her voice for the sake of attaining the anonymity of the authorial philosophical voice.

Kofman forces us to think about the relation between life and text, and specifically between autobiography and philosophy. How does the "I" of autobiography relate to the "I" of the philosopher? Is there an alternative way of conceiving this relation other than by opposing the universal to the particular? Other than relegating the autobiographical to the sphere of the contingent and merely personal?

In this essay, I would like to inquire whether Deleuze's notion of immanence might offer us a fruitful way of answering this question. I propose to do this by staging an encounter between two texts, both written at or near the end of each author's corpus—Sarah Kofman's *Rue Ordener, Rue Labat*⁵ and Gilles Deleuze's "Immanence: A Life."⁶ In this textual encounter, I shall be doing several things simultaneously: (1) read "Immanence: A Life" closely, (2) read Kofman's autobiography using Deleuze's concept of "immanence," and (3) explicate Deleuze's notion of "a life" through its application to autobiography.

The Transcendental Field

Deleuze's final essay, "Immanence: A Life," is the posing of the question of "a transcendental field" that leads to the concept of pure immanence. As a heuristic device, I would like to suggest that one could understand Deleuze's metaphysical intent (his anti-transcendental metaphysics) by thinking of his project as an "epoche"—in the phenomenological sense—a reduction, but not of objects to the constituting

⁴ Jacques Derrida, "Introduction," in *Enigmas: Essays on Sarah Kofman*, ed. by Penelope Deutscher and Kelly Oliver (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1999), 22.

⁵ Sarah Kofman, *Rue Ordener, Rue Labat*, trans. by Ann Smock (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1996).

⁶ Gilles Deleuze, "Immanence: A Life," in *Pure Immanence: Essays on A Life*, trans. by Anne Boyman (New York: Zone Books, 2001), 25–33.

consciousness, but to something nearer, more immediate than even self-consciousness. In the following passage, Deleuze refers to the transcendental field as being irreducible to the mutually constituting relation of subject and object (of the transcendental ego and the transcendentially constituted object). He is effecting an *epoche* that goes beyond consciousness, so to speak.

Consciousness becomes a fact only when a subject is produced at the same time as its object, both being outside the field and appearing as “transcendents.” Conversely, as long as consciousness traverses the transcendental field at an infinite speed everywhere diffused, nothing is able to reveal it. It is expressed, in fact, only when it is reflected on a subject that refers it to objects. That is why the transcendental field cannot be defined by the consciousness that is coextensive with it, but removed from any revelation.⁷

But if it is “removed from any revelation,” how can we conceive of the transcendental field? If consciousness can only think of objects that it can represent to itself, and if the transcendental field cannot be thought—“cannot be defined by the consciousness that is coextensive with it”—then I suppose consciousness would have to conceive of the transcendental field by creating or finding a kind of inadequation with the field. To ask about the transcendental field, I take it, is to consider the *field of possibility* of thought, which is to say—to consider that there might be other possibilities of understanding, other formations of experience, other combinations entities, other doors, other windows to becoming.

How do we know this is possible? How can we know that there are other possibilities of thought? I would suggest that it is a matter of pursuing avenues of inadequation. It’s a matter of teasing the snags of existence in order to unravel some portion of its fabric, in order to come to another layer, another plane of possibility. We listen for, we follow the restlessness and uneasiness we might feel, that signals to us other registers of being than the one we have come to inhabit. We put our ears on the ground and listen for a different beat. We follow our affects. In other words, the “beyond consciousness” of what I would call the Deleuzian *epoche* is not so much a going beyond as it is a “getting beneath” consciousness.

This is why the question of the transcendental field leads directly to the concept of immanence:

⁷ *Ibid.*, 26.

The transcendent is not the transcendental. Were it not for consciousness, the transcendental field would be defined as a pure plane of immanence, because it eludes all transcendence of the subject and of the object.⁸

and the concept of immanence, directly to “a life”:

No more than the transcendental field is defined by consciousness can the plane of immanence be defined by a subject or an object that is able to contain it.

We will say of pure immanence that it is A LIFE, and nothing else. It is not immanence to life, but the immanent that is in nothing is itself a life.⁹ ...

... The transcendental field is defined by a plane of immanence, and the plane of immanence by a life.¹⁰

A Life from the Individual to the Singular

A life refers to thrumming life, faint life, buzzing, or somnolent life, but *a life here*—life sensed, life felt, life recognized as it flares (or dims), but not contained by subjects (of consciousness) in objects (known) or abstracted and projected to a transcendent beyond. The indefinite article “a” is crucial here. “A life” here is conceived neither in terms of the organic unity of a body¹¹ (with determinate boundaries) nor in terms of a universal life force—neither *this* life nor *life in general*, but *a* life. The phrase retains the index of the singular that is at the same time indeterminate.

In order to illuminate what he means by “a life,” Deleuze resorts to an example from literature:

What is immanence? A life ... No one has described what *a* life is better than Charles Dickens, if we take the indefinite article as an index of the transcendental. A disreputable man, a rogue, held in contempt by everyone, is found as he lies dying. Suddenly, those taking care of him manifest an eagerness, respect, even love, for his slightest sign of life. Everybody bustles

⁸ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 27.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 28.

¹¹ This is in contrast, for instance, to Aristotle’s definition of the living body in the *De Anima*—although it has to be remarked that even for Aristotle, the “primary definition” of life is still indeterminate: the being-at-work of an organic body *as potency*.

about to save him, to the point where, in his deepest coma, this wicked man himself senses something soft and sweet penetrating him.¹²

This is crucial—that reduced to “his slightest sign of life,” stripped of power and his defining characteristics, it is not only that the people around him are able to recognize something that they respond to with “eagerness, respect, even love,” but that *the man himself* “senses”—*feels* —“something soft and sweet penetrating him.” *His* life is his and not his, him and not him, emanating from him, coursing through him, but also penetrating him. The dying and the saviors both are able to enter and sink into a plane of immanence by virtue of a *pathos* of dispossession that is more radical even than renunciation. It allows beatitude and empathy to meet: the beatitude of one and empathy from others, precisely when the one, the individual, gives way to *a* life—an impersonal yet singular life:

Between his life and his death, there is a moment that is only that of *a* life playing with death. The life of the individual gives way to an impersonal and yet singular life that releases a pure event freed from the accidents of internal and external life, that is, from the subjectivity and objectivity of what happens: a “Homo tantum” with whom everyone empathizes and who attains a sort of beatitude. It is a haecceity no longer of individuation but of singularization: a life of pure immanence, neutral, beyond good and evil, for it was only the subject that incarnated it in the midst of things that made it good or bad. The life of such individuality fades away in favor of the singular life immanent to a man who no longer has a name, though he can be mistaken for no other. A singular essence, a life¹³

What does this mean? How can a life be both impersonal and yet singular? What is the difference between individuality and singularity? Between individual life and *a* life as pure immanence?

I hope to develop an interpretation of this notion by reading Sarah Kofman’s autobiography, situating this within her own conception of the practice of autobiography, as an example of this movement from individuality to singularity. My working hypothesis is that Sarah Kofman’s

¹² Deleuze, “Immanence,” 28.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 28–29.

autobiography, *Rue Ordener*, *Rue Labat*, can be understood by applying Deleuze's concept of immanence; and that conversely, applying Deleuze's categories in the interpretation of Kofman would offer a good way of illuminating what is possibly meant by Deleuze's notion of "a life."

A Life and Kofman's Autobiography

How could an autobiography be useful in illuminating the concept of "a life"—supposed to be indeterminate and impersonal—when the act of writing about one's life fixes, rather than strips away, the "accidents of internal and external life," recounts, rather than escapes, "the subjectivity and objectivity" of what happens?

I suggest that it is a matter of placing Kofman and Deleuze on the same plane, of reading Kofman in a Deleuzian fashion, which is to say, from the perspective of the rhizome rather than of the tree.¹⁴ From the arboreal schema, the question of the philosophical significance of the philosopher's autobiography would be posed in this way: What is the universal significance of the life of the individual thinker? To the extent that it does have (or is presumed to have) a philosophical significance, wouldn't it mean either (A) that the philosopher's life is reduced to the universalizable traits (marks) it possesses? Wouldn't one end up turning the individual's life into a model (an example or an exemplar) of the universal or at least of a particular type—or, in the Hegelian mold, as a moment in the development of the Idea? Wouldn't one have to reject (or transform) the contingencies of individual life in order to do so?

Or (B) the alternative in this arboreal reckoning—which the female philosopher is particularly vulnerable to—would be to disregard the philosophical significance of her autobiography and the autobiographical aspects of her work, and to dismiss her philosophical work for being merely (or too) autobiographical.

In both cases, the philosophical significance of autobiography is essentially negative—the particular perspective embodied by the philosopher's life, unless purified of whatever in it is contingent and accidental, serves only to undermine the universality and objectivity of the philosopher's thought.

And in both cases, autobiography is construed as an account of individual, i.e., individuated, particular life. Individuation finds its bearings in its relation to the kind, the scheme of classification. The individual is situated within a field of determinate objects and events. Here, the

¹⁴ See Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. by Brian Massumi (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 3–25.

individual's life is the life actualized in the "accidents of external and internal life."¹⁵

From this perspective, namely, the perspective of individual life, one might read *Rue Ordener, Rue Labat* as a memoir in the genre of Holocaust literature. Sarah Kofman was one of the generation of children who were able to survive the war because they were hidden by their Christian saviors. One could read her autobiography as a historical document; aggregated with similar accounts, it gives a picture of what the survivors of the Holocaust suffered as children and continue to suffer. On the basis of such accounts, we could generalize the effects of war, of genocide, of displacement, of religious intolerance.

What would it mean to read Kofman's autobiographic writings *otherwise*? What would it mean to read *Rue Ordener, Rue Labat* as a memoir not of an individual but of a singular life?

First, let us note that the difference between the individual and the immanent, singular life does not consist in the difference between external and internal events. It does not consist in the difference between objective and subjective, as both are already borne by a life flowing "everywhere" and "in all [its] moments":

A life is everywhere, in all the moments that a given living subject goes through and that are measured by given lived objects: an immanent life carrying with it the events or singularities that are merely actualized in subjects and objects. This indefinite life does not itself have moments, close as they may be one to another, but only between-times, between-moments; it doesn't just come about or come after but offers the immensity of an empty time where one sees the event yet to come and already happened, in the absolute of an immediate consciousness.¹⁶

So on the side of immanence are the "events and singularities" carried by a life; and on the side of the individual life (the life of a "given living subject") are the subjects and objects in which these singularities are actualized. It is not a question of pitting these "sides" against one another, but of descending from the level of discrete, individuated, existents (subjects and objects both) to the indeterminate, to the diffuse intimations of the virtual by catching sight of the in-between.

¹⁵ Deleuze, "Immanence," 28.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 29.

But how is this operation to be done? How do we shift gears, so to speak, from the level of individuality to that of singular, immanent life? In other words, how does one read Kofman's autobiography as a memoir of a singular life? The following passage is instructive here:

The singularities and the events that constitute *a* life coexist with the accidents of *the* life that corresponds to it, but they are neither grouped nor divided in the same way. They connect with one another in a manner entirely different from how individuals connect. It even seems that a singular life might do without any individuality, without any other concomitant that individualizes it. For example, very small children all resemble one another and have hardly any individuality, but they have singularities: a smile, a gesture, a funny face—not subjective qualities. Small children, through all their sufferings and weaknesses, are infused with an immanent life that is pure power and even bliss.¹⁷

Singularities connect with each other in a way very different from how individuals connect. What's the difference? Deleuze continues:

The indefinite aspects in a life lose all indetermination to the degree that they fill out a plane of immanence or, what amounts to the same thing, to the degree that they constitute the elements of a transcendental field (individual life, on the other hand, remains inseparable from empirical determinations).¹⁸

It is a question of how connections are made (or not made), or perhaps, a question of unmooring the individual life from its usual constitutive—its empirical—determinations. It is a question of recognizing procedures or practices that disengage a life from its accustomed bearings (from its moorings in everyday experience) and give intimations of what I referred to a while ago as “inadequations” with the field of consciousness and its objects.

I would like to suggest that Kofman's notion of *autobiogriffure*—of which her own memoir can be read as an example—is such a practice (a textual practice) of disengaging the individual and her life from its empirical coordinates, and resituating it in another field, with other subterranean

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 29-30.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 30.

concomitants. I am proposing, in other words, that Kofman's autobiography can be read as "filling out a plane of immanence."

Autobiogriffure

"*Autobiogriffures*" is the title of one of Kofman's works, in which she reads a work of fiction by E.T.A. Hoffmann, *The Life and Opinions of the Tomcat Murr*.¹⁹ The word "autobiogriffures" is a play on autobio-"graphie" (writing), *griffe* – which can mean a *claw* (such as a cat's) or a *stamp* (in the sense of a label) or *signature*, *griffer* which means to scratch or claw or stamp one's signature (the way a cat would "write"), *griffonage* which means scrawl or scribble, and *greffe*, which means 'graft.' Kofman coins the term to refer to the tomcat's autobiography that is interspersed with and grafted upon (and thus mockingly interrupts) the biography of Johannes Kreisler in Hoffmann's *Tomcat Murr*.

In a 1986 interview with Roland Jaccard, Kofman likens herself to Murr in her ambivalent desire to write her life:

I have devoted to Tomcat Murr, by Hoffmann, a text, *Autobiogriffures*. I am like the Tomcat Murr, whose autobiography is only an assemblage of citations from various authors. He seeks to affirm his identity through this autobiography, but he does not realize that he loses it precisely through writing.²⁰

Kofman here is acknowledging an inescapable paradox of autobiographic writing: that the act of appropriation—of events, of memories, of other texts—is at the same time an act of disappropriation of the self. The risk of losing a sense of the boundaries of the self is inherent in autobiography due to the citationality of all writing. And yet, despite the elusiveness of this self that she seeks to affirm, despite the fact that she doubts the viability of this desire to affirm one's identity through an autobiography, despite the fact that she is aware that this desire could very well be merely illusory, still, Kofman admits to feeling a need to write her life:

I have come to a moment where I feel the necessity to write a biographic "autobiogriffure" which would not simply be an autobiography through texts. I feel I no

¹⁹ E.T.A. Hoffmann, *The Life and Opinions of the Tomcat Murr*, trans. by Anthea Bell (London: Penguin Books, 1999).

²⁰ Sarah Kofman, "Apprendre aux hommes à tenir parole. Portrait de Sarah Kofman," interview with Roland Jaccard, in *Le Monde* (27–28 April 1986), vii.

longer have anything to say, and yet, *I feel driven to make an autobiography that would be myself*. But this myself, is it not an illusion? Is it not an illusion to believe that I have an autobiography other than that which shows through my bibliography?²¹

Assuming that Kofman writes her autobiography with a self-conscious awareness of this paradox and the unavoidable grafting that constitutes autobiographic writing and with a Nietzschean wariness about the truthfulness of our self-representations, we could apply Kofman's own notion of *autobiogriffure* to the reading of her own autobiography.

In *Autobiogriffures*, Kofman contrasts the linearity of the tomcat's autobiography with the disrupted biography of the composer Johannes Kreisler, and shows how the cat's autobiography mocks man's²² claim to superiority over the animal on the basis of his rationality:

... the writing of Murr is linear, it is the telling of a biography, which has a beginning, birth, and an end, death (reported in a note by the editor...). Rigorous continuity of the Murr pages, the points of suspension which "begin" each page only the mark of the provisional and contingent suspension of the text of the cat by the text of the man. Therefore a linear autobiography, parodying the strict order of consciousness: the order of the story which is that of a novel of "formation" which follows the individual from his birth until his death, passing through the detours of an education which leads him away from his birthplace, to confront the hazards of the world and to come up against them, before returning home, having acquired by experience, wisdom and reason.²³

This is one way "to tell the story of [one's] life." As Kofman argues in *Autobiogriffures*, the convention parodically employed by Murr is aimed at constructing a narrative of the formation of the great man, the man of genius.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² My use of the masculine here is intentional, since the leitmotif of the "grand homme" is a gendered notion. The unmasking of man's suppressed and misrecognized appropriation of what he takes to be the feminine is a recurring theme in many of Kofman's readings of various authors, such as Rousseau, Comte, and Freud.

²³ Sarah Kofman, *Autobiogriffures. Du Chat Murr d'Hoffmann*, 2nd ed. (Paris: Éditions Galilée, 1984), 93. Translation mine.

It intends to paint a portrait of an exemplary life that has succeeded in educating animality into “wisdom and reason.” This narrative of cultivation (*Bildung*) transforms Murr into a hero to be emulated by others. It interprets his childhood as the precursor to the flowering of genius in his adulthood. In the following passage, Kofman points out how Murr retroactively endows the events of his childhood—even of his infancy—with the significance of a hidden, nascent destiny, the destiny of the “grand homme”:

Thus, Murr, like all heroes, barely escapes death, at the moment of his birth: twice. The first time, thanks to his mother, when his father, like Kronos, wanted to devour him; the second, thanks to Master Abraham, when he almost drowned

To be saved twice, is that not the sign that one is born under a lucky star? Is this not the sign of a brilliant hidden destiny?²⁴

Like Murr, Kofman as a child was saved from death during the war. Might we read in Kofman’s confession that she “had always wanted to tell the story of [her] life,”²⁵ and to have wanted to tell it in a continuous, linear story, without any gaps, a confession to a desire to decipher in her own life a destiny that would, in effect, save her life by giving it significance? If so, then conversely, Kofman’s rejection of the ideal of the linear, continuous narration of her life would imply relinquishing the fantasy of a hidden destiny. It would also mean questioning the narrative of the “grand homme,” who can only be raised to the height of greatness at the expense of a reductive reading of his life and childhood, a reading that determines in Hegelian fashion the essential elements while discarding its contradictory and unsublatable aspects on the grounds that these are merely contingent and accidental.

From a Deleuzian standpoint, Kofman’s notion of autobiography, the *autobiogriffure*, can be seen as a mode of writing that seeks to descend to the singularity of a life by shaking it loose from its moorings in the narrative of the “grand homme,” the narrative of destiny that culminates in the affirmation of the individual’s identity. Rather than presenting a sustained narrative that explains her struggles and the decisions that have defined the person she has become, in other words, rather than bestowing upon her life a unified meaning, *Rue Ordener*, *Rue Labat* offers its readers only a fragmentary

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 97.

²⁵ Sarah Kofman, “‘My Life’ and Psychoanalysis,” trans. by Georgia Albert, in *Selected Writings*, ed. by Thomas Albrecht, Georgia Albert, and Elizabeth G. Rottenberg (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 250–51.

account that hints at what in Kofman's life remains unnamed, unsettled, and would perhaps remain undone.

I think it is utterly significant to note that when Sarah Kofman finally writes her memoir, she devotes it only to the tumultuous years of her childhood, beginning with the arrest and deportation of her father to Auschwitz and centering on the ensuing trauma of being caught between her mother and the woman who hid them during the German occupation. She does not provide much of an account of her adolescence and early adulthood except for brief anecdotes about her difficulties with her mother and, more frequently, of keeping in touch with Mémé as she marks time with a recitation—all within the last chapter—of where she lived and studied until she entered the *École Normale Supérieure*. At this point, Kofman writes, “another life begins” and she closes her memoir with the death of Mémé.

Rue Ordener, Rue Labat retains the sense of unreality that surrounds childhood memory. Rather than employing a strictly continuous and linear narrative, the very short chapters read like a series of vignettes with faded backgrounds. Remembered fragments follow the tangled paths of memory; a memory conjured by some detail in the current temporal frame evokes another memory from either a more remote or recent past.

For all its brevity and the sparseness of its narration, *Rue Ordener, Rue Labat* is anything but a simple account of a childhood. Rather than giving the impression that it states Kofman's “bare truths,” the restraint in Kofman's writing style surrounds her words with the silence of things that remain unsaid. The tone of the memoir is that of someone who feels compelled to testify to the truths of one's past and to mourn the losses—still unbearable—that have been suffered.

In Kofman's memoir, what is said serves as a screen that keeps the intolerable at bay. For example, immediately after the chapter recounting the court battle between Kofman's mother and Mémé, where her mother accused Mémé of “having tried to ‘take advantage’” of Sarah and where Sarah in turn betrayed her mother by testifying (truthfully enough) that her mother had been beating her, Kofman breaks her narration with two apparently parenthetical chapters, both dealing with the substitution of the bad for the good mother and the confusion between the two. Chapter XVIII speaks of Leonardo da Vinci's drawing, the *Madonna and Child with St. Anne*, and Chapter XIX, of Alfred Hitchcock's film, *The Lady Vanishes*. These chapters can be said to function as an introduction to the years of her anguished relationship with her two mothers, but they also forestall a direct confrontation with the painful event that had just been narrated, allowing Kofman to speak of her trauma indirectly.

By inserting these two chapters, Kofman is breaking the continuity of the narration of her childhood. Citing da Vinci (as well as Freud, who

analyzes this scene) and Hitchcock is, on the one hand, an act of appropriation of these texts; but on the other hand, one can also read it as an act of dispossession and dis-appropriation of the self. Her life is in a sense no longer *her* life—it is now a footnote to Leonardo da Vinci and to Alfred Hitchcock. These chapters interrupt and break down the consistency of her individual identity, and resituates her childhood with other “concomitants.”

As Deleuze points out, the events, the singularities gain their virtuality and are given their power (their power for transformation) by being linked and divided differently, by being assembled with other singularities, allowing them to enter into a plane—an other plane—of immanence. On this reading, the significance of citationality in autobiographic writing is that it invites the dissolution of a discrete individuality in order for the story or the outlines of a particular individual, the subject of the autobiography, to reemerge in a way that resonates with other stories of other individuals, with other memories and other desires, in other places and at other times.

From Individuality to Singularity: Autobiography as a Testimony

According to Deleuze, “the Life of such individuality fades away in favor of the singular life immanent to a man who *no longer has a name; though he can be mistaken for no other*. A singular essence, a life...”²⁶ Is it possible to reconcile such “namelessness” with the naming that occurs in the act of commemoration that is performed by the autobiographer?

I believe so. I would argue that in *Rue Ordener, Rue Labat*, all the talk of names of persons and places—publicly verifiable, especially the places—on one hand, serve to anchor the autobiographical narrative in the empirical: this is about the individual called Sarah Kofman. And yet, on the other hand, once you read the autobiography, you do not meet Sarah Kofman the philosopher, the individual born in September 14, 1934 and who would die in October 15, 1994. You hear an interior, atopic voice. Speaking in the first person, recalling events, remnants of impressions in simple, sparse prose, this autobiographic voice captures what Deleuze might mean by a haecceity that is anonymous and yet singular, “nameless” and yet “cannot be mistaken for another.”

I would like to introduce at this point the notion of testimony, which I would argue is at the core of this singularity that characterizes Kofman’s autobiographic voice. It is true that in testifying, the one who speaks seeks to make a testimony that is as precise in its details—hence, the enunciation of names, the dating of events, the identification of places. On the surface, testifying seems to run counter to the “fading away” of individuality and the

²⁶ Deleuze, “Immanence,” 29. Emphasis mine.

“loss of names.” But there is an aspect of testimony that makes it an exemplar of singularity: the one who testifies is irreplaceable. And the one who testifies is testifying to an event that has vanished, to an event whose existence is precariously guarded by the testimony. The voice that testifies is absolutely singular, even if this testimony were to be joined by other testimonies. The testimony is in some sense an attestation to the singular.

Kofman’s autobiography, as a memoir not just of experiences in general, but of childhood, a traumatic childhood, is bearing witness to an invisible universe—a virtual space. She mentions persons by name—classmates in school, teachers—who had been kind to her. And she mentions places in Paris—names of streets, train stations, even apartment addresses, no matter how uncertainly remembered.

But her mother, strikingly, remains unnamed. Her father’s name is mentioned near the beginning of her memoir, when the police come to arrest him: Rabbi Berek Kofman. Siblings, teachers, Mémé’s lover Paul, even her rival, another girl also taken care of by Mémé, are named, but not her mother. Although it is true that her substitute mother, whom she calls Mémé, is also never properly named, Kofman does mention that her saint (and possibly namesake) is Claire.

The woman who saved her, and at the same time wounded her most deeply, is first referred to as “the Lady of Rue Labat” and then later on as “Mémé.” But her mother’s name is never given. She is always called “my mother.” This suggests that while the opening of *Rue Ordener, Rue Labat* draws the reader’s attention to her father’s broken pen to signify what she had been wanting to write about, perhaps, what was truly intolerable for Kofman, what which she could not bring herself to speak about²⁷ was not the death of her father but her separation from her mother. It is as if in this book, the nameless mother becomes an emblem for the vanishing point at which anonymity gives way to absolute singularity. Perhaps, one can only bear witness to the absolute singularity of a being or an experience by hovering about it wordlessly.

Thus, Kofman substitutes the names of the streets for the names of the two women—her mothers. The streets, train lines and stations, the landmarks in Paris and in the countryside plotted the virtual landscape of her childhood. Recalling a fateful night in February 1943, when because of a

²⁷ *Rue Ordener, Rue Labat* begins with these words: “Of him all I have left is the fountain pen. I took it one day from my mother’s purse, where she kept it along with some other souvenirs of my father. It is a kind of pen no longer made, the kind you have to fill with ink. I used it all through school. It ‘failed’ me before I could bring myself to give it up. I still have it, patched up with Scotch tape; it is right in front of me on my desk and makes me write, write.

“Maybe all my books have been the detours required to bring me to write about ‘that.’” Kofman, *Rue Ordener, Rue Labat*, 3.

warning that there would be a roundup, she and her mother had to flee their apartment to seek refuge in the Lady of Rue Labat, Kofman writes:

The Metro stop separates the Rue Ordener from the Rue Labat. Between the two, Rue Marcadet; it seemed endless to me, and I vomited the whole way.²⁸

Autobiography and Virtuality

Kofman's autobiography, a sparse, discontinuous, discrete testament to the persons and events of her childhood, is an act of dispossession. Nearly the last book she would publish, it is a book in which, as Ann Smock (who translated this book to English) puts it, Kofman was able to "turn toward a sort of knot in her past, into which her heart was tied."²⁹ But if she was able to turn towards this knot, it was not in order to unravel it and attain the illumination of an explanation. Smock describes the lucidity of Kofman's autobiography in this way:

... bathed in a lucidity unclouded by insight. No sense of understanding or ultimate resolution—no relief, no consolation whatsoever—mars it. It is clear.³⁰

Through the simplicity of its style, *Rue Ordener*, *Rue Labat* bares an old wound with utmost discretion; without the support of an edifying purpose. without offering lessons on how suffering is to be overcome, and without even the support of her usual (anti-)philosophical style. Speaking of the "high-spirited Nietzschean malice" in Kofman's philosophical writings, and contrasting this with the tone of *Rue Ordener*, *Rue Labat*, Ann Smock observes that:

She liked to play the role of the mocking girl whose laughter interrupts the philosopher at his desk, scatters his grave truths the better to greet in their stead beautiful fictions, uncanny signs, and figures 'devilishly deceptive.' That splendid mask of insolently feminine brilliance is not apparent at all in *Rue Ordener*, *Rue Labat*, which, I would say, does without literary qualities.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 31.

²⁹ Ann Smock, Translator's Introduction to *Rue Ordener*, *Rue Labat*, xi.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, xii.

It is simple, but it does not have a simple style or any style. You would not say of it “well written” or “a good story.” Fortunately, it exists and is plainly legible.³¹

In this book, Sarah Kofman speaks, and yet not in the way that say, Nietzsche speaks in “*Ecce Homo*.” Yes, it is confessional, for it opens with an admission: “Maybe all my books have been the detours required to bring me to write about ‘that.’”³² But rather than offering an explanation of how one becomes what one is, hers is more of a confession of all that is unresolved in her life. It is as if Kofman were saying, “Perhaps, this is what I could not bring myself to write about, and so I wrote all those other books instead”

Kofman’s autobiography is an act of dispossession of mastery over her own life. In Deleuzian terms, it undoes the markers of Kofman’s individuality—her style, her status as a philosopher, an analyst of Nietzsche and Freud. Using a fragmentary structure, it disavows the genre of the biography of the *grand homme* and descends to a plane of immanence. By entering the wound of her childhood—by opening up an old wound—Kofman renounces the fiction of the life that has progressed into maturity, found its destiny, and in which one has “become what one is.” Just at the point where, in all its simplicity of language and style, Sarah Kofman attains to the singular voice of the witness to the singular experience of her childhood, this voice becomes the anonymous voice of *a* life.

A life, writes Deleuze, “contains only virtuals. It is made up of virtualities, events, singularities.”³³ And he explains virtuality by saying that “what we call virtual is not something that lacks reality but something that is engaged in a process of actualization following the plane that gives it its particular reality.”³⁴ What exactly does Deleuze mean by virtualities? Virtualities can only be spoken of in the most indeterminate way—which is why the indefinite article is an index of the singular. But it is important to note that these singularities are not purely isolated. Deleuze speaks of virtualities as “something that is engaged in a process of actualization following the plane that gives it its particular reality.”³⁵ Thinking of virtualities is therefore, both a matter of thinking the in-between—the indeterminate, the possible—as well as the plane of consistency that “give[s] virtual events their full reality.” It is my understanding that in Nietzschean terms, identifying a plane of immanence—or perhaps, more precisely, situating oneself within a plane of immanence—would mean having a perspective.

³¹ *Ibid.*, x–xi.

³² Kofman, *Rue Ordener, Rue Labat*, 3.

³³ Deleuze, “Immanence,” 31.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.* Emphasis mine.

As Nietzsche would put it, to live is to have a perspective. And to have a perspective, does this not consist in placing oneself in a nexus of “concomitants”? But not just any sort of perspective will do. The final passages of Deleuze’s brief essay suggest that in order for us to descend to a plane of immanence, a certain discomposure with ourselves—with our certainties, with the organizing and individuating unity of the self—is necessary. Which is why Deleuze identifies the plane of immanence with a *wound*:

Events or singularities give to the plane all their virtuality, just as the plane of immanence gives virtual events their full reality. The event considered as non-actualized (indefinite) is lacking in nothing. It suffices to put it in relation to its concomitants: a transcendental field, a plane of immanence, a life, singularities. *A wound is incarnated or actualized in a state of things or of life; but it is itself a pure virtuality on the plane of immanence that leads us into a life. My wound existed before me: not a transcendence of the wound as higher actuality, but its immanence as a virtuality always within a milieu (plane or field).*³⁶

Deleuze speaks of a wound as “a pure virtuality on the plane of immanence” and of woundedness as containing the possibility of “lead[ing] us into a life.”

“My wound existed before me” — what if we were to read this quite literally from the standpoint of autobiography, and in particular, Kofman’s autobiography? It would mean that trauma precedes the subject. Before the “I” who writes the autobiography, who self-consciously thematizes one’s life in the act of writing, is the wound—which is to say, everything in one’s history, personal and historical, that calls for healing and saving, for some sort of reckoning without providing the terms of its reckoning.

Because the memoir is a testament, the plane of immanence that it fills out through the wound is a plane of possible encounters. We could thus sketch an ethical structure of autobiography: on the side of the autobiographer, autobiography (1) sketches the contours of a perspective—neither an inexorable fate nor a project drawn by the individual—with which another may resonate; and (2) bears witness to the nameless, to those who have disappeared, but who are irreplaceable, singular. And on the side of the reader, autobiography opens the possibility of responding with empathy, and

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 31–32.

like the “others” in Dickens’ work, with “eagerness, respect,” or perhaps, “even love” for an elusive and singular life revealed in the text.

Finally, what of the relation between autobiography and philosophy? The autobiography is a wound of philosophy. It enables philosophers to sink beneath the terrain of conceptualization in order to find traces of inadequation, of dissonance between consciousness and its field.

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