RE-CENTERING THE MOTHER: SHOAH AUTOBIOGRAPHY IN RUTH KLÜGER, EDITH BRUCK, SARAH KOFMAN

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ABSTRACT

Re-Centering the Mother: Shoah Autobiography in Ruth Klüger, Edith Bruck, Sarah Kofman

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Through a close-reading of Ruth Klüger's *Still Alive* (2000), Edith Bruck's *Lettera alla madre* (1988) and *Chi ti ama così* (1959), and Sarah Kofman's *Rue Ordener, rue Labat* (1994), this dissertation explores the relationship between Jewish mothers and daughters as represented in these Shoah autobiographies.

In literary criticism as much as in psychoanalytic theory there is a gap on the subject of mother-daughter relationship: existing studies tend either to take on the perspective of the mother, or the subject-matter is subsumed under a more generic mother-child rubric. This work wants to contribute to a discussion that focuses exclusively on the mother-daughter bond and in particular within the Jewish personal and historical experience.

In order to deeply penetrate the intimacy of the domestic daily mother-daughter story, memories of the war period become a particularly fruitful source. Typically, the fate of young children during a war is always tightly knotted with that of their mothers.

The war becomes the ideal observation point for this thesis on the specificity of Jewish women's autobiographies in relation to how the grown-up survivor deciphering her own past and personal history revisits her identity in-progress through the reconstruction of her relationship with her mother.

By retracing the representation of motherhood in Shoah survivors' literature, this dissertation analyzes some of the identity-formation processes and technologies of Jewish daughters, as well as their identification or disidentification with the mother figure (and/or with Judaism) *despite* or *because of* the most horrendous hour in recent Jewish history.

This study focuses on the way in which the complexity of the world surrounding each individual (the survivor today, and her younger self) is reflected in the mother-daughter microcosm—through the traumatized vision that the psychically fragmented *I* of the narration has of itself and of the mother.

Klüger, Bruck and Kofman share an ideological opposition to patriarchy, which creates a very strong connection among their otherwise very different texts, and a gender awareness that produces in all three cases a very interesting feminist critique of history, society, and for an original contribution to a new discourse on the Shoah.

The Jewish mothers and daughters of these autobiographies incarnate a compromise with a tradition that would rather ignore the historical woman and her experience, while celebrating and honoring her as sheer discursive symbol, and valuing her only in virtue of her reproductive indispensability. Jewish mothers like those of these survivors' texts, who strategize their own survival and the survival of their daughters/children, who fight for their rights in an inimical Jewish and non-Jewish world,

daughters who become writers and speakers for themselves and their history are already an exception in—if not a threat to—the *récit* Jewish tradition has constructed of and about itself.

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Dedicato a zia Fabiola (זיל) e alla mia famiglia
fkc.

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Abbreviations

Still Alive	*S.A.*
Lettera alla madre	*L.m.*
Chi ti ama così	*C.t.a.c.*
Itinerario	*It.*
Signora Auschwitz	*Sig.A.*
Lettera da Francoforte	*L.F.*
Rue Ordener, rue Labat	*RO/rL*
Sacrée nourriture	*S.n.*

List of Illustrations

It is always hard to get to the
bottom of things with words
Etty Hillesum

INTRODUCTION

> The mother is the faceless figure of a *figurant*, an extra. She gives rise to all the figures by losing herself in the background of the scene like an anonymous persona. Everything comes back to her, beginning with life; everything addresses and destines itself to her. She survives on the condition of remaining at bottom.
>
> Jacques Derrida, *Otobiographies*.

The present work is the expression and result of my long-lasting interest in establishing a genealogy of Jewish mothersthrough the autobiographical writings of twentieth-century Jewish daughters. *Re-centering the Mother: Shoah Autobiography in Ruth Klüger, Edith Bruck, Sarah Kofman* is the first step of a broader commitment to explore the mother-daughter relation in Jewish women's autobiographical repertoire from the last *fin de siècle* to today. Initially, at the very root of this project lay the ambition to rescue the Jewish mother from either invisibility or the indictments of stereotype and misogyny—with the help of other women, of her writing daughters.

In the past year or so, while this work was in the making, as I told people that I was writing about Jewish mothers, the first reaction this provoked was invariably euphoric laughter; the assumption being that mine was going to be a Jewish-mother-and-cholent joke, with an academic seal of approval. Only once I explained that I was actually looking at the way in which only Jewish daughters evaluate their mothers, the euphoria would vanish. At that point, I almost invariably lost the interest of men (who in all honesty seem to doubt there is such an "angle" to the subject); on the other hand, Jewish women understood exactly what I meant: my topic could *not* be even remotely funny.

I came to realize that there is something about the Jewish mother that is deeply dramatic and disturbing when seen from the perspective of her daughters: these are ready to deeply sympathize with her, while at the same time, trained by feminist and post-feminist awareness, reject the Jewish-mother archetypal model (a mirror provided by culture in which the daughter must see herself reflected) as something which their lives as adults have strived to utterly deactivate, though not without a high price of guilt.

In literary criticism as much as in psychoanalytic theory there is a gap on the subject of mother-daughter relationship, which tends either to take on the perspective of the mother, or is subsumed under the mother-child rubric, as Caroline Eliacheff and Nathalie Heinich have pointed out in their *Mères-filles*: "Nous ne pouvons guère nous appuyer sur des théories existantes, sauf par quelques emprunts partiels et éclectiques. Car bien qu'il s'agisse d'un sujet à la fois très investi par les intéressées, il est étrangement peu étudié : à l'abondance des études sur la maternité, la filiation, la féminité

ou la sexualité féminine s'oppose […] la quasi-absence de réflexions, notamment psychanalytiques, sur les rapports mère-fille."[1]

As if looking at an imaginary map of Jewish historical experience, I began by scanning the horizon for a territory, a moment in time, that more than others has proved a particularly fertile soil for autobiographical production. And it quickly became apparent that no other period has compelled Jews to write like the Shoah. Despite the fact that it remains a most untellable traumatic experience, the Shoah has produced an enormous amount of testimonial, archival, historical, documentary, artistic, filmic, philosophical and fictional material. It is, still for the time being, the dark *humus* of conscious and subconscious Jewish life. Post-war Jewish autobiographical writings are damned to inescapably peer through, skim or brush against the barbed-wired skin of Auschwitz. I had to begin from there.

Because I wanted to penetrate as deeply as possible the intimacy of the domestic daily mother-daughter relationship, memories of the war period became a particularly fruitful source. Typically, the fate of young children during a war is always tightly knotted with that of their mothers. The war becomes the ideal observation point for my work on the specificity of Jewish women's autobiographies in relation to how the grown-up survivor deciphering her own past and personal history revisits her identity in-progress through the reconstruction of her relationship with her mother.

By retracing the representation of motherhood in survivors' literature, I hope to analyze some of the identity-formation processes and technologies of Jewish daughters, as well as their identification or disidentification with the mother figure (and/or with

[1] *Mères-filles: une relation à trois* (2002), 385.

Judaism) *despite* or *because of* the most horrendous hour in recent Jewish history. Turning to the gender specificity of memory I also hope to contribute to breaking the dangerous though still widespread habit of studies in Shoah literature to "[focus] primarily on the writings of men, whose perspectives have been taken as representative of the experience of all Holocaust victims," as Marlene Heinemann has pointed out in her pivotal study *Gender and Destiny*.[2] In the specific case of Jewish women, when we talk about the selective transmission of memory, as Sarah Silberstein Swartz and Margie Wolfe wrote, "what has been neglected may be as critical as what has been passed down."[3]

At the onset of my exploration, some basic questions were the pointers of my reflection on autobiographical texts written during the war: What role does the Jewish mother play in the identity-formation process of the Jewish girl—in the extreme situation of the war, but also exile, migration, foreignness? What does being Jewish mean, in times of war (the war against the Jews), to an eight-year-old girl? And what does it mean to such a girl also to be French, Austrian, Hungarian, etc.? When, with the disappearance of the father, all certainties are shattered and the safe sense of self guaranteed by the world/Law of the Father comes undone, what are the options for a child's psychic survival? And how to represent the unrepresentable that is the Shoah, death, loss, the undoing of one's (Jewish) Self?

Reading the vast primary material at hand, three works in particular struck me for the strong themes that interconnected them: Ruth Klüger's *Still Alive* (2000), Edith

[2] *Gender and Destiny: Women Writers and the Holocaust* (1986), 2-3.
[3] *From Memory to Transformation: Jewish Women's Voices* (1998), 9.

Bruck's *Lettera alla madre* (1988) and *Chi ti ama così* (1959), Sarah Kofman's *Rue Ordener, rue Labat* (1994).

Klüger, Bruck and Kofman were all about the same age during the Second World War and experienced it in Europe, together with their mothers; all lost their fathers in the Shoah. (Edith Bruck was the only one who survived alone, witnessing the death of her mother in Auschwitz.)

Born in Austria in 1931, Klüger emigrated to the United States with her mother after surviving Auschwitz together and having lost everything they had in Europe. Originally from Hungary, Bruck (b. 1932) chose Italy as her new homeland and Italian as literary language, after a brief attempt to make a new life in Israel, and has lived in Rome ever since the war's end. From a Yiddish speaking family of Polish émigrés, Kofman (b. 1934) was the first generation born in Paris and French was acquired only secondarily in school.

During the war, Kofman's mother arranged alone the placement of five of her six children among hosting families where they remained hidden until the Liberation of France. She took her daughter Sarah with her in hiding under the protection of a French woman (referred to as "mémé") who lived in the center of Paris. Her husband, a rabbi of a small orthodox community, deported in 1943, never returned from Auschwitz.

The Brucks were arrested in their home around 1944. They were herded onto the cattle train to the ghetto of Satoraljaulhely, before the final transfer to Auschwitz. Here mother and the youngest daughter Edith were immediately selected for extermination: but, understanding the situation, the woman pushed away the girl and forced her, in the chaos of a hellish scene, to join the right-hand line of the (temporarily) spared. Together with

two sisters who remained in hiding between Budapest and the countryside, three out of four siblings survived the concentration camps—the author, Peter and Eliz—while the rest of a quite large family was completely decimated.

After her husband tried to save his life by emigrating to Italy first and southern France afterwards, Ruth Klüger's mother remained alone in Vienna with her daughter and some elderly members of the family: everybody had wrongly believed that only the able males were in danger and that, according to some fossilized knightly code of honor, no one would have harmed women, children and the old. Unbeknownst to the family, Klüger's father was caught in the South of France and sent to his death to a concentration camp. Ruth and her mother were also arrested in Vienna and brought to Theresienstadt before being sent to Auschwitz, where they survived while also protecting a girl, who by then orphaned and alone, accepted them as her new family. Bruck and Kofman hailed from a Jewish orthodox environment, while Klüger's was an assimilated *Mitteleuropäisch* family which, blessed by the Haskalah and Viennese cultural and social enlightenment, comfortably lived by Y.L.Gordon's motto: "A Jew at home, a man in the street."

As adults, Klüger and Kofman pursued successful academic careers, the former in German literature, the latter in philosophy. Bruck devoted herself exclusively to creative writing and some sporadic radio and tv work. Clearly, the cultural contexts of these women's childhoods as symbolized by their mother('s)-tongues were significantly different from those of their adult and creative life.

The biographical resemblances in the life of the three girls during the war are quite startling: losing the father, losing one's family language, remaining with the mother

(until her death in Bruck's case). Female history emerges from these autobiographies, and it does not start from (or stop at) the daughter-writer but rather searches back and forward for the links to and roots in a larger female chronology. All three women established intense bonds with female figures throughout their lives: thus proving the necessity and healing power of establishing mothering connections among women beyond biology, beyond their mother model. Kofman and Bruck in particular voluntarily renounce motherhood for themselves.

Additionally, these authors all chose literature and writing as the safe place where to rediscover, challenge, reconstruct language (or *a* language for themselves) in their lives as writers and professors. Lastly, there is the shadow of suicide that haunts the lives of these survivors: "Qualche volta anch'io penso che sono stanca, dovrei smettere con la vita. L'ultima volta che mi è saltato in mente l'idea malsana era la vigilia della Pasqua quando si è suicidato lo scrittore amico sopravvissuto […] potevo farlo anch'io" (*L.m.*, 34).[4] "I wondered whether I could make myself drown in a river like the Hudson … And so I stumbled through days of psychic imbalance with suicidal thoughts, talking to my ghosts" (*S.A.*, 191). In 1994, Sarah Kofman was overwhelmed by the call of death.

By the time all three authors published their autobiographies, their mothers were no longer alive. Klüger awaited her mother's death in 2000 before writing *ex novo* her memoir in English (a first autobiography had in fact appeared in Germany with the title *weiter leben*: *Eine Jugend* in 1992—where the author had hoped that the book could be kept hidden from her mother who rejected all things German). Kofman, whose youth was

[4] "Sometimes I think I am tired too, that I should stop living. The last time that such unhealthy thought came to mind was the eve of Easter when my friend, the writer and survivor, killed himself […] I could have done the same."
† All translations from the Italian in this dissertation are by Federica K.Clementi.

characterized as we will see by the split between two mothers (her own and the French lady who saved her during the war), published *Rue Ordener, rue Labat* shortly after the death of the surrogate mother and long after the passing away of the biological one.

Besides these extrinsic connections between the lives of the authors, however, the texts themselves are intrinsically linked by one thematic articulation: they are all books centered on the figure of the narrating *I*'s mother. Mothers who are paramount in the survival of the three daughters, and who will remain their metaphysical, subconscious and conscious dialogic Other for the rest of their lives.

A persistent anxiety deriving from questions of sameness and difference, selfhood and otherness, runs through all these texts: an anxiety articulated around and by the theme of daughter and mother, mother and survival. As I will show, the mother is more than a character, a pretext, or audience for the narrator's story: all three mothers are at the very root of the daughters' need to write. The natural bond between mother and life is metaphorically transposed in the connection between life and writing. The painful practice of using language to bear witness at all costs to the trauma and to one's identity and history passes through the body of the mother, which therefore is also the text of the daughter's life. Writing is writing about the mother and *out of* the mother: "Ma anche i libri sono fatti di sangue e carne mamma. In specie i miei non sono frutti mentali" (*L.m.*, 42).[5]

Kofman refutes the Freudian assumption that, because of the Oedipal hurdle, women are by nature denied the ability to sublimate—something with which boys are plentifully bestowed and in virtue of which they enjoy access to the artistic life. Not only is this strategy available to women as well, but for these writers-survivors sublimating

[5] "But also books are made of flesh and blood mother. Especially mine, they are not figments of the mind."

death in art means the possibility to reestablish a conversation with the ghosts of the past where the war experience seems to have left only silence: the space of the book becomes a space of death into which the living daughters have to enter in order to recover their own voice and the voices of those who cannot speak otherwise but through the survivor's ventriloquism. Thus the resulting book allows for, and narratively strategizes, an encounter between mother (despite the fact that all the mothers have already died by the time these texts are composed) and daughter in death. The book of memory, in that "book of the mother," also stands for a semiotic territory, a new realm of language beyond the tellable. In the instance of these three books, we can say that the mother comes to constitute the text itself because of the many levels she occupies: thematic, semantic, and textual. Mother is the *corpus* of writing: she symbolically incarnates the Book of life and death for the daughter.

The Mother is the book of memory: and Shoah memory is a memory of death. Therefore these mother-books emerge from the territory of death, in which the author can sublimate her own death in art and thus pay back the debt of life, of memory, to the mother.

> [N]on ho programmato né il contenuto né il finale né niente, vado alla cieca, ti dico qualsiasi cosa pur di trattenerti in attesa della fine che verrà da sola e ti lascerò andare, ti lascerò riposare in pace e sarò anche io in pace con te e tu con me. [6]
>
> *Lettera alla madre*, 78.

The end of what? Of the endless book (Bruck's books are all about the mother, all about Auschwitz—which she declares are one and the same)? Or the end of life? Bruck has

[6] "[I] did not plan either the content or the ending or anything else, I'm groping my way, I would tell you no matter what as long as it forces you to stay here waiting for an end that will arrive by itself and then I will let you go, I will let you rest in peace and I too will be at peace with you and myself."

mentioned various times that she will die, or kill herself, the moment she won't be able to write anymore: therefore the end of writing (the book) and the end of her life coincide, and since the books are the mother, then the life of the mother and the book are kept going by the writer as much as vice versa.

Within this theme and *raison d'être*, these books, each in its own particular narrative way, also present a tension towards their textual love-object: these books *for* the mother are also paradoxically books *against* the mother.

Of course, the conflict with and anger towards the mother—remember Irigaray's "With your milk, Mother, I swallowed ice"—is hardly a new trope in literature or a rarity in the experiential history of mother-daughter rapports. In a textbook-perfect way, the image of the mother, in *Still Alive* as well as in *Lettera, Chi ti ama così*, and *Rue Ordener, rue Labat* is classically split between the poles of extreme positivity and extreme negativity (goodness and evil).[7]

However, the nature of this critical judgment passed on the mother is novel and subversive in the literature of these three authors because it inserts itself disruptively within the frame of the Shoah and the Jewish discourse on memorialization. Writing highly critically about the mother and the perverse psychic effects this intimate and unique bond generates in the young daughter is not only a common element among the three books I treat here, it also distinguishes them from most other Shoah autobiographies: in Shoah memoirs internal domestic conflict is often downplayed, denied or removed, in order to maintain one's and the reader's focus exclusively and, most important, unambiguously on the apodictic distinction between good and evil, victims and victimizers.

[7] Cfr. Jessica Benjamin "The Omnipontent Mother."

The portrayal of the mother that is revealed here is not an easy one to assimilate for readers accustomed (by decades of cinematic, literary, and ideological manipulations) to highly idealized representations of the martyrs of injustice.

As British Jewish author Anne Karpf has pointedly noted in *The War After* (a mixture of autobiography, memoir, historical reportage and biography), "It's hard to speak about Holocaust survivors in anything but a reverent tone or without turning their suffering into a sacrament. People expect of them abnormally high standards of behaviour, as if a dehumanizing experience might somehow dignify and elevate, and along with the loss of their worldly goods they should also have lost all worldliness."[8]

In fact, it is impossible to speak about Holocaust victims in other than highly idealized terms. "Oh scusami mamma, scusami mille volte, tu sei una morta sacra, un martire intoccabile, ed è vero, ma è anche vero che tu sei mia madre" (*L.m.*, 47).[9]

Klüger, Bruck and Kofman courageously use their unequivocal position of victims to speak differently about victims, survivors, and, most extraordinarily for the Shoah literary canon, about the perpetrators (and their culture).

The complexity of the world surrounding each individual (the survivor today, and her younger self) is perfectly reflected in the mother-daughter microcosm. Though inevitably, the psychically fragmented *I* of the narration has a traumatized vision of itself and of the mother.

As Bruno Bettelheim pointed out: "The manner in which the child can bring some order into his world view is by dividing everything into opposites."[10] If for the child it is

[8] *The War After* (1997), 249.
[9] "Oh my, forgive me, a million times forgive me, you are a sacred dead, an untouchable martyr, this is true but you are also my mother. And to my mother I have the right to say everything."
[10] *The Uses of Enchantment* (1989), 74.

strategic to split the world into good and bad in order to make sense of it, the adult survivor cannot renounce the same bipartite division because an ethical understanding of the Shoah requires an unambiguous distinction between right and wrong, good and evil sides. In a way, the adult is no better equipped than the child to give up those categories. Klüger, Bruck and Kofman write of themselves as adults looking back at their childhood, and in so doing they recuperate their own vision of the world as children: which is a two-sided vision where the split between good and bad is not only clear but essential to making sense of the surrounding environment. What the adult writer adds however is the complexity with which each element is understood as fluid, shifting, and therefore possibly suited for both, either or neither classifications. The polar vision of the Shoah, of any genocide and all human great injustices, imposed by our ethics, influences the way characters in the autobiographical war memoirs are traditionally described: often they remain flat and single-sided in the mute column of the victims: i.e., with little else to add to what their victimization already expresses.[11] While Klüger, Bruck and Kofman's strategy to overcome the impasse is to grant their mothers—and hence, to grant themselves—an existence *outside* of the Shoah, besides and despite that "unholy situation" (*S.A.*, 90); the complexity of a daughter-mother relationship restores tridimensionality to the characters.

> Or if she [mother] had only been more truthful. But she bent the world to her needs, the needs of her disturbed ego.
>
> *Still Alive*, 37.

[11] Unconsciously, through the one-dimensional depiction of a world in which evil is absolutely recognizable and so is good, in which "figures are ferocity incarnate or unselfish benevolence" (Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment*, 74) the "canonical" Shoah writer strives to bring the reader (the non-witness, the "Judge") to a more direct understanding of his/her actions and reactions at the time. Cfr., Agamben, *Il linguaggio e la morte* (1982), *Quel che resta di Auschwitz* (1998); Hannah Arendt, *Essays in Understanding* (1993); Bruno Bettelheim, *The Informed Heart* (1960).

> Tu non mi amavi più, anzi, era meglio se non nascevo. Mi addossavi tutti i tuoi guai di madre, di moglie, di ebrea.[12]
>
> *Lettera alla madre*, 36.

From this perspective, there is a recollection in Klüger's text that clearly exemplifies the problematic relation between objective memory and memorializing objectivity. It concerns her relationship as a young girl with a pair of relatives, uncle and aunt. On the one hand, the author cannot deny her strong antipathy towards these quite unpleasant people who in various occasions showed their intolerance towards the quirks and eccentricity of the small inquisitive girl. "She [aunt] was the person who confiscated my collection of used streetcar tickets, one of the few amusements I invented for myself outside of reading [...]. She scolded me when I recited poems out loud [...]. But worst of all, she was the person who stood between me and my mother, keeping her at a distance from me [...]" (*S.A.*, 19). On the other hand, she cannot deny them the respect they deserve for the absurd way their death was precipitated upon them by the Shoah. "So what could I say to her son, who loved her as a child loves his mother, when he questioned me, who hated her with a child's needle-sharp aversion, and who can't forgive her, even after a death that is as hard to imagine as it is impossible to forget? For it is not in our power to forgive: memory does that for us, and when memory refuses, the honeyed words that are meant to convey what we sincerely think we ought to feel turn sour with hypocrisy. I know of her death in my mind. But my childish resentments are more deeply ingrained, where the mind doesn't reach" (*S.A.*, 20).

We encounter the same problem with Bruck and her struggle with rational and sentimental memory: "Avrei voluto parlare con lo zio, lamentarmi dei suoi genitori, delle

[12] "You did not love me anymore, and it would have been better if I wasn't born at all. You held me responsible for all your troubles of mother, wife, and Jewish woman."

sue sorelle zitelle, del nonno che non sapeva neppure di quale dei suoi figli ero figlia e come mi chiamavo, ma come potevo? Come si può parlare male dei morti ammazzati?" (*L.m.*, 58).[13]

It is possible to interpret similarly Kofman's reticence to expose those people in her biography for whom nothing nice can be said, in the use of initials or the omission of identifying details (including *mémé*'s surname, her savior).

About the mechanisms that force us to idealize the dead in order not to avoid confronting the extra pain of our contradictory feelings towards them, Art Spiegelman's Shoah "comic" book *Maus* gives an exemplary line: talking about his six year old brother, Richieu, killed by the Nazis and whose photograph rules, beautiful and untouchable in his parents' bedroom, Artie, the protagonist mouse says "The photo never threw tantrums or got in any kind of trouble… it was an ideal kid, and *I* was a pain in the ass. I couldn't compete."[14] And finally he adds "It's spooky, having sibling rivalry with a snapshot!" The spookiness in my three authors' memoirs is that they keep the filial rivalry going with mothers that are no longer there, the mothers of their (lost) childhoods. The same way his jealousy allows Artie to symbolically take down Richieu's shot from the wall (the wall in the *sancta sanctorum* of the parents' intimacy), so does the rivalry with the mother evoked by the adult daughters represent a reclaiming of that state of youth in all its "reality", particularity and humanity. It helps them, if not cope with life, for a brief moment recuperate a state of life, which in the non-life after Auschwitz is not only rare but seems unbearable. The "happy ending" implicit in the story of survival mocks in

[13] "I would have wanted to talk to my uncle, to complain about his parents, about those spinsters of his sisters, about grandpa who did not even know to which of his sons I was daughter or what my name was, but how could I? How could one speak badly of murdered people?"
[14] *Maus II* (1996) 175.

perpetuity the tragic, depression-ridden, wounded existence (an extension of life) of the survivor.

In these texts, we are also faced with an unexpected and unusual resistance to the victimhood of the mother. The authors all portray the lost fathers with loving brushes of untainted sympathy, unflinching worship and compassion. The adult writers comprehend very well the status of victim of the mothers as well, in and beyond Auschwitz: yet a series of shields are raised in order to prevent falling in love with the story of one's mother's martyrdom. Recognizing the mother's martyrdom seems to bring the danger of mythopesis too close to the daughters-survivors as well: in order to look at those years—into the depth of an unsustainable darkness—and re-evoke its atrocious phantasm in memory in a manner that is as true as possible to one's psychological perception of it at the time, it is necessary to keep alive the battle with the mother, to exhume the *difference* the daughter juxtaposed between herself and her mother and out of which she was able to make sense of her (becoming) self at the time of the story, and out of which, i.e. out of this recognition of the mother as "original *I*," now, in the present-tense of writing, their art is possible.

> Io sono così diversa da te come se non fossimo neppure parenti, e non venissimo dallo stesso luogo.[15]
>
> *Lettera alla madre*, 61.

> Però da piccola non conoscevo il perdono, mi nascondevo nella poesia, sotto il letto, nel bosco, lontano dai tuoi occhi cattivi, le tue maledizioni, le tue mani pronte a colpire. [16]
>
> *Lettera alla madre*, 60.

> I was losing any desire to talk to her […] But then my silence would make her suspicious. She smelled secrets where there were none.

[15] "I am so different from you as if we are not even related, and as if we do not hail from the same place."
[16] "However as a child I did not know forgiveness, I used to hide inside of poetry, under my bed, in the woods, far from your evil eyes, your maledictions, and your hands always ready to strike."

Still Alive, 188.

> I met the familiar look in her eyes—rigid, vacuous—which meant that she had found a free run for her accumulated anxiety and rage.
>
> *Still Alive*, 49-50.

> Elle [Mémé] ne cessait de répéter que j'avais été mal élevée […]. Elle entreprit de me rééduquer de pied en cap et de parachever mon instruction. [17]
>
> *Rue Ordener, rue Labat*, 58.

> Si je prolongeais [the visits to Mémé, the substitute-mother] de quelques minutes, j'étais accueillie à coups de martinet. Curieusement, ma mère avait pensé à l'emporter avec elle [the day they escaped from the Nazis] […] Je fus très vite couverte de bleus et me mis à détester ma mère. La vie à l'hôtel, avec elle, devint intolérable.
>
> *Rue Ordener, rue Labat*, 69.

In the end, the existence itself of the text testifies to the salvation of the daughter through the harshest psychological and historical life battle. But the cost of salvation for these three children is detachment from the mother, symbolized by a complete rejection of their Judaism.

There is no identification possible with that same Judaism that does not allow women to say *Kaddish* for their dead, even when there is no man left alive to say it. A Jewish tradition that praises boys' education over everything and leaves to the mothers the task of keeping daughters away from books and closer "home." In fact, all three mothers in these texts show a resistance to the young daughters' inclination to literature (poetry, writing, reading).

> When I said, I have to work, she would say studying isn't working […]. She claimed that I read too much…
>
> *Still Alive*, 188.

[17] Strikingly, the difficult, impossible "mother" Kofman describes here is the putative mother, not her biological Jewish one. *Rue Ordener, rue Labat* in fact, in doubling the figure of the mother, shows the complexity inherent in the institution of motherhood in the broadest sense.

> Je dus donc retourner chez ma mère, […] ne sachant pas quel enfer je devais y vivre pendant les deux ans où j'allais préparer mes bacs, dans des conditions matérielles épouvantables, me battant quotidiennement pour pouvoir continuer le lycée et faire mes devoirs.
>
> *Rue Ordener, rue Labat*, 97.

> "Non fai che leggere poesie" mi rimproveravi ogni girono, ricordi? Io sì. Mi strappavi i libri di mano e mi ordinavi di smettere di sognare, di fantasticare, di leggere cose inutili invece di pregare.[18]
>
> *Lettera alla madre*, 27.

In protesting the patriarchal story, these women must attack the mother as well who is guardian and executioner of the paternal *dicta*. In doing so, these texts end up questioning the institution itself of memory which is a foundational tenet of the patriarchal system and one of its threats to the independent voice of the female subject in that it represents another way in which the power structure keeps not only the present but the past and future under control. In the intentional and creative act of remembering, these authors put into question the process and politics of Memory. These are books of memory, in which memory takes on both a positive and negative meaning: again, life and death are inextricably intertwined between the many threads of memory.

Zachor (Jewish memory) in these women authors means also memory of the injustices the male laws and social systems have burdened the mothers with—thus turning them into those half-crazed "evil queens" (the folktales' step-mothers) the daughters are compelled to antagonize and reject—in order to lock their love and loyalty back into the "king's" (father) castle.

[18] " 'You don't do anything else other than reading poetry' do you remember how you used to reproach me every day? I do. You would tear the books off my hands and ordered me to stop dreaming, fantasizing, reading such useless things instead of praying."

Bruck calls memory "fate" and "conscience": implicitly accepting that it cannot reside permanently in any material idols (books, photos, museums, etc.). There is no going back *to* memory, just as there is no getting rid of it. Memory is part of one's psychic identity and it grows, mutates and dies with it: and for this reason, the survivor knows that sharing it with the world in the name of a volatile collective historical Memory is a naive, impossible project—yet unrenounceable.

> Mi fermo sulla porta della mia stanza da letto e i miei occhi s'imbattono in immagini di familiari morti. Non mi danno più nessuno stimolo. Nessuna emozione. Sono come il rumore dell'acqua della fontana, sono qualcosa che m'appartiene. Fanno parte dei miei organi. Circolano nel mio sangue.[19]
>
> *Lettera alla madre*, 103.

Psychoanalysis has concluded that the girl's attachment to the father and mother and the resolution of her Oedipal crisis takes place according to different modes and at a belated time in comparison to the boy. Interestingly, according to Freud, girls "do eventually resolve their Oedipus complex, but they do not 'smash it to pieces.'"[20] In her critique of Freud's sexual theories, Nancy Chodorow writes that the girl's "attachment to her father in particular is more idealized and less intense than a boy's to his mother. Given this less charged attachment, and given her ongoing relation to her mother, she is less likely to fear maternal retaliation, and maternal retaliation fantasies are less likely than paternal retaliation fantasies toward a son" (*ibid.*). Although the three authors of my analysis all reveal common textbook-perfect psychodynamics towards their fathers—all highly idealized—Klüger, Bruck and Kofman show a very strong and clear fear of maternal retaliation. According to classical clinical analysis, the boy loves the mother more than

[19] "I stand by my bedroom's door and my eyes fall on some images of dead relatives. These no longer produce any reaction in me. No emotion. They are like the sound of the water from the fountain [downstairs], they're something I own. They are one of my body parts. They flow in my blood."
[20] *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (1999), 133.

the girl loves the father, and therefore the boy has to fear accordingly more revenge from the same-sex parent. Counter to theoretical expectations, these writers describe a relationship daughter-father that is strong enugh to justify a strong fear of maternal retribution. They implicitly point at the flaw within the Freudian model, which does not correctly take into account the extent of the mother's psychic influence and power not only over boys but over girls as well. The boy's early detachment from the mother very early on during childhood—his quick renunciation for fear of castration—equips him better to face the extrafamilial relational world when puberty comes.[21] The outside world's demand to sever her relationship with her mother is the most painful task adolescence requires of the "domestic" girl. At this point, tenderness and hostility mix up in the way in which the girl relates to her mother, but also vice versa: because as Chodorow explains, "Mothers feel ambivalent toward their daughters, and react to their daughters' ambivalence toward them."[22] In the case of these authors' childhoods, all the complexities inherent in the difficult process of growing up are grafted onto the impossible, and unlivable, circumstances of the Shoah. "Leaving the father behind" takes on a literal meaning in these texts that hunts the life of the survivor to the end of her days. Here, fear *of* the mother is tragically mixed up with fear *for* the mother—on whom the daughter's life literally, not only psychically, depends. In the specific case of Kofman and Klüger, the two mothers at the center of these texts are additionally given by the historical contingency a power that is denied to the fathers: the fathers are the first to be taken away and die, while the mothers stay and take strong decisions, courageous actions, and survive. These are mothers who take on the role of "men" and save the family. The

[21] See also *ibid.*,133-140.
[22] *Ibid.*,135.

narrated pre-adolescent girls resent the fact that the mother holds the reins of life and death (she is a threat to the daughter in her love to her father and to her independent identity); contemporarily, from a conscious point of view, they realize that the mother is herself in the historical grip of death—which cannot but stir feelings of confusion, terror, and guilt in the child. The war makes it far more difficult for the child to come to terms with her death wishes for her mother, at a time when reality might horrendously answer this wish.

These authors blur the boundaries between remembering and creating and bring to the fore the painful struggle—and its psychic price—of doing both (remembering *and* creating). Through these women's pens the autobiographical project shows its deceptive face. After Auschwitz, there is no "true telling," only the necessity of telling; the necessity of writing and testifying. A writing "sans (le) pouvoir"—to paraphrase Kofman. *Still Alive, Letter to the Mother* and *Rue Ordener, rue Labat* exemplify this impossibility by letting conscious and subconscious knowledge, the free play of language, take over the scientific (historical and psychoanalytical) practice of (and trust in) "truth" and "telling." Since there is no *dia-gnosis* or cure possible, then the talking/writing therapy is but a delusion.

> The most precise memories are thus the ones that seduce us into lies, because they won't be budged by anything outside themselves. No matter what you propose to them by way of later judgment and better knowledge, no matter how you reproach them or cajole them, like stubborn dogs they just show you their teeth without giving an inch.
>
> *Still Alive*, 34.

Memory can be a lie, especially if our perception of reality was wrong in the first place (as it might happen in the impression of a child): in the three works I analyze here, the autobiographical *I*, in the *post ex facto* act of remembering, intentionally gives in to the

seduction of the lies letting the girl of the time of the narration express all her anger, disappointment, fear and hatred in the adult world and especially in the mother.

These authors undermine the power and authority of the speaking "I" in the autobiographical narrative: by splitting this *I* each with her own particular narrative strategy, they plurivocalize the narration of the past, putting in question their own versions, other people's and the official versions of the private as well as of the universal events. Klüger breaks up her chronology and interposes opinions and editorial instrusions by her friends, and urges the reader to check things up in better detailed history books. Bruck uses letters, already a particular form of literature, to write to her mother and to write her autobiography. In fact, Bruck's text represents a *mise en abîme* of genres: autobiography, epistolary, poetry. To which she adds letters she receives from those students or audiences she lectures to on her *lager* experience. Kofman renders her text the projecting tool (a *camera obscura*) of all her previous works. It is self-referential, and metatextual. Her memory becomes thus a *collage* of quotes from all life-memory (life-long thinking, life-long philosophy, etc.), which she describes as "autobiogriffures" and that is grafted on a postmodern auto-bio-bibliographical endeavor. The texts I examine share the fundamental implication that these stories/memories do not start or end with or in Auschwitz.

This is how Klüger explains how her life amounts to more than the sum of the years in the Shoah's deathly grip.

> The place which I saw, smelled, and feared, and which now has been turned into a museum, has nothing to do with the woman I am.
> And yet in the eyes of many, Auschwitz is a point of origin for survivors. The name itself has an aura, albeit a negative one, that came with the patina of time, and people who want to say something important about me announce that I have been in Auschwitz. But whatever you may

> think, I don't hail from Auschwitz, I come from Vienna. Vienna is a part of me—that's where I acquired consciousness and acquired language—but Auschwitz was as foreign to me as the moon. Vienna is part of my mind-set, while Auschwitz was a lunatic terra incognita, the memory of which is like a bullet lodged in the soul where no surgery can reach it. Auschwitz was merely a gruesome accident.
>
> *Still Alive,* 111-112.

The Shoah is not *everything*—while being *in every thing*.

For the individual, the Shoah-story plot cannot end with the liberation from the death camps. Like the folktales analyzed by Vladimir Propp in his 1928 classic *Morphology of the Folktale*, the plots not only have different functions from story to story, but within the same story there are several plot-paths that rarely are resolved with the resolution of one single crisis. Klüger, Bruck and Kofman's life plot did not start and certainly did not end with the liberation from the camps or the coming out from hiding: and their relationship with the mother did not resolve itself in the resolution to one single conflict but is the sum of the conflicts and resolutions in progress throughout life—something that no text can fully contain or mimetically reproduce. It is not enough for Snow White to survive the first attempt of the queen to have her killed by the huntsman: there will be many other trials, many of which are left to the imagination of the child, and cannot be contained within the fairy tale proper.

Auschwitz is also part of a broader history of injustice which is brought to the fore by these texts. Exile for Jewish woman, it is suggested by these authors, happens on top of and beyond the universal exile of Israel. It has concretely manifested itself through millennia of subjugation within the Jewish communities and in the world at large. Auschwitz is understood by these three among its innumerable victims as one of the many products (undoubtedly the most monstrous event) of the violence produced by

man-dominated history, which, regardless, has always sacrificed women. The mothers' state of semi permanent hysteria and paranoia is reconnected to its very concrete socio-historical roots: and these only pierce through the Shoah, do not begin neither end with *it* (id).

Thinking about the Holocaust as the result of centuries of oppression and anti-Semitism one risks making the mistake of seeing the Shoah as point of arrival in a process that culminates in Auschwitz. These writers bring attention to the continuum of oppression beyond Auschwitz and despite it. Kofman in the hardship she faced receiving due recognition as a philosopher and professor in France; Bruck exposing the sexual abuses she suffered from men in her own family, the exclusion she faced in Israel on the part of other Jews, or the anti-Semitism she encounters in Italy; and Klüger denounces the American (Jewish and non-Jewish) attitudes towards Shoah survivors, especially women survivors who had to justify their lives vis à vis the much greater loss of men. "I felt inferior, saw myself through the eyes of others, […] at a time when women were constantly put in their supposed place, it was natural for a young refugee to question her own value. In my family the women had survived, not the men. And that meant that the more valuable human beings had lost their lives" (*S.A.*, 185)

There is no easy evasion in this literature from the struggle with one's gender, national, religious and social identity. These writers' subversive witnessing act—to a different conception of victimhood, history, Judaism—renders them a category *sui generis*, which none of the preconceived rubrics—Jew, survivor, woman, writer—can suffice alone to contain or identify. These authors and their memoirs speak of the difficulty of saying "I" and bring our attention to the complexity this subjective act of

writing implies after the Shoah, and the general difficulty, regardless of the historical trauma, of speaking one's identity.

By formulating a one-size-fits-all *identikit* for the victims one avoids identifying who the victims were, case by case, and the real dimensions of their complex lives as Others also within their communities, their households, in a world that their subversive presence constantly challenges to change — before, beyond and regardless of Auschwitz. Klüger's text depicts a woman, her mother, who not only had left her first husband in the 1920s, moved to Vienna, remarried, willingly aborted a child, but who spent years fiercely fighting to get custody of her first son against her ex-husband's will. Kofman describes a mother (of very humble origins) who is incredibly combative and who single-handedly saves herself and six children in a foreign country with close to no personal, economic or social resources. Bruck's mother, in a faraway miserable shtetl, managed, despite extreme poverty and the general oppression of the Hapsburg and post-Imperial era, to send the children to school and feed them while the husband, alcoholic and incapable of earning any money, wandered around in search of work. Life before the Shoah and its power imbalance towards women has to account for a share in the responsibility for the unpreparedeness of mothers, wives and sisters to fend for themselves and take well-informed decisions for the children left in their care once the husbands disappeared during the war; once the Father's power (economic, political, social) declined or vanished altogether under the merciless pressure of Nazi-fascism. Women found themselves having to deploy all their survival skills in order to make up for the void left by the absent (metaphorically, when not literally) male counterparts, in a world that was hostile to them as Jews *and* as women. And these women's stories of

heroism—because connected to a prehistory of oppression—are not easy to tell and celebrate after the war is over; especially, as Klüger points out, after so many men did not come out of it alive.

These authors clearly express a condition of uneasiness and non-belonging. They find their place neither within traditional Judaism, nor within a society that has prepared a precise script for them and their experience. This would not distinguish them from many other marginal groups: feminists, lesbians, etc. within or outside the Jewish community. But in the case of Klüger, Bruck and Kofman, the key factor is the Shoah: the quintessential collective Jewish experience of recent memory. How does the Shoah (one's direct involvement in it as victim) become a de-Judaizing force rather than the opposite? Can we talk of a negative symbiosis between woman and Judaism, in this case? A permanent separation from it while still identifying with its "lineage" and genealogy—which passes through the mother. A mother who is neither the frail, gentle and "mute" shadow by the kitchen stove, nor an idealistic, soldiery Jewish Amazon, but rather a mixture of outspoken anger, psychotic courage, reactionary inflexibility coupled with acts of immeasurable tenderness and a will for independence.

These Jewish mothers and daughters incarnate a compromise with a tradition that would rather ignore the historical woman and her experience, while celebrating and honoring her as sheer discursive symbol, and valuing her only in virtue of her reproductive indispensability. Jewish mothers who strategize their own survival and the survival of their daughters/children, who fight for their rights in an inimical Jewish and non-Jewish world, daughters who become writers and speakers for themselves and their

history are already an exception—if not a threat—in the *récit* Jewish tradition has constructed of and about itself.

> I had spent my life among women, and this didn't change in New York. In my family, in the camps, and even after the war, men had been at the periphery of my life. It was true that from that periphery they called the shots because they had the power, and my mother never ceased to assure me that a woman needed to marry someone who'd provide for her. But her own example was different. from the beginning of the Hitler period until the time I left her, she was without a husband. Before and after she was a wife. But I knew her in the postwar time as a working woman, and under the Nazis her men had been powerless and had perished.
>
> *Still Alive*, 179.

These three writers share an ideological opposition to patriarchy, which creates a very strong connection among their otherwise very different texts, and a gender awareness that produces in all three cases a very interesting feminist critique of history, society, and for an original contribution to a new discourse on the Shoah.

As Suzette Henke has pointed out, in these autobiographies, as in all the genres that share a common self-inflected narration, we have "an author attempting to fashion an enabling discourse of testimony and self-revelation […]. Women daring to name themselves, to articulate their personal histories in diary, memoir, and fictional form, reinscribe the claims of feminine desire onto the text of a traditionally patriarchal culture. In so doing, they begin to celebrate a semiotic discourse and a maternal subculture that has always generated experimental modes of feminine self-invention."[23]

The patriarchal world is under attack in this literature: a patriarchal universe where gender weighed heavily on the worth of each person.

> After I had been seen in Martin's [Wasler] company, some of the Jewish students took me aside for a serious talk. […] First, in my childhood,

[23] *Shattered Subjects: Trauma and Testimony in Women's Life-Writing* (2000), xvi.

> there had been the contempt of Aryan children for Jewish children in Vienna, then the condescension of Czech children for German-speakers in Theresienstadt, and now [after the liberation from Auschwitz] the arrogance of men towards women. These three types of contempt may be considered incommensurable, but I experienced them within a few years in my own person, in the order mentioned.
>
> *Still Alive*, 166.

Yet, the hurdle remains: How can one attack patriarchy without attacking the Jewish father victim of the Nazi extermination plan? How to split one's loyalty between ideology and biology (family)?

The pain deriving from this writing is excruciating: evoking the dead to embrace them and at the same time decry them, resisting the soothing tendency to deny one's own ambiguous feelings towards them, is acutely paroxysmal. And writing is not exactly a healing process in these Shoah autobiographies.

Henke uses the term "scriptotherapy" to describe the healing power of autobiographical writings of traumatic experience. "Autobiography could so effectively mimic the scene of psychoanalysis," she argues, that "life-writing might provide a therapeutic alternative for victims of severe anxiety."[24] In these texts, I would claim, there is also resistance to therapy as long as it portends to a "cure" and a dia-gnosis (knowledge). We encounter resistance to therapy as the intervention of psychoanalysis, i.e. the limiting and encapsulating fiction on women ideated by Sigmund Freud. But also to therapy as a way in which writing can operate a catharsis. And in both instances, resistance is given by the intrusion of the mother *in* the text. There is no feeling better (*weiter leben*, if you will) beyond the text. *Living* is the text, which is the text of the mother. A prerequisite of healing in Henke's scenario is the idea of telling/writing to an absent listener that is however imagined as validating and sympathetic. As I hope to show,

[24] *Ibid.*, xii.

especially in my treatment of Bruck's work, however, as readers we are only the accidental and unintended receivers of the addressed message that is the book, a message which will never reach its *destination*. These texts do not seek an alliance with the reader—though they invest the reader with the heavy burden of accepting their testimony, the injunction to hear. The text does not aim at mimicking the psychoanalytical session: it mimics the mother-daughter relation. The apostrophizing daughter forces the mother to respond: it forces the ghost to let out her own ambiguous feelings towards family and children, and also to express her desperate anger, to recuperate a voice in her daughter's story. Is the telling (in the talking therapy) possible without the therapist? Yes. Is the writing possible without the reader? Yes. Is the autobiography possible without the mother? These authors seem all to answer, No. What Henke suggests about "scriptotherapy" is however still partly valid also for the authors I examine here: after all writing is what allows them to live (literally and metaphorically). But to be cured from this particular severe trauma is out of the question. Shoah-autobiography (which is not "life-writing" but death-writing), it seems to me, is writing in order to keep alive the anxiety and power of that original pain. It is the horrific legacy the living, the survivors, have been assigned by the speechless dead.

There is a vignette in Art Spiegelman's *Maus* that although spoken from the perspective of the second-generation survivor, the son, it actually resonates also in the conflicted feelings of these three survivors-daughters: "Just thinking about my book… It's so presumptuous of me. I mean, I can't even make any sense out of my relationship with my father… how am I supposed to make any sense out of Auschwitz?... of the

Holocaust?"[25] In their titanic effort to put suffering into narrative, Klüger, Bruck and Kofman, like many trauma tellers, give up on understanding and let the emphatic intrusions of memory negotiate with language, in a macabre and often cruel mutual play, their position in the story.

The far-less than perfect mother is the key to approaching the otherwise untellable. Myth is not the language of women. Women's new *language* after Auschwitz has to speak them and their experience of women-daughter/women-mothers differently from the language of man: which is the language of metaphysics, science, mythology (including folktales), medicine (including psychoanalysis).

I discuss the works of Klüger, Bruck and Kofman in three separate chapters. I approach the three authors through the theoretical lens that I believe most represents them and better helps me unlock the intricacies of their intellectual project: feminist deconstructionist rereading of the fairy-tale genre (Ruth Klüger's *Still Alive*); philosophy and Jewish mysticism (Edith Bruck); psychoanalysis (Sarah Kofman).

In Chapter One, I go back to the symbolic language and narrative strategies proper of fairy-tales in order to approach the psychic world of the little girl whose experience is narrated, recuperated via a mnemonic evocation, by Ruth Klüger. While the adult narrator explicitly refuses all romanticization and mythologization of her past, the psychic world of the child at the time of the narration functioned along the expected and textbook-perfect psychic mechanisms shared by all children and that are the prime object of folk stories in which these mechanisms are reflected and sublimated. The utterly abnormal condition of the Shoah and Auschwitz is inserted into the normal child development process, and the categories "normal," "universal," "sane," "pathologic,"

[25] Spiegelman, *ibid.*, 174.

"good" or "evil" are exploded by the narrative on the psychic as much as on the historical plane. I take one of the central themes of fairy-tales and myths, the good-mother/bad-mother tension, and show how in the reality of this specific story (*eine Jugend*) these frames and pointers cannot help the girl make sense of her identity, or help her cope with life circumstances which put in doubt her very right to existence. The moral of the fairy-tale that rewards the girl who keeps within the frame of meekness, submission, patriarchal regime (marriage with the prince), and punishes (often in quite horrific ways) the powerful woman (witch/step-mother) who is set up as the perennial antagonist of other women, of the girl, of her daughter, makes no sense in the tortured and torturing psychic and experiential life of the Shoah child: Klüger's text ends up exposing these lessons as utterly biased, regimental, *exclusive*, misogynistic, coercive and potentially murderous. I also hope to show how *Still Alive* succeeds in resolving the impasse between "communal" (historical) and "personal" (private) experience of the Shoah, by first framing it between larger human categories (daughter and mother, sex and death) and then by breaking the spell of these archetypes, and resignifying them according to the meaning pertaining to her personal singular story. Klüger exposes the numerous myths that since childhood inform our psyche—be it Snow White or the Viennese legend of Drunken August, but also anti-Semitic tales of the infectious Other, or Jewish stories about bitter herbs and the parting of the sea—which, although enriching for our imagination and cultural repertoire, also poison women's sense of self, our perception of reality and the daughter's maternal loyalties.

In Chapter Two, I discuss how Edith Bruck's endless dialogue with the absent mother is interwoven with the theme and structure of letter writing. I interpret Bruck's

oeuvre as a continuative and desperate striving to bear witness to the unbearable despite the impossibility for such communication among the living to ever effectively take place. The survivor lives in an impenetrable silence from which her voice can never be fully heard and reach the outside, the world of the living. Only in the space of death, represented in Bruck by the realm of the book, a mutual correspondence among the ghosts is possible: and this dark area is the one accessible to the remembering witness through writing. Here the narrator, with a ventriloquist's power, encounters her mother, father and dead relatives and engages them in a dialogue which of course answers back to the writer and the reader with ever more painful silence. Plunging into writing, to Bruck, means immerging herself in a close-to-death experience of self-erasure and textual recomposition in the heart of the otherwise unspeakable trauma. And this center is occupied entirely by the mother: a figure of divine dimensions—and in Bruck's poetics, God (like Mother) is not only creator but also unjust dispenser of all evils. Maternity is a metaphor for Auschwitz, writing, sickness, life, death in Bruck. The author lets the mother write her text: the daughter, as if under dictation, incarnates the message of the dead—much like Socrates and Plato do in Derrida's wonderful proposition of a cultural and metaphysical dialogue *à rebours*, against the grain of history in *La Carte Postale*. I examine how the resurrection of the dead happens through the rhetorical means of the apostrophe which forces the evoked Thou back into a dialogue from which it is "naturally" excluded.

Chapter Three, centered on Sarah Kofman, sums up many of the elements that my analysis has highlighted in the treatment of both Klüger and Bruck: the fairy-tale pattern in the psychic understanding and sense-making of the world by a child; the

incommunicability of trauma; the reader as *post* of a letter the writer addresses despite this incommunicability, and whose real addressee is the absent mother of one's childhood and of one's psyche. But with Kofman, by virtue of her different biography and survival, we add some new elements that retrospectively shed light also on the previous two chapters of which she is conclusion, summary and continuation. Metatextually the *Rue Ordener, rue Labat* embraces Kofman's entire life-long intellectual production and locks it into European culture, philosophy and psychoanalysis.

Kofman's text exemplifies the impossibility, and simultaneously the necessity, of the autobiographical project. She begins by stating that her book, in fact all her writing, has been demanded by the existence (remains) of her dead father's pen which she keeps on her desk. The sustaining metaphor of her work is played between the scratching potential of a pen (Father) and the injured surface of the page (Mother). The paternal pen (or Jewish and non-Jewish male cultural and legal tradition) erases/injures woman as it writes it: to accept the pen's injunction to write is an act of self-sacrifice on the part of the daughter (writer). But in the act of picking up the pen (phallus) and scratching with it the page, the daughter creates the deep furrows where her disruptive presence can find a collocation to create a new story, to mix up with or within the story of the Father. The daughter's writing is always disruptive and subversive: even if it has to use the father's pen to come onto the page. But the space that hosts the daughter is the Mother-Text. Kofman's project is one of uncovering the riddle of femininity by accepting the matricidal and incestuous instincts as part of the dialectic of Eros. In the revisitation of her past, the maternal is reborn as a Dionysian force: a naked force, which is as equivocal as it is vital.

Kofman writes a Freudian mock-text where the illusion of the oedipal drama is perfectly projected as if onto the wall of a *camera obscura*: but once we step back and turn our attention to the projecting medium (writing, the insinuations of language), once we see the trickster behind the trick, then we also realize that the projection is but the inverted and reverse shadow of an as much intangible and otherwise unpronounceable/invisible reality: this reality is the enigma of woman and the complex negotiations to come into one's feminine identity. The projection of the daughter's complex sense of self happens on the canvas of the mother. The mother is the text onto which the daughter speaks *her self*. Kofman describes writing, especially autobiographical writing, as the painful scratching on the page—similarly to what the paws of a "feline writer" would do.[26] I therefore analyze how in the process of summoning her childhood's experience of loss and trauma onto language, the daughter must scratch and painfully injure the "body" of the mother (the book) with which, however, her presence is inextricably interlaced.

[26] *Autobiogriffures : Du chat Murr d'Hoffmann* (1984).

Conclusions

How could I rehabilitate Jewish mother out of three texts where she remains stereotypically a *yiddishe mame* (in the face of the Shoah) and in open fierce conflict with the daughter speaking her?

At first, what came out of these texts was another look at the travesty of the mother-daughter's love-hate relation, the drama of symbiosis and detachment inherent in the same-sex impossible (forbidden) romance. As Eliacheff and Heinich observed, there are aspects of the mother-daugther dynamics that pertain to our universal psychic history while others must be considered in their specific historical and social context: « Dans les rapports mère-fille, il est souvent difficile de faire le partage entre ce qui est spécifique d'une époque et ce qui est transversal à toutes, autrement dit entre des paramètres socioculturels et une réalité psychique sinon intemporelle, du moins peu perméable aux évolutions.»[27]

However, at the end of my literary dissection, I understood that though these texts play dangerously close to the Jewish-mother stereotype ultimately they turn it into a life strategy—to make of it the very fabric of the life of daughters, their identity and survival (to make the survival in a new identity possible). The flaws of the mothers are understood in their complex, political, historical origins and contexts and they are also shown as assets for survival. Klüger's mother is exemplary: her abnormal "Jewish" paranoia and neuroses in the normality of pre-war life become paradoxically fitting and perfectly functional in the abnormality of the concentrationary reality.

[27] Eliacheff and Heinich , *ibid.*, 14.

Klüger, Bruck and Kofman take the "typical" Jewish mother and read her as symptom: but symptoms are tactics. And this, the Jewish mother, is a life-saving tactic.

This is a literature of the daughter-witness: the daughter becomes the testimony of her story, her mother's, and history. These autobiographies testify to the history of Jewish women, to the Shoah and to the relationship mother-daughter in historical context.

What makes these mothers Jewish mothers is their dowry of death: these are mothers who in virtue of the Jewishness they pass down to their offspring condemn the daughters to die. At the same time, they are also a double source of life to their daughters: birth and survival. Furthermore, beyond Auschwitz, they represent a lesson in strength and an affirmation of presence despite the erasing pressure of the male (Jewish or not) *récit* of them.

In the words of Kadia Molodowsky's Yiddish poem *Women Songs*, the excruciating debt and bond that link the female genealogies is expressed thus:

> I will go to meet the grandmothers, saying:
> Your sighs were the whips that lashed me
> and drove my young life to the threshold
> to escape from your kosher beds.
> But wherever the street grows dark you pursue me—
> wherever a shadow falls.
>
> Your whimperings race like the autumn wind past me
> and your words are the silken cord
> still binding my thoughts.
> My life is a page ripped out of a holy book
> and part of the first line is missing.[28]

It is helpful to think back to the "institution" of motherhood as intangible presence, the way in which Adrienne Rich does in *Of Woman Born*: "When we think of the institution of motherhood, no symbolic architecture comes to mind, no visible embodiment of

[28] In *A Treasury of Yiddish Poetry* (1969), 284, translated by Adrienne Rich.

authority, power, or of potential or actual violence. Mother calls to mind the home, and we like to believe that the home is a private place."[29]

Carmel Finnan has examined how identity is constructed in the *now* of writing through the crucial continuity that memory (as much as history) assumes between past and present.[30] Traditionally memory is the underdog of historical exploration: personal memory is kept out of the empirical examination, or, at best, in an extremely marginal position. But Shoah autobiographies have helped bring personal memory to a new dignity: the dignity of the victim's perspective. With women's autobiography, the home has shown its strategic public function: its political and historical as much as psychic and private location. The process of self-representation in these texts is not limited to history but it makes central the complex and ambiguous configuration of personal history together with that of psychic history.

Trauma dictates what and how one talks about oneself. Yet, these particular authors do not let the Shoah dictate what they (can or can't) say about their personal experience and their identity.

Adrienne Rich declared: "The institution of mother cannot be touched or seen […]. It must go on being evoked, so that women never again forget that our many fragments of lived experiences belong to a whole which is not of our creation."[31] I hope that with *Re-centering the Mother* and its evaluation of this complex and less explored frame of reference, I can contribute to make visible in the field of autobiography a new maternal territory, the otherwise invisible institution of (Jewish) motherhood.

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[29] *Of Woman Born* (1976), 274.
[30] "Autobiography, Memory and the Shoah" in *Jews in German Literature since 1945: German-Jewish Literature?* (2000), 448.
[31] Rich, *ibid.*, 276.

I had despaired of rehabilitating the Jewish mother: yet I believe I ended up reclaiming her in a completely unexpected way.

I ended up discovering for myself a different autobiographical way of conceiving restoration, of honoring the memory of the Other, in other words, of loving the mother. This view retools a stereotype, turning it inside out to reveal hidden underlying seams whose strength resides in their ambiguous, intricate and interralated nature: hidden patterns which ultimately, for the daughter's art, are freeing articulations.

Spiegelman, *Maus*, 174

Chapter 1

Lupus in Fabula

> Like Snow White, each child in his development must repeat the history of man, real or imagined.
> BRUNO BETTELHEIM

In analyzing Klüger's *Still Alive—A Holocaust Girlhood Remembered* as a postmodern Shoah autobiography, I will draw some theoretical parallels between aspects of this story and those reflected in a different genre that, in recent years, has also undergone a major transformation through post-modern influences and readings: the fairy tale. Much like autobiography, this "minor" genre (in the sense used by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari[32]) also centers on the question of transmission and better than others is able to play with the ambiguities of identity, reality perceptions, forming selves, the unconscious and its symbolic language, all the while keeping intact the moral division between right and wrong. Most important, it is a genre that has at its very core the issue

[32] *Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature* (1986). For Deleuze and Guattari, a minor literature is one written in a major language, whose nature is strongly political (i.e., a literature whose stories contain a whole other story vibrating from within, [17]), and that has a collective value, yet whose origins are rooted in the margin and not the center of the status-quo culture it belongs to and thus it has a powerfully r/evolutionary potential.

of conflict development and resolution between the young and the parents, sons and fathers and daughters and mothers.

I propose a sort of fairy-tale approach to the otherwise unspeakable. Much like the folk-tale,[33] autobiography has a mimetic quality: it reflects life in the past (personal and collective) and shows its connection to the present and the future, dotting the trajectories in terms of continuum. With a similar fairy-tale strategy (but under the sign of tragedy), the Shoah memoir demands of the reader a suspension of disbelief. They both rely on that particular faculty of the human mind that manages to perceive what is read/listened as "unreal" (either because imaginatively far-fetched, or too humanly horrible to grasp) but also as not "untrue."

As Cristina Bacchilega has suggested, commenting on Bettelheim's and Italo Calvino's conclusions on the functioning of fairy tales, we are capable of feeling them, in an abstract way, yet as "part of our own experience."[34] Taking the perspective of the storyteller, Walter Benjamin had also concluded: "The storyteller takes what he tells from experience—his own or that reported by others. And he in turn makes it the experience of those who are listening to his tale."[35] Something similar happens when we read autobiography, and Shoah autobiography in particular. Analyzing the alternate identification and disidentification between reader and autobiographical text, Nancy K. Miller points out that "whatever the modality" by which we read autobiography (either by seeing ourselves reflected in it as if we ourselves had written it and that were *our* story,

[33] I should specify that by "fairy tale" I intend something that would be better expressed by *legend* or *telling*, or in other languages as *fabulae*, *fables*, (*Zauber-*)*Märchen* or better *Buchmärchen* (book tale), which unlike the English "fairy-tale," maintain the allusion to the fantastic, improbable, imaginary without linking it necessarily to the figure of a fairy and whose frontiers broaden beyond the children's circle.
[34] *Postmodern Fairy Tales: Gender and Narrative Strategies* (1997), 28.
[35] *Illuminations* (1968), 87.

or by rediscovering ourselves through the encounter with a totally unimaginable other) "the experience passes through acts of memory—the author's and yours, and through the passage between the two. In the back and forth between what's on the page and in your head, your 'you' becomes text."[36]

This theoretical approach allows me to focus attention not so much on the external world, on information about the unfolding of the historical events, but on the inner processes taking place inside the individual.[37] As both the English and German title of Klüger's book reminds us, this is the story of a *Jugend* (youth) or childhood, hence the re-telling of the psychic processes a girl goes through in order to form a self, an identity, and to reach maturity—which is the stage of sexuality, oedipal resolution and completed individuation. Klüger tells the reader how, being a pre-pubertal and pubertal girl trying to figure the world out without much help from her mother and other grown-ups, she found very helpful the recourse to fictions of all kinds—literary or cinematic (even the horrible Nazi propaganda *feuilletons* and hateful reels). At that age, the stream between what the girl reads/watches and what she later experiences in the house or in the streets flows uninterruptedly. The "stories" (of books, journals, films) are already influencing her way of relating to real-life experiences and of adjusting to them.

On the one hand, the author warns us not to believe in the "fairy-tale end" of one single girl's story (in the optic of the overall historical catastrophe): on the other, when recovering the perspective of that girl (via the autobiographical journey, which requires a sort of mnemonic re-incarnation) the conflicts described as pivotal in the identity formation of the girl follow and repeat that universal pattern from which millennia of

[36] *But Enough about Me: Why We Read Other People's Lives* (2002), 12.
[37] I am paraphrasing and adapting here what Bruno Bettelheim describes as the intent itself of fairy stories (*Uses of Enchantment,* 23-28).

folk-stories about our human impulses have drawn their material. How Klüger turns this normative repetition into narrative subversion is the main object of my analysis.

Jack Zipes wrote in his seminal work *When Dreams Come True*, that "(b)oth the oral and the literary forms of the fairy tale are grounded in history: they emanate from specific struggles to humanize bestial and barbaric forces, which have terrorized our minds and communities in concrete ways, threatening to destroy free will and human compassion. The fairy tale sets out to conquer this concrete terror through metaphors."[38] Shoah fictions and memoirs, also grounded in history, set out to conquer this terror in much the same way: via a *metaphorical* (in that mimetic) re-telling of one's story. Repetition reinforces the value of the story: yet the Shoah experience, as Klüger suggests, unlike other human stories that take on archetypal, mythical proportions through transmission/repetition, must be de-mythologized at each retelling. By definition, the Shoah can not generate positive stories that entertain, educate, pass on cultural norms and spiritual values (classical goals of all story telling). So how can it be told? Klüger decides to *untell* this known story: i.e., to repeat it but from the margins, from the fractured regions of one woman's/child's perspective. The canonical protagonist of a story weaves (constructs) the story under the eyes of the reader as she moves forward, on the ideal trajectory of time, from a far away and overcome past towards the present: *untelling* means to go backwards toward one's past from the standpoint of one's present, to break up the chronology, mix up present and past, adding to one's own also the voices of other (dissenting) witnesses, thus de-constructing the story in the re-telling. This autobiography is used to refract and diffract the Shoah (not as specular but diffuse reflection). It is a mirror of sorts: and Klüger uses it to reestablish maternal genealogies against the rough

[38] *When Dreams Come True: Classical Fairy Tales and Their Tradition* (1999), 34.

surface of the patriarchal "magic mirror," while exposing the roots of the mother-daughter performativity that a repressive and violent human history (of which the Shoah is one climatic expression) creates, normalizes and maintains.

In Klüger's hands, the autobiography of a survivor becomes a postmodern fairy-tale: it both affirms and questions the normative, it rearticulates the repetition implied in performative discourse (mother-daughter) but because after the Shoah the normative (like the naked emperor of the folk tale) has shown its vacuity, its implicit deceitfulness, Klüger unearths for us the "unexploited or forgotten possibilities"[39] in the repetition of a "known story."

Fables and folklore are a vivid part of the woman's memory of her Austrian childhood. Their gentle and deceptive presence is disseminated throughout as a corollary and adornment of her recollections. "Vienna was settled early by the Romans and has had a vibrant history, embellished by folklore ... The Danube, the surrounding mountains, and even ordinary houses in the city ... are crawling with supernatural creatures, whose stories found their way into our school books [...]" (*S.A.*, 40). We cannot overlook the influence of children's stories and Austro-German folk tradition on a girl who was born within that same Germanic culture that, more than any other, as Zipes has pointed out, "has incorporated folk and fairy tales in its literary socialization process so that they play a most formative role in cultivating aesthetic taste and value systems."[40] "I had been very receptive to a nascent patriotism, and I loved all of my city's old stories. There was the river nymph in the Danube and the monstrous Viennese basilisk, which could kill you with a glance. There was the defeat of the Turks...." (*S.A.*, 41). And then there are quasi

[39] Bacchilega, *ididem*, 22.
[40] Zipes, *ibid.*, 134.

superhuman characters such as Johan Wolfgang Goethe, not only "Germany's greatest poet but also [...] traditionally invoked as a role model for all kinds of conduct" (*S.A.*, 56).

There are legends and there is history, and sometimes the borders between the two are blurred—especially in the mind of a child, and especially when the status quo *Kultur* that edits (in or out of our lives/books) these stories has a purpose for them to blur. Such is the case, for example, of the authoritarian interwar chancellor Engelbert Dollfuss (father of Austrofascism and the *Ständestaat* regime): "We were meant to become good, patriotic little Austrians, and so in first grade we learned a song celebrating the martyrdom of Chancellor Dollfuss.... murdered by a Nazi, one fascist in effect killing another fascist" (*S.A.*, 40). Similarly, the adult author reassigns new meaning to old crystallized tales: the Shoah throws a deforming or re-informing shadow over everything she/we knew from before the disaster: "Even better was the story about Drunken August, who lived at the time of the Great Plague and wasn't scared but got drunk every night after entertaining the crowd with his bagpipe. One night when he was tumbling home, he fell into an open grave, full of corpses. He slept until morning and crawled out of this deadly ditch bright-eyed and not infected. A possible patron saint of the deported who returned, indestructible, lovable, and a little contemptible in the view of those who never got close to the plague of our time. But Jews have no patron saints" (*S.A.*, 41-42). The Jewish story of the war (unlike, for example, the memorable defeat of the Turks that left us as *memento* the delicious *croissant*/*Kipferl* [*S.A.*, 41]) has no fairy-tale twist, no feel-good ending, no reusable memento. Yet it must be narrated by those who returned from the living graveyard that were the *konzentrationslagern*.

Klüger strategically structures her autobiography so as to make safe the importance of what is told while dis-*integrating* at the same time the frames within which the truth (about Shoah, gender, power relations) is generally reflected. She takes two human foundational questions, Sex and Death—the very Muses of human outer (art) and inner (subconscious) worlds for Freud—and uses them to frame her story. The first and last page of *Still Alive* significantly open and close the book on these two existential givens. As Bettelheim, as well as Carl Jung, Erich Fromm, Mercea Eliade and others, all point out, these are also the underlying psychological concerns metaphorically thematized by all folktales and myths. But Klüger uses her autobiography to resignify these opposite yet complementary poles. And sandwiched between sex and death, these Pillars of Hercules, metaphorical and literal book-ends, there unfolds the story of a daughter and her mother—whose existence is signified by sex (gender systems) and death (loss, abjection, victimization).

One early scene in the text offers an ideal starting point for this exploration: it is the account of an afternoon at the movie theater, one Sunday, in nazified Vienna.

Ruth is only eight or nine years old at the time. She is aching to go see the Disney film *Snow White*,[41] but the Nürnberg Laws forbid Jews from all public spaces, movie theaters included. So she "groused and bitched about this unfairness" (*S.A.*, 46) of the anti-Jewish legislations, until, exasperated by the child's complaints, her mother suggests

[41] The references to *Snow White* in my chapter disregard the problematic rendition that Walt Disney made of this folk classic. I am interested in the archetypal elements and classical story-line of *Snow White*—a story, which, most likely, the Viennese child had had access to (before the movie release) in its German version by the Grimm brothers. For a discussion of the *disneyzation* of folkstories, see: Kay F. Stone, "Fairy Tales for Adults: Walt Disney's Americanization of the Märchen," in *Folklore on Two Continents: Essays in Honor of Linda Dégh* (1980). Also cfr. Susan Gubar and Sandra Gilbert's analysis of Snow White in *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (1979).

she ignore the laws and simply go see the film. The Snow-White lesson will remain fire-imprinted in Klüger's memory for life:

> [My] mother proposed that I should leave her alone and just go and forget about what was permitted and what wasn't. I hesitated a bit at this unexpected go-ahead, for it was a Sunday, we were known in the neighborhood, and to go to a movie right there in broad daylight was a kind of dare. My mother couldn't accept the absurdity of blatant discrimination. She assured me that no one would care who sat in an audience of children.
>
> *Still Alive*, 46.

Little the mother knew (or did she?) that the Shoah would not differentiate among its Jewish victims. What really pushes the little girl to action is the challenge the mother throws at her (not the only one in the book) to compete with her own courage:

> I shouldn't think I was that important, and I should stop being a coward, because she [mother] was never a coward, not even when she was my age. So of course I went, not only for the movie, but to prove myself.
>
> *Still Alive*, 46.

The scene at the cinema reaches its climax when, despite her clever attempt to psychologically outsmart the enemy by purchasing the best ticket for the loge seats, Ruth ends up being noticed by the children of the local baker: a 19-year old girl and her enthusiastic Nazi siblings. We are not given their names: thus, besides a certain humorous effect, this anonymity creates a tale-like atmosphere, where characters' namelessness points to the general validity of the experience and integrates their presence into the mythical good-versus-evil story symbolized by the *Snow White* movie.[42] These dark characters don't have proper names but they have voices which they use to underline the difference between themselves and the Jewish girl: the baker's daughter will address

[42] "The fairy tale [...] makes clear that it tells about everyman, people very much like us. [...] If names appear, it is quite clear that these are not proper names, but general or descriptive ones" (*Uses of Enchantment*, 40).

her in perfect *Hochdeutsch*, the same clear and impeccable language of bureaucracy, classic poetry, Nazi propaganda and, of course, fairy tales—probably inspired by the film she also just saw—in contrast with the bastardized language Nazi culture assigned to the infectious Others, who cannot but remain silent, like Ruth in that movie theater. For over an hour Ruth can only focus on the piercing presence of the baker's children and the power they hold in that moment over her life, while in agony, her mind merges the movie with the nightmarish reality.

> The wicked queen of the film merged with my neighbor, her fairy-tale malice a poor imitation of the real thing, and it was I, and no innocent princess, who was lost in the woods, offered poisoned apples, and in fear of glass coffins.
>
> *Still Alive*, 46.

Her guilt doubly exposed—that of having broken a law, and being Jewish—the girl trembles in self-contempt and shame. And she also uses the fairy tale in order to make sense of her situation and incorporate at some level truth and fantasy.

This scene better than others summarizes that unreal quality that many survivors assign to the real-non-real circumstances of the Shoah (*skepsis*). And the feeling of being *inside* the story as much as *outside* of it, to inhabit Shoah discourse as much as create it, to be *in* the text and *outside* of it, is the ambivalent position and existential split Klüger, and all witnesses who "spoke" about what happened, experience over and over throughout life.

"Why didn't I get up and walk out? Perhaps in order not to face my mother, or because any move might attract attention" the narrator retrospectively wonders (*S.A.*, 46). So while at first the connection between the evil characters of the film and the evil characters of Nazi Vienna is the most natural to make, upon further elaboration, the

implication that, perhaps, in the psyche of the young girl the narcissistic queen of the movie and her mother have something in common, too, also comes to the fore. And this might partially explain the girl's mistrust towards home-coming as a solution to her problem. The wicked queen alluring Snow White to eat of the poisoned apples merges with the challenge by the narrator's mother who dared the eight-year old to defy laws that adults themselves found impossible to evade.

Tears in her eyes, angry, and powerless, she returns home. As painful as it might have been, the girl had an epiphany that brought about her conscious understanding of self as Other, and sadly revealed the connections between private life and history. A hurtful abyss has opened, and the girl has at least gained the clairvoyance of recognizing how things stand for the Jews out there in the real world, and how things stand for her in relation to her mother.

To say it with Mercea Eliade[43], if every fairy tale represents a rite of passage, then the afternoon at the movie theater—under the aegis of Snow White—represents for the young girl an initiatory scenario: one quickly translated from the imaginative plane of the film into the actual historical plane of conscious lifetime.

> I had found out, for myself and by myself, how things stood between us and the Nazis and had paid for knowledge with the coin of pain.[...] I had had the feeling of deadly danger, and this feeling didn't leave me but escalated until it was justified. Without having to think it through, from now on I was ahead of the grown-ups.
>
> *Still Alive*, 47.

[43] *Birth and Rebirth* (1963). Also see by the same author: *Myth and Reality* (1963), and *The Two and the One* (1965), *Cosmos and History: The Myth of the Eternal Return* (1954).

In the process, she also ends up grasping the intrinsic larger lesson the fairy-tale symbolizes: "The story of Snow White can be reduced to one question: Who is entitled to live in the king's palace and who is the outsider" (*S.A.*, 47).

However, indirectly, this lesson comes through the mother. The "explanations, instructions, directives" (*S.A.*, 48) a child requires form the parents were lacking in Ruth's life, and the narrator remembers a maddening feeling of confusion and disorientedness—and this proximity to death, danger, erasure is imputed to the mother: "I got the impression that I shouldn't trust my mother, that she had only bad advice for me" (*S.A.*, 48).

What is particularly vexing for the (pre-war) Shoah child is the impossibility of finding in the outside world any recovery, escape and consolation (four of the fairy tale's fundamental effects on the reader according to Tolkien—to which Bettelheim adds a fifth one: threat). Normally, the young girl feels unjustly treated, not understood or enough appreciated by the mother (the step-mother of the folktales which impedes the full realization of the good and fair heroine). The outside world (of school relations, friendships, sympathetic adults) provides the territory where the girl explores different relational dynamics, thus finding solace *in* the world—paradoxically, exactly the outcome that the conflict with her mother is meant to bring about: social adjustment, individualization. But the world outside the house in the 1930s is dangerously inimical to the girl's life: there is no consolation or relief to be found out there, and everything becomes an ominous extension of the rejection and depreciation the girl imagines or actually suffers at home from the mother. The automatisms in the dynamics that sustain a child's imaginative and psychic world, and that are echoed by folktales, is short-circuited

by the Shoah circumstances. The child's world is one regulated by justice: the good is rewarded, evil punished. As Chesterton pointed out, "For children are innocent and love justice, while most of us are wicked and naturally prefer mercy."[44] Out *there,* there is a concrete threat imperiling the physical life of the child: and the anxiety that derives from the clash between inner psychic conflicts and outside material threats plants a seed of resentment towards the world (in this case, the mother—primary connection to the world for Klüger), angry confusion but also depression, and frailty.

Klüger's mother seems to fit that particular type of mother that psychoanalysts Caroline Eliacheff and Nathalie Heinich describe as "more woman than mother": who feels the urge to compete with her daughter, and whose duties towards her own life and self are not obscured by those towards her offspring (as it happens in the "more mother than woman" type). " '[L]es plus femmes' font figure de 'mauvaises mères': peu présentes, indifférentes, mal-aimantes. La fille, certes, peut pâtir de cette absence de tout lieu où être et s'aimer elle-même au regard de sa mère ; mais au moins pourra-t-elle s'en plaindre, voire transformer en haine son amour impossible."[45] *Still Alive* gives out a good measure of this daughterly hate, when, in revisiting the years that preceded Auschwitz, Klüger depicts an image of mother who is absent, dismissive of many of the child's concerns and fears—which to the daughter's eye translates more than once into wicked-queen type of mother. The "familiar look" in the mother's eyes, we are told, is a "rigid, vacuous" one which heralds a soon-to-come explosion of "accumulated anxiety and rage" (*S.A.*, 49-50). And the daughter feels lost, alone and helpless. Strangers' goodwill appears more comforting than the mother's inflexibility. When, during a subway ride, a man

[44] *Brave New Family* (1990), 80.
[45] Eliacheff and Heinich, *ibid.*, 102.

offers an orange to the little Jewish girl with the yellow *magen David* sewn on her coat, the mother (hearing the story once the daughter returns home) is outraged and makes her feel a shameless beggar, without considering the difficult position Ruth had found herself in, not wanting to accept the gift but also risking to condemn the man who broke the law by showing sympathy and pity for a Jew. "I was helpless before this moral double bind: my mother's disapproval, the stranger's goodwill" (*S.A.*, 50).

Klüger's narrated younger self is critical of her mother for not appreciating her poetry and thus mortifying her ambitions of poet *in nuce* (and later on, those of writer), for not paying attention to her desires, for not taking her side when other people treated her in a way she perceived as unjust or unfair. The narrator still feels the pain of the child when she was left behind as her father made his escape out of Austria. The adult voice questions the mother's choice not to let her go with her father—what at the time seemed the most logical action to guarantee the girl's safety and survival. This is how the author reconstructs the memory of that event:

> There had been talk that he [father] could take me on his passport. I had forgotten or repressed that idea, but decades later my mother confirmed it. 'Viktor had you on his passport and wanted to take you.' So why didn't he? Either she didn't want to let me go, or he didn't want to have me along. [...] And then I wasn't even permitted to come along to the station. [...] Maybe my mother was afraid he and I would leave together at the last moment. Instead I was in bed, yet another kind of prison, where one had to go if anything exciting happened. And I thought with tears of resentment how they'd refused all my wishes—even simple, modest wishes they had rejected—and I never knew beforehand when they'd say no.
>
> *Still Alive,* 37.

Hence she questions the capacity of a mother not only to choose what is better for her daughter, but also her good faith in making certain choices. An unexpressed accusation seems to linger in the air: did my mother care about my survival? Can a more-woman-than-mother's subconscious desire to kill the daughter (the parental edition of the Oedipus) spill over into conscious reality? The grown-up narrator who knows the development of the story knows the answer to this question, but the child's sense of self, her perception of the adult world, is marred by the painful doubt. The adult narrator's knowledge is juxtaposed to the young girl's (Oedipal) blindness.

Furthermore, Kluger's mother could also be understood, using Eliacheff and Heinich's definition, as "une mère défaillante:"[46] one, that is, whose attitudes can variably oscillate between opposite and contradictory poles: guardian angel (assurance that as long as she is around her daughter shall never fear for her life), girl-friend and accomplice, or irresponsible "little girl" (thus provoking a response of exaggerated seriousness and responsibility on the part of the daughter that suddenly sees herself as her mother's mother/protector). "En quoi consiste la défaillance humaine? Objectivement, à ne plus assurer, de manière permanente ou transitoire, les devoirs de la position que l'on est censé occuper, telle, ici, la position maternelle : devoir de présence, de protection, d'éducation, de surveillance, de transmission. Subjectivement, la défaillance porte sur l'inconditionnalité de l'amour, cette exigence exorbitante des enfants à l'égard de leurs parents : exigence à la mesure de leur propre amour et de leur dépendance initiale."[47]

[46] Eliacheff and Heinich, *ibid.*, 203-226.
[47] Eliacheff and Heinich, *ibid.*, 203.

In discussing what Heinz Kohut calls "the injured self"[48] Jerrold Post explains that often the rejection "by cold and ungiving mothers" is one of the causes of this "injury" which damages the child's sense of self. "A special form of rejection is overprotection by the intrusive narcissistic mother. She cannot let her child individuate because she sees him as an extension of herself. Her own sense of perfection seems to depend on her child's perfection."[49]

Still Alive tries to mend the lacerations of the injured self by recuperating and making central the moments of resistance the pre-pubertal, pubertal, teenage and adult narrator opposes to the mother, first, and consequently to patriarchal society—which is there to frame/limit the possibilities of a different mother-daughter encounter. The daughter's attempt to defend herself and resist the pressure of the mother's implausible psychic demands is strategized in a refusal of the mother's Word: disbelieving what the mother says and rejecting the model the mother sets—thus, embracing the matrophobic phase if necesssary. The mother's language becomes a mined territory on which a two-front war, between an inner (the mother's paranoia) and an outer conflict (the mother-daughter short-circuited dialogue), plays itself out: "What sounded like a fact might be a lie, and every opinion [from mother] was tailored for the moment. Language to her was like the makeup of an actress—you choose what your respective role requires—and so she listened for what might lurk beneath the surface, always speculating about the unsaid. But words will take their revenge when thus misused and played havoc with her mind" (*S.A.*, 197). And, later on in America, new connections with women outside of the kinship circle is the narrator's answer to the smothering mother-daughter love-prison.

[48] *The Analysis of the Self* (1971).
[49] "Current Concepts of the Narcissistic Personality: Implications for Political Psychology" in *Political Psychology* (1993), 107.

Luce Irigaray's vision of this prison can illuminate also Klüger's text: "And I can no longer race toward what I love. And the more I love, the more I become captive, held back by a weightiness that immobilizes me. And I grow angry, I struggle, I scream—I want out of this prison."[50] But who's holding the key to this prison? Who builds and controls the panopticon (which is a mirror in its function of separating the seeing from the being-seen) in which, one generation after the other, mother and daughter are reflected, in *mise en abîme*, weaving and unweaving their reciprocal *fabulae,* and in which daughters are born and mothers are mourned?

To survive the mother, (Jewish) women often resort to alternative female models from which to draw inspiration and assure psychic healing—against the grain of constructed (purported) nature, that demands for the family clan to stick together against the outside world, against differentiation. The testamentary Ruth, chose Naomi, her mother-in-law, and followed her turning away from her own family/tribe. Alma Klüger had preferred her mother-in-law to her own mother: "My grandmother died a prisoner [in Theresienstadt] [...]. My mother, who is otherwise quick to disparage her fellows, admired her mother-in-law as the epitome of human warmth. [...] Of all the many people whom she [grandmother] had served food in the course of her life, my mother and I were the only ones who were with her near the end. My mother said the last words she heard from her were 'Go to bed, child'" (*S.A.*, 73). So will her daughter Ruth turn towards alternative female figures for nurture and mothering. By the end of the book, we learn that Klüger's daughter is also drawn to her grandmother, Alma, in a special way—once again, celebrating the possibility for women to choose their own "mothers" based on elective affinities.

[50] *One Doesn't Stir Without the Other* (1981), 60.

Going back to the description we receive of Alma Klüger as reflected through the daughter's mirror, on the one hand, the definitions "failing mother," "more-woman-than-mother" or "narcissistic mother" all apply to her, on the other the main character, Ruth, seems to react to the mother's swinging attitudes in a text-book-perfect way.

"Since a narcissistic (step)mother is an unsuitable figure to relate to or identify with, Snow White, if she were a real child, could not help being intensely jealous of her mother and all her advantages and powers."[51] Before the war, the real child of our story shows signs of this puerile jealousy in various forms and occasions: there is the mother-father relation to arouse the classical oedipal split and preferences in the child for the other-sex parent,[52] and competition with same-sex parent; then there is the presence of the older step-brother, Schorschi, six years Ruth's senior, who, though the object of her immediate love and admiration, undeniably represents an element of disruption in the asymmetrical relation and affective flow between mother and daughter. In order to recover her vision of these multidirectional relations and conflictual feelings, the adult daughter interrogates the "magic mirror" of memory represented by her text. Over and over the narrator of *Snow White* (in the brothers Grimm's text) tells us that the mirror *never* lies. The domestication of the girl into believing uncritically whatever the mirror says, even when it pleases and reassures the girl's narcissism, suits society's reactionary and controlling impulses. But, as I will show, Klüger's uses of narrative enchantments help fragment all *prima face* images, deconstruct the frame (by critically focusing on it),

[51] Bettelheim, *ibid.* (1989), 204. On the one hand, "[i]t is the narcissistic parent who feels most threatened by his child's growing up, because that means the parent must be aging" (*Uses of Enchantment*, 203), while on the other hand, "Narcissism is very much part of the young child's make up. The child must gradually learn to transcend this dangerous form of self-involvement" (*idibem*).

[52] Here, I will not go into a discussion of the innate feminine heterosexuality implied in the Freudian theory on the girl's Oedipus complex. For a feminist discussion on this topic, *cfr.* Nancy J. Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mother* (1978/99).

and therefore distinguish a different reflection altogether as the story unfolds, by denuding the mirroring process. Klüger's understanding of *Snow White* hits on an important point: the Queen *and* Snow White both fight for their right to remain into the King's castle. The King's presence is even no longer necessary to the plot development of the fairy tale. The mirror, in fact, can be understood as reflecting (in a Freudian way) the King's answer/desire, which causes the Queen to panic—because she knows that such narrative demands her death.

So, as we read about the daughter-father *entente* vis à vis the mother in this text, a "stepmother" image is configured as third element in the father-daughter dyad: the way in which the girl perceives her mother is that of a "spoilsport" in her relationship with her dad.

> My father came home with the new currency [the Deutschemark replaced the Austrian currency] and showed it to me. [...] My father explained the value of the new money and imitated the weird pronunciation of the invaders. In brief, we had fun. My mother indicated that this was scandalously childish behavior in desperate times. I didn't understand what she meant and wondered if she was right (if her concern was genuine), or if she was being a spoilsport.
>
> *Still Alive*, 29.

But, strategically, while on the one hand Klüger lets the young girl criticize the *nudnik* paranoiac mother, on the other she undermines her main character's capacity to fully understand what goes on in her own biography/reality: thus Klüger questions, while stating them, the protagonist's interpretations. Both narrator and reader understand this scene differently from its protagonist, thanks to the same historical hindsight they rely on and thanks to the demystifying power Klüger puts in motion within her narrative. As Miller has written, also in autobiography the reader is "a partner in crime" of the

autobiographical subject: [53] the necessary other whose presence and detached (chronologically and emotionally) understanding helps come about a sort of synthesis between the truth of the present of the narration, the present tense of the writing and the present moment of the reading.

The book makes quite clear the father-daughter paradox: the daughter loves and admires her father (thus confirming the daughter-father idyll prefigured by Freud, Bettelheim, *et. al.*) but unambiguously fears him too and feels him as absence rather than presence in her childhood. She assigns him very little power ("a person of absolute and yet phony authority, a tyrant with great charisma who was no last resort, for he didn't return," *S.A.*, 37): all the power is seen as standing in the mother's will/hand. And this division of power is exemplified in the still open question of whether the mother *or* the father decided that Ruth would not leave for Italy but stay in Vienna. The question is still open, however, only for the narrator, the sixty year old woman who has tried throughout life to gain more and more knowledge about what went on (for which the only source remained the mother's word—something, Klüger told us, she deeply mistrusts). But to the child, the issue looked rather straightforward: the father must have wanted to take her along, the mother forbade it. "This is what the oedipal and adolescent girl wishes to believe about her father: that even though he does as the mother bids him, he would side with his daughter if he were free to, tricking the mother as he did so."[54]

Klüger can find no solace to her early doubts regarding the ambivalence of a father who, to her younger self, seemed to oscillate between not wanting to transgress the mother's law and not killing the daughter. Her relation with her father is unfinished

[53] Miller, *ibid.* (2002), 2-3.
[54] Bettelheim, *ibid.* (1989), 205.

business, and the only images her memory has preserved of it depend on the understanding of things the eight-year-old girl had: "Everything to do with him is unfinished; nothing was ever resolved" (*S.A.*, 33). The authoritative, yet "elbowless," man of her childhood—who had humiliated her with a harsh reprimand their very last night together—died a nameless death. For a long time, ignorance about her father's last hour was bliss: until one day Klüger happened to find out the details about how men in the gas chambers were found dead on top of the weakest, of children and women, who didn't have the strength to try to crawl upwards for the last breath of air. How can she integrate the new truths life and experience keep throwing at her, so that they continually modify the frozen image of the father she has formed for herself and held on to over the years? There is the truth of personal memory and the truth of history and they are not always assimilable. But can there be an exception to the truth? And what would that be? As Klüger says, the crammed mind has to arrange its content over and over and do so selectively: certain images will never fit together. There are only composite truths—and the narrated self and the narrator each has access to different angles of this composition. "There is a gap between knowledge and memory, and I can't bridge it" (*S.A.*, 33) is Klüger's way of distilling this tremendous trauma into words.

Bettelheim's reading of the fairy-tale's failing father connects, not that subtly, to the question of the Shoah father. A survivor of Buchenwald himself, he saw the (male) European Jew as the creation of the internalization of the surrounding anti-Semitic hatred: which, according to Bettelheim, explains many Jews' failure to survive Auschwitz and to save the family under his protection. Bettelheim's famous repudiation[55] of Anne Frank's Diary (in its paper, reel and stage incarnations) as the happy Shoah fairy tale that makes

[55] "The Ignored Lesson of Anne Frank" (1960), republished in the 1979 volume *Surviving*.

the reader forget (in fact, disbelieve) Auschwitz meant to charge Otto Frank, the father, as guilty for the family's demise, thus feeding that dangerous post-Shoah categorization of good Jew (the resistance fighter) and bad Jew (the sheepish father).[56] As Sander Gilman has noted, the bad Jew (Otto Frank) renders all testimony nil, and condemns "the speaking witness as the lying witness."[57] In part, Klüger's text on the complexities of identities—European, Jewish, gender—partly challenges Bettelheim's accusation. She points to the possibility for agency in the worst circumstances (something that Bettelheim's concept of totally dehumanized victim seems to exclude) and at the concrete obstacles inbuilt within the social fabric of the early 20th-century patriarchal world which foreclosed the victims' chances for action, especially condemning women.

Although in *Still Alive*, from the child's perspective, a/the (step)mother's imposition, distrust for the husband's capacity to decide, saves her life, the adult narrator prevents the reader from any feel-good reaction by pointing back to the exceptionality of the Shoah autobiographical model of which repeatedly unearths the painfulness of chance and randomness.

There can't be a "happy ending" to a life that has been touched by the long deadly fingers of the *Hurbn*. The remaining life is not a whole life because of the irrecoverable loss—for the survivors, after the Shoah, there is no living just *weiter leben.* The teenage daughter will be left looking for signs of her father's lost presence in the men she encounters later on in America—those with a Viennese accent like he had, an accent that to the daughter translates into "voice." Her uncle, other old-time family friends and the psychiatrist doctor Fessler, all bring back (with their Austrian accents) a dear memory,

[56] *Jewish Self-Hatred* (1986), 350-351.
[57] *Ibid.*, 351.

while tearing open each time the unhealed wound of the loss. Sadly, the grown-up woman will end up gradually forgetting (removing) that special sound of the father's presence. "That was asking too much. [...] I could still hear his voice in those days; by now I have forgotten it" (*S.A.*, 187).

However, what pushes the father's voice out of the girl's mind is the association with the behavior of the surrounding male world. Klüger can hardly evoke any warmth and support in the male world she grew up in before and after the war (not to mention the violence of the Shoah which she clearly associates with male power). To trace in another man's voice the lost, irrecoverable, presence of the dead father is an act of sentimentalism, and all sentimentalisms are a lie. As Klüger has learned from paying attention to the frame rather than to what the mirror reflects, sentimentality is deception (*S.A.*, 95).

Klüger refuses to sentimentalize her life, that of the living or the dead. She refuses to fit the role of the "good Jewish girl" either for the sake of the American optimistic future-oriented society or for her Jewish past-oriented world "which reduces its daughters to helpmeets of men and circumscribes their spiritual life within the confines of domestic functions" and, perhaps most important, for a religion that impedes her to say *Kaddish* for her father (*S.A.*, 30).

The narrator must also struggle with the second object of the girl's jealousy, Schorschi, in the reconstruction of her memory with a multilayered experience—which, again, has at its core issues of death, gender systems, and the transmission of these experiences.

In this book about mother and daughter surviving trauma, the atrocious story of Schorschi is part and parcel of the trauma. Born out of her mother's first marriage,

Schorschi was for years the object of child custody battles. For a while, Alma and her second husband (Viktor Klüger) succeeded in bringing the child to Vienna, where Ruth will briefly be granted the short-lived happiness of having a sibling, a first role model (*S.A.*, 28). With tragically bad timing, Schorschi is sent back to Prague to visit his father. Because of the paternal family's refusal to let him return to his mother and because of the Nazi invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1938, mother and son were never reunited. Klüger's mother will never completely recover from this loss:

> And suddenly she'd say to me: "You can't know this, but I think of him [Schorschi] every day." She never asked whether I thought of him, whether he meant something to me. And I confess, I was so suspicious that I mistrusted the full extent of her grief and speculated to what extent she was playacting. Perhaps I was simply jealous of her greater right to mourn him.
>
> *Still Alive*, 80.

Here, the narrator's resentment is directed at the fact that the mother takes away something from the daughter's right to co-own the brother.

Earlier, the girl had suffered more straightforwardly for the mother's blatant preference towards her first child: "Once I asked her the foolish question 'Whom do you like better him [Schorschi] or me?' And she actually said, 'Schorschi, because I have known him longer.' [...] Sixty years later [...] I still hear her say it" (*S.A.*, 29).

The mother's irrational condemnation thunders more explicitly and cruelly years after the war: "My mother, later: 'If it hadn't been for you, I would have saved him [Schorschi]'" (*S.A.*, 29).

Far from feeling triumphalistic about a dreadful fate that left her alive and erased her older brother, the child is aware of her "ugly duckling" status partly within the family and principally within the broader society. Countless folk-tales deal with issues of sibling rivalry and the triumph of the "lesser" (usually youngest) child which symbolizes the successful integration of id, ego and superego. While the ugly-duckling effect is often typical or implicitly embedded in the *Bildungsroman* narrative (which *Still Alive* partially adopts), the Shoah experience twists the meaning of this archetypal situation for the child who triumphs through it alive. "A small child, bright though he may be, feels himself stupid and inadequate when confronted with the complexity of the world which surrounds him. Everybody seems to know so much more than he, and to be so much more capable" is Bettelheim's understanding and interpretation of the "youngest child as simpleton" scenario.[58] However, Klüger makes two things clear: that her survival doesn't mean any fairy-tale-like triumphing over anybody, that the death of millions and among them her brother, makes everybody alive either guilty or mute, opening an unbridgeable fracture that forever wrecks the successful integration of the individual and collective id, ego and superego; and that the feelings of inadequacy are not neutral, but instilled by people like doctor Fessler, by her rich Long-Island uncle, by the great-uncle in Vienna and his wife, by her mother, in turn all products of a society/culture that worships the male child over female offspring.

Memories of gender-specific double standards are numerous and vivid throughout *Still Alive*: "If I had been a boy, he [great uncle] would have treated me differently, that I was sure of. Boys had to study ... But girls did not need that" (*S.A.*, 50). The wonderful Jewish holidays segregate rather than include women: "Passover is an imaginative feast

[58] Bettelheim, *ibid.* (1989), 103.

and appealed to a little girl who loved poetry... But in truth, it is all these good things for men and children, and scarcely for women" (*S.A.*, 44). Even the visionary father of Israel, Theodor Herzl (a kind of Jewish redeemer, like Moses before him) lackeda broad enough vision to include women in his otherwise exact predictions of the Jewish future: "But even Theodor Herzl, the founder of political Zionism and our hero and guru, who hailed from my part of the world, believed that it was the duty of Jewish wives to be especially supportive of their husbands, because only men had to put up with anti-Semitism" (*S.A.*, 72). When it comes to procreation, a son (real or imagined) remains the undisputable Jewish wish fulfillment: "He [father] aborted a child of his own, which would have been a boy, my mother says, and he was 'sad for days'" (*S.A.*, 35)—although, of course, had there been such a small baby in the family, even a boy, none of them would have survived their arrival in Auschwitz. So, also in the case of Ruth and Schorschi, the narrator implies, somehow their rivalry was already inscribed in their roles. The text (like a magic mirror) "reflects and conforms to the way things 'truly' are, the way our lives are 'truly' lived. As with all mirrors, though, refraction and the shaping presence of a frame mediate the fairy tale's reflection."[59] So, on the one hand, this story, visibly framed within the parameters of death by the Shoah and patriarchal gender roles, reflects the true state of things, sentiments, conflicts, on the other, it opens up the narrative to the possibility of revolt, subversion, self-transformation, and gender dis/identification.

Judith Butler writes that, "Paradoxically, the reconceptualization of identity as an *effect*, that is, as *produced* or *generated*, opens up possibilities of 'agency' that are insidiously foreclosed by positions that take identity categories as foundational and fixed. For an identity to be an effect means that it is neither fatally determined nor fully artificial and

[59] Bacchilega, *ibid.*, 28.

arbitrary."[60] Klüger places identity as an effect of the compulsive mother-daughter reflection. But because the reflection is also controlled and regulated by the forces of patriarchy, she reframes her story differently to reflect what the archetypal universals fail to show. The artifice of identity making, gender systems, familial dynamics and intra-familial power structures, is unmasked by the mirror of this reflective autobiography. No one is exonerated from the responsibility of co-producing these injurious magic effects. The mother's "craziness" forbids her from including new characters in her own story: she must bar Snow White from the castle, or else the mother will be lost/dead outside in the enchanted forest of multiple paths and meanings. Her craziness, however, is due to her entrapment in the *castle*: here losses have accumulated, trauma after trauma; important fights have been lost (as with her ex husband who deprived her forever of her son); and some battles have been won (helping her daughter survive). By the time the daughter is ready to repossess the mirror and formulate her own questions, the mother has been reduced to silence: it is impossible for her to integrate new versions of the story (about Schorschi and her husband) into the one she painfully sewed together and to which she precludes access to her daughter.

The sibling-rivalry scenario culpabilizes the child's demands for autonomy, while taking the focus away from the tyranny of patriarchal hegemonic structures. Bettelheim reproaches Hans Christian Andersen of a disruptive pessimism imbedded in his classic story "The Ugly Duckling": Andersen's tale relies on fate and a measure of predestination for the main character's redemption/salvation. It just so happens that the ugly duckling will turn into a jaw-dropping swan. To put it in Bettelheim's words: "No

[60] *Gender Trouble* (1999), 187.

need to accomplish anything is expressed in 'The Ugly Duckling.'"[61] A "depressive world-view" is what he calls this vision. But the story's nontriumphalist tone and "natural" development offers a suitable model for a child's desires and expectations, even a Shoah child. For a child whose survival, whose "triumph," owes so much to chance, luck, and indeed fate—as a Shoah child would know—the "ugly duckling" sad and depressive world-view resonates strongly. The ugly duckling lesson can be reduced to the Shoah child level as: You are lucky if you grow up to be what you were meant to. Bettelheim underestimates the desire of a child to grow into a different breed while overestimating, or wrongly universalizing, her desire to be superior.[62] He claims that a child's "chance for success in life is *not* to grow into a being of a different nature as the duckling grows into a swan, but to acquire better qualities and to do better than others expect, being of the same nature as his parents and siblings [...] that he must do something to achieve his superiority." [63] On the contrary, in Klüger's case, the narrated self's fantasy of escaping her sense of self-smallness finds relief in the idea of "growing into a different breed" altogether (which can be interpreted as a metaphorical desire for individuation and separation as much as a literal escape wish from a culture that proves oppressive and repressive). Klüger describes the guilt-ridden psyche of her post-war condition in America, where depression starts creeping out undisturbed by more urgent questions of practical survival: "I felt inferior, saw myself through the eyes of others, and there were times when it seemed that instead of having been liberated, I had crawled away like a cockroach from the exterminator. [...] I would have liked to be a man, and preferably not a Jew" (*S.A.*, 185).

[61] Bettelheim, *ibid.* (1989), 105.
[62] *Ibid.*
[63] *Ibid.*

Where does this sense of inadequacy come from? Clearly, it is instilled not only by the Nazis, the anti-Semites, the historical well-defined and recognizable enemies, but also by the good people one lives with day by day. What escape strategies are available to the child as well as to the older woman?

Before the war, once the oedipal romance with mom and dad starts waning around the age of six, "[t]he child becomes able to gain some emotional satisfaction from persons who are not part of his immediate family [...],"[64] and thus a possible escape is found into alternative nurturing models as a child. Ruth projects her oedipal frustrations unto a "good-fairy" figure (her German nanny) and a "fantasy land" (Israel, that promises the Shoah child something more than adventures and great personal freedom).

> It wasn't she [mother] whom I learned to trust, but my nanny, whom I called Anya, and whom I loved dearly. She was young and funny and never laid a guilt trip on you. [...] I watch her and hope that I, too, will grow up to have long, smooth legs like my Anya. Unlike my mother, she was never suspicious or thought I was lying.
>
> *Still Alive*, 53.

Later on, in her twenties, Klüger will intensify her reliance on female bonding, which will be paramount in her adult life: "I fell on my feet and found my bearings because of these three [best life-long friends: Liselotte, Kit, Monique] I could talk to them. They listened and answered, for or against, but always weighing what they had heard, unlike my mother, who used language for manipulation, not to express and opinion or state a fact" (*S.A.*, 197). Klüger finds alternative mothering and female models in her friends, with whom deep affinities unite her: "none of us had grown up with a father, and all of us had problems with our mothers [...]. In a way we were each other's parent replacements" (*S.A.*, 195).

[64] *Ibid.*, 124.

In both cases, the (step)mother of course ends up functioning as an intruder into all these relations the daughter builds for herself.

One day the nanny Anya, whom the Nürnberg laws had forced out of the Klügers' household, pays a visit to her old employers, and the scene is described as follows:

> [Anya] visited us once, months later. I jumped with joy like a puppy, wanting to be held and cuddled: my very own Anya. My mother was embarrassed, or perhaps jealous of this display, which the young woman took for granted.
>
> *Still Alive*, 53.

The mother's jealousy could be real or imagined, but it is symptomatic of the perception the child had of her as "bad mother": the intrusive, jealous, paranoid Jewish mother who cripples her children's psyche (whose mothering is *smothering*). Hadn't Klüger's mother hated her own mother who had been "always dependent on men and money, and [...] developed a tortured self-love which reached pathological proportions as she advanced in years"? On the one hand, the author sees herself as the product of this crippling Jewish psychic genealogy—thus inserting herself, her mother, and her whole family into the larger discourse on the European Jew as endemically sick, inadequate, agonizing (*ergo*, co-responsible for his tragic fate)—on the other, she also challenges this view by showing its larger context and implications. The nanny, with the *alias* name of Anya, was not chased out by a jealous stepmother but by the Nürnberg laws, and perhaps even she (whose scent of cyclamen and mountain violet returns to Klüger only at the thought of her) joined the Nazi ranks, and became willing part of the murderous machine. Klüger's mother and the entire family were the difficult, neurotic product (*S.A.*, 52) of a millennia-long oppression.

At first, Klüger sketches a portrait of *yiddishe mame* that is in keeping with the stereotypical image evoked by innumerable Jewish comedians: "[She] tortured me with her anxieties. She alluded to the suicide attempts of unnamed women; she talked about fatal illnesses and the imagined destination of the ever more frequent transports of deportees [...]. When I came home to our cramped quarters from a rare outing with other Jewish kids, happy and exhausted from running around in the open air, she'd paint the specter of deadly pneumonia, which I was very likely to have caught, she said. She persuaded me that I had flat feet (I don't) [...]" (*S.A.*, 54). As Jewish bitter humor demands, once the child actually got quite sick the mother doesn't pay any attention to the girl's evident agony (*S.A.*, 56).

Thinking back to these scenes, Klüger realizes that throughout her life she has looked at her mother and her family as "we observe civilizations, alien to our own [...]" (*S.A.*, 56): as that *terra incognita* from which one hails and which one must leave in order to survive.

However, gradually, Klüger finds for herself a new observation point from which to interpret this Jewish experience. What other options were available to a rich woman, "the spoiled child of wealth," whom an old-fashioned bourgeois upbringing had deprived of other more viable options to face such overwhelming reality as the threat of total extermination? "Politics was not meant to be a feminine domain, and in my mother's Czech finishing school they didn't teach the girls how to read a newspaper critically any more than they instructed them on how to delouse the heads of children. Neither did her social experience prepare her for the harsh realities we faced, since by definition anti-Semites didn't move in Jewish circles" (*S.A.*, 56). Magic (the stuff of women, after all),

once reality reaches utmost illogicality (a form of *un-reality*), looks like a perfectly realistic option: "My mother turned superstitious and regularly frequented a fortune-teller [...]. She talked about a miracle-working rabbi who had an ancestor of hers and whose spirit protected the family in times of need" (*S.A.*, 56).

Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz hits an important mark when she points out that, "Fuzzy boundaries between the self, family and community can be a sign of Jewish health."[65] Thus, paradoxically, the mother's paranoid mistrusts, fearful guardedness and "intrusive possessiveness" prove to be the healthy answer for a woman to the unhealthiest of historical circumstances.

In fact, Nazi reality is so absurd, that the daughter's psyche ends up aligning itself with the mother's logic, once all logic is totally upset by the concentrationary universe. Once in the camps, Klüger will finally understand that her mother, with her fears and constant feelings of imminent threat, had been right all along.

Nevertheless, the mother is repeatedly positioned as the obstacle between the daughter and the realization of the daughter's wish. When later on in life Klüger tried to reconnect with the nanny by the alias name of Anya, her mother could not or did not want to help her: "I can't look for her because I don't know her real name, and I wouldn't know whom to ask, since for my mother she was simply an employee of long ago" (*S.A.*, 53). This perception of the bond to the mother as an obstacle to the bond with the outside world (of people or desires) recurs also in regards to Ruth's second escape fantasy.

"To escape his inner turmoil, he [the child] dreams of being the child of different and better parents with whom he would have none of these psychological difficulties.

[65] "The Issue Is Power: Some Notes on Jewish Women and Therapy" in *Jewish Women in Therapy: Seen But Not Heard* (1991), 13.

Some children even go beyond such fantasizing and actually run away in search of this ideal home."[66] Ruth's fantasy escape is indeed practicable, feasible and, on top of it, might reveal itself as the smartest option for the survival of the entire family nucleus. She flirts various times with the "what ifs" of making *aliyah*, going to Palestine, building a new nation. Twice real life grants this option, and twice the mother closes the door to it.

I have already mentioned the scene at the JCC, when the mother answers negatively the proposition of a young man to send her daughter away from Vienna (i.e., away from her). This is how the text brings us back the memory of that determinant hour, converging into one the inner turmoil of both the young girl and the adult woman: "But I never forgot that brief glimpse of another life which would have made me a different person. What kind of person? Who knows? Should she [mother] have asked my opinion? Not have treated me exclusively as her property?" (*S.A.*, 57).

Palestine/Israel as escape has a far deeper meaning for both the young pre-Shoah girl and the grown-up Auschwitz survivor: it is psychologically associated with the Zionist father (*S.A.*, 76). The mother's foreclosure of that option, therefore, is felt as a double blow: to the independence and quest for autonomy of the developing (powerless) daughter and to the power of the father.

The second telling instance will occur after the war:

> I wanted to emigrate to Eretz Israel, to Palestine, and help build a country inspired by socialist ideals, where justice and humanity would prevail. [...] We could have sailed illegally, via Italy. That seemed doable to me, merely a further adventure; but my mother saw only the risk. [...] In the end she made the final decision without consulting me. I could hardly blame her [...] but still it was a severe blow.
>
> *Still Alive*, 160.

[66] Bettelheim, *ibid.* (1989), 207.

The expression the narrator chooses "a further adventure" somewhat substantiates the idea that even from afar, from the distance granted by the decades that separate the child from the writing adult, Klüger cannot deny the pre-menstrual 13-year-old self the right to see the world as an adventure in which she is the triumphant heroine, on a quest (maturity, independence, separation from mother, sex) through unimaginable perils. However, between the first and the second rejection of the Zionist option by the mother, in the chronology of the story, there passes the Auschwitz "parenthesis."

The imprisonment in the concentration camps almost creates a latency-period effect in the story. During the year in the death camp, the young girl adapts in order to survive on a totally different level: from the standpoint of daily life as prisoner here everything one was familiar with in the life *ante* has to be reset, forgotten if necessary, rearranged. Here all that counts is life (i.e., avoidance of death) and sex (handling menstrual periods, secret pregnancies, abortions; avoiding the forced option of prostitution or the murderous selection for doctor Mengele's experiments, etc.). Not much is revealed about the torments of those months in the camps—for that Klüger advises the reader to look at nicely detailed history books: what she focuses on instead is the recovery of touching flashbacks of nurture, care, and astounding motherly heroism. But the mother-daughter conflicts and negotiations do not cease, not even in the *lagers*.

As noted earlier, the absurd scenario of Auschwitz brings forth an unexpected phenomenon: the "disturbed ego" of the Jewish mother turns out to be quite an asset in the "disturbed" reality of the death camp. All of a sudden, in there, the world's *outside* matches the mother's disturbed *inside*. And the young daughter, plunged into a crazy reality, finally peers into a different maternal horizon. "The paranoia which has probably

haunted her all her life met its objective correlative during the murderous Hitler years" Klüger writes (*S.A.*, 123). The surrounding reality fits that insane imaginary reality of the mother's mind which in the "normal circumstances" of before Auschwitz handicapped her as somewhat unfit for coping with reality demands. Quoting Lessing's famous phrase "There are things which must cause you to lose your reason or you have none to lose," Viktor E. Frankl tried to illustrate the surprising self-preserving powers of the human mind vis à vis the unexpected and unbearable: "An abnormal reaction to an abnormal situation *is* normal behavior," he writes.[67]

Despite the fact that the mother's very first instinct had been *thanatosis*, suicidal, i.e. to jump with her daughter onto the electrified barbed wire, once Ruth has refused such hypothesis, the rest of their internment is spent struggling against all odds to make sure her daughter will survive.

As innumerable narratives about the conditions in the *lagers* have shown, sustaining oneself alive through this experience was a titanic endeavor: notwithstanding, Alma Klüger pushed through the cataclysm herself, her own daughter and a second orphaned girl, Susi, who joined them and informally "adopted" them as her elective family. In the camps, as in Vienna, the mother applies the same technique and the same language to push the daughter over limits too scary for the girl to contemplate. When faced with the last fatal *selektion*, the mother's unsentimental reaction triggered by crazy desperation will again save the girl's life. With some Jewish comedic emendations, this is how the tragic moment is described:

> Two SS men conducted the selection [...] He condemned me as if I had stolen my life and had no right to keep it [...] We [mother and I] stood on the street between the two rows of barracks and argued. She tried to

[67] *Man's Search for Meaning* (1984), 38. Emphasis added.

> persuade me that I should try a second time, with the other SS man in the other line, and claim that I was fifteen. [...] "You are a coward," she said half desperately, half contemptuously, and added, "I wasn't ever a coward." So what could I do but go in a second time [...]. I had proved to my mother that I wasn't chicken. [...] I had won an extension on life.
>
> *Still Alive* 104-108.[68]

The source of the mother's responses to the Shoah and the *konzentrationslager* is located by the narrator in "[sometimes] paranoia, sometimes reason and evidence. Goodwill or malice might be part of it. Mostly, however, it came from an undifferentiated instinct, a mixture of unexamined experiences, a bubbling stew of indistinguishable thoughts and emotions" (*S.A.*, 48). The portrait, that slowly forms through the patches of memory sewn together by the daughter in the reflection of the mirror/book, is one of a guilty mother and a victim mother at the same time. One thing does not exclude the other. Her word has more than once condemned the daughter, but also saved her and saved a second daughter from disappearing (both metaphorically and literally). It's a mother whose body and mind bear the marks (like the prisoner in Kafka's *The Penal Colony*) of the uninterrupted writings that patriarchal (Jewish) society has inscribed on her. But while patriarchy's text is being written over and over, mother and daughter cooperate in the weaving of their own inter-subjective story, of which *Still Alive* is one expression.

If the author emphasizes those crippling faults of the mother's attitudes towards her daughter, she also locates her own strength, subversiveness and feminist principles in

[68] Parenthetically, not only the mother, but an unknown German woman is instrumental in saving Ruth's life in this scene, corroborating the child's lie about her age with the skeptical SS-doctor. In fact Klüger gives this anonymous character most of the credit. In discussing this woman's action, Klüger makes the strongest case about agency being possible even under the worst conditions: declaring the Shoah simply "dehumanizing" (as Bettelheim's observations based on his own one-year internment in Dachau and Buchenwald—from 1938 to 39—concluded) means to (unconsciously) speak from the vantage point of the victimizers and hence leave the victims in a truly dehumanizing vacuum, like voiceless, faceless, agency-less marionettes.

her mother's model. Klüger remarks how her upbringing, which was the mother's making, "taught [her] to be antiauthoritarian, skeptical, and inclined to question and contradict" (*S.A.*, 175). In the world where female characters must please masculine expectations, mother and daughter jump in and out of role in order to survive it. The strict, inflexible mother is the same woman who had, in her youth, divorced and left her hometown, "a rather unusual step in those days" (*S.A.*, 27). While alone in Vienna, before deportation, the mother had industriously managed to find employment for herself (at a time when Jews were hardly allowed outside of their houses) and thus provide for her daughter, mother-in-law and other dependent relatives. After their brave escape from the hands of the Nazis (during one of those endless marches from one labor camp to another), Alma immediately started working for the allied troops and created not only the financial conditions but also the all-important social net of contacts that will allow the three women (she has two daughters at this point) to get back on their feet, to emigrate to America; her indefatigable resourcefulness granted Ruth the chance of even catching up with her studies while still in Germany. Once in America, her mother immediately finds a way to support the entire family and manages to remarry a couple of times.

After the "latency" period of Auschwitz, the girl is necessarily a different human being from the one who entered it. What Geoffrey Hartman wrote—"Before Auschwitz we were children in our imagination of evil; after Auschwitz we are no longer children"—is valid for the survivors as well as, metaphorically, for the subsequent generations of this story's listeners.[69] The chapters that follow the part about the camps, however, are there to warn us against the sentimental deduction that Auschwitz has any transformative power, that one enters it a child and exits it a Man—as if it were a

[69] "The Book of the Destruction" in *The Longest Shadow: In the Aftermath of the Holocaust* (1996), 130.

Dickensian chapter. The conflicts with the mother reemerge because their deepest source is rooted beyond the biological mother-daughter circle, or the Auschwitz-Jew prison, into the larger world which (with its patriarchal hegemonic structure) has been left practically untouched by the Shoah. The larger human narrative of which she and her mother are constructed discourses slowly takes shape again after the war.

After the war, mother and daughter surviving the trauma of Auschwitz find themselves claustrophobically together trying to survive this new life which promises a future, though only in exchange for the erasure of the past. Klüger's *parvenue* aunt from Long Island advises the young girl to "erase from [her] memory everything that happened in Europe," which sounds absurd to the survivor: "I thought, she [aunt] wants me to get rid of the only thing that I own for sure: my life, that is, the years I have lived" (*S.A.*, 177).

For a girl, who is not yet even 20, six years of life are too large a percentage to let go. Instead, her mother's injured psyche tries to do everything possible to work that lapse out of her overall existence, meeting, however, the daughter's fierce resistance.

> She forced me into little girl dresses for which I was too grown-up and too plump. [...] My mother consistently pretended to be six years younger than she really was. Six years is the length of World War II. Perhaps she didn't want to have aged in those years. She pretended that the Nazi years had washed over me, as if, being a child, I hadn't been quite conscious of what was happening.
>
> *Still Alive*, 180.

Bettelheim remarked that "[m]ost survivors, in counter-reaction, tried to deny validity to their camp experience after their liberation [...]. Since they could not forget that it had happened, the closest they could come to negating its validity was not permitting it to change either their way of life or their personality."[70]

[70] Bruno Bettelheim, "Trauma and Reintegration" in *Surviving* (1980), 31.

First, before the war, the daughter learns from the mother to dislike "the role of passive victim who could be comforted with small demonstrations of kindness" (*S.A.*, 49).

Then after the war, when the mother contradictorily contravenes that rule, Ruth resists Alma's attempt at stylizing herself at her daughter's expense: "she is the potential heroine [...] and reduces me to poor-little-victim status" (*S.A.*, 127). In particular, Klüger refuses to be ossified into one fixed image, into the oppressive unidimensional role of the victim: refusing to fit the frozen-in-time image of the "innocent persecuted heroine." This unidimensionality serves the interests of a society that still resists complexity. The autobiography's narrative strategy of mirroring (its relation to truth and personal/collective history) risks freezing the "heroine" looking into it (and being seen through it) into a permanent one-sided, immobile image.[71] Through her own resistance to the mother's version of the story, and the mother's rejection of the daughter's edition, Klüger exposes the (gendered) artifice of a memoir. Memoirs are about a constructed self in performance: even when the Shoah has a lot to do with this construction. "Construction is not opposed to agency; it is the necessary scene of agency, the very terms in which agency is articulated and becomes culturally intelligible"[72] and Klüger does not "establish a point of view outside of constructed identities"[73] but rather stays *in* the mirror and works a revolution of the constructing mechanics from *within*.

The unification of the child's self, Lacan *docet*, happens via a mirror. But so does the undoing of the unified self when it searches for its reflection in the decentering space of the text. Breaking glasses (mirrors, crystal coffins), i.e. renouncing wholeness,

[71] Here I am paraphrasing and playing around with what Cristina Bacchilega writes about Snow White: "Such mirroring frames and freezes Snow White as an image of beauty and suffering—the 'innocent persecuted heroine'" (*ibid.*, 35).
[72] Butler, *ibid.*, 187.
[73] *Ibid.*.

choosing fragmentation and multi-layeredness, is part of breaking the spell under which woman as well as the survivor are kept paralyzed by the societal frame.

"Assuming that a frame always selects, shapes, (dis)places, limits and (de)centers the image in the mirror, postmodern retellings focus precisely on this frame to unmake the mimetic fiction"[74] and so does Klüger's postmodern memoir, thus challenging the authority of the mirror by speaking herself through it (her memoir) and letting the mother's voice (and dissent) and that of other narrators' (history books, friends' emails and comments) be heard too: a chorality Hélène Cixous names "*peuplement*"[75] or *peopling*. The daughter is compelled to distance herself from the "framed" mother in the patriarchal mirror: despite the mother's courage, her intermittent defiance of cultural and societal demands, her mother's transformative power is constantly de-activated by pre- and post-Shoah society, i.e., the "normal" world that Auschwitz, to the eye of the daughter, has intervened to unmask as the ultimate fraud: with its male/masculine Language (that puts "the shame of the victim into the service of the victimizer," *S.A.*, 159), its totalizing overarching categories and restrictive borders/frames. As Bacchilega observed, every magic mirror, we shouldn't forget, is always framed. The frame of our text's mirror is that of patriarchy: a patriarchal *Kultur* that gestated and generated an evil progeny (the Nazis and their antihuman plans). The same patriarchy that sets the victims up against each other: so that the (Step)Mother and Snow White keep seeing each other as rivals—while as allies they'd be capable of surviving the worst circumstances the man-made world could put them up against.

[74] Bacchilega, *ibid.* (1997) 35-36.
[75] *La jeune née* (1975), 158-159.

Klüger uses her narrative as a mirror: she forces us to ask our questions and then judge by ourselves the process of mirroring that the answer reflects.

The writer faces multiple answers to her interrogation of her memoir. She doesn't refuse or escape either version but integrates them into her overall vision of her past and present identity. And it is precisely this resulting multiplicity of reflections that ends up shattering the authority of the mirror.

As Bettelheim's analysis of the *Snow White* story suggests, the daughter's text functions like the queen mother's mirror that "seems to speak the voice of a daughter rather than that of a mother."[76] No doubt, these descriptions of the mother originate in the daughter's perception of her. The deaf dialogue these women writers, such as Klüger and Edith Bruck, entertain with their mothers has a painful one-sidedness. In *Of Woman Born*, Adrienne Rich tackles this thorny issue (the responsibility of "talking for" instead of "letting talk": of objectifying the mother through a memoir) and her personal experience takes on the character of a universally valid *monitum*: "It is hard to write about my own mother. Whatever I do write, it is my story I am telling, my version of the past. If she were to tell her own story other landscapes would be revealed."[77]

When the girl finally gets a glimpse of what the mother has to say about her, the divergence between her self-image and what the "queen" thinks of her causes quite a surprise. This happens after the war: Klüger is in her late teens and, while in New York, is directed by her mother to see a Viennese psychiatrist because of her panic attacks in school when confronted with tests and exams. Doctor Lazi Fessler doesn't conceal his preconceived ideas about Ruth and the source of this pre-judgment. He has been

[76] Bettelheim, *ibid.* (1989), 207.
[77] Rich, *ibid.* (1976), 221.

romantically seeing her mother for a short while and heard the mother's side of the daughter's story: "[...] I suppose she told him a little about the two of us, leaving him with the impression that I was difficult and that she was patient. (Of course, I thought the opposite was the case, that I was an undemanding, if not an exemplary, daughter, and that it was she who was alternately unapproachable and prying)" (*S.A.*, 185).

Neither the patient, the mother, nor the psychiatrist is equipped to understand what the older voice of the narrator is able to spell out without difficulty: this "deep malaise, which repeatedly turned into paralyzing depression" was not only caused by the cultural-shock any emigrant experiences, because she and her mother were not just *any* emigrants (two women united by biology and an insurmountable trauma they each can only hope to overcome individually): it was due to "the recurrence of losses and the question of one's own worth" (*S.A.*, 185).

In particular, the question of one's own worth becomes crucial after the war, in a world that subconsciously reproaches women for making it out alive instead of men. Once in New York, Klüger and her mother must face the petty pretentiousness and emotional as well as economic stinginess of those Jewish relatives and friends, who had made it to America before the Shoah, and who dread these female relatives' presence as a reminder of their own guilt and responsibility towards those left behind to die. There is that unpalatable feeling that because in her family "the women had survived, not the men" the worth of those who made it through was not enough to repay in part the Jewish world of its immeasurable loss: "And that meant that the more valuable human beings [men] had lost their lives" (*S.A.*, 184).[78] Once again, the dimensions of Death and

[78] The shock of rejection in the new country on the part of those who, the young girl had thought, would be able to take the place of her father, is quite bitter: "Today I understand (though still not fully) that these

Sex/gender systems underpins the structure of Klüger's narrative. The survivor is doubly guilty for being a female survivor.

Mirrors, Bacchilega observes, are desire containers and "folk and fairy tales are ideologically variable desire machines:"[79] breaking their spell means exposing "that magic which seeks to conceal the struggling interests which produce it."[80] Klüger's autobiographical text produces its effect through the thematizing of the conflict between *normative* function of the Shoah autobiography and *subversive* function of woman's autobiography.[81] Klüger makes sure not to re-produce any magic by exposing the mechanics of text writing: by doing away with all artifice.

Still Alive narratively mirrors the oscillations of the unconscious and the traumatized psyche. The chronology breaks up, Klüger's personal memory is intersected with that of the mother or other people, hate and love, doubts and contradictions alternate throughout. Klüger struggles to draw the reader into the double dimension of her trauma: one part of which has its source in the mother, and one part of which she shares as victim with the mother—which makes her critical evaluation of the asymmetric mother-daughter relation all the more painful and problematic. Particularly in a post-Shoah world that does not grant the victims any life outside of the catastrophe: that, in order to better manage it,

men [Jewish male refugees who had spent the war in America] had their own agenda: the Jewish catastrophe was mainly and merely a resounding humiliation to them, not the tragedy of saints and martyrs that our own propaganda has made of it since" (*S.A.*, 187).

[79] Bacchilega, *ibid.*, 7.

[80] *Ibid.*.

[81] This is what Bacchilega rightly recognizes as being the workings of folktale (7), which thus are able to generate magic, wonder.

reduces all the nuances and complexities of this event into umbrella categorizations that leave very little room for real, "dissenting," human conflicts and emotions.[82]

Mother and daughter are entangled in their common trauma: each one's version of the facts remains lopsided without the other's. Because of the experience they shared, they complement each other's existence in a way far more tragic than any regular mother-daughter continuum. They feel they are each a mirror to the other's life: "I was a stage prop, her property, at most a minor figure in her drama," says the daughter (*S.A.*, 180)—while the mother's counter-accusation reveals a different scenario: "You have always run away from me" (*ibidem*). The dialogue (verbal or metaphysical) between mother and daughter is like a needle piercing through a blank fabric: patterns form on both sides of the canvas (the plane of memory shared by these two connected women). There is pulling and releasing all through the process: at times, the memoir tells us, the power of the mother wins (in the scene of the *selektion*, for example, or in the decision of going to America rather than Palestine); at others it is the daughter who pulls the strongest (as when she decides for everybody that it is time to escape the labor camp, when she refuses to ever go visit the Long Island relatives again or when she leaves for California "abandoning" her mother).

The synergy/coactivity between mother and daughter is continuous: "one doesn't stir without the other" to say it with Irigaray. Butler explains that "The rules that govern intelligible identity, i.e., that enable and restrict the intelligible assertion of an 'I,' rules that are partially structured along matrices of gender hierarchy and compulsory

[82] Klüger exposes this tendency in even its minimal expressions, such as the fact that only a few names of concentration camps made it into the universal historical consciousness, when in fact there were 1600 of them and Klüger would hope for each of their names to be known and remembered.

heterosexuality, operate through *repetition.*"[83] In the optic of a narration, "[r]epetition functions as reassurance within the tale, but this very same compulsion to repeat the tale explodes its coherence as well-made artifice."[84] This Shoah autobiography is only one version of various possible versions: there exists in fact already a double, German double, not a translation but a parallel text to the one we read in English. Within itself, the book reflects the possibility for variants not only in the multiplicity of voices that intersect that of the autographed *I* but also in the double ending with which Klüger closes (in fact, opening it up to further possibilities) her story.

To paraphrase what Bacchilega says about postmodern fairy tales, postmodern autobiography also holds its mirror to the magic mirror of history (personal and communal), "playing with its framed images out of a desire to multiply its refractions and to expose its artifices."[85] The autobiography-mirror does not remain unchanged either: "while this play of reflection, refraction, and framing might produce ideologically 'destructive,' 'constructive' and 'subversive' effects, the self-reflexive mirrors are themselves questioned and transformed."[86]

The Shoah cannot be universalized—without running the risk of erasing the individual experiences and homogenizing them into the general "*condition humaine*"—and cannot be contained in one person's singular experience. Kluger's *Still Alive* succeeds in resolving the impasse by framing the experience between larger human categories (sex and death; daughter and mother) then by breaking the spell of these archetypes—and resignifying them according to the meaning contained in her personal

[83] Butler, *ibid.* (1999), 185.
[84] Bacchilega, *ibid.*, 23.
[85] *Ibid.*
[86] *Ibid.*, 24.

singular story. Klüger exposes the numerous myths that since childhood inform our psyche—such as Snow White or the Viennese legend of Drunken August, but also anti-Semitic tales of the infectious Other, or Jewish stories about bitter herbs and the parting of the sea—and as much as they enrich our imagination they poison our sense of self and our perception of reality. "Recipes for gefilte fish are no recipe for coping with the Holocaust," she sarcastically points out (*S.A.*, 30).

Going back to the double end of this text, the girlhood phase ends with Ruth's departing from her mother:

> My friends were there and helped me pack, and my mother was desperate. She was aware that I wouldn't come back. [...] So this is the end of the story [...]. At the end of the story there was a vacuum, in the rooms, in the people. At the end there was my betrayal: I had become Shylock's Jessica, abandoning an unloved parent.
>
> *Still Alive*, 202.

Again, for a moment in life, the inside comes to match the outside: the echo of the rooms' emptiness reaches deep inside another empty compartment—the cave of memory, where only phantoms live. And the betrayal of those who left us (despite themselves), the willing betrayal of an entire country, of humanity, of one's relatives, finds the ultimate confirmation, for the mother, in the betrayal of the daughter: Shylock's Jessica. The daughter of the wandering Jew, who had naively thought s/he had found a new home and stability, a safe place where his power can be restored: instead the daughter snatches that away from him/her. ["And when I leave, is it not the perpetuation of your exile?"[87]]

The Epilogue, a second end to the story, tells us about the death of the mother: a death that starts with a worsening psychological illness (the mother's paranoia), followed by senile dementia that makes the now old lady regress into the past of her Czech youth.

[87] *One doesn't stir without the other* (1981), 66.

The text opened up with a girl who was about to experience a tragic series of losses,[88] and it ends with a girl, the author's 5-year-old daughter Isabela, who is now facing her first loss and, via the grandmother, has her first encounter with death.

The narrator is standing between these two generations, between these two women's reciprocal recognition, holding a photograph that fixes in time and space the physical and spiritual granddaughter-grandmother encounter. "I look at a snapshot of the two of them gleefully rubbing noses, a smile of total affinity on both their faces" (*S.A.*, 214). Presence, in the moment the author is holding this picture, seems to have triumphed over absence. But *presence*, like memory, is a fraud (a consoling fraud, at best). It cannot ever quite be pinned down. In the end, life translates into a series of losses and accumulative emptinesses: the autobiographical *I* undoes life as it pronounces it. Between Isabela ("the child whose mind hadn't reached maturity") and her grandmother ("the old adult who had once lost a teenage son to anonymous murderers and whose mind had gone beyond ripeness") there passes not even a second, not even a centimeter in the artifice of the photograph's reflection: they are each other's repetition, each other's asymmetrical reflection, that knows only the here and now. Affinity, not identity, connects them. "The girl who'll be a woman of the twenty-first century, and the woman who was a girl in the early 1900s, sharing some genes, sharing affection" (*S.A.*, 214). And Klüger, the seasoned professor of Germanic philology, knows that "affinity," in the elective culture of Goethe, still magically conjures echoes of passionate resistance and great rebellions to come.

All great storytellers have in common the freedom with which

[88] Another curious correspondence between beginning and end of the text: Ruth's very first experience of death occurred when her grandmother's bird died, Isabella's happened when her grandmother's cat died.

they move up and down the rungs of their experience as on a ladder.
A ladder extending downward to the interior of the earth
and disappearing into the clouds is the image for a collective experience
to which even the deepest shock of every individual experience, death,
constitutes no impediment or barrier.
WALTER BENJAMIN

Chapter 2

Sehr geehrte Frau

No one pushes his way through here, certainly not someone with a message from a dead man. But you sit at your window and dream of that message when evening comes.
Franz Kafka

At the margin of communication there lies an open letter. At the very center, Judaism and Western philosophical culture have posited God's Word: which is the utterance that demands a response, the question that cannot go unanswered, the call that summons everything into being. Removed from, yet complementary to, this all-filling center, there is Man—the one who is summoned. According to the cosmic hierarchy, Logos emanates from an all-encompassing center, where nothing *happens* that is not already contained in the instant. But no messages are to be received from this center anymore, since man's first free choice has broken infinity condemning God to exile and the human progeny to a finite life. As the Jewish mystics

and cabbalists taught, every word at the disposal of Man, oral or written, heard or read, is a word toward God, toward the knowledge of God: it represents a secret key to reinstate that conversation with God that has ceased to take place. It is a matter of combining the letters, hence the numbers each represents, in the right combination and the *unio* creator-creation will be reinstated. Until then, though, due to the irreparable break in the communication with the Center, at the periphery of this self-intelligent universe a different drama is bound to eternally take place: here, imprisoned amongst the restrictive parameters of time and space, there unfolds a desperate tide of human messages in search of an addressee, the invisible inscrutable God, the Other to my voice: a flow of apostrophes, prayers, invocations that might never reach their destination.

Communication and abject destination understood in this existential sense, and a noticeable obsession with the addressing of *letters*, undeliverable messages, characterizes much of Edith Bruck's work. Looking at some of her most compelling texts one notices immediately how these share a formal and thematic engagement with the philosophical question of "address" (*envoi*). It is certainly the case of *Lettera alla madre* (1988),[89] *Signora Auschwitz* (1999), and *Lettera da Francoforte* (2004).

The epistolary genre is complex and controversial, with various formal incarnations: an exchange of letters between two real or fictional characters, a polylogic exchange among various people, a corpus of documents imbued within a novel. The

[89] *Lettera alla madre* is a three-part book composed of two chapters or, better, separate texts: *Lettera alla madre* is in the form of a long epistle, while the second part of the text, *Tracce* is a narrative piece about a woman writer, Shoah survivor, who returns to Germany, gets psychologically bruised by this trip between present and past, and rushes back home in order to work on her next fictional novel which will constitute the last third of the entire book. Originally, *Lettera alla madre* was a self-standing work to which *Tracce* was secondarily added upon the publisher's request. However, *Tracce* was intentionally conceived by the author as a connected work, a continuation of sort of *Lettera alla madre*, in which the same narrating voice is recognizable throughout and whose same autobiography (that of Bruck's) is being narrated according to two different literary modes.

balance between letters and narrative has varied through centuries, aesthetic demands and authorial styles. *Lettera alla madre* belongs to the epistolary genre in its most classical incarnation of the monologic address.

However, this text also raises questions of genre that are metaphorically mirrored in the narrative itself. Is this autobiography when the referentiality mirrored in the autograph on the front cover comes undone? (Edith Bruck being not the birth name of the author penning this story.) The personae in *Lettera alla madre* bear for the most part fictional names, although their biographies are clearly identifiable to the reader and confirmed as real by the writer herself. The fact that we are dealing with a "literary letter" not an actual epistle later published as literary text by an editor, but born and meant to be literature further adds to the ambiguity. It certainly helps here to think of autobiography according to Paul de Man's definition of it, that of "not a genre or a mode, but a figure of reading or of understanding that occurs, to some degree, in all texts."[90]

But Bruck's text is not an autobiographical, it is also a letter: and as such it tries to address and contemporarily answer the dialogue with an other. It declaredly exists because the Other exists: the Other's injunction to answer *its* own destiny exists.

All of Bruck's production, with one exception,[91] verges predominantly on two elements, invariably wrapped in the mortuary drape of the Shoah: the constant reappearance of letters as a metaphor for lost communicativeness, and her mother. How are these two elements connected and how do they constitute an answer to the problem of

[90] *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (1984), 70.
[91] *Il silenzio degli amanti* is her only attempt at writing "pure" fiction, a novel proper, a non-Shoah, non-autobiographical text, which Bruck describes in these terms: "[...] mentre lo scrivevo sapevo bene di mettere al mondo un bastardo, magari rifiutato da chi mi avrebbe letto respingendomi nella mia pelle tatuata, ma ho provato e riproverò" ("while I was writing it I knew I was delivering a bastard child, that would probably be refused by the readers who were going to push me back inside my tattooed skin; but I tried nevertheless and I will do so again") (*Sig. A.*, 17).

the total communication breakdown after the Shoah? No doubt, writing letters to or about the dead mother is not an answer as much as it represents a questioning in Bruck's literary production. She is the bearer of a message (the text) that the mother seems to have written, dictated. The daughter's claim over the mother's word hopes to bring reconciliation with an indelible past: the absence of the "true" speaker (the mother) however condemns the daughter to receiving in her hand but a *lettera morta* and to being its testamentary interpreter. Edith Bruck, Auschwitz survivor at 14 years of age, is now a melancholic woman who mourns the loss of her mother as the loss of all sense of self and in life.

Lettera alla madre's title, its style and brevity, i.e. the fact that it exhausts itself within the space of one longer communication—without being classically broken down into dates, without exact inner chronology or any spatial definition—puts it in relation with another twentieth-century illustrious epistolary precedent: Franz Kafka's *Brief an den Vater* (*Letter to the Father*), from 1919, also addressed to a failing yet much beloved parent, who although the addressee of the son's anguished thoughts was never truly meant to receive this envelope and who thus remained forever unaware of the implicit filial injunction: Listen Father!

These two Jewish authors, Kafka and Bruck, seem to encapsulate the twentieth century between the telling frame of their critical relationship with their parents and the obsessive dedication to letter writing.[92]

[92] Kafka's correspondence is so large, especially if compared with the scarcity of his literary production, that Maurice Blanchot, Guattari and Deleuse, Elias Canetti and others have pushed the scholarship into considering his epistolary as much part of his literary repertoire proper, as the fragments of stories, novels, and notes Kafka left us. *See* Mark Anderson, "Kafka's Unsigned Letters: A Reinterpretation of the Correspondence with Milena" in *MLN*, Vol. 98, No. 3, German Issue (April, 1983), pp. 384-398.

Between Kafka and Bruck, of course, there are determinant differences. Naturally, Bruck's text has at its core the Shoah and the relation between it and literature—extraneous to Kafka for obvious chronological reasons. Kafka's distorting imagination regarding the impending drama hovering upon the human race became for Bruck an all too real life circumstance. Kafka's father was still alive at the time of the composition of the son's missive, despite his unawareness of its existence; while Bruck witnessed the murder of her mother in Auschwitz. While it was the father's word to compel Kafka to write ("Dearest Father, You asked me recently why I maintain that I am afraid of you... I now try to give you an answer in writing..."), in Bruck's case, it is the mother's silence and unresponsiveness that compels the daughter to respond ("If you had listened to me to the end only once, maybe I wouldn't be writing to you now"). All differences apart, however, the two letters, and the two authors behind them, suggest a common Jewish philosophical involvement with and profound concern for the fate of communication, and more specifically of parent-child *correspondence*—which ultimately equals a creator-creation relationship. A question lingers ominously over their literature: Language, the *trait d'union* among people as species and social animals, is our most resourceful tool to share with others our experience, which in fact counts only as long as it can be communicated in language—but what if one's experience can not be communicated in language? And our experience becomes incommunicable when it has a place outside of language, when the significations of our experience cannot find a comfortable collocation in the "envelope" of our daily, common signifiers: it is the case for dreams or nightmares, of course, but also of subconscious fears and more tragically so of trauma.

In order to deliver one's experience of these realms, language as we ordinarily use it, must be transformed in order for it to deliver a message that could carry the full impact of such experiences. Jacques Derrida, in his convoluted history of the *envoi* (*La Carte Postale*, 1980) would say that language is readdressed, redestined. And we (as readers or listeners) each represent a "post" (point of arrival, departure, rerouters) in history; there is a message on its way to us that we might not be able to decipher or even receive, but that is there nevertheless and our function is of guaranteeing that this message exists, that it be sent, transmitted for the sake of the sender and to keep the hope for communication itself alive. What counts is no longer the knowledge of the message (which might be impossible) but the existence of the message and the right of the bearer of the experience to send his or her story toward its destination; to give it a destiny, so to speak.

"By giving names to things, by classifying them in species and genera, man virtually destroyed his capacity to understand anything except 'essences' and general characteristics. Words serve the practical purposes of life, but they hide from man the secret of the individual and the particular."[93] Bruck, Kafka and much of 20th-century authors pick up Lev Shestov's understanding of the limitations of utilitarian language (an understanding not extraneous to Dante or Dostoyevsky either) and readdress the Word to the service of dream or nightmare, not of knowledge. Perhaps, a particularly Jewish way of conceiving literature. The human catastrophe of the Second World War has made ever more pressing the issue of the relation between language and the experience it refers to, history and narrability of history; a discussion that has been going on ever since 1945. What if one's experience cannot be communicated, then?

[93] *Great 20th-Century Jewish Philosophers: Shestov, Rosenzweig, Buber* (1969), 15.

"Che pena mamma, che pena, tu credi sia facile essere una sopravvissuta?" (*L.m.*, 35).[94] A first question this statement raises is how to determine one has psychically survived a near-to-death encounter—other than by the sheer biological fact of having remained alive. The devotion to writing of so many Shoah survivors seem to suggest that the answer to this question is that the survivor can affirm to be alive again when he or she can *tell it*. Telling is fundamental to the elaboration of any traumatic experience. But the question remains, telling how? And telling to whom? The task of this kind of telling is arduous as it demands not only to be believed but somewhat accompanied by the listener-turned-cowitness in the revisitation of one's trauma.

"He holds him with his skinny hand,
'There was a ship,' quoth he.
'Hold off! Unhand me, grey-beard loon!'
Eftsoons his hand dropt he."

Coleridge immortalized thus the ghastly horror a common person feels at being interrupted in the course of his serene life by someone who wants to force on him an awful truth, a story the serene man not only does not want to hear but resents as having nothing to do with him. Not unlike the Ancient Mariner, the Shoah witness carries a story that, besides being too impossible to tell must also be forced on the listeners: it's a story no one volunteers to hear.

> Spesso, soprattutto negli ultimi tempi, mi sembrava di parlare al deserto, nonostante avessi davanti centinaia di teste che sembravano tutte uguali.[95]
>
> *Signora Auschwitz*, 14.

> Chi mai potrà capire Auschwitz? E come spiegarlo per renderlo credibile, reale, […]. Non può esistere un'età giusta un tempo favorevole per parlare di Auschwitz.[96]

[94] "What misery, oh mother, what misery, and you may think it's easy to be a survivor?" (*L.m.*, 35).
[95] "Often, especially in the last period, I had the feeling that I was talking to a desert, despite the hundreds of heads in front of me that seemed all the same" (*Sig.A.*, 14).

Lettera alla madre, 18.

Poetry, of course, is most effective in ordering the attention of a listener through the use of the apostrophe. It is poetry's nature, it seems, to call out "Listen!"

Poets, and Bruck among them, have always carried out the desperate task to establish a dialogue with what is around and beyond them in order to keep the metaphysical *correspondence* alive and in so doing fulfilling the human creative need to inspirit things as well as memories. Things not uttered do not exist or end up disappearing, being forgotten. Through the poetic or fictional apostrophe, poets achieve the task of calling even the inanimate to order, of making presence out of absence, of arousing understanding where not even listening is possible. The apostrophe is a figure of speech which responds to the subversive need of the artist to upset the cosmic hierarchy and dethrone the center as incapable (at least, anymore) to speak by itself. This evocative power of poetry did not elude the biblical writers, who, not by chance, chose the versification for many memorable lines particularly in the book of creation, Genesis; the Aramaic poem to mourn the dead, the *Kaddish*, is in verse; while the Jewish foundational prayer screams out loud from the congregants' chorus: "Hear oh Israel" (Deuteronomy, 6:4). A way of calling a man, the addressee of the call, to accept a poetic and de facto incarnation into a People and his destiny as plural no longer singular. Since the Hebrew God, after his first utterance, withdrew from his creation, man fills in the gap left by the divinity at best of his capabilities. Like the biblical *auctor*, an author apostrophizes "to will a state of affairs, to attempt to call it into being by asking inanimate objects to bend themselves to [his] desire," Jonathan Culler explains: "In these terms the function of

[96] "Who will ever understand Auschwitz? And how to explain it and make it credible, real [...]. There is no right age or right time to talk about Auschwitz" (*L.m.*, 18).

apostrophe would be to make the objects of the universe potentially responsive forces: [...]. The apostrophizing poet identifies his universe as a world of sentient forces."[97]

Avanti padre! Sei collaudato a ogni evenienza armato di esperienza conosci la prima linea, i fucili, le trincee anche la lotta quotidiana in tempi di abbondanza. *Az egyenlöség, apa!* [98]	Go on, father! You've been tested against all [contingencies your experience is your weapon you know the frontline, the rifles, the trenches and the daily battle even in times of riches.

No doubt, as Gubar remarked, this "shocking reanimation of the dead [in Holocaust poetry] cannot be equated with the traditional elegiac attempt to bring a particularly cherished person back into living *memory*, to assert the dead person's immortality, or to envision some union with the dead in a place elsewhere."[99]

W.H. Auden says that "poetry makes nothing happen" or rather something happens and it is the survival itself of poetry: "it survives, /A way of happening, a mouth."[100] In Bruck, we witness the encounter between apostrophe, as key to the survival of writing itself, with the untellable story of the Shoah, as key to the survival of the teller herself. Similarly to the lyrical apostrophe, the use of letters in a literary text functions as invocation to an absent addressee who is asked to halt and listen, to accept the role of the recipient of a message that *must* be delivered at all costs.[101]

It is in the optic of the address as destination of one's Being, Derrida has conjured with *La Carte Postale* a "fabulous" and convoluted "story of the address, finally of the

[97] *The Pursuit of Signs* (1981), 139.
[98] "Equality father!" in *Itenerario*, 19.
[99] "Prosopopoeia and Holocaust Poetry in English: Sylvia Plath and Her Contemporaries" (2001), 192.
[100] W.H. Auden, "In Memory of W. B. Yeats" in *Selected Poems* (1979), 82.
[101] Even in the case in which the addressee is invited to correspond and participate to the dialogue the narrator/author has started to weave, the epistolary form by its belated nature demands of each speaker to be an attentive and silent listener first.

Geschick," [102] inspired by a 13th-century illustration figuring Socrates (in the act of writing) and Plato (pointing the page to his teacher). Geschick is the German word for fate, lot; and it obviously shares its root with the verb for sending, *schicken*. Hence in a typically postmodern thought-play the *envoi* ends up conforming to *destiny*. The weird delegation figured in the image Derrida discusses, where Socrates who has "never" written is now writing, while the writer, Plato, is indicating to him what to write reverses, according to Derrida, the history of philosophy and its destination: "the letters shuttle between this apostrophe (the turning aside of discourse in a singular address) and the catastrophe (literally: an overturning) of destination which has already turned the address aside from itself. The singular address divides, fragments, goes astray, and, like a misdelivered post card, lays itself open to anyone's reading."[103] In *La Carte Postale*, Derrida talks about a problem of identity connected with the question of *envoi* and its technologies (5 September, 1977), and it is certainly true for Bruck, whose destiny and identity are entrapped and entangled in this answerless correspondence, self-destination.

The doubt about the role of one's word, the destiny of one's message is also evident in Bruck's marginless text *Lettera alla madre*. The book opens up as *in media res*: in the middle of an ongoing conversation with the mother (which unfolds somewhere beyond our earshot), the daughter exclaims *ex nihilo*: "Quante volte avevo incominciato a scriverti!"[104] Where the recent pluperfect indicates a farther past, implying "I had begun letters before this one, which is the one I actually finished writing." Therefore positioning this letter, *Lettera alla madre*, as only the last of a series of letters. This seems to be confirmed by the fact that practically all of her books are over and over *destined* to her

[102] *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*; "September, 1977," 64-67.
[103] *A Derrida Reader: Between the Blinds* (1991), 485.
[104] "How many times I had begun to write to you!"

mother, who becomes the coerced listener and witness to the desperate loneliness and wounded identity of the daughter.

Interestingly the opening line of *Lettera alla madre* is reminiscent of Adrienne Rich's address to her late husband, in *Your Native Land, Your Life* (1986): "I have resisted this for years, writing to you as if you could hear me." Where her resisting as well as Bruck's writing without sending, beginning without publishing, are the same form of reticence and maybe self-censorship. Those who live use the dead, Rich explains, but her finally having addressed her dead husband implicitly concedes to the fact that there is no other way:

> I have resisted this for years, writing to you as if you could hear me. It's been different with my father [...]. But, you, I've had a sense of protecting your existence, not using it merely as a theme for poetry or tragic musings [...]. The living, writers especially, are terrible projectionists. I hate the way they use the dead.
>
> (XXII)

Undoubtedly, also Bruck uses the dead, like the living do. But in line with so many post-war poets, especially women, Bruck recasts the role of the Muse in her literary deliverance. The classical Muse—epitomized by Homer's still vibrating *Mênin aeide thea Pêlêïadeô Achilêos* (Sing, O goddess, the anger of Achilles!)—the woman-inspirer, the light that comes to shine through the poet to illuminate the reader and to send back glory to the Muse herself, is a dead concept: and Shoah literature and poetry might have played a great role in this transformation of one of the oldest rhetorical tekhnē.

Bruck's mother is certainly not a Muse in the classical sense. This mother doesn't speak through the daughter thus illuminating us with a knowledge otherwise reserved to

the gods; neither does the passive mother shine through the words of the inspired daughter who is not spinning a eulogy in her glory.

Bruck is trying to find *a* voice, to borrow one. And this particular Muse does just that. Bruck came out of Auschwitz alive, an experience in which language itself became violence incarnate: however, the victims made it out of there speechless, without a viable language to communicate. What Bruck has to say, only one who has perished in there can make it come out, can say it best. She summons the only other person who would believe her and in front of whom she knows herself and her story and the truth of them both. It is a Muse that doesn't help the artist develop, that doesn't illuminate but rather consumes the voice that evokes her and expands darkness around. "Forse la mia lettera a te è solo uno strumento per scrivere di Auschwitz, ma tu ed Auschwitz siete inscindibili"[105] (*L.m.,* 66).

This Muse's presence does not elevate the artist but rather intimates, compels her to live on. It is a guardian, in both the positive and negative sense of the word: the protector and the jailer; the custodian angel and the kapo.

> Forse è a te che mi ribello, che altro eri tu se non Dio? Senza il Suo lato oscuro.[106]
>
> *Lettera alla madre*, 21.

> Se ti dicevo che io non avrò la tua vita, preferivi di nuovo non rispondermi, nemmeno salutarmi al ritorno da scuola. […] non dicevi niente. Non ti accorgevi di me, guardavi oltre, come Mengele il selezionatore.[107]
>
> *Lettera alla madre,* 36.

[105] "Perhaps my letter to you is only an instrument to write about Auschwitz, but you and Auschwitz are inseparable" (*L.m.*, 66).
[106] "Maybe it is against you that I rebel; what else were you but God himself? Without his dark side" (*L.m.*, 21).
[107] "When I used to tell you that I would not have the life you had, again you would not answer to me, or say hello when I came back from school. [...] you wouldn't talk to me. You didn't notice me, you looked passed me, like Mengele the Selector" (*L.m.*, 36).

Why then choosing the mother as Muse—an unhappy, distant, resentful woman—and not the father, also a Nazi victim in Dachau—a quiet, harmless man, for whom the Yiddish language has concocted an endless number of definitions: shlemiel, shlimazl, nebbish, shnuk? (A character that would make great material for Jewish comedy, were it not for the devastating circumstances of his death, which cut out all possibility, even for the Jews, of turning life's injustice into healing humor.) "Mi torturo sì. E scrivo. Scrivo a te perchè sei mia madre"[108] (*L.m.*, 66).

Fathers don't make for great Muses, it would seem. And Bruck's is no exception: one reason being that, for as beloved he had been to the daughter, he was a man and therefore from the ranks of a masculinity that is synonym with either impotence or aggression in Bruck's work and biography. Another reason for rejecting this ghost as a viable mouth for the ventriloquist daughter is his extreme emotional weakness, his disconnectedness from everything and everybody: an absentee even when alive.

Mio padre	My father
sempre colpevole perchè povero	always guilty because poor
fingeva il sonno	feigned sleep
per paura d'accuse	for fear of being accused

Itinerario, 51

> Lui [padre] non litigava con me come te. Non mi diceva mai niente. Non parlava. Era muto. Impotente. Non chiacchierava neanche con Dio come te. Lui era solo. Non parlava con nessuno. Era l'uomo più solo che abbia mai conosciuto. [...] Mi piaceva tanto. Da grande me lo sarei sposato.[109]
>
> *Lettera alla madre*, 67

The father, like the daughter, fears not God's accusation (God would not bother with this man and vice versa) but his wife's. The daughter-father relation is twofold in Bruck: in

[108] "I am torturing myself, yes, I am. And I write. I write to you because you are my mother" (*L.m.*, 66).
[109] "He [father] didn't quarrel with me like you would. He didn't say anything to me. He didn't talk. He was mute. Impotent. He didn't even chat with God like you used to. He was alone. He didn't talk to anybody. He was the loneliest man I've ever known. [...] I liked him so much. When I grew up I would have married him" (*L.m.*, 67).

fact, it's never a straight daughter-to-father relation but it invariably passes through the mother too. The father does not exist in Bruck except in relation to the other foundational term: the mother.

Nel sospiro di mia madre	In my mother's breath
C'era il giudizio universale	There was the Final Judgment

Itinerario, 51

Her total adoration for this man used to be complete. So, why do we end up forming an idea of this character as not an adequate one? Not only because the daughter herself recognizes the lacunae in the way in which her father related to his children—justifying his lackings, much like Kafka does in his letter, as the result of the historical and therefore ideological era which schooled this kind of fathers. But there is a negative judgment of the father throughout Bruck's poetry and autobiographical prose that seems to come not directly from the daughter's mouth but from his wife's. Indicating that in the macabre role-play, in which as we will see the author incarnates various dead characters, Edith somewhat embraces the mother's point of view in judging the father: and the results of the two women's analysis (the mother's and the adult writer's) end up squaring. As a daughter she had adored him: as the adult writer, sharing now her voice with her dead mother, she sees him under a double light that brings out both what was there to retain and what was there to reject of the paternal and marital figure. "Papà non ha avuto tanti figli come te!"[110] (*L.m.*, 84) We could say that the mother, whose ghost possesses the adult writer, forces her to see her idealized father under a new perspective: no longer that of an adoring child, but the perspective of an adult, a woman, the neglected and subdued wife caught between the law of the husband and that of God, with too many children to care for, and an anger and frustration that can find no reprieve.

[110] "Dad did not have as many children as you did!" (*L.m.*, 84).

Most important, her father is a person with whom she had been in love once but had not been loved back by, or at least not the way she had hoped to be (just like her mother, it would seem): and to this kind of person, as Bruck states at the very opening of *Lettera alla madre* ("come quando si incomincia una lettera a qualcuno che si ama molto senza la sicurezza di essere riamati"[111]), is hard to write letters, to reanimate them against their cooperation. "Potevo rivolgermi anche a papà ma ti confesso che non [*sic*] ho mai pensato. Non credo che avrebbe avuto la pazienza di ascoltarmi, a momenti neppure lui sapeva come mi chiamavo!"[112] (*L.m.*, 67). Therefore, there is only one place to go back to, from which the traumatized woman feels she can speak and say even the most horrible and most painful things: and that place is the Mother. The mother is the ghost, to and through which the daughter speaks—far more than the opposite turns out to be true. The trauma is displaced onto the unbridgeable distance between daughter's face/mouth and mother's face/mouth: the poet enters this non-place (*tra-verses* it) each time, at every word, at every breath, at every call "mother!" The mother is thus a polyvalent agent: she is Muse, figure of speech, projection of one's self onto an external model into which the speaking voice looks and recognizes itself; but she is also the subject of actual personal memory, organic absence, and crux of the unmitigable trauma.

In Lacanian psychoanalytical terms, the mother is the Thing (*la Chose*, or the fist Other) the depressed daughter is condemned to mourn forever.[113] *La Chose* is the lost object of desire, a prehistoric irrecoverable (but also forbidden) Other. And since poetry/writing itself is the sublimation of *la Chose* (a surrogate for prohibited jouissance),

[111] "[I]t's like beginning to write a letter to someone you love without the certainty of being loved back."
[112] "I could have also turned [address my letter] to dad, but I must confess that it never crossed my mind. I don't think he would have had the patience to listen to me, if at times he did not even remember my name!" (*L.m.*, 67).
[113] Cfr. Jacques Lacan, *L'éthique de la psychanalyse*, 1959-1960, Livre VII.

writing helps bridge the distance from the mother and stands in for her absence: ultimately, they are inseparable.

The mother is frozen into a past that repeats itself on the loop of memory. The daughter has grown up, if anything her traumas have grown even more numerous—experiences of extreme poverty, migration, rape, forced abortion, etc. Her ability to survive, keeping her ethics intact in the process, will not find the blessing or praise she begs for from the mother for whom the child/writer seems to put up all this effort. Neither will Bruck receive any absolution for the mistakes committed along the way: her sense of guilt is constant and irreparable. The relation with her mother is utterly off balance. The adult, independent, successful grown-up woman is still treated by the ghost-mother of the mnemonic visitations the way she was at five or seven years of age. And there is no hope to break this loop. The predominance of the present tense in her prose and poetry would confirm this psychic impasse. "«Maiale» ti sento ancora dire. Tu giudichi gli uomini ancora per quello che mangiano"[114] (*L.m.*, 66). Or: "È mai possibile che mi sorvegli sempre, che mi proibisci tutto? […] mi fai abbassare il capo quando dovrei alzarlo, mi insinui la pura, […] come se vivessi per grazia"[115] (*L.m.*, 82).[116]

Bruck embraces her memory unconditionally and with unrestrained sentimentality, but she manages to leave out of memory any romanticization of the past. The laceration of the loss stands side by side with a deep analysis of the relationship her younger self had with the woman she had known as her mother first and foremost—who had been a

[114] "'Porc' I still hear you say. You still judge people based on what they eat" (*L.m.*, 66).
[115] "How can it be that you keep surveiling me, all the times, that you still forbid me everything! [...] you force me to lower my head when I should hold it up straight, you instill fear in me, [...] as if I were alive only by an act of grace" (*L.m.*, 82).
[116] A powerful line from Kafka's *Letter to the Father* accuses the parent of much the same guilt-instilling crime against his son: "I could be grateful to you for everything only as a beggar is, and could never show it by doing the right things" (53).

victim of a much broader and ancient oppression than the more restricted frame of the Shoah could hold in: "famiglia e società si riflettono a vicenda"[117] (*L.m.*, 22). Much like Ruth Klüger and Sarah Kofman, also Bruck portrays a cold, jealous and even cruel mother: one with fits of jealousy over the daughter's affection toward her father. With the difference that Bruck's mother counted on an exaggerated faith in divine justice which the daughter, since very early on, refuses and that she will end up seeing as one thing with Auschwitz: God, Mother and Mengele seem to be interchangeable and at times undistinguishable in *Lettera alla madre*.

> Nei tuoi silenzi c'era qualcosa di cattivo. Di pericoloso […] Tu non mi amavi più, anzi, era meglio se non nascevo. Mi addossavi tutti i tuoi guai di madre, di moglie, di ebrea.[118]
>
> *Lettera alla madre,* 36.

Madre and Dio exchange roles continuously: both guilty of not loving closely enough, of being too distant, too judgmental, never there when she most needs them, and whose word demonstrates itself not so reliable as she would have thought. Both creators and destroyers of life: with a complete power over the daughter. Just like Mengele—Bruck never misses a chance to draw this parallel. "Come vorrei che tu dicessi che io ho torto […] a non credere nella bacchetta magica di Dio, che se c'è dovrebbe essere una specie di Mengele del cielo!"[119] (*L.m.*, 20).

At the same time, there is on the part of the writer an insane desire to affect this dialogic other, to break domination and recompose the human circle: to re-enter a safe wholeness with the mother and the past that was never of her life, not even before

[117] "Family and society reflect each other" (*L.m.*, 22).
[118] "In your silences there was something evil. Something dangerous […]. You did not love me anymore, and it would have been better if I wasn't born at all. You held me responsible for all your troubles as mother, wife, and Jewish woman" (*L.m.*, 36).
[119] "How I would love to hear you say that I was wrong [...] not to believe in the magic wand of God, who, if he exists, is probably a kind of Mengele of the heavens" (*L.m.*, 20).

Auschwitz. A wholeness that, for one, is denied to the poor, to women, to *shtetl Juden*, to outspoken girls, or to unambitious fathers.

Nascere per caso	To be born by chance
nascere donna	to be born woman
nascere povera	to be born poor
nascere ebrea	to be born Jewish
è troppo	is too much
in una sola vita.	for one single life.

Itinerario, 53

The daughter would wish for a total identification between herself and the mother: to switch places, in other words. But even regardless of Auschwitz, the two very different, separate lives would remain unreconciled. In the relationship with his symbolic as well as historical figure, there lurches a trauma that precedes Auschwitz.

Mother and daughter are no undifferentiated identity; identification between them had already come undone before the final disaster: as part of the universal mother-daughter's history.[120]

> Io mi sentivo un po' orfana da sempre. [...] Neppure tu ci giocavi con me, mai. So che non avevi tempo, ma almeno qualche sguardo dolce, un sorriso, un segno della tua presenza, del tuo amore non lo potevi dare?[121]
>
> *Lettera alla madre*, 63.

[120] When we talk about the Shoah, and the recomposition of the self after the traumatic experience and after survival, we bring the clock of creation back to a zero hour positioned either at the very entrance to the death camp or at the very exit. Primo Levi's classical text *Se questo è un uomo*, perhaps the most representative Shoah narrative, begins not from the beginning of the victim's life but as if the narrator's existence came into being because of his deportation, at the moment itself of his deportation. So does Elie Wiesel's *Night* and many other classics of the Shoah literature. These kinds of narratives leave out the self that preceded that experience as if once exploded by the magnitude of the horrific death equivalent that self became pre-historic, simply symbolic, no longer object of post-experience life: it dis-integrates. but Bruck's écriture, as well as Klüger's, demonstrates how certain writers reconnect to a sense of self, and explore it, in a quite wholesome way: although aware of the split that the camp experience caused, they also see a complete picture of their human case that includes a pre-Shoah world, pre-Shoah traumas and experiences whose importance is not diminished by the magnitude of the later traumatic episodes.

[121] "I felt somewhat orphan since always. [...] You too didn't play with me, never. I know that you had no time, but at least couldn't you turn toward me a loving glance, a smile, a sign of your presence, of your love?" (*L.m.*, 63).

Bruck talks time and again about the "sacred dead of Auschwitz" to whom her mother belongs as well. However, she strives to de-mythologize and desacralize her mother, in order to feel her more real, more alive next to her, engaging the mother directly in her literary dialogue/monologue with direct speeches and quotes. With a real mother the daughter can even be sacrilegious but not with a sacred mother—one, that is, elevated to pure symbol. "Oh scusami mamma, scusami mille volte, tu sei una morta sacra, un martire intoccabile, ed è vero, ma è anche vero che tu sei mia madre. E a mia madre io ho diritto di dire tutto"[122] (*L.m.*, 47). Otherwise it would be impossible for the daughter to make sense of the gap between the sacred mother, her poetical Muse, and the real mother, also a Muse, who was a woman full of contradictions and faults towards her family, especially her children. A victim of her own social status, of total destitution and maiming religiosity, this mother instilled a sense of guilt and inadequacy in her daughters and sons as well as in her husband, while, at the same time, being the main point of reference, a sort of divine presence that made the daily "miracles," as Bruck calls them[123], happen: producing a Shabbat dinner out of an empty pantry, baking bread despite the almost total lack of flour, fabricating a ribbon out of nowhere to give 8-year-old Edith some comfort on the cattle-train to Auschwitz.

Mia madre era una santa	My mother was a saint
faceva dei miracoli	she did miracles
nella dispensa vuota	in the empty cupboard
trovava sempre qualcosa …	she always found something...

Itinerario, 49

[122] "Oh my, forgive me, a million times forgive me, you are a sacred dead, an untouchable martyr, this is true but you are also my mother. And to my mother I have the right to say everything" (*L.m.*, 47).
[123] "Soprattutto durante le feste importanti, secondo le quali mia madre contava i mesi, le stagioni, e riusciva sempre a creare qualcosa di speciale da mettere in tavola, dal niente che avevamo, come una maga" (*L.F.*, 93).

And yet, "I nostri ultimi anni a casa cosa erano se non l'anticamera di Auschwitz?"[124] (*L.m.,* 88).

Bruck's mother (one of the "morti sacri di Auschwitz") demands absolute priority: and the daughter's poetics is rooted in resistance to this diktat. "Conoscendomi un po' mamma, pur essendo stata una figlia schiava mi sarei ribellata alla tua volontà onnipotente, come ai tuoi ordini da bambina"[125] (*L.m.*, 60). Bruck strives to affirm her love despite the fact that the truth about the complex mother-daughter relation might be difficult and even ugly at times. And resistance is shown also in the daughter's obstinacy in wanting to affect this dialogic other.

The daughter admits to the broken-up relation with an impossible mother regardless of Auschwitz and her martyrdom there: "Come avresti vissuto tu il dopo, mamma?" she interrogates the dead mother. "Io avrei litigato con te. Noi due avremmo litigato sempre? Tu non mi avresti mai approvato in niente, io avrei fatto ciò che ho fatto soffrendo il doppio. Non mi rivolgeresti più la parola come da piccola"[126] (*L.m., 35*). Her weakness is imputed to the mother's toughness as well: "dovevi accarezzarmi per rendermi più forte. Forse anche il mio corpo sarebbe più sano se tu mi avessi baciato di più dappertutto come avevo visto fare le mamme con le loro bambine nude dopo il bagno.

[124] "What were our last years at home if not the antechamber of Auschwitz?" (*L.m.*, 88).
[125] "Knowing myself, mother, even though I had been a slave-child, I would have ended up rebelling to your omnipotent will, the way I rebelled to your orders when I was a young girl" (*L.m.*, 60).
[126] "How would you have lived the aftermath, mother? [...] I would have fought with you. Wouldn't we have fought all the time? You would have never approved anything I do, I would have done everything just the same but suffering twice as much. You would probably refuse to talk to me, just like when I was little" (*L.m.*, 35).

Tu non hai mai baciato la mia pancia, i miei piedini, il mio sesso, il mio sedere"[127] (*L.m.*, 62).

Following Derrida's idea of a catastrophe (overturning) of destination, we can see how once in the process of addressing her messages Bruck is no longer totally other than her mother (9 June 1977). Bruck's dream matches Plato's dream: "Plato's dream: to make Socrates write, and to make him write what he wants, his last command, *his will*"[128]—"Ti lascerò dire ciò che conosco già, ti faro ripetere ciò che avevo sentito dalla tua bocca fino all'ultimo, fino all'ultima parola, è il tuo testamento"[129] (*L.m.*, 8).

Mother and daughter are two differently-shaped rings of the one same chain (like Plato, Socrates, Nietzsche, Derrida—Derrida says): all the daughter can hope for is maintaining her writing as the continuum between herself and her mother who comes to represent her entire past, present and future in that the mother is the dialogic Other (very much like Socrates to Plato in the treatment of the *carte postale* by Derrida) with whom Bruck needs to correspond. As in the medieval figuration at the base of Derrida's reflection, the daughter stands right behind the mother to whom she dictates the words to be written down—creating the paradox of "catastrophe," overturning the rules of the natural sequence. But in the image Socrates also holds an eraser with which he undoes as much as does the destiny (*destination*) of the text, and with it the destines of those finishing it in the future.

[127] "[Y]ou should have caressed me to make me stronger. Maybe even my body would be healthier today if you had kissed me everywhere the way I had seen mothers do with their daughters after the bath. You never kissed my tummy, my little feet, my sex, my butt" (*L.m.*, 62).
[128] *The Post Card*, "3 September 1977."
[129] "I will let you say what I already know, I will let you repeat what I heard from your mouth until the last moment, your last word, it is your testament" (*L.m.*, 8).

Bruck's solution is to try and dictate to the mother (direct her to) their story so that in the end it would be the mother writing it, thus testimony could be restituted to its proper signified. Any witness on the stand other than the dead herself, Bruck feels, invalidates the testimony and further erodes her Being. The daughter is the interpreter between signified and signifier: their respective meaning finds origin in the daughter's mediation. Her testimony, her word, her letters, deny the arbitrariness of the relationship signified and signifier, and establishes instead an internal personal logic, total motivation. *Shoah* (the simple sound of a word, a noun) without *mother* is *noise*: meaningless. But, is *mother* without the Shoah impossible? (As Saussurian semiotic logic would require?) As Lacan suggests, the real can never be fully known and so the mother remains beyond the realm of the knowable as one slides among sings: Shoah, daughter, birth, bread... all words that refer back to *mother* but are never mother—who is lost for good, who remians *clandestinus*, of a "secret destiny." To use one of Lacan's strongest metaphors, the mother is beyond a black mirror: the daughter knows she is there but cannot experience *it*, know *it* fully other than as lack; she knows that reality only as "mancanza," absence. "Thus I have lost my life writing in order to give this song a chance, unless it were in order to let it silence itself, by itself. You understand that whoever writes must indeed ask himself what it is asked of him to write, and then he writes under the dictation of some addressee [...]. Thereby everything is corrupted, there is only the mirror, no more image, they [Plato, Socrates] no longer see each other, no longer destine each other, nothing more."[130]

Bruck's "catastrophic" dictation to her mother has to go on for the daughter to know and re-cognize herself and ultimately stay alive. Without this illusionistic dialogue

[130] Derrida, *ibid.*, 143-144.

not only the mother would be lost a second time but the daughter would vanish as well: "E se mi dimentico di te mi dimentico di me. Finché io ci sarò, tu ci sarai, finché tu ci sarai io ci sarò. Solo la morte spezzerà la corda ombelicale"[131] (*L.m.,* 47).

But whose death will break the chord that links mother and daughter? Death has already intervened to cut that chord: it happened in Auschwitz, at the very first selection, upon getting off the train. Two books recount this scene in two different ways: in the autobiography *Chi ti ama così*, Bruck recalls this event as follows:

> Io stringevo il braccio della mamma con tuta la mia forza. Improvvisamente sentii che un soldato mi spingeva verso destra e quasi sussurrava: –Destra, destra!
> Mi rifiutai. Mia madre si buttò in ginocchio, e parlò in tedesco al soldato. – Lasciatemi la mia piccola bambina, lasciatemela, non portatela via! – disse. Ma il soldato la respinse con il fucile e a forza di botte mi costrinse ad andare a destra.[132]

While in *Lettera alla madre*, the situation is recalled thus:

> Obbedisci! Obbedisci!" gridavi lasciando la mia mano, il mio corpo, anzi, spingendomi via da te, consegnandomi al soldato, alle sue botte per mandarmi dall'altra parte, nella direzione opposto alla tua.[133]
>
> *Lettera alla madre*, 8.

For the sake of accuracy, the author explained to me during an interview that the facts occurred as explained in *Chi ti ama così.* The two versions of this scene complement rather than contradict each other. It is all too plausible that in the terror and confusion of that last moment the mother might have reacted instinctively at first trying to keep her

[131] "And if I forget you, I forget myself. Until I'll be around, you'll be around, until you'll be around I'll be around. Only death will tear up the umbilical cord."
[132] "I was holding on to mother's arm with all my strength. Suddenly, I realized that a soldier was pushing me toward the right and was kind of whispering: 'To the right, to the right!' I resisted. My mother got down on her knees and implored the soldier in German: "Leave me my baby girl, leave her to me, don't bring her away!" she said. But the soldier shoved her aside with his rifle and wouldn't stop hitting me until I moved to the right line" (*C.t.a.c.*, 25).
[133] "'Obey! Obey!' you screamed while letting my hand go, my body, and pushing me away from you even, handing me over to the soldier, to his fury that meant to force me to the other side, in a direction opposite to yours" (*L.m.*, 8).

daughter with her and as soon as the adult realized in fact that the soldier's intent was to save Edith then she resolved to force the daughter away from her into salvation. What counts is that in her revisitation of this horrific scene, Bruck gives voice to her own split feelings toward the mother—the same that recur over and over throughout her works. A mother that is at the same time creator, nurturer, life, and destroyer, evil stepmother, death.

"In quel momento io ho capito che Dio era una donna non un uomo, un po' come te, creatrice di ogni bene e di ogni male"[134] (*L.m.*, 80-81).

Despite the two versions of the *selektion* scene, the result doesn't change: death, as the author predicts, has indeed torn apart the daughter from the mother already. Yet the umbilical chord, as Bruck says, is still in place: this chord is writing itself. The text is the umbilical chord between mother and daughter: and the life of the text, its continuation, its being written, i.e. *destined*, depends as much on the daughter's life as the daughter's life depends on the writing, *destination*, of the text. And this umbilical chord expands beyond the linear trajectory between mother and daughter, the original dyad of all correspondences and communication, to embrace the fate of humanity and its history.[135] Indeed, the "evocation of the mother in *Lettera alla madre* is not simply the evocation of another being, but of an-Other whose presence is essential to the speaker's existence [...]."[136]

[134] "In that moment I realized that God is a woman not a man, somewhat similar to you, creator of every good and of every evil" (*L.m.*, 80-81).
[135] Barbara Johnson also brings up this same point à propos of the mother-child relation in abortion poetry ("Apostrophe, Animation and Abortion," 36).
[136] Adalgisa Giorgio, *Strategies for Remembering*, in *European Memories of the Second World War* (1999), 250.

Mother in Bruck becomes a primary word, in the sense used by Martin Buber talking about the Man-God encounter: "Primary words do not signify things, but they intimate relations. Primary words do not describe something that might exist independently of them, but being spoken they bring about existence. [...] If *Thou* is said, the *I* of the combination *I-Thou* is said along with it. [...] The primary word *I-Thou* can only be spoken with the whole being. [...]"[137] We could translate Martin Buber's concept into an a-religious dyad whose core is the mother-daughter relation. This daughter's literature resets the *I-Thou* encounter as not beyond the realm of human communication, as theorized by Buber. "When a primary word is spoken the speaker enters the word and takes his stand in it."[138] Bruck seems to pick up on the I-Thou symbiosis even by way of asserting time and again to be her own mother. She declares to look somewhat like her, sound like her, and that in the moment of worst agony (particularly in the act of writing) she feels she is her mother's personification. She constantly penetrates and exits that other person, the other self, in and out: remaining exhausted and burnt by the experience. As Kai Erikson explains about the workings of trauma: "[s]omehting alien breaks in on you, smashing through whatever barriers your mind has set up as a line of defense. It invades you, takes you over, becomes a dominating feature of your interior landscape [...] and in the process threatens to drain you and leave you empty."[139] This alien invasion, that in Bruck is willed, is a mediatic experience: in that it mediates, reconcile through language, past and present; it reanimates the inanimate and nonexistent; and bridges over past and future, latching the solitude of the victim onto the outside world which she also

[137] *The Writings of Martin Buber* (1958), 43.
[138] *Ibid.*, 44.
[139] "Notes on Trauma and Community" in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (1995), 183.

wants to call to attention, force to listen to her story. Behind each "Listen!" there brews a "Let me talk" through which the speaker implores her right to be.

Ti rivedo nel tentativo	I see you struggling
di infilare l'ago	to push the thread through the needle
sento la tua bocca	I feel your mouth
da cui sgorgano improperi	from which insults flow out

Itinerario, 45

[A]nche tu madre leonessa a carponi …	[Y]ou too mother lioness down on all four…
Senza sapere la tua e la mia destinazione	Without knowing your or my destination
per troppo amore volevi la mia morte	for an excess of love you were willing my death

Quel pensiero, (*Itinerario*) 25

The lyrical apostrophe is the form which resurrects the dead, the absent, by bringing the evoked Thou back into the dialogue from which they are "naturally" excluded. Barbara Johnson analyzes this specific effect of the apostrophe in the poetry on abortion by contemporary women poets, which, she observes, expels the speaker into otherness.[140] And in speaking about the particular poems she analyzes, Johnson concludes that "each of these poems exists, finally, because a child does not."[141] Abortion poems are thematically about a life that has been lost: but Johnson's intelligent analysis proves that this premise might be deceiving, for "the life that is lost may be someone else's."[142]

"Di figli non ne ho, lo sai, come avrei potuto metter al mondo qualcuno dopo la tua fine? Ho sempre abortito mamma. Ecco un'altra ragione per cui rinnegarmi"[143] (*L.m.*, 32). The suffix *mi* indicating the direct object pronoun "me" as well as reflexive particle "myself" in Italian creates the intended ambiguity in this sentence, where a double meaning is at work: both "one more reason for you to repudiate me" as well as "one more

[140] "Apostrophe, Animation, and Abortion" (1986), 36.
[141] *Ibid.*
[142] *Ibid.*, 32.
[143] "I have never had children, as you know, how could I have brought someone into this world after the way you died? I have always aborted them, mother. Here is another reason to be repudiated" (*L.m.*, 32).

reason for me to repudiate myself" are possible readings. "L'amore materno mamma spesso mi fa paura,"[144] (*L.m.*, 63) Bruck's persona admits in trying to explain the obstacle her past, Auschwitz, and her rapport with her mother represent to her own becoming mother.

Going back to our initial comparison with a letter from another son who tries to involve the parent into a dialogue to which the historical father refuses or is inabilitated to participate, it is interesting to see how Kafka explains similarly to his father his reasons for not marrying: he laments his exile from that territory which is the exclusive domain of the father in these terms: "[M]arrying is barred to me because it is your very own domain. Sometimes I imagine the map of the world spread out and you stretched diagonally across it. And I feel as if I could consider living in only those regions that either are not covered by you or are not within your reach. And in keeping with the conception I have of your magnitude, these are not many and not very comforting regions—and marriage is not among them." [145] Herman Kafka was to the territory of masculinity and therefore husbandhood, what Sarah (Edith's mother) had been on the map of womanhood and therefore motherhood. Unmatchable: inimitable both for their respective qualities in these assumed roles, as for their faults and mistakes in carrying them out.

In Bruck's case, the psychic picture of her relationship with her mother is of course complexified by the difficulty of talking to a mother who is not only her mother but also a martyr, a symbol of sacrality no longer only private but reclaimed by each Jew, posterity and Jewish Memory. So that this woman, already so gigantic in the daughter's life when alive, is even bigger and harder to disempower in/because of her death. It is the

[144] "Maternal love, mother, often scares me" (*L.m.*, 63).
[145] *Letter to His Father/Brief an den Vater* (1966), 113.

grandiosity of the father's power as much as its crushing devastation and the superiority of the mother's saintliness as much as her irredeemable condemnation that Franz Kafka and Edith Bruck must defuse via their writing; escaping as far as possible in the territories of the mind. Paradoxically, this fugue is not meant to interrupt a conversation with the parent but to actually establish one. On the philosophical plane, this kind of withdrawal has potent creative power and a long history in Jewish mysticism.[146] On the historical plane the problem of audience, in a broader way, is a problem that predates the Shoah, for Bruck as well as for Klüger: daughters and sons, in Jewish families and patriarchal Europe, seem to be born into a condition of soundlessness. In the case of women, of Bruck and Klüger for instance, the voice might even be there but the world around them reserves for it only a marginal space: thus affecting their identity as speakers. "Se tu mi avessi ascoltata una sola volta fino in fondo, forse non ti scriverei adesso" (*L.m.*, 78).

Bruck's dialogue with the lost mother shows how the question of daughterhood, as much as the one of unexpressed motherhood (in abortion or miscarriage), is to be recast as a question of death, self-erasure, suicide on the part of the apostrophizing voice. It's about her own death, the loss of her identity, that Bruck the poet and the author constantly talks about, that she sees incarnated in the ghost of the mother, which uncannily literalizes the trope of the voice from the otherworld. Here, since it is a daughter to write letters to the dead, murdered mother, we witness an interesting twist: the daughter gives life back to the mother, re-births her mother because her own birth (literary as well as biological) is imperiled by the mother's absence. Like a voodoo of

[146] The Kabbalah talks of a similar process called *tzim tzum*, this time divine, at the basis of creation: at the origin of time, the withdrawal (death) of the creator has allowed for the life of the creation—at the cost, of course, of an unbridgeable reciprocal distance between the two.

sorts, literature makes the encounter between the living and dead possible but that also turns upside down the rules of nature. "Sarei stata una buona madre per te mamma, se tu fossi vissuta come me"[147] (*L.m.*, 59).

Much like a pregnant woman who feels the baby's little heart beating within herself, Bruck demands of the mother to feel her heart as if she were still in her womb. "Non mi senti nel tuo ventre? Non senti battere il mio cuore? Se non mi senti, non senti più niente"[148] (*L.m.*, 47). (Where the Italian verb "sentire" expresses indistinguishably the English "to feel" and "to hear," "to heed.")

Il tuo latte era già avvelenato	Your milk was already poisoned
da un presagio minaccioso	by a threatening presage
le tue braccia stanche	your exhausted arms
non mi offrivano protezione	offered me no protection
i tuoi occhi erano consumati dal pianto…	your eyes worn out from crying ...
la tua bocca s'apriva solo per pregare	your mouth moved only to pray
o maledire me l'ultima nata che chiedeva rifugio	or to curse me the last born in search of [shelter
dalle sagome umane che colpivano nel buio …	from the human silhouettes hitting in the dark...

Infanzia (*Itinerario*), 11

"The absent, dead, or inanimate entity addressed is thereby made present, animate, and anthropomorphic. Apostrophe is a form of ventriloquism through which the speaker throws voice, life, and human form into the addressee, turning its silence into mute responsiveness" Johnson observes. And this is the way Bruck turns her text into the resonance-body of her mother's death. She forces the reader to listen to the mother's story, which however remains untold. The frozen, soundlessness of this place draws us into the traumatic dimension within which the author is speaking. Bruck's is an apostrophe without true animation. The ventriloquism the daughter

[147] "I would have been a good mother to you, mum, if you had survived as I did" (*L.m.*, 59).
[148] "Don't you feel me in your womb? Can't you feel my heart beat? If you can't feel me, then there's nothing you can feel anymore"(*L.m.*, 47).

practices in order to make us hear the mother's voice is indeed a sheer illusion. When we hear the mother's voice, even when signaled between quotation marks, we are only witnessing a quotation: we are never really hearing the mother, but a quotation of that question by the mother which the autographed author is striving to re-address. In the process, redestining herself. What *Lettera alla madre* both thematizes and incarnates as a text and as a genre is the "impossibility of closure and of totalization (that is the impossibility of coming into being) of all textual systems made up of tropological substitutions," as de Man says of all autobiographical enterprises.[149] Self-knowledge is not the point, neither is it possible.

Bruck's discovery is that the living and the dead after Auschwitz share the same incapability to describe what happened there: she had hoped and still does that the mother could say it best, in the daughter's stead, but this message doesn't quite come out. Once laid out on the page, it feels like a futile exercise in self-expression, which does not free the author, as she had hoped, from the malignant "creature" she has been carrying inside herself since Auschwitz. Therefore, as an act of revolt against words that generate only more unsatisfaction, Bruck struggles with an unexpressed wish to withdraw from language: and the awareness of the impossibility to do so, lest one dies, exacts a heavy toll of physiological and psychological agony. « C'est l'être *séparé* de mon inconscient par un nouveau transfert à un nouvel autre ou à un nouvel idéal, que je suis capable d'*écrire* la dramaturgie de ma violence et de mon désespoir cependant inoubliables »:[150] Julia Kristeva concludes that writing is the melancholic's answer to an impossible life : the alternative to suicide or better its

[149] De Man, *ibid.* (1984), 71.
[150] *Soleil noir*, (1987), 216.

aesthetic sublimation. And since writing about the mother means talking about the Shoah, the daughter is forced despite herself, despite the physical and emotional pain this produces, to keep bearing oral and written witness to what happened to all Jews, to all the dead.

Bruck talks in all her texts about the physical torment connected with her writing about the Shoah, the unbearable nausea caused by going from school to school talking to students of all ages about it. She will have to carry her albatross alone, and wander around in search of audiences harder and harder to come about and never stop: not writing is not an option, as long as death must be refused. The depression and melancholia that grips the narrator is, in Kristeva's words, "un gouffre de tristesse, douleur incommunicable qui nous absorbe parfois, et souvent durablement, jusqu'à nous faire perdre le goût de toute parole, de tout acte, le gout même de la vie ».[151] Not surprisingly, the very center of Bruck's severe physical indisposition is located in the belly:

La solitudine è profonda	My solitude is deep
un ventre materno buio e silenzioso	a maternal womb that is dark and quiet
tutto è ovattato	all wadded
i rumori	sounds
giungono da lontano	arrive from afar
il passato come corda ombelicale	the past nourishes like umbilical chord
nutre tutto è perfetto	everything is perfect
come la vita non nata	like unborn life
come la morte mai conosciuta.	like death not experienced.

Itinerario, 67

One cannot overlook the fact that the core of Bruck's deeply physical wretchedness, the belly, is also that part of her body on which Mengele's eyes had rested, considering her candidacy for his sadistic experiments: "E io lo vedevo, lui era lì, e stringevo lo stomaco

[151] *Ibid.*, 13.

e la pancia con tutte le mie forze e mi dicevo che non mi vede, non deve vedermi, che i suoi occhi maledetti cadano su qualcun altro"[152] (*L.m.*, 47).

It is this impossibility to testify to anybody but the dead, that annuls in Bruck any possibility for her maternity: "È un bene che io non abbia dovuto raccontare niente ai miei figli. Forse non li ho avuti proprio per questo"[153] (*L.m.*, 18):

> Se avessi una figlia, forse sarebbe come Sara, la bellissima Sara che ha succhiato il latte d'Auschwitz e nei suoi splendidi occhi c'è una specie di resistenza, di ostilità verso la vita come aveva un grande scrittore italiano amico che si è suicidato da poco.[154]
>
> *Lettera alla madre*, 32-33.

Bruck's train of thoughts goes from womb to death, passing through all the possible children in between—those who were born (her niece Sarah), those who remained only potentiality (her eight aborted fetuses), herself as child, to those who were murdered. Again it is death at the very root of Bruck's writing: the death of the mother, Primo Levi's death (*amico che si è suicidato*), the death we bring to other people directly or indirectly, consciously or unconsciously even in the act of writing ("one kills someone by addressing a letter to him that is not destined to him," declares Derrida). And our existential status of children (we are all someone's children) makes every poem or letter to a mother the letter to all mothers from all the children—"e i figli sono spesso dei vampiri"[155] (*L.m.*, 63). This letter's metaphysical movement then makes this a *panletter*:

[152] "And I saw him, he was there, and I held my stomach and my belly with all my strength telling myself that he won't see me, he can't see me, may his cursed eyes fall on someone else" (*L.m.*, 46-47).
[153] "It is for the best that I never had to explain anything to children of my own. Perhaps this is exactly why I never had them" (*L.m.*, 18).
[154] "Had I had a daughter, perhaps she'd be like Sara, beautiful Sara who sucked Auschwitz milk and in her splendid eyes there is a kind of resistance, of hostility toward life, the same you could find in a great Italian writer, my friend, who recently committed suicide" *L.m.*, 32-33).
[155] "[A]nd children are often vampires" (*L.m.*, 63).

"a billboard that we have on our backs and to which we can never really turn around" as Derrida says of his *pancarte*.[156]

Motherhood and daughterhood are bonded by the repetition and infinite reproduction of death: separation, distancing, detachment, and destination. One sends the other onto a different and differing trajectory by the simple act of being. In synthesis maternity is a two-way movement: the mother lets go of the child (which is a part of herself), likewise the child lets go of the safety of this larger part of itself, the womb, the mother to which it belongs. That "body of yours, large, where I would have loved to return" (*L.m.*, 76), the narrator tells her mother. The death of the mother, therefore, inevitably rehashes while reenacting the despair of the loss already experienced at the moment of birth. *Trauerarbeit* in German means the labour of mourning, indicating that the correspondence between life and death is hard work (as Ruth Klüger described it) for the living. In Bruck, we encounter both a fundamental and successive mourning at play: the former goes back to the fundamental loss of the Thing (*la Chose*) at birth, and the latter being rooted in the later traumatic loss. The "onda nera" (black wave) which Bruck laments and faces now and again has a lot in common with the « soleil noir » described by Kristeva in the homonymous book. "A volte m'invade la felicità senza nessuna ragione, a volte, nei momenti in cui sono più sola, mi invade un'onda nera [...] allora come l'amico scrittore suicida penso che non c'è più speranza, non c'è mai stata e non ci sarà mai"[157] (*L.m.*, 71). But « D'où vient ce soleil noir ?"[158]

[156] *Ibid.*, "9 June 1977."
[157] "Sometimes without apparent reason I am invaded by happiness, sometimes when I feel totally alone I am invaded by a black wave, [...] then like my friend, the writer who committed suicide, I think that there is no hope, that there's never been and there'll never be hope" (*L.m.*, 71).
[158] Kristeva, *ibid.* (1987), 13.

Death begins with the mother/daughter irrecoverable separation at birth, continues with the separation when the mother gives life (the possibility for an extension of life) to the daughter by pushing her to the right-hand side of the *selektion* line, and only partially ends with the separation by death in the *lager*. In the reelaboration of the *selektion* scene in Auschwitz, Bruck makes clear the tremendous dimension of her mourning when in one single scene she collapses three moments of loss: mother lost to the daughter, daughter lost to the mother, any such reproduction of oneness, wholeness, lost to the writer forever. As Giorgio observed, the mother/daughter separation in Auschwitz "makes the daughter aware of the previous merger with her mother."[159]

> Di colpe ne avevi, se sono colpe, solo con noi, tuoi figli piegati alla tua volontà fino all'ultimo, quando mi dicesti: "Vai! Obbedisci! Vattene! Va via via obbedisci a tua madre!" E avevo obbedito. E perciò vivo. E sono felice di essere viva. Mi avevi partorito con dolore inesprimibile per la seconda volta.[160]

In a way, Bruck's letters and poems are underscored by abortion. They are the author's way to expel outside of herself her creation—which is a sickening and sickened creation; which is death itself. The words she put together spell out death, Auschwitz, loss, no matter how she combines them. Writing therefore paradoxically saves her while *destining her to death* all the time in the process. "Credevo, mi illudevo, che con ogni mio libro sarebbe uscito un pezzo del figlio-mostro concepito ad Auschwitz. Forse per questo non li ho mai amati, mai aperti dopo che avevano visto la luce, pur sperando che non restassero orfani, e trovassero dei genitori adottivi"[161] (*Sig.A.*, 16).

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[159] Giorgio, *ibid.* (1999), 251.

[160] "You were at fault, if one can call it fault, only with us your children, completely subdued to your will until the end, when you told me: 'Go! Obey! Go! Move away, do as your mother tells you!' and I had obeyed. And for this I am alive. And I am happy to be alive. With inexpressible pain, you gave birth to me a second time" (*L.m.*, 92).

[161] "I thought, I deluded myself, that at every new book a piece of the child-monster conceived in Auschwitz would finally come out. Perhaps this is why I never loved my books, never opened them once

Maternity is the axis of all metaphors in Bruck: Auschwitz, writing, sickness. Death, which as we saw is at various metaphorical levels "mother" in Bruck, is an infectious illness; it sickens the author and her imagination without reprieve. There is no medication to cure this illness, of course: "I medici non potevano sapere, né sospettare in me il mostro. Era possibile che non volessi separarmene neppure io. Per poter tenere in vita i miei morti e tutti i morti?"[162] (*Sig.A.*, 18).

Writing is one of the two possible answers to the "onda nera" (black wave) that's always in the lurch: the same one that has overcome so many survivors, such as Paul Celan, Tadeusz Borowski, Sarah Kofman. Also for Primo Levi, Bruck's dear and maybe closest friend, the point where he could no longer write a book (or feared he wouldn't have written any) was the moment he had to let go of his life. In remembering a conversation with him, Bruck reports Levi's torment in old age and his terror of having nothing left to say: " 'Te ne rendi conto?' concludeva in fretta. 'Non so se farò un libro'"[163] (*L.m.*, 71).

About Levi's death, which Bruck is among the many who firmly believe it was suicide, she asks herself: "Da quale fantasma stava fuggendo forse pensando di sopravvivere ancora una volta? Ed è sopravvissuto di nuovo. Ci è riuscito. È vivo"[164] (*L.m.*, 72). This seemingly absurd declaration is explained by the same technique the author applies to the resuscitation of her family's dead: "Io non l'ho mai pensato morto. Quando pronuncio il suo nome è il nome di un vivo, come quando lo leggo, i suoi libri

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they saw the light, though hoping they would not remain orphans but find adoptive parents" (*Signora Auschwitz*, 16).

[162] "Doctors could not guess or suspect the monster that lived in me. It was possible that I myself didn't want to let go of it. To keep my dead and all the dead alive?" (*Sig. A.*, 18).

[163] "'Can you imagine?' he would quickly conclude, "I don't know if I'll ever write another book again'" (*L.m.*, 71).

[164] "From what phantom was he fleeing, perhaps thinking that he would survive once again? And he did survive again. He made it. He is alive" (*L.m.*, 72).

sono più vivi che mai, solo quando guardo una delle sue tante fotografie da vivo, si vede che è morto"[165] (*L.m.*, 72). All names, therefore, are names of live people. There is no such thing as a name referring to a thing that *is* not. Parenthetically, this indirectly brings us back to that original doubt the writer has always had about the existence of a god who in Judaism indeed has no name, who can not be called, addressed: and who will exist, reunite with his creation, only once the right composition of his name's letters will be figured out—a job for which too much piety is required, and piety has proved not of Bruck's world. Once god is neutralized this way, it is natural for the author not to be afraid of him: "Al contrario di te mamma, io non ho paura di Dio, solo degli esseri umani" (*L.m.*, 74).

Talking to ghosts seems to be all that remains to the survivors in order, paradoxically, not to lose their identity and reality as living ghosts themselves (dead after Auschwitz despite biological survival). We find this same imaginative reanimation connected to the theme of suicide in Klüger: "I wonder whether I could make myself drown in a river like the Hudson [...]. And so I stumbled through days of psychic imbalance with suicidal thoughts, talking to my ghosts" (*S.A*, 191).

Also Klüger has kept alive a dialogue with the murdered father: and through literature she drags him into a direct conversation which epitomizes the fiction of all autobiographies as impossible projects. "I talked to the ghost of my father. 'There, you see,' I said, 'you had no friends. Not what I would call friends'" (*S.A.*, 190).

Death haunts the Shoah victim: first in the *lager* as an opprobrium to be avoided at all costs, then as a tempting place in which to find refuge. Ruth Klüger voices clearly

[165] "I never thought him dead. When I pronounce his name it is the name of a living man, like when I read him, his books are more alive than ever, only when I look at one of his many photographs from when he was still alive, I can see that he is dead" (*L.m.*, 72).

this terrible state, when she explains: "In New York the fear of death which had haunted me in Auschwitz gradually turned into its opposite, into depression, the temptation of death" (*S.A.*, 184). Also for Bruck writing is the antidote to (physical) suicide.

"Sul dattiloscritto non resta traccia di sé"[166] Bruck says of the creative and as much as auto-annihilating process of writing (*L.m.*, 32). Getting lost into one's own memory and personal referents is a strategy of Bruck's narrative: the writer wanders along the map of her memories, that to the outsider looks like a nightmarish labyrinth which at every corner shows a different face—the mother is at one point nurturer, at another, murder, and this Doubleness repeats itself for almost all personae and places in Bruck's memory. There seems to be no desire to help the reader find a way, a comfortable path within this nightmare: because as such, as unsolvable trauma, is the way in which Bruck still lives in it herself.

To the narrator, writing *to* the mother means writing *about* one's identity. Structurally the letter becomes the container (envelop) of the story of the daughter, the story of a mother (who can no longer tell it herself), and the story of Jewish history (which is under constant risk of erasure via rewriting). The letter holds together—like an umbilical chord—the fractured identity of the survivor by making the irremediable separation of the mother/daughter *continuum* the paradigm of life's impossible healing: from personal and universal trauma, from Auschwitz.

Fratello mio numero cavia torcia	Brother number guinea-pig torch
cenere albero	ash tree
tra milioni di alberi	among millions of trees
genitori alberi	tree parents
nella terra amata così amata da nostra madre	in the beloved land so beloved to our mother
caro albero fratello	dear tree brother

[166] "No trace of oneself is left on the typescript" (*L.m.*, 32).

non dirle che io non sono ramo figlia
ramo sorella
ma madre radice
che vi nutre con sangue
v'innaffia con lacrime
vi tiene in vita con il suo grido
con il suo respiro
finché il vostro ramo
non mi prenda nelle sue braccia buie.

don't tell her that I am not a branch daughter
branch sister
but root mother
who feeds you all with her blood
waters you with her tears
keeps you all alive with her shriek
with her breath
until your branch
will take me in its dark embrace.

Bátyám/Fratello mio (*Itinerario*), 29

Bruck is mother to the dead in that she births them via her witness. Again the axiom god-writer-witness: like god the writer can create as much as destroy, and so does the witness with her testimony.

Bruck seeks and cherishes a "visionary company"[167]: it is the uncanny double to which she herself must give voice in order to bring forth a visionary dialogue. The daughter wears on the mask of the death and speaks through it: in this play (in the German sense of *Spiel* as both game, play and representation) self-representation is at play. The dead mother is able (again) to give birth to the daughter: but through this second birth, the daughter is necessarily born dead. Keeping the mother alive is essential to the life of the writer, and in so doing what is reaffirmed every time is not the life of the mother, of course, but the death, or dead life, of the daughter.

The mother is not talking to us: the daughter is. "For even those poets who strenuously decrease their distance from the 'deathmask' disclose an awareness of the

[167] Susan Gubar, *ibid.* (2001), 197.

inescapable inauthenticity at the core of their undertaking. Bestowing presence onto the absent dead is inherently oxymoronic."[168]

The letter to the mother becomes itself mother to the writer. As de Man has pointed out regarding Wordsworth's *Essays upon Epitaphs*, the larger question we must reckon with when dealing with autobiographical discourse is one of a discourse of self-restoration.[169] Following De Man's conclusions on Wordsworth's poetic movement in the course of establishing the history of the epitaph as an hyperbolic writing of his own epitaph/autobiography, we can say that also Bruck moves "without compromise, from death *or* life to life *and* death." [170] Surpassing the and/or contradiction with a reconciliation and collapse of the and/or into each other. "It is a system of mediations that converts the radical distance of an either/or opposition in a process allowing movement from one extreme to the other by a series of transformations that leave the negativity of the initial relationship (or lack of relationship) intact."[171]

The mother, which as we said is both a natural being and a metaphor, turns into a figure of knowledge: she is the "eye that reads the text of the epitaph."[172] The daughter looking at the mother looking at her (the daughter), and the whole scene moved or animated by language, can work only through the application of the figure of prosopopoeia, a figurative incarnation by means of language, or "the fiction of an apostrophe to an absent, deceased, or voiceless entity, which posits the possibility of the latter's reply and confers upon it the power of speech."[173] De Man identifies in the

[168] Gubar, *ibid.* (2001), 196-197.
[169] De Man, *ibid.*, (1984), 74.
[170] *Ibid.*
[171] *Ibid.*
[172] *Ibid.*, 75.
[173] *Ibid.,* 75-76.

prosopopoeia the mask itself of autobiography. In Bruck's dialectics between mother and daughter, history and language, a displacement is at work: the prosopopoeia provides the space for this displacement. It happens in the face (*prosopon*) the author provides herself with in order to speak. The macabre twist in Bruck occurs in the realization that the fictional voice-from-beyond-the-grave [174] is indeed *out of metaphor*: her voice is genuinely from beyond the grave. So, to recuperate de Man's understanding of Wordsworth's auto-addressed epitaph—"an unlettered stone would leave the sun suspended in nothingness" [175] —we could say that an unlettered book leaves the mother/reader suspended in nothingness.

Language itself, as sheer mimesis of something that otherwise is not, is a mask: its emptiness is filled by the literalized memory of a past that is irrecoverable.

The effort of annulling nothingness at all costs, despite the impracticality of this project, costs the author of this autobiography her own suspension into the world of death. She must remain among the dead ones in order to be able to speak for them. She is their medium as much as they are hers. As I will later show, this is made particularly clear and vivid by a poem addressed to her father, "Uguaglianza padre!"

The letter puts back the name and the voice of the dead and the deadly living into a text: but being the voice grounded in language paradoxically intervenes to erase the letter itself. This ironic movement, or defacement as de Man calls it, creates the Mother as it erases *it* and creates the daughter as it affirms simultaneously her non-existence or mimetic value. She cannot be daughter to a mother that *is* not. And she cannot be witness

[174] *Ibid.*, 77.
[175] *Ibid.*.

to an event she was not *in*. And she cannot be voice in an autobiography that destined her to an unintended addressee (the by-standing reader).

In order to negate these impossibilities, Bruck goes on (throughout her artistic production) attempting to bring about the longed-for epiphany. But, much the same way de Man discovers the impossibility for a true epiphany in Romantic poetry's apostrophe (particualry in Hölderlin's *Wein und Brot*), so does Bruck in her prose as well as in her verses. "[T]he word that designates a desire for an epiphany but necessarily fails to be an epiphany, because it is pure origination"[176] in our case is Mother. What is always there, hidden on purpose by our volition, can not give itself as epiphany but simply discovery, or rediscovery: i.e., recognition.

Even the stylistic choice of language in Bruck serves the purpose of this recognition: both in her poetry and prose, Italian sheds off its proverbial adjectival richness; there are only very short clauses, even the variety of conjunctions is reduced to a minimum. Direct yet bare Bruck's language struggles to say what it has to say in the most telegraphic of manners. It is the language of the depressed: "repetitive et monotone. Dans l'impossibilité d'enchainer, la phrase s'interrompt, s'épuise, s'arrête. Les syntagmes mêmes ne parviennent pas à se formuler. Un rythme répétitif, une mélodie monotone, viennent dominer les séquences logiques brisées et les transformer en litanies récurrentes, obsédantes.»[177] Deprived of its literary beauty, Italian becomes but a means to an end: that of recognition. To make sure that things are the same, that the past hasn't moved an inch, that one's certainties for as cruel and unbearable they might be are still there intact, Bruck repeats her telegraphic messages over and over with similar rhythms

[176] *Ibid., 6.*
[177] Kristeva, *ibid.* (1987), 45.

and in similar forms. She tries to use language, rather than succumb to being used by it. Paul de Man wrote about our everyday use of language, that "words are exchanged and put to a variety of tasks, but they are not supposed to originate anew; on the contrary, one wants them to be as well-known, as 'common' as possible, to make certain that they will obtain for us what we want to obtain. They are used as established signs to confirm that something is recognized as being the same as before; and re-cognition excludes pure origination."[178] There is a point in refusing that total origination of which the poetic injunction "Come!" "Live" "Talk" "Bloom" etc. is capable and responsible for materializing in poetic language. "But in poetic language words are not used as signs, not even as names, but in order to *name.*"[179] What could a Shoah survivor's word originate but death itself? The naming of the ghosts flings open the door to their tombs.

Bruck lives her emotional and psychic life at the threshold between language and silence. Where the poetic logos can give back the deceitful yet lenitive illusion of a return to the source: but this return is an *iter* back to the inferno. The withdrawal into silence, therefore, seems to be the only shelter for the ailing poet. How is silence obtained without renouncing testimony? Without dying a second time? Bruck finds a ingenious compromise to this macabre *pil pul*: she writes undestined letters. Letters whose true addressee will not receive or answer. The addresser will imagine and fantasize on the answers of the addressee, but this animation is only the projection on the wall of the daughter's shadow: memory makes light within the darkness of the daughter's mind, and projects outside, on the wall of a page, the figurines animated by the daughter's words or creative "breath".

[178] De Man, *ibid.* (1984), 3.
[179] *Ibid.*.

For the Jewish God, the Word is One (one single interminable *fiat*) and contains all the *letters* that destine the infinitely varied creation. For the pious Jewish mother, words are there to be combined in ever more sorrowful prayers to god inviting him to join in a conversation, a correspondence, he has withdrawn from. To the godless daughter words and *letters* are empty graves that echo back her solitude, loss and desperation. If *at the beginning there was the Word*, at the end there is only silence.

It is exactly that negation of permanence implied in all beginning and ending that Bruck would like to achieve. Because the "empty shell" left behind by an entity that was discontinued by death and by a birth represents a specificity, as de Man explains, to which the author does not want to go back .[180] "We can understand origin only in terms of difference: the source springs up because of the need to be somewhere or something else than what is now here. [...] But the natural object, safe in its immediate being, seems to have no beginning and no end. Its permanence is carried by the stability of its being, whereas a beginning implies a negation of permanence, the discontinuity of a death in which an entity relinquishes its specificity and leaves it behind, like an empty shell."[181] Or, as best interpreted in Hölderlin's own words: "Delphi schlummert und wo tönet das große Geschick?" (*Wein und Brod*).

Bruck recovers to a certain extent this Romantic conception of the relation between language and the things it refers to: "Poetic language seems to originate in the desire to draw closer and closer to the ontological status of the object, and its growth and development are determined by this inclination."[182] At times the evocation is so intense,

[180] De Man, *ibid.* (1984), 4.
[181] *Ibid.*
[182] *Ibid.*, 7.

the demands of consciousness so obliterated, that it seems impossible to distinguish between literality and mimesis.

In Bruck's case the apostrophe to the mother becomes uncanny and makes the reader shiver because of the frozen space of death it drags us into: the fiction of address, also evoked by Culler—"Pause, traveler!" — "thus acquires a sinister connotation that is not only the prefiguration of one's own mortality but of our actual entry into the frozen world of the dead."[183]

The address to the dead folds back unto itself and points at the fact that "something once present has been lost or attenuated; this loss can be narrated but the temporal sequence is irreversible, like time itself. Apostrophes displace this irreversible structure by removing the opposition between presence and absence from empirical time and locating it in a discursive time."[184] This *now* of writing, as opposed to the now of time, is evident in the poem to her father *Uguaglianza padre! Az egyenlöség, apa!*

L'uguaglianza padre! Il tuo sogno s'è avverato
ti intravedo ti vedo ancora camminando
accanto a Roth il possidente che ci negò
un po' di ricotta per le feste,
Klein il calzolaio che a credito non risuolò
le tue uniche scarpe, Goldberg il macellaio
con la barba da capra tagliata che ti trascinò
in tribunale quando vendevi carne senza licenza,
Stein il maestro che ci diede lezioni di ebraico
in attesa di un compenso divino ci dirigeva
come un direttore d'orchestra indemoniato
rompendo dozzine di bacchette sulle nostre teste
figli tuoi in ebraico analfabeti destinati all'inferno.
E tu, il più povero, il più riconoscibile
da quelle natiche magre! Il più agile, più
sfruttabile per lavori forzati.
Avanti padre! Sei collaudato a ogni evenienza
armato di esperienza

[183] De Man, *ibid.* (1984), 78.
[184] Culler, *ibid.* (1981), 150.

conosci la prima linea, i fucili, le trincee
anche la lotta quotidiana in tempi di abbondanza.
Conosci la prigionia, l'asse dura della cella buia
dove ti spidocchiavi, ti leccavi le ferite,
srotolavi le cicche.
Conosci il sapore del sangue nella bocca
per un dente guasto
per il pugno di un gendarme
per la pallottola
nel difendere la patria, ostinandoti a crederla tua.
Conosci la morte in agguato
la meschinità degli uomini
il gioco dei potenti
lo sfruttamento dei padroni.
Conosci tutta la scala dell'umiliazione
le strade oscure con l'ombre minacciose
con i lupi famelici i cavalli imbizzarriti
in notti insonni nei tuoi viaggi solitari
nell'illusione di affari
fallimentari,
le promesse non amnatenute
eccetto l'ira di Jehova!
Avanti padre conosci le marce
il gelo la fame! Su la testa!
non devi più nasconderti dai creditori
sono lì tutti nudi!
Ah, ti volti! Non mi riconosci,
sono cresciuta ho i seni duri
una peluria tenera pura
come aveva la mamma quando te la portarono
in sposa. Prendimi padre!
ti darò piacere non figli,
amore non doveri,
amore non rimproveri,
amore da te sconosciuto
da me immaginato, corri
è tempo d'Apocalisse!
Commettiamo un peccato mortale
per meritare la morte.

In this poem, Bruck visits as a ghost the ghost of her father. In this heartbreaking encounter, she evokes the apocalypse: not a biblical one, but a completely worldly, realistic scenario. From a distance, not being heard, the poetic voice calls and incites the

father to keep on going, not to give in to impossible circumstances, to Dachau. It is an encounter with an awful specter: the daughter's voice represents the incarnation of a ghost herself, because only as ghost, she could enter the territory where her father is stuck for eternity in the poet's mind, and hold a dialogue, wrapped in deceit, with him. She incites him to go, reminds him that he is strong and perfectly able to face this *lager*'s conditions after the life-long training in injustice and violence he endured; the daughter thus tries to change the unchangeable course of events, of history. There is pathos of desperation but also of anger.

"Equality, father! Your dream has come true." After opening with these words, the voice explains right away what kind of equality has finally materialized on earth: "I make your silhouette out I manage to see you again as you walk/ next to Roth [...]/ Golberg [...]/ Stein [...]": the father walks through the *lager* indistinguishable from all those from whom he was so different when still among the living. He was poor and rejected by all communities; even his family was no harbor.

After describing the long "scale of humiliations" he had to suffer, the daughter offers herself to him in reparation. "Take me father!/I will give you pleasure not children,/ love not duties,/ love not reproaches,/ love that was unknown to you/ and only imagined by me, hurry/ it is time for the Apocalypse!/ Let us commit the mortal sin/to deserve our death." The daughter goes back to the dead to repair something irrevocably broken. Incest is no longer an issue in Auschwitz: a revisited Auschwitz of the mind. The Shoah makes all other horrors, those pertaining to the social taboos (such as incest) scot-free. The true horror is not incest, but Auschwitz. And, in any case, is it really incest the ghost is proposing? "So you turn to me! You don't recognize me,/ I am older and have

firm breasts/a soft pure pubic hair/like that of mom when they brought her to you/in marriage. Take me father!" The scene is part of a real memory in which while in Dachau the daughter and the father did briefly see each other in the obscenity of their reciprocal nudities, their emaciated weaknesses and proximity to an unspeakable death. However, the ghost also represents the poet at the present time of her poetic vision: a vision which she courageously enters with her adult body of the time of writing. Since we are so accustomed to her poetic voice constantly becoming and unbecoming her own mother, it is clear that in her fantasy this ghost has another central function, that of offering with herself a different version of womanhood, wifehood, sexual pleasure, to both her father and her mother.

Bruck has already recalled in *Lettera alla madre* her mother's status of pure reproductive organ to her husband, rather than lover and accomplice: "Tu non hai fatto l'amore per amore, pur amando mio padre, ma per dovere, siamo nati per decisione divina, come fossimo figli di Dio, non di nostro padre e tua. Sembrava che papà non c'entrasse per niente, come se ti avesse messo incinta Dio stesso"[185] (8). Hence, the daughter, with her poetic incestual proposal aims at mending not only the rapport within her family, the unbalance between the sexes proper of her private history, but that of history in general: she sees her parents as the product and the victims of an oppressive history that precedes and in fact accompanies as much as follows the Shoah. As I mentioned earlier, the Shoah makes sense in Bruck as integral part of a violent history of oppressions of which Auschwitz is a disproportionate yet consequent result. Both parents are recurrently described as victims of a civilization that thrives in social injustice. And

[185] "You did not make love out of love, though you loved my father, but out of duty, we were born out of divine will, as if we were God's children, and not yours and our father's. It was as if dad had had nothing to do with it, as if God himself had knocked you up" (*L.m.*, 8).

as part of this injustice there is also the absurdity of codes that would consider incest less acceptable than burning people alive. The ethical system in which parents of the Shoah generation had strongly believed is under attack in Bruck's writing: especially the idea of God and the Fatherland. "You know the taste of blood in the mouth" the daughter-ghost reminds her father, because besides having been beaten up by local gendarmes, or having had rotten teeth that he could not afford to get cured by a dentist, he also has known the bullets received "to defend the fatherland, holding on to the idea that it belonged to you as well." In fact, as Bruck declares in another poem, this time apostrophizing her brother, for the dead people she encounters in her mediatic trespassings life had been no better than their death: "life is not more just/than your death" (*Fratello mio*/Bátyám). She dismantles that same ethics that her parents' generation thought imperative to pass down to the children with the hope that they wouldn't be expelled, ostracized, in a word, noticed as Others by a fatherland they had to be ready to give their blood for: more royalist than the king. "They are growing up like savages you used to say/without God/without a proper father/ without bread/ without education/ without future/poor daughters. /if you'll be honest and obedient/good and pure/you'll find someone/ that won't care for the dowry/[...]if you won't be squeamish/and won't expect to choose/because you cannot afford it/[...]" [*Crescono come selvaggi*, (*It.*, 47)]—Bruck hears her mother tell her and her sisters.

The daughter's text is like the accounting book of life that like god she holds in her hands at the time of this final judgment: the daughter holds the mother accountable

for her mistakes. "[T]u non avevi orecchie per me, per te tutto era più importante di me"[186] (*L.m.*, 78). "Quante volte mi hai rinfacciato di essere nata"[187] (*L.m.*, 59).

However, of the cold rigidity of the mother Bruck makes a metaphor rather than a sheer accusation. She knows all too well that her mother was just one in a countless line of Ashkenazi mothers, beaten by misery, by centuries-old stratified oppression—at once neither exclusive nor generalizable. Bruck calls her mother "lioness," acknowledging with infinite love and gratitude her strength (both physical and ethical) which proved essential in the daughter's survival in Auschwitz and afterwards. Bruck's persona recognizes several times that both mother and daughter were destined to victimhood not only by the Shoah but by a long history inimical to them. "Mi hai mai accarezzata tu? Non me lo ricordo proprio […]" [188] (*L.m.*, 63). "Che altro potevi fare tu in quella miseria? [...] Le madri povere sono le più dure lo so, sono anche cattive [...]"[189] (*L.m.*, 61); "Un padre quando mai palava o giocava con i propri figli?"[190] (*L.m.*, 63). Only as the adult writing voice—hiding behind a pseudonym, behind a fictional alter ego—the daughter realizes the extent of the problem of "missed womanhood," an issue that stretches and connects women like herself, but also the lowest social classes as a whole, well beyond the war period. "[E]ri tu la figlia-madre di una coltura convinta che bastasse sfamare i figli"[191] (*L.m.*, 63). A reproach to the Victorian-styled generation of parents echoed in so much of twentieth-century literature, including Kafka's *Brief and den Vater*: "[Y]ou were conforming to the general method of treating sons in the Jewish middle class" (87). Many

[186] "[Y]ou didn't have ears for me, of you everything else was more important than I" (*L.m.*, 78).
[187] "How many times you flung it in my teeth of being born" (*L.m.*, 59).
[188] "Have you ever caressed me? I really can't remember you doing it [...]" (*L.m.*, 63).
[189] "What else could you do in that misery? [...] Poor mothers are the toughest, I know, they can even be wicked" (*L.m.*, 61).
[190] "When on earth would a father talk or play with his children back then?" (*L.m.*, 63).
[191] "You were the daughter-mother of a culture convinced that it was enough to feed the children/that all there was to children was feeding them" (*L.m.*, 63).

children of the Shoah, particularly women, seem to agree in condemning their parents' attitude of silence, meekness, servility towards a society (rich or poor) that aimed at their destruction regardless of their willingness to conform or obey. Italian author, and Auschwitz survivor Piera Sonnino wrote in her memoir *Questo è stato*: "Ma più ancora del timore delle rappresaglie, io ritengo trattenesse tutti noi la rassegnazione al nostro destino. Una sorta di fatalismo di antica data, connaturato alla nostra gente. […] Come se essere ebrei volesse dire dover essere massacrati."[192]

Also Lia Levi expresses the same realization, not only in her first and best known memoir *Una bambina e basta* ("Siamo state tutte e tre [noi sorelle] educate alla disciplina e ci avviamo come soldati, lente e pesanti con i nostri fagotti"[193]), but more explicitly in an interview from January 2007, in which, talking about the infamous roundup and deportation of the entire Jewish community of Rome by the Nazis, she states: "Most of all that event caused in me a complete loss of trust in the adults. They had told us not to worry; they had hardly talked about the 'issue' out loud, even among themselves —the German troops in Rome and what was going on elsewhere in Europe; they were supposed to protect us and most of all to be a reliable source of information. They weren't. That's the day my life changed." And this particular culture's responsibility is seen as that of having generated sickly children, good only for Mengele, or for writing. "Comunque sia io non posso essere che vittima. Mi hai educato tu mamma. Io sono frutto della tua educazione"[194] (*L.m.,* 46).

[192] "But even more than fear of retaliations, I believe that we were all frozen by a resignation to our destiny. A kind of fatalism that goes back a long way, ingrained in our people. [...] As if being Jewish naturally equaled being massacred" (*Questo è stato*, 63).
[193] "The three of us [sisters] had been brought up to accept discipline and like soldiers, slow and weighed down by our bundles, we marched on" (*Una bambina e basta*, 51).
[194] "No matter what I can not but be a victim. You taught me, mother. I am the fruit of your education" (*L.m.*, 46).

Not by chance, it is on the field of writing that these two generations clash. The children accuse their parents of a total lack of interest, if not straight out aversion to their literary inclination: "The aversion you naturally and immediately took to my writing" (Kafka, *Letter to his Father*, 87); "Un ebreo non pensi a voce alta, non scriva certe cose" (*L.m.,* 92); "[S]he [my mother] even considered my [writing] career an embarrassment" (*Still Alive*, 210). At the very end of his letter, Kafka imagines his father responding to this missive with a resented accusation, and it's not unlikely that Bruck and Klüger would fear the same kind of reaction from their mothers: "If I am not very much mistaken, you are preying on me even with this letter itself" (125). But let us not forget: a letter that the father or the mothers will never be aware of, can not be a preying letter—or the prey cannot be the parent but the haunted "children" behind the text themselves.

It is important, not to confuse the textual mother with the biological mother murdered by the Nazis in Auschwitz: the "you" exists only in the text because it is created by it.

The mother is the midpoint between origin and goal. In the same terms used by Buber to describe the God of the Jewish Bible, we could describe the concept of Mother in Bruck as a mobile midpoint, not pinned down in time, but perceivable at any time: as the "voice which from earliest beginnings has been speaking in the direction of the goal".[195] Mother is Revelation: and it comes to the daughter, just like its theological equivalent in Judaism, through history *and* nature.

But then, in this clear dialogue from which I as reader am excluded, what is my role? What does this mother-daughter impossible correspondence do to and of a reader? Reading such text, such apostrophes destined to someone else than me-reader creates a

[195] *Israel and the World*, "The Man of Today and the Jewish Bible" (1948), 94.

strange state of uneasiness in the unintended ones who receive the message. Culler writes that apostrophes in Romantic poetry not only "may complicate and disrupt the circuit of communication, raising questions about who is the addressee, but above all they are embarrassing: embarrassing to me and to you."[196] And this feeling of discomfort is also provoked by the fiction addresses of Bruck's persona: except that together with embarrassment they elicit guilt as well. In Bruck's texts, the reader is turned into the one to whom the interpellation is addressed. There is an uncomfortable feeling of guilt and unease awoken by what Althusser calls the act of "hailing," attracting attention, through a police-like (or God-like) halting exclamation "Hey, you!" It is not only the narrating voice that at times loses its boundaries and merges in and out of the mother it still so strongly "belongs" to, but the reader as well feels herself or himself drawn into the persona of the mother by the interpellation of the daughter which, lacking any correlation in the real world, turns *any* receiver of her message into the willed addressee of that message. So, I too am called into question; the ideology, discourse, I support and connive with; my silences make me guilty, my compliance as much as any abuse I make of my power (even as reader).

Bruck's *Lettera alla madre*, like Derrida's dream of a scrap copy, is left in our hands and we recognize it as not being addressed to us, but at the same time our accessing it feels like a murder that we commit again against the real true addressee of the letter. We are called by the "mistake" (mistaken delivery) to be accountable.

The letter form (like Derrida's post card) contains a message that delays its own arrival: the uncertainty of the arrival, the anonymity of the actual addressee (reader) and the possibility for the real addressee never to be there—in fact the mischance of

[196] Culler, *ibid.* (1981), 135.

addressee which happens here where the addressee being absent (mother) forces the letter to get to a non-intended addressee or not the addressee of the letter (the reader). As Derrida pointed out, it is typical of letters to "get out of hands."

The addressee of the letter and the addressee of the message are two different entities.

Pushing away the moment of its arrival is the purpose of this abject literature's particular destination. "Abject literature is on the way, and it spies on you, crouching within language, and as soon as you open your mouth it strips you of everything without even letting you enjoy getting underway again, completely naked, to the one you love, living, living, living, there, out of reach. The condition for me to renounce nothing and that my love comes back to me, and from me be it understood, is that you are there, over there, quite alive outside of me. Out of reach. And that you send me back."[197] The paradox of destination[198] here is that this communication which takes place via epistles, apostrophes, via the calling an absence into being, can be considered, to borrow from Derrida, the *envoi* itself of Being: and it is an impossible project. Because even once the message has been formulated, it still requires a "*facteur*" to arrive to destination. *Facteur*, is not only the person delivering the post, but it has its Latin sense in God—"Massimo Fattore" (the Supreme Factor). In Bruck's world without god, therefore there is no *deliver*ance: no arriving of the message and even the message itself, personal, perhaps just a fantasy, or a nightmare, is put into question.

Writing is living for Edith Bruck, but not any writing: only the writing of a personal letter, the autobiographical apostrophe, the retelling over and over of variations

[197] Derrida, *ibid.* (1987), 29.
[198] *Ibid.,* 504.

of the same story. And where could this story end? A story whose life is implicit in its telling, as well as its being "on its way to..." an unreachable destination: but a story whose existence lies in its telling, can it ever end? The event is life and life flows on: absence, loss bears proof to this paradox. Presence is assured by absence: and to state this truth (of being alive) the writer must send letters whose arrival delays, prolongs the distance between addresser and addressees, and which will suffer of an open-endedness because no answer will arrive, and not the intended addressee will receive it. But someone will receive the letter and know the writer lives. "The condition for it to arrive is that it ends up and even that it begins by not arriving" says Derrida of his *carte de l'adestination*.[199]

The ideal parable to exemplify this *différence* is again provided by one of Kafka's stories: *Eine kaiserliche Botschaft* (*An Imperial Message*). The parable begins as follows: "The Emperor—so they say—has sent a message, directly from his death bed, to you alone, his pathetic subject, a tiny shadow which has taken refuge at the furthest distance from the imperial sun. He ordered the herald to kneel down beside his bed and whispered the message in his ear. He thought it was so important that he had the herald speak it back to him." Here not only the message will not arrive but it will remain unknown to the reader as well, and the addresser's death will foreclose any chance of reproducibility of the message. The *convoy* (messenger) of the *envoi* does not even make it along the physical trajectory between addresser and addresee. All elements of the communication are shortcircuited and so is reality in this short parable. The reader will receive an open letter, one whose message is being written as it is being read, one which in fact doesn't end and for the reader does not even begin.

[199] *Ibid.,* 29.

"But the crowd is so huge; its dwelling places are infinite. If there were an open field, how he [the messenger] would fly along, and soon you would hear the marvelous pounding of his fist on your door. But instead of that, how futile are all his efforts. He is still forcing his way through the private rooms of the innermost palace. Never will he win his way through." And the fact that the message is from and of a dead person nullifies its destiny (which is also the emperor's destination) altogether: "Niemand dringt hier durch und gar mit der Botschaft eines Toten" ("No one pushes his way through here, certainly not someone with a message from a dead man"). Right, who wants to heed a message from a dead man?

Lettera da Francoforte thematizes, again, the problem of telling as a life-saving strategy for the survivor and of the impossibility to reach an audience for this telling: another message from death. In *Lettera da Francoforte* and *Signora Auschwitz* the author let go of her exclusive power to summon, to call attention by the "Listen!" imperative—so central both in *Lettera alla madre* and her poems—and through the introduction of letters and responses of other people she engages in a new thematic and narrative deployment of *correspondence*.

The title *Lettera da Francoforte* recuperates and reproduces that same philosophical point according to which all letters are one letter, and all messages one message—from this particular, survivor, writer, woman. The use of the singular "lettera" despite the years-long exchange of letters/missives is the same we find in "lettera alla madre" where it is clear that in a metatextual way this one letter is part of a corpus of messages, documents, one-way dialogues entertained by the desperate daughter with her absent mother.

This is the story of an Hungarian survivor—Signora Castelli, a painter living in Rome—who spends years applying for a war restitution program and keeps being rejected first and put indefinitely on hold afterward by an impersonal, and inhumanly enormous, bureaucracy of a Foundation located in Germany: the very center of this text are the letters, in German and only occasionally in English, exchanged between the desperate aged woman who needs to be recognized as victim by the victimizer through the allocation of this irrelevant life-pension, and anonymous offices in Germany (Division B, Division A, etc.) that with the calculated distance and detachment proper to all bureaucratic *bodies* talk to the victim as to a general not-better-identified "Sehr geehrte Frau," thus objectifying her, her sufferaning, and depersonalizing an issue (surviving Auschwitz, losing one's entire family in the gas chambers) that the survivor struggles to make and keep as personal as possible: for the survivor it is not a question of money, but one of being recognized as the name, surname and biological unique existence to whom something irreparable was done—a recognition that bureaucracy is not equipped to sustain. The real people at the foundation for war restitution and pensions are just as much part of that world of ghosts that in this as in previous books Bruck tries to have a dialogue with, to reason with—beyond all reason. "Neppure l'attesa c'entra più con il risarcimento di qualcosa di non risarcibile, ma probabilmente con l'ostinata, banale curiosità di sapere come e quando avrà fine il mio rapporto con questi fantasmi dei fantasmi"[200] (*L.F.*, 34). And again: "[C]ome e quando finirà la mia corrispondenza con quei fantasmi"[201] (*L.F.*, 68).

[200] "Waiting has no longer anything to do with the compensation of something that can't be compensated, but rather with the obdurate, banal curiosity to find out how and when my rapport with these phantoms' phantoms will come to an end" (*L.F.*, 34).
[201] "How and when will my correspondence with these phantoms end" (*L.F.*, 68).

There is undoubtedly an element of the Kafkaesque in this epistolary exchange. And it flows back and forth from the linear, bi-dimensional plane of the letters into the tridimensional reality of everyday relations in the world: her friendship/hate with a German Christian woman who, in the effort to help the narrator keeps abusing her and putting into question her unique status of victim; her non-Jewish husband who, with the pretext to protect his wife from the pain such legal battles entail, tries to avoid the issues at the heart of the narrator's restitution demands; the old German translator of the embassy, with her unbearable language and accent, her badly-hidden indifference if not despise for this Jewish survivor and her demands. The narrator is profoundly sickened by this correspondence, which works as if at erasing her at each letter: "una mancanza perfino fisica, come se ogni lettera da Francoforte, ogni dubbio sulla mia esperienza avessero sottratto qualcosa dal mio stato di sopravvissuta, dalla mia stessa esistenza reale rendendomi un'orfana anonima"[202] (*L.F.*, 93).

Here the phantoms are the bureaucrats at the Foundation in Frankfurt, but as long as the correspondence with them continues, her dialogue with the other phantoms cannot stop or find relief either. Everything rotates around the *post* (which is "technology, poition, 'metaphisics'" in Derrida[203]): even the victims were "sent" (envoyées) to Auschwitz: both destined and predestined there by the hate history of humanity. Which message did they represent? And to whom? *Lettera da Francoforte* tries to address precisely this "absurd" question. "Neppure le domande più semplici avranno mai risposte?" (*L.F.*, 75).

[202] "[A] lack, even physical, as if each letter from Frankfurt, each doubt about my experience had been subtracting soemthing from my status of survivor, from my true existence itself turning me into an anonymous orphan" (*L.F.*, 93).
[203] Cfr. Derrida, *ibid.* (1987), 66.

Lettera da Francoforte does not follow the trajectory of letters that are on the way to someone or somewhere: but on the contrary, it traces the way in which certain letters the more they multiply and grow the more they erase, annul the persons that originate them. "[O]ne kills someone by addressing a letter to him that is not destined to him, and thereby declaring one's love or even one's hatred. And I kill you at every moment, but I love you. And you can no longer doubt it, even if I destroy everything with the most amorous patience (as do you, moreover), beginning with myself."[204]

Lettera da Francoforte is a book about the va-et-vient, to-and-fro, of the distancing and nearing. An elastic map on which Bruck's identity suffers mortal lacerations and amputations: "[A] ogni lettera precipito all'indietro, mi accascio dentro"[205] (*L.F.*, 60).

Unlike what happens in Kafka's nightmarish subconscious fantasies, Bruck allows for a constant going in and out of the nightmare: there is a world that is free from the nightmare, and the victim can see and perceive it, and with the goodwill of those who love her she might even be repeatedly invited (even dragged) to enter it; but the normalcy is precluded to the survivor. And the paradigm of the state of surreal normalcy, in which the survivors are condemned to live, explodes in all clarity at the very end of the story. Finally, after agonizing for years over the senseless demands and deaf responses of the Foundation's office divisions, the narrator—not without great physical pain, nausea and unease—boards a plain, all alone, and flies to Frankfurt to plead her case in person in front of the employee, Mr. Tarshawsky, behind those sometimes anonymous sometimes autographed letters. It is one last desperate gesture to tell "I exist" to what she images being a second-generation German bureaucrat desensitized toward history, truth, and

[204] *Ibid.*, 112.
[205] "At each letter I fall headlong backwards, I collapse inside" (*L.F.*, 60).

responsibility. After waiting for hours in a dark suffocating room, inside a monstrous building, she is let into the bureaucrat's office, Signora Castelli finds herself face to face with a minute man her same age who tries to be as quick and efficient as possible in getting rid of this difficult lady and her claims of being considered any special in virtue of her experience. When, in reaching out for his jacket hanging behind a door, the man's shirt-sleeve retracts and shows a bluish number on the inside of the left withered arm, an awful and hideaous realization takes hold of the shocked narrator: "Sono gli ebrei che gestiscono il Fondo per il risarcimento. Dio mio, no, magari non l'avessi mai saputo!"[206] (*L.F.*, 148).

When Mr. Tarshawsky approaches extends his hand to shake hers, the protagonist retracts in horror: her hand refuses to be touched by him, "che non è neanche un lui ma un incubo"[207] (*L.F.*, 148).

One more trauma to retell, to explain, to report to the outside world: that peaceful world to which access is denied to the survivor. How to tell this umpteenth humiliation to her husband who had already vociferously discouraged her from looking for any compensation? How to find a sympathetic ear when the entire world had warned her and by now was weary of this insistent old lady and her horror stories and paranoias. In fact, once back home, Signora Castelli will not have the courage to tell her husband what happened in Frankfurt, "per la vergogna di dire la verità a un non ebreo, invento mille bugie"[208] (*L.F.*, 150): on this shame the book ends.

[206] "It is the Jews that manage the Fund for the compensation. Oh my God, no!, I wish I had never found out!" (*L.F.*, 148).
[207] "[W]ho is not even a *he* but a nightmare" (*L.F.*, 148).
[208] "For the shame of telling the truth to a non-Jew, I invent a thousand lies" (*L.F.*, 150).

It is also worth mentioning briefly another book *Signora Auschwitz*, which is a text between autobiography and essay: here Bruck poses herself openly as narrator and retells the immense difficulty she has to endure when going from school to school, classroom to classroom, throughout Italy as a the "Wandering Jew" turned "wandering witness". Letters from school children and adults that have read her books and heard her talk are scattered everywhere along the text, and are the frame that captures and limits what the author will and can say: the witness is limited in her testimony by the capacity, will, and flexibility to understand/hear of the listener. And the letters are there, physically imbedded within the text, to recreate these margins, these boundaries.

However, despite the exploration of these various possibilities for communication, Bruck's poetics is one centered on and rooted in the impossibility of messages to reach their destination.

In general, of all form of human communication, Bruck takes the letter as the last resort when what has to be said cannot be said otherwise: in a face to face conversation, or through body language or simply via any of the available technological resources, or because of the absence, even inexistence, of the/an interlocutor. In a metaphysical way, all literature is an open letter to a faceless public, who is the addressee of the writer's message and the narrator's story.

Giorgio affirms that in Bruck letters are the daughter's way "to make amends for her mother's death and to express her love for her, while begging her forgiveness and requesting her blessing for her life."[209] However, implicit in a one-way missive is the impossibility of an answer: which in turn guarantees that forgiveness shall never be granted. And it is this impossibility thematized as the center of Bruck's intellectual world

[209] Giorgio, *ibid.* (1999), 253.

that constitutes the intra-textual cord throughout her oeuvre. After Auschwitz, the dialogue is no longer possible. Neither is forgiveness.

"[A]ppeasement with her mother comes to signify appeasement with herself as a woman, a Jew, and also as a writer" Giorgio concludes.[210] Except that I believe appeasement does not occur. The failure at being appeased lacerates the narrator's self further, ever more painfully, and it ends up lacerating the text itself which finds its only possibility for "survival" in a detour through a different strategic escapes: the fugue or crossing over between orality and narrative (Signora Auschwitz); or the open-endedness of *Lettera alla madre*.

Bruck's melancholia is rooted in the time of her childhood. Trauma loses its connection to space (the "somewhere" where it originated) and remains entrapped in a permanent time that knows no end. The facts are occasioned in space, but the effects (trauma itself) will be played out forever in the mind. In particular, the traumatic experience manifests its existence through the workings of memory (false, real, symbolic, etc.) and is characterized by immobility: the trauma is stuck in the past, the traumatized psyche is stuck in that past. And every movement of the traumatized mind is from a now to a then, or simply from within a *then* from which it cannot escape. Therefore, if as Kristeva affirms forgiveness (pardon) is antihistorical (210-211) in that it halts the chain of cause and effect, then trauma and pardon are irreconcilable. Trauma is glued to the eternal past tense while forgiveness comes from an undeclined-yet future tense.

Not only does appeasement not occur, but the daughter herself dispenses a punishment. The mother's crime is that of having been mother, of having sentenced to death her daughter by the act itself of giving birth. The daughter dispenses a punishment:

[210] *Ibid.* .

the punishment the mother receives is the daughter's letters themselves. A communication that doesn't leave her alone, that doesn't allow her to rest in peace. However, Auschwitz is not at all secondary to the unfolding of this drama: since the life the daughter receives from the mother happens *also* in Auschwitz. There is double birth as there is double death: at the moment of conception and at the *selektion* (an all too earthly final judgment) in the camp. Auschwitz uncannily mirrors the other act of coming to life and to death (eternal separation) of the daughter: the double dimension of the narrator's mourning therefore endlessly amplified by this mise-en-abîme through the black mirror of her psyche: despair is absolute and irrecoverable.

Like all classical ghosts, also the mother's asks to be put to rest, to be said goodbye to: a sacrifice the daughter is not willing or able to make. This request expresses itself and dramatically unfolds around the issue of praying: the mourner's *Kaddish*.

" 'Neanche un Kadish' ti lamenti?"[211] (*L.m.*, 70). The *Kaddish* is a prayer to the dead, a tribute to the murdered ones, that can not be delivered to the intended addressee, because the six million addressees have no resting place, no place, from where to receive it. As in Ruth Klüger (*S.A.*, 30), and so much of Shoah testimonial literature, the *Kaddish* becomes the ultimate epitome of the daughters' critique of the relation between Judaism and gender and their respective historical experience. The *Kaddish* painfully brings to the fore the issue of gender in Judaism: so that these daughters-survivors are through the Jewish ritualization of death deprived again of their voices. They cannot say *Kaddish* because they are women, they cannot address their prayers to any specific place because there is none, they cannot pronounce their dead dead because they themselves are alive, because they cannot provide proof of it (but absence itself), and they cannot say *Kaddish*

[211] " 'Not even a kaddish' you complain?" (*L.m.*, 70).

because they have lost the god who demands for these words to be uttered and hence they have lost with him the sense of the Logoi (words, grammar, letters, as well as signification), itself, and this message will remain unexpressed.

> I keep wanting to celebrate him [father] in some way, to find or invent an appropriate way of mourning, some ceremony for him. And yet celebrations and ceremonies are not my thing. I suspect them of mendacity, and often they strike me as ridiculous. Nor would I know where to start. In the Jewish tradition only men say the kaddish, the prayer for the dead. (Who is keeping you from saying any prayer you please? my friends ask. But it wouldn't count, couldn't be part of a prescribed communal ritual [...]) [...] If it were different, if I could mourn my ghosts in some accepted public way, like saying kaddish for my father, I'd have a friendlier attitude towards this religion, which reduces its daughters to helpmeets of men and circumscribes their spiritual life within the confines of domestic functions. Recipes for gefilte fish are no recipe for coping with the Holocaust.
>
> *Still Alive*, 30.

" 'Riposare in pace con una figlia come te che non ha mai detto una preghiera a sua madre, un solo Kaddish!' mi stai ricattando"[212] (*L.m.,* 78). The English word "blackmail" works indeed perfectly in explaining the exchange between mother and daughter here. The mother indeed black-mails the daughter who in turn white-mails the mother: i.e., she uses white pages, open letters, no secrecy, no esoteric formulae (*Ytgadal, veitkadash Shmé rabbah...*). Their correspondence, the black-and-white mail between the living and the dead, begs for an absolution: "Perdoniamoci a vicenda mamma. Io sono tua figlia. Tu sei mia madre. [...] tu sei l'Unica per me, come Dio tuo, nostro, se c'è"[213] (*L.m.*, 78).

The book is therefore the new *Kaddish*, in the impossibility to pronounce the formal one. Writing is a form of absolution. « C'est par l'artifice miraculeux de cette identification toujours instable, inachevée, mais constamment triple (réelle, imaginaire et

[212] "'To rest in peace when my daughter has never said a prayer for her mother, one single Kaddish!" I hear you blackmail me" (*L.m.*, 78).
[213] "Let's forgive each other, mother. I am your daughter. You are my mother. [...] You are the One for me, like your God, ours, if he exists" (*L.m.*, 78).

symbolique) que le corps souffrant du pardonnant—comme de l'artiste—subit une mutation […]. Elle lui permet de vivre une seconde vie [...].»[214]

It must be noticed that the book finishes with ellipses: a scriptural mark of incompleteness; three points of suspension that usher in the certainty of another letter, another message to come. The text is the rest-in-peace blessing of the living over the memory of the dead: though its endlessness means that the daughter is not willing or ready to let go of this memory. Bruck remembers one occasion in which her memory of her mother had failed her: that was the time when she herself was practically dead, in the *lager*. "Come si fa a dimenticarti e farti dimenticare? Se lo vuoi sapere tu sei più viva per me da quando sei morta. Finché c'eri era normale che tu ci fossi, nei Lager la fame annullava la memoria, il pericolo, la paura divoravano ogni energia, ogni attenzione"[215] (*L.m.*, 81). Memory is for the living: it is the panacea of those who are. In the non-being of Auschwitz memory had to die: the dead do not remember one another. Do not recognize one another either. This is what the role of the living daughter is: to incarnate the memory of her dead mother; to become her memory, both in the sense of "the memory of her mother" and "her mother's memory." In order to accomplish this, the daughter has to momentarily die in the asphyxiation of the book: the text in which she plunges herself like a ghost among ghosts to bring a light that will illuminate them and make them real to the reader. "Anch'io sono altrove mentre scrivo, tu eri con Dio io sono con te e caccio via anche i gatti, allontano anche gli amici, le persone più care, mi

[214] Kristeva, *ibid.* (1987), 217.
[215] "How can one forget you and make one forget? If you ask me you are more alive for me since you are dead. Until you were alive it was normal to have you there, in the *lager* hunger annulled memory, danger and fear ate up all your energy, every bit of your focus" (*L.m.*, 81).

dimentico di mangiare, di bere, di telefonare, di avere male alla schiena"[216] (*L.m.*, 87). Just like her mother ("quando pregavi tu dimenticandoti tutto,"[217] *L.m.*, 87), the daughter mystically reaches a different state of being when visiting her past in writing.

But in response, first the mother warns her not to write: "'Un ebreo non pensi a voce alta, non scriva certe cose'" (*L.m.*, 92). And then she even challenges the daughter to try, to pronounce the lines of the *Kaddish* that should put an end to this agony: this protracted stay in the land of the dead for both of them. "'Prova a vedere' mi incoraggi […]. 'Su, su…'"[218] (*L.m.*, 92).

The daughter then reaches out for the prayer's book while still asking the phantom: "Vuoi che ti faccia dire un Kaddish, una preghiera mai pronunciata da una figlia per la madre"[219] (*L.m.*, 93). Bruck answers the mother's challenge by trying to demonstrate that the *Kaddish* is definitely not the umbilical chord between them: it is not Judaism, the mother's God and the fixed identity he portends to represent that makes the ventriloquism possible, that makes the daughter love her mother and feel her as if she were pregnant of her, in her own womb, giving birth to her the way she had been given birth to by her, but desperately only able to deliver always and only death: dead memories, dead voices, dead ghosts, dead letters. If anything the *Kaddish*' masculinity, its canonicity, and generality is what ultimately separates the mother, and her dogmatic religiosity, from the daughter, and her a-dogmatic creativity and disbelief in everything but her own memories and ghosts.

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[216] "I am somewhere else too when I am writing, just like you were with God, I am with you and I chase away my cats, I push away even my friends, the dearest people I know, I forget all about eating, drinking, making phone calls, my back-pain" (*L.m.*, 87).
[217] "[W]hen you prayed you forgot about everything else" (*L.m.*, 87).
[218] " 'Try and see by yourself,' you exhort me. 'Come on, come on...' " (*L.m.*, 92).
[219] "You want me to have a kaddish recited for you, a prayer that was never pronounced by a daughter for her mother" (*L.m.*, 93).

Neither the book nor the *Kaddish* will be finished.

The ambivalent rapport Bruck admits having with religion can be explained only by understanding faith as something different than the dogmatic version monotheism's guardians have traditionally imposed. All of Bruck's narrators invariably state, that they do not believe in God, and in this disbelief they position themselves in the opposite camp from their mothers. Bruck's stories have in common the fact that the narrated mothers (in fact, all are but one mother) are ones who believed and were killed in the concentration camps; whereas, the narrators, all survived daughters (in fact all are but one daughter) are delivered to and from the same hell alive perhaps (the narrating voice implies) because of their impiety, of their being so different from their victim-mothers.

As Kristeva has pointed out describing the state of mind of chronically melancholic patients, there is a form of mysticism in the turned-off belief-switchboard of the depressed psyche. "Nous avons supposé le dépressif athée […]. Cependant, quelque athée qu'il soit, le désespéré est un mystique : il adhère à son pré-objet, non pas croyant en Toi, mais adepte muet et inébranlable de son propre contenant indicible. A cette orée de l'étrangeté, il consacre ses larmes et sa jouissance. Dans la tension de ses affects, de ses muscles, de ses muqueuses et de sa peau, il éprouve à la fois son appartenance et sa distance vis-à-vis d'un autre archaïque qui échappe encore à la représentation et à la nomination, mais dont ses décharges corporelles et leur automatisme gardent la marque. Incrédule du langage, le dépressif est un affectueux, certes blessé, mais captif de l'affect. L'affect, c'est sa chose."[220]

[220] Kristeva, *ibid.* (1987), 24.

Religion for Bruck is writing. "La mia religione è lo scrivere […]. Perdonami"[221] (*L.m.*, 24). Writing born out of the vital necessity to speak, to utter all the words that the mother had tried to suffocate in the daughter.

> Se tu mi avessi ascoltata una sola volta fino in fondo, forse non ti scriverei adesso, forse non avrei scritto mai nessun libro, la devo a te anche questa mia malattia di scrivere, e ad Auschwitz dove mi hai lasciato andare, anzi, mi hai spinto via, urlando di obbedire a uno che mi batteva con il fucile.[222]
>
> *Lettera alla madre,* 78.

But also the necessity to express all the words that in the "avantpost" of signification, in a time lost and mourned continuously by the daughter, used to assure the daughter's identity and which now perpetuates her fragmentation and propulsion away from the Thing.

Bruck inherits from her mother a strong faith, but transforms it into something different from the way in which the mother conceived of faith. Bruck's faith is the kind that Buber talks about: i.e., not as a sentiment of the human soul, but as doorway, passageway into reality for the human being.[223] "Per me eri tu la fede, tu non ci sei, io mi difendo da ogni immagine che mi ricorda la fede, quindi da te"[224] (*L.m.*, 25). Bruck substitutes Buber's religious anthropology (he calls this wholeness of man "philosophical anthropology")[225] with a Shoah anthropology: the problem of the wholeness of humanity after Auschwitz. Auschwitz does not exist per se. It exists only in relation to something else, the "else" one tries to understand and connect to via the symbolization and imagery

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[221] "Writing is my religion [...]. Forgive me" (*L.m.*, 24).
[222] "If you had listened to me to the end at least once, perhaps I wouldn't be here now writing to you, perhaps I wouldn't have written any books; I owe it to you also the illness of writing, and to Auschwitz where you let me go, to be precise where you pushed me away yelling that I had to obey to a guy who was hitting me with his rifle" (*L.m.*, 78).
[223] *L'eclissi di Dio* (1990), 17.
[224] "To me you were faith, you are no longer here, I defend myself from every image that reminds me of faith, therefore from you" (*L.m.*, 25).
[225] Cfr. Martin Buber, *Man and Man.*

of Auschwitz (see Caruth, 137).[226] So the central problem remains the Mother, the relation with one's origins, with one's fellow human beings, with identity and one's country, with language and history: Auschwitz is not to be understood apart from or beyond the understanding of these other human problemata.

So Bruck's writing represents her own version of a prayer to God, to ask to maintain her memory, to keep her from forgetting the mother, from forgetting the pain:

che mi vengano pure malattie, e sciagure	Let illness and disgrace befall me
che i giorni non siano meno faticosi	Let the days be no less tiring
che esistano pure le brutture	Let it be ugliness
[…]	[...]
purché iddio che non c'è	as long as god who doesn't exist
(ho sempre meno paura a dirlo)	(I'm less and less scared of admitting)
mi conservi fino alla fine	lets me to the end
la nostalgia di te.	miss you.

Itinerario, 69

"Non accetto la tua morte, perciò sono inaccettabile per te"[227] (*L.m.*, 78) Bruck's alter ego says: and this unacceptability, between mother and daughter, is at the base of the mother's black-mailing. The "black wave" that invades the narrator unexpectedly from time to time is the message from death that demands to be recognized: but in so doing it affirms its presence, its being, its un-deadliness. Leaving the writing daughter in an incurable limbo, where no closure is possible only further dying.

"Si je ne consens pas à perdre maman, je ne saurais ni l'imaginer ni la nommer" is the drama of the psychotic child, says Kristeva (*Soleil noir*, 53).[228] "Mais non, je l'ai retrouvée dans les signes, ou plutôt parce que j'accepte de la perdre, je ne l'ai pas perdue

[226] See Cathy Caruth (1995), 137.
[227] "I don't' accept your death, therefore I am unacceptable to you" (*L.m.*, 78).
[228] Kristeva, *ibid.* (1987), 53.

(voici la dénégation), je peux la récupérer dans le langage. "[229] Language denies absence, hence loss, and this is why a denial of language's denial is necessary: a suspension of this *negative* of language allows the encounter with the ghost, of the ghosts: Bruck, like Kristeva's depressed patients, annuls the denial, "et se replie, nostalgique, sur l'objet réel (la Chose) de sa perte qu'il n'arrive précisément pas à perdre, auquel il reste douloureusement rivé."[230]

"Se vuoi ti recito io un Kaddish! Sì io! Qui. A casa mia"[231] (*L.m.*, 94): that same house where all the writing takes place, where her letters are mailed from, where the daughter's injunction to the dead to listen as well as to return originates.

Lettera alla madre had opened with the mother peremptorily demanding obedience from the daughter closes on the daughter demanding obedience from the mother: "Per una volta obbedisci tu a me"[232] (*L.m.*, 94).

Hence the daughter's writing is also an act of self-vengeance: "Non puoi dirmi nulla se io non ti do la parola" (*L.m.*, 8). Giorgio points out that the daughter both grants a voice to the mother but has "also the power to take it away from her."[233] Which is the authorial power implicit in all apostrophes.

> "Fai finta che tu sia mia figlia e io tua madre. Non temere, no. Il Kaddish è tuo, su dammi una spinta. Su e giù, su e giù, più forte, più in alto, forte forte, più vicino a Dio mamma! Più vicino! Voglio che senta anche Lui il mio Kaddish:
>
> "*Itgaddal, veitkaddash Scemé rabbà; bealmà diverrà chirutè, veiamlich malchutè bechaiechon, uviomechon, uvchaiè dechol beth Iarael Baagàla Uvisman kariv veimrrù amen…*"[234]

[229] *Ibid.,* 55.
[230] *Ibid.*
[231] "If you want I will say kaddish for you! Yes, I! here. In my house" (*L.m.*, 94).
[232] "For once, obey to me!" (*L.m.*, 94).
[233] Giorgio, *ibid.* (1999), 252.
[234] "Pretend that you are my daughter and I your mother. Don't worry, no. the Kaddish is yours, come on give me a push. Up and down, up and down, faster, higher, faster, faster, nearer to God mother! Nearer! I want Him too to hear my Kaddish" (*L.m.*, 95).

To « address » etymologically means "to make straight" (from the vulgar Latin for *ad directiare*), i.e., to make spoken words arrive straight to the intended addressee. Bruck's letter draws a straight line amongst all the instants of her life and connects them to one single central point: the forced, violent physical detachment from her mother's embrace in Auschwitz during the line-up for the final selection. There where Mother, God and Daughter were simultaneously present and simultaneously sacrificed. One instant in which all life is contained, in which all previous and following instants are forever already expressed. At that specific point, where language has proved its incapacity to be effective, the daughter's psyche is forever entrapped there and in this infernal non-place the grown up survivor silently awaits what she knows will never arrive (or depart): "Il mio stato attuale potrei anche definirlo come quello di un viaggiatore in attesa ad una stazione, da dove né partono né arrivano i treni"[235] (*L.m.*, 109). Which tracks are these? Perhaps the same of which Charlotte Delbo has written in the opening poem of her Shoah memoir *Auschwitz and After*: "there is no arriving in this station./ [...] The station is not a railroad station. It is the end of the line. They stare, distressed by the surrounding desolation." And because the reader detains a *post* in history and therefore is mistakenly delivered the shadow of this ghost's letter, it is the reader too who surrounded by desolation makes out the message "when evening comes."

> Naturally things cannot in reality fit together the way the evidence does in my letter; life is more than a Chinese puzzle. But with the correction made by this rejoinder—a correction I neither can nor will elaborate in detail—in my opinion something has been achieved which so closely approximates the truth that it might reassure us both a little and make our living and our dying easier.
>
> Franz
>
> Brief an den Vater, Franz Kafka

[235] "I could describe my present state as that of a traveler waiting at a station, from which no train arrives or departs" (*L.m.*, 109).

Chapter 3

Auto da fe'

> 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 a letter to his friend Ignacy Witkiewicz, Polish author, and Shoah victim, Bruno Schulz described this way his personal theory about the origin of an artist's fantasies:

> 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 […] Such images constitute a program, establish our soul's fixed fund of capital, which is allotted to us very early in the form of inklings and half-conscious feelings. It seems to me that the rest of our life passes in the interpretation of those insights, in the attempt to master them with all the wisdom we acquire, to draw them through all the range of intellect we have in our possession. These early images mark the boundaries of an artist's creativity. His creativity is a deduction from assumptions already made. […] 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.[236]

[236] *Letter to Ignacy Witkiewicz*, first published in Polish in the weekly magazine *Tygodnik Ilustrowany,* N. 17 (1935), part of this letter was later quoted in the introduction to the English translation of *Sklepy Cynamonowe* by Jerzy Ficowski (20).

Schulz devoted to the fantastic, and scary, world of childhood's impressions and imagos all his writings and drawings. In his phantasmatic prose, governed by a dark eroticism, there is always a doubling of geographies, meanings, and matters itself is always duplicitous—a fantasy dominated by a father (the great demiurge), who like a madman, tries to force reality, manipulate fate, but ends up disappearing, conquered by that world of illogic "rationality" he had tried (like his son) to subvert. His fantasmagoric autobiography *Cinnamon Shops* in particular takes the space of a city (the Galician town of Drohobycz—the landscape of Schulz' life and imaginary) and shows how within it lies a different space, the one of memory, of night visions, dreams (that are also nightmares): a space that develops and takes place (like a living thing) between and beyond the architectures of daily normal space.

French philosopher Sarah Kofman knew this. All too familiar with Freud's theories of the subconscious and the double language of our desires and drives, Kofman devoted a small book, her last one, to the double and multiple geographies of memory: *Rue Ordener, rue Labat*. A story narratively, semantically and structurally built on the intricacy of spatial and mental routes. In her memory, space (mental as well as narrative) splits itself up, scatters itself like lost pieces of a puzzle: and on each piece, like on a floating island, a different experience takes place. We have the geographical space of the action: war-time Paris, the countryside around the capital, regions and villages in France. And on this geographical space the path of inner life is grafted: the serpentine of a young girl's experiences in this geographic world. On this multilayered map (real and subconscious, public and personal) Kofman distributes with precision the characters of her story and these loci often refuse to blend, remaining separate and unreconciled.

There is no ambivalence possible between these spaces in *Rue Ordener, rue Labat*. The title itself does not allow for ambivalence: there's no "and" "or", but just one thing separate from the other, irreconcilably separated by the hymen of a comma.

What strikes the reader familiar with Kofman's work, however, is exactly *Rue Ordener, rue Labat*'s compartmental structure: the hermetic separation of the spaces (geographical and human) within her text. Which seems to contradict a life-time's philosophical production characterized by a search for *integration*: diluting of barriers, inclusion rather than rigid Hegelian (rationalistic) exclusion.

From the very start, from the title itself, this text promises a radical treatment of boundaries (Jewish-non-Jewish, homosexual-heterosexual, adult-child, phantasm-truth, mythos-history). In 23 condensed chapters,[237] ekphrastic vignettes, Kofman synthesizes her passage from childhood to art: here images of the past resist the regimentation of chronology and logic; the child's emotional responses to the real is the only organizational principle to make sense of the stories; pleasure is in the act itself of writing, of "scratching" (*griffer*) the page with her presence, to pose herself as object of (her) art, and in this way this künstlerroman implicitly answers the question "was the suffering inherent in the creative act worth its while?" with an irrefutable "yes". This "yes" that does not want to deny the costs of art; in fact, *Rue Ordener, rue Labat* embodies Kofman's act of acknowledgement of this suffering.

[237] All chapters have specific titles, listed in the table of content at the end of the book—omitted in the English edition: I. Stylo; II. 16 juillet 42; III. Mourir à Auschwitz; IV. Zigzag; V. Fetes et interdits; VI. Madame Fagnard; VII. Merville; VIII. Séparations; IX. Errances; X. Scellés; XI. Rue Notre-Dame-des-Champs; XII. Métamorphose; XIII. La fete des Mères; XIV. Education; XV. L'Haÿ-les-Roses; XVI. Paravent; XVII. Libérations; XVIII. Les deux mères de Léonard; XIX. « Une femme disparaît » ; XX. Idylle ; XXI. Fuite ; XXII. L'hôpital ; XXIII. Hendaye – Moissac – impasse Langlois.

In the early 90s, Kofman explained in an interview to Alice Jardine: "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."[238] And as we will see, this way of letting language play, free from posing unanswerable questions, will affect the relation between this writer and her last book, and this book and its reader.

Kofman published an incredible number of scholarly works on Plato, Kant, Marx, Blanchot, Derrida, et al.: but most of all, she incessantly worked at interpreting and therefore "rewriting" against the grain of her feminist lens, the intellectual legacy of Friedrich Nietzsche and Sigmund Freud. In particular, the appeal to these two fathers of modern culture allowed her to expand the discussion beyond just philosophy and psychoanalysis stricto sensu and powerfully to draw in also literature and art. Together with Freud, for example, Kofman engaged in a double reading of E.T.A. Hoffmann's stories and Leonardo's paintings. In the end, all her books are part of a continuative meditation: it is almost impossible to read them separately; but it is greatly rewarding to embrace her production with an intertextual eye in order to understand her novel intellectual proposition: a female philosophy of *autobiogriffure*—"Ecriture hybride qui efface toute propriété et empêche toute relève dans l'érection d'*un* portrait."[239]

Kofman is fascinated by the idea of a double (multiple) text and of writing as "scratching," as leaving profound, devastating (for who writes, who reads, and the text

[238] *Shifting Scenes* (1991), 105.
[239] *Autobiogriffures* (1984), 152.

itself) marks on the page. In order to make her case for the possibility of such differently-born *écriture*, she picks up an ideal text to analyze and with which to "identify": E.T.A. Hoffmann's most bizarre novel, *The life and Opinions of the Tomcat Murr*. It is the story of a pompous self-taught tomcat who writes his autobiography (scratching the page with his claws) using as blotting pad the autobiographical book 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 *griffures* proper to each book: but separate books end up scratching one another, altering reciprocally every text. I will use this same conception to decipher Kofman's own works : "Il en résulte que la dualité des biographies dit en abîme l'altération de chacun des textes par la griffures de l'autre: hétérogénéité, enchevêtrement indépassables, irrelevables, par la bonne volonté et le bon sens d'un éditeur."[240]

Only sporadically, however, has Kofman lifted the curtain on the private autobiographical scene. A collection of her non-fictional essays was published in English in the journal *Sub-Stance* as "Autobiographical Writings" (1986) and in the volume *Selected Writings* (2007), and the book *Paroles Suffoquées* (1987) grafts the autobiographical (the story of her father's murder) on the biographical (the writings of Maurice Blanchot on the Shoah). *Rue Ordener, rue Labat* was the most unambiguous step towards auto-biography, with which she completed her writing career: Kofman took her life shortly after the publication of *Rue Ordener, rue Labat*, on the day of her sixtieth birthday in 1994.

[240] *Ibid.,* 83.

Interestingly, *Rue Ordener, rue Labat* is also the only book in which the author finally admits female figures into her writing space, acknowledging the knots that linked her own life to that of a crowded world of invisible, often nameless, women. Also because of this, the contrast with the male-dominated literature that had defined her entire career is quite striking. In fact, the presence of men in *Rue Ordener, rue Labat* is practically banned—with the one exemplary exception of her father.

But there is even more to puzzle the reader in this autobiography. As I hope to highlight through my study, the autobiography seems not to care about, on the contrary it welcomes, contradictory elements in the weaving of the story; the stylistic beauty of the narration is coupled by a plot that seems at times incongruous, while an intentional manipulation of the emotions frustrates the reader (and the reader, as Kofman tells us, loves to think of himself as *lecteur policier*[241]) who ends up doubting the narrator's tenability. Memory itself ends up functioning as a screen between the authorial name on the book and her stories which should classically be there to lend veracity to history and the position of the writer (the Self) in this history. In the end, we realize that *Rue Ordener, rue Labat*, a book authenticated by the signature of the auto-biographer, is about Sarah Kofman *only* if we understand this nominative as something more than just a "bio," and try, helped by her philosophy, to understand the signature and the book (*all* her books) as one and the same thing: Sarah Kofman the woman, the girl from the past, the artist (she was a painter), the interpreter of art, the philosopher, the interpreter of philosophers, the phantasy-maker, the professor, her reality and her dreams, her nightmares and deepest fears, all work simultaneously on *this* life and the images of the past that flow up to the surface are indeed *imago* born out of the intellectual excitement (jouissance) of writing.

[241] *Ibid.*, 98.

Kofman's intellectual project can be thought of as "autobibliography:" she recuperates the importance of one's bibliography and biography and blends them as being both expressions of one same authorial complex selfhood.

With each set of stories, Kofman strived to tell the other set of stories (philosophy tries to illuminate the biography, the biographical tries to illuminate the philosophical). And only considered together, her essays and autobiographical pieces come together and the holes left open by the "purely" autobiographical (personal) or the "purely" philosophical (rational) are partly filled.

In one of her most compelling analytical "translations" (*Freud and Literature*), Kofman wrote about Freud writing about Jensen's *Gradiva*. She pointed out how Freud in his summary of the story operates a rewriting of a (another) story. And isn't every autobiography itself in fact a summary, the main text of which is life itself? The same lapses and holes in the fabric of the *Ur*-story, the original story that can never be retold in its entirety/wholeness—mainly because there is no real *memory* of/for it—are present necessarily in an autobiography. And just as Kofman traces the most important elements in what is left out by Freud's text, so I interpret her left-outs in her story as not only paramount to the construction and holding together of the left-ins but as the real essence of what she says. I understand her writing as a conscious act of omission. Her autobiography is meant as omission, detraction, or to use a favorite Freudian term "de-fusion."

The effect of looking inside her text is similar to peering inside a *camera obscura* (a dark chamber as much as a visual instrument). In *Rue Ordener, rue Labat*, a life is projected on a wall as if inverted by the medium of memory, always already a screen. It

is the miracle, or illusion, of seeing through the camera obscura something that is not there. "The camera obscura," explains Kofman, "is that language [*langage*] […] which would make it possible to disguise nothing, to disclose all, down to the last detail, even at the risk of appearing impertinent, at the risk of being ridiculous and indecent. Only in this way might one find one's way amidst the chaos of contradictory feelings, amidst 'this bizarre and singular assemblage' which nevertheless constitutes a self."[242]

In following with Kofman's/Freud's method, I will try to summarize the summary: by revealing what is told in a way that the untold might at least be felt as textual as well as metaphysical presence—since *telling* it remains impossible. Although, as Kofman would have pointed out, my retelling is already no longer Kofman's story (the way Freud's retelling distances the reader from Jensen's story and approaches the reader to a story by Freud), but a new version (translation/*conversio*), a particular lesson in readership, which is rooted in writing—one's own and the other's. "The summary not only fragments, and selects from, the text, it also puts into operation a whole series of semantic substitutions. It is the translation from one language into another."[243]

Rue Ordener, rue Labat retells the story of how a Jewish girl, daughter of an orthodox rabbi from Poland, survives the war hiding with her mother in the apartment of a French Christian woman, identified as Claire but called throughout only mémé (granny[244]). This is the backbone of the story (chapters VI to XVII and XX through XIII) on which, like vital limbs, are grafted at the beginning and toward the end of the book scraps from the story of the father, buried alive in Auschwitz for refusing to work on the holy

[242] *Camera Obscura: Of Ideology* (1998), 38.
[243] "Summarize, Interpret: *(Gradiva),"* in *Freud and Ficiton* (1991), 96.
[244] I will capitalize the word mémé to indicate the symbolic import of this nominative, using it as a proper name, to differentiate it from the lower-case word which has a biological connotation.

day of Shabbat, and of her coming to adulthood which coincides with her coming to philosophy and art (chapters I to V, and XVIII-XIX).

The opening of *Rue Ordener, rue Labat* indicates immediately that this text is going to rest upon an enigma. The enigma of life, or better, since 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,"[245] the enigma of death.

> 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. Un stylo comme l'on n'en fait plus, et qu'il fallait remplir avec de l'encre. Je m'en suis servie pendant toute ma scolarité. Il m'a « lâchée » avant que je puisse me décider à l'abandonner. Je le possède toujours, rafistolé avec du scotch, il est devant mes yeux sur ma table de travail et il me contraint à écrire, écrire.
> Mes nombreux livres ont peut-être été des voies de traverse obligées pour parvenir à raconter « ça ».

"Ça", that's how the first chapter, "Stylo," entirely quoted above, ends. What does "this" refer to? and why has the author put *it* in quotation mark? Grammatical and syntactic logic may indicate that "ça" refers to everything that has been said that far: which is very little, and yet which might, in the eye of the writer, already constitute the essence of all she had to write, in fact, of all she has ever written. That is: that which has compelled her to live so far, and the only way of living has been writing, has been filling the void between presence and absence, between desire and death by way of words, by writing. And isn't "ça" also the crime she is confessing to? A confession that sounds something like this: "all that was left of my father was being guarded by my mother. I stole a piece of this memory. I reached into my mother's forbidden place and took a piece of my father away from her, a piece of my father for me." An old ink pen: a pen in constant need to be refilled, which is "fed" by the daughter; a pen that ejects its semen on the page, whose act

[245] Derrida, *The Ear of the Other* (1985), 5.

of creation dries/kills it. The father has left the daughter before the girl could articulate anything to him. So here is this necessary pen that might fulfill this purpose. And yet, also the pen, like its previous owner, abandons the daughter before she is ready to let go of it. Writing about this pen that has failed her when she still needed it has thus become the goal and scope of her life. Ça.

The old pen is a transversal voice, like her books declaredly are, to arrive to her father: to become her father's hand, to be her own father. Thus to possess the impossessible.

But in order to do this, Kofman has to first pass under the radar of the mother's attention and steal away from her a piece of the shared corpse, the beloved man, the murdered father/husband, the ultimate victim. So, "ça" in quotation mark could be ça and more than ça, ça and its multiples, beyond ça.

Seemingly, this starts out as a book about the father: the father's pen, the father's injunction to write through the symbolic substitute of a pen, the father's marvelous studio where great mysteries take place (marriages, circumcisions and ritual killings), the story of the father's arrest and his heroic self-immolation (*kadosh haShem*). A father whose smallest gestures are the object of the daughter's undivided fascination ("j'observais ses moindres gestes, fascinée," *RO/rL*, 12). Father-Abraham who makes sacrifices (Kofman's father was the community's *shohet* as well), who answers God's call, who brings the family to a foreign land, whose wife will give him a child, i.e. the beginning and survival of a nation. Abraham who, however, is also willing to kill his only child: "Le souvenir du sacrifice d'Isaac (dont une reproduction dans une bible illustrée où j'avais appris à lire très jeune l'hébreu m'avait souvent inquiétée) effleura mon esprit"

(*RO/rL*, 12). As Kofman explores her farthest past by these free associations, the reader gets lost with her in a non-time, similar to the anachronic, displaced atmospheres of Chassidic fairy-tales. How should a reader take all of this, "ça"?

One particularly powerful memory of the father is connected to his addiction to smoking. "Des cigarettes, il ne pouvait s'en passer. À la maison, dès la fin du Shabbat, il en allumait une. L'interdiction de fumer ce jour-là lui était particulièrement pénible. Les dernières heures de la journée, nous les passions ensemble dans sa chambre à chanter des chants hébraïques et d'autres dont les paroles étaient de son invention et dont je reconnus plus tard l'un des airs dans une symphonie de Gustav Mahler. […] Il allumait alors une bougie rouge torsadée, faisait la prière du Kiddoush, un verre de vin à la main, puis le renversait sur la bougie pour l'éteindre, et redonnait l'électricité. Il se mettait alors à fumer" (*RO/rL*, 17-18).

Kofman's father (the great *tzadik*) and Schulz' father (the great heresiarch) are two equal versions of a child's same fantasy: the dream of the return to that perfect season in which nothing was impossible; where there was nothing fantasy or an all-powerful father could not take care of; a season that precedes differentiation in the world, where father-mother, house-world, books-life are one and the same thing. In fact a time perceived, in both authors, as space, morphing and shaping up together with the morphing of the imaginer.

> My father was again sitting at the back of his shop, in a small, low room divided like a beehive into many cells of file boxes from which endless layers of paper, letters and invoices overflowed. […] There my father would sit, as if in an aviary, on a high stool […]. The depth of the large shop became, from day to day, darker and richer, with stocks of cloth, serge, velvet, and cord. […] The powerful capital of autumn multiplied and mellowed. It grew and ripened and spread, ever wider, until the shelves resembled the rows of some great amphitheater. […] My father walked along these arsenals of autumn goods

> and calmed and soothed the rising force of these masses of cloth, the power of the Season. […] The time of the Great Season was approaching.
>
> *The Night of the Great Season*, 127-128.

> Dans un coin de la pièce (la chambre de mon père, la plus grande et la plus belle de l'appartement, lambrissée et tapissée, la mieux meublée, mystérieuse et revêtue d'un caractère sacré car mon père y accomplissait des cérémonie religieuses diverses, mariages, divorces, circoncisions) j'observais ses moindres gestes, fascinée.
>
> *Rue Ordener, rue Labat*, 11-12.

> Il s'exerçait à la maison et je le voyais prendre et remettre le shoffar dans le tiroir d'une armoire où il était rangé à coté de son talès, de ses tvilim et du rasoir avec lequel il égorgeait les poulets selon le rite. Tous les vendredis soir, des femmes attendaient dans notre entrée, leurs files emplis d'un ou de deux poulets. Je jouais à la balle contre le mur et observais attentivement les allées et venues de mon père, des cabinets à la salle d'attente. Tout cela était plein de mystère et m'emplissait de frayeur.
>
> *Rue Ordener, rue Labat*, 20.

"Mon père était rabbin" Kofman tells us more than once, and because of his presence, everything at Rue Ordener is religious and sacred: governed by a religious and sacred father. "À la maison régnait une atmosphere religieuse et sacrée" (*RO/rL*, 19). Yet "frayeur," fear, is a huge factor in Kofman's childhood. Which seems to indicate that upon closer examination the domestic paradise or any *maysele* (fairytale) is never free of anxiety. Rosh haShannah, with the awesome sound of the shofar terrified Sarah (reminiscent of the sound the chickens make when the shohet slices their throat: "J'associais le rasoir du shoreth au couteau d'Abraham et les sons gutturaux du shoffar aux cris des poulets égorgés" (*RO/rL*, 21); so did Pesach, with the perturbing moment of the opening of the door to let the prophet Elijah in (a stranger, a guest whom the girl fears as an extraneous new element in the perfection of the family circle)—"j'avais très peur quand elle ouvrait la porte qui donnait sur le palier afin de laisser entrer le prophète Élie pour lequel était réservé un couvert à la table du Séder" (*RO/rL*, 21-22). (How not to

think, with Freud, of the Sandman of the uncanny story by E.T.A. Hoffmann.) And lastly, Purim, "où ma mère nous faisait peur en revêtant des masques horribles" (*RO/rL*, 22). But then to restore peace and serenity there is the Shabbat, or Simchat Torah (when the father would dance in mystical rapture together with the other *chassidim*) and Sukkoth (in the description of which, strangely and exceptionally, food is not mentioned in relation to some phobia, fear, or sickening reaction). Is it important that, as Michael Stanislawski has pointed out, some of the terminology related to Jewish practice and tradition (a second skin to a girl raised under the sign of strict orthodoxy), are either spelled wrongly or some rituals are even mistaken by the author?[246] "[S]he 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."[247] Are these *lapsi linguae* or, perhaps, *lapsi calami* (slip of the pen—the father's pen)?

Through the eyes of the child, there are only powerful fathers with mysterious studios where magic things happen, fathers with secret formulae (such as a Havdalah blessing), who own the key to the world of the secret art of creation (which holds together life and death).

And then there is "ça". "Ça" in quotation mark: beyond the illusion and phantasm of ça. The "real" autobiography, the story of one's history, cannot remain in the unhistorical, in the antihistorical of magic: it is not *there* that "ça" takes place. "Ça" unfolds beyond what remains of the earliest childhood's illusion and daydreams. "Ça" is

[246] *Autobiographical Jews: Essays in Jewish Self-Fashioning* (2004): "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" (157) to which I would also add the use of "Simhatorah" instead of Simhat Torah.
[247] *Ibid.*

rooted in what happens once the daydreams are shattered, once repression raises high screens against memory.

The historical ensues and slowly takes away the place of the father and *Rue Ordener, rue Labat* remains inhabited completely by the mother—in fact, by two mothers. Kofman's mother, a religious woman, a foreigner with a foreign language, a *rebbetzin* from Poland whose husband is deported and murdered, left alone to fend for her life and the life of her six children in a world inimical to her as foreigner, Jew, and woman. (But also Kofman's other mother, the French woman who, in the act of saving her, condemns her to a new exile which begins by abandoning the paternal territory and banning the maternal one afterwards.)

At first, we experience this book as a book on the Father: a phantasmal unassembled mosaic, as the writing/talking of analysis which operates by free association. A pen that demands a flow of ink (blood) 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 *in extremis* substituted by the blood of a lamb.

Then, slowly, the whirlwind of images takes a more organized form, chronology forces its way into the narration, and a first (realistic) dialogue appears: within/from the free and liberating chaos of the beginning another story emerges: and it is the story of the Mother: the good and bad spells of the maternal—a new story about identity negotiation as profoundly rooted in the synchretic, equivocal, duplicitous maternal relationship. Understanding the enigma of the daughter-mother relation as the enigma of ambivalence is the key to the complex and paradoxical space of *Rue Ordener, rue Labat*.

All of a sudden, the *telos* (natural good) of the childhood's idyll is torn apart: an unexpectedly crude scene intervenes to bring back the reader to the *hic et nunc* of history. It is the war time, Paris is occupied by the Germans, and more disturbingly so it is in the hands of the collaborators, those familiar individuals—yesterday's next-door neighbors—turned slaughterers. A policeman enters the scene: he arrives to take away the father, the rabbi, the officiator of unions, covenants and burials.

This other story governed by Mother, grafted on the *maysele* governed by Father, starts with a lie. One lie on which stands for a moment the course of history.

This "other" story pushes itself aggressively through the lines of the fatherly *maysele* and begins with the words of the mother: "Monsieur le rabbin Bereck Kofman? – Il n'est pas là, dit ma mère" (*RO/rL*, 12).

The mother, with premeditation, lies to the policeman who chooses to believe that rabbi Kofman is not home and sets out to leave, satisfied with her untrue answer. Her "unholy" strategy has worked. But rabbi Kofman volunteers out of his room and consigns himself to the policeman: "Prenez-moi!" (*RO/rL*, 12). *Ecce homo*. This act of self-sacrifice on the part of the father of six seems so absurd that the mother has to intervene again: again with a lie. "Ce n'est pas possible, j'ai un bébé dans les bras qui n'a pas encore deux ans!" (The boy she was holding had already turned two, on July 14th, the most French of days). And adding to it one more lie: "J'attends un autre enfant!" Madame Kofman acts along similar lines to biblical Sarah. Abraham's Sarah had not believed it possible for her to get pregnant and had laughed at the idea of giving life, rabbi Kofman's wife had not believed it possible for her husband to have to be sacrificed and had laughed at the idea of telling the truth—both mothers laughed at the truth.

Kofman's mother had believed that lying would save her, her progeny, her family, her nation's history (just as it had happened to Sarah). It was worth trying.

"Ma mère ment!" (*RO/rL*, 13). But the girl witnessing this scene has not learned yet that there is such a thing as a "white lie" ("mensonge pieux"), and the mother's resolve registers as the gravest of treasons. The mother's prosaic reaction has pushed itself forcedly onto the space of the father's poetry: his superior and poetic act has been soiled by the practical, "historical" good-sense of the woman. In the world of the child there is no nuance, no compromise: so the child is not able to understand or appreciate let alone forgive the mother's act of heroism which instead is perceived as an act of betrayal. Lying means infringing upon the law the father has set for their world, being of this world instead of the world of perfection and uncompromised purity inhabited by the father. (And perhaps, could the senseless self-immolation of the father be there exactly to condemn the humanity of the mother?)

Foreshadowing similar and more painful moments to come, the girl and the cop (the Angel of death) end up on the same side of an invisible court summoned against the mother: they become the judges of the mother, they weigh her ethos; she loses. "Le flic, lui, parait embarrassé." An embarrassment shared by the daughter: "que ma mère puisse mentir m'emplissait de honte et je me disais, inquiète et tourmentée, qu'après tout, j'allais peut-être avoir encore un petit frère!" (*RO/rL*, 13).

The adult writer does not jump in to rectify the girl's impression. She does not interpret: she lets language and memory carry their mutual interplay. And could this interplay be meant at the expense of the "scientific" reader?

The most profound grief, as the tragedians understood, originates in the private and personal. For this reason Plato mistrusted tragedy, family bonds and the closeness with one's children: too distracting from the main concern that had to be the polis, the public thing.

As in a Greek tragedy, the family's grief unfolds under the eyes of the polis posing itself as exemplary *monitum*: Do as we do! Lament and pray because our tragedy is your tragedy, our end is yours, our death is the death of humanity!

> En lisant la première fois dans une tragédie grecque les lamentations bien connues "Ô popoï, popoï, popoï" je ne puis m'empêcher de penser à cette scène de mon enfance où six enfants, abandonnés de leur père, purent seulement crier en suffoquant, et avec la certitude qu'ils ne le reverraient jamais plus: « ô papa, papa, papa ».
>
> *Rue Ordener, rue Labat*, 14.

Rue Ordener, rue Labat rests constantly on a suffocating intimate scenario: on the verge of claustrophobia. Suffocation is a constitutive element of this text, on the narrative and imaginative plane. Suffocation by food, a huge problem in Kofman's life marked by vomit or refusal to eat; suffocation by love and fear (mother); death by suffocation (father). And it cannot escape us that the interaction between the narrated self and the world passes through a constant oral metaphor: the mouth is the center of Sarah's (psychic) life negotiations.

History and its details are guardedly kept at the margins: yet they are one of the classic purposes of the autobiographical act (especially Shoah literature), which is an act of self-reinscription into a past time and space, that portends to connect the subject to his/her Self, and to the rest of humanity via the belonging to a common (true) history/story. However, history hardly reveals itself here. Auschwitz is there, so are

Drancy, Vel d'Hiv, Paris' real topography, kommandantur men and other historical characters. Yet, these elements' realism is constantly undermined by the logic of the narration. They are used to recompose memories whose fabric is not history but emotions, subconscious elaborations, and the emotional fervor of writing which gives them birth, speaking them on the page. They stand as keys to several possible interpretations of one's past and the way the writing self has come about.[248]

> Un boucher juif, devenu kapo […] l'aurait abattu à coups de pioche et enterré vivant, un jour où il aurait refusé de travailler. C'était un Shabbat : il ne faisait aucun mal, aurait-il dit, il priait seulement Dieu pour eux tous, victimes et bourreaux. Pour cela, avec tant d'autres, mon père subit cette violence infinie : mourir à Auschwitz, ce lieu où ne pouvait, où ne devait être respecté aucun Repos.
>
> *Rue Ordener, rue Labat*, 16.

This is how the horrible death of the father is briefly recounted in *Rue Ordener, rue Labat*. This story had been given for the first time a central role in the development of her analysis of two authors, Maurice Blachot and Robert Antelme, in *Paroles Suffoquées*. In *Rue Ordener, rue Labat*, some horrifying details are added (among which the fact that the murderer was a Jewish butcher who, after the war, went back to his store where Kofman and her mother could see him daily), which indicates how Auschwitz after-Auschwitz is also a place *from* which one cannot find a moment of rest.

The story of her father's death is wrapped in incomprehensibility: not only because of the ungraspable illogicality of the concentrationary world, but also because, in the way in which the daughter relates it to us, this story leaves open some logic questions

[248] Perhaps, though, one could push the limits of interpretation further and discover that by avoiding "history," Kofman denies a place for herself in the Shoah while affirming it. Are we dealing with the so little examined guilt of the survivor? The parallel female world seems to put her apart from Auschwitz—the paradigmatic male world (SS male power, male Jew prisoner as universal symbol, male war, etc.). The narration is organized in a way that reproduces the illusion of transition, metamorphoses, passage: a male-dominated world (the domestic and communal world of the father) slowly fades and leaves room to the female world of teachers, mentors, mothers. In the former the girl is born, in the latter the girl is formed.

regarding the father's behaviour. Stanislawski has examined some of these problematic points in Kofman's text and has pointed out 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"[249]—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.[250] It is obvious then, that to *this* story, to *ça* which took Kofman so long a journey to get to finally express, the father immolating himself twice (in a way that, for as painful and poetic, defies common logic and religious law) must be particularly relevant—not to the historical but to the most intimate, personal level.

The father emerges as universal metaphor for righteousness/justice, the perfect encounter between the divine and the human. Ancient mythology teaches us that when the divine grafts on the human, the resulting character always ends up feeding some tragic plot. These characters, be it Prometheus or Jesus, are not fit for life—destined to an exemplary end that reiterates their higher moral ground and allows for the transposition of what they represent from the personal and familiar onto the plane of the transpersonal and universal. This is the way in which here as well as, or especially in, *Paroles suffoquées*, Kofman negotiates the story of her father. He not only becomes a paradigm of victimhood, but also the metaphorization for that place (Auschwitz, *sensu stricto* and *largo*) the "powerless" daughter (*sans pouvoir*: without the power to talk and without being able to talk) is compelled to write about without any experience of it except through the "impossible" experience of her father. "Parler – il le faut – *sans pouvoir* :

[249] Stanislawski, *ibid.* (2004), 157.
[250] A classic example is that of doctors who are allowed to break the shabbat rest if they are called to save a life.

sans que le langage trop puissant, souverain, ne vienne maîtriser la situation la plus aporétique, l'impouvoir absolu et la détresse même, ne vienne l'enfermer dans la clarté et le bonheur du jour ? Et comment ne pas en parler, alors que le vœu de tous ceux qui son revenus – et il n'est pas revenu – a été de raconter, raconter sans fin, comme si seul un 'entretien infini' pouvait être à la mesure du dénuement infini ?" (*Paroles suffoquées*, 16).[251]

But in the "entretien infini" how can the "rest" find its place? And the rest is also her own life and story, and her mother's. *Rue Ordener, rue Labat* seems to me to be grappling exactly with this impossible conundrum: the integration of the finite story into the infinite story, of what can be said into that which can't be said, bio-graphy into thanatography, the *griffures* of life into the *griffures* of death.

Naturally, the mother occupies entirely the space of the human, of nature: therefore fit for life, fit for survival. And it is to survival, to life via the mother, that the rest of the book—in fact of life—is centered on. Once the passage from rue Ordener to rue Labat (where the French lady will hide Sarah and her mother) takes place, we lose all traces of the father, he will be mentioned again only exceptionally. As if, once again, there can't be any ambivalence: the impossible and possible remain separate.

First, the paradisiacal scenario of the world-with-father fades away, then some "guardian angels" (all female teachers and mentors) make their appearance and slowly, while protecting the girl, lead her away from the memory of the father (not without a dark price of anxiety). Between these two moments, there exists a grey area, inhabited by mother

[251] "To speak: it is necessary—*without (the) power*: without allowing language, too powerful, sovereign, to master the most aporetic situation, absolute powerlessness and very distress, to enclose it in the clarity and happiness of daylight. And how can one not speak of it, when the wish of all those who returned—and he did not return—has been to tell, to tell endlessly, as if only an 'infinite conversation' could match the infinite privation?" (*Smothered Words*, 10).

and daughter, in which sparks of the lost paradise are still alive: but this space shrinks quickly as the idyll of early childhood gradually turns into hell.

Despite the mother's attempts to hide the girl with or without her siblings in numerous places in and outside Paris, Sarah learns very early on how to bend the world to her will: she categorically refuses to be separated from her mother. And one way of strategically obtaining this is by refusing food wherever she is being sheltered (sometimes using the pretext that it is not kosher). This is one of the first of many repeated instances in which food becomes the battleground for major negotiations on the girl's affective stage. In the end the mother decides to keep Sarah with her at all times: not without the intervention, though, of something close to a miraculous sign. "D'abord, à la campagne […]. J'y restai deux jours à pleurer et à refuser toute nourriture. […] "Then « rue du Département […]. Je restai une semaine "; it followed "l'hôpital Claude-Bernard […] : je lus *Bibi Fricotin* et *Les Pieds Nickelés* qui me permirent de tenir trois jours. Puis, je fus mise en pension rue des Petits-Ménages […] [J]e refusai de manger du porc. Restait la ressource de me cacher dans une maison d'enfants juive où je pourrais continuer à manger kasher. [….] Ma mère remplit les formalités administratives et partit. Dans l'escalier, elle m'entendit pleurer, crier, hurler. Elle revint sur ses pas, et je repartis avec elle. Dans la nuit qui suivit, la Gestapo se rendit rue Lamarck et les enfants juifs furent tous déportés. Ma mère cria au miracle et décida de me garder désormais avec elle, quoi qu'il arrivât " (*RO/rL*, 37-38). So as long as the world is governed by the mysterious and the miraculous, daughter and mother still hold harmoniously together.

But again, the circumstances work at cruelly undoing the fabric of the child's *maysele*, the good story in which she can keep living happily ever after. Implicitly,

Kofman's text explores the Lacanian idea of how the child constructs the illusion of a unified self, a conscious ego that accepts no ambiguities, through the word "I".[252] The writing voice though is the *living proof* of that illusion being false: the tension between the present memory and the past perceptions is incarnated in the form of myriads ambiguities, contradictions and incongruities. The intervention of trauma on the illusion (the *maysele*) the girl tries to construct for herself hunts the way in which also the adult voice is able to reconnect to that girl—a young girl still hanging on to an *I* the narrator recognizes as lost, or in fact illusory.

Mother and daughter end up hiding in the apartment of a woman, who had known the Kofman family before the war. The lady of rue Labat used to be a neighbor of her parents at a previous address. She had afterwards bumped into her mother who was walking with her young children and had remarked "such lovely blond children" ("si beaux petits enfants blonds"). Which made Kofman's mother think that this woman really loved children and that therefore she could not deny them shelter (*RO/rL*, 40). (Which is the exact opposite of the way the reader knows how to interpret this lady's sentence, of course.)

The occasion to run for help to this woman comes one evening when a unknown man knocks at the door and warns madame Kofman to run away with her children because that same night a round-up was scheduled for that building. "Sans finir notre bouillon de légumes, sans tout à fait réaliser ce qu'avait dit l'inconnu, nous partons chez elle […] je vomis tout le long du chemin "(*RO/rL*, 40). The escape from the certain to the uncertain is marked by a painful somatization of fear.

[252] Cfr. Jacques Lacan, *Le stade du miroir comme formateur de la function du Je*, in *Ecrits I* (1966), 92-99.

The lady has a charming effect on the terrified child: « je la trouvai très belle, douce et affectueuse. J'en oubliai presque ce qui nous avait conduit chez elle, ce soir-là " (*RO/rL*, 40). The charm had to be really strong if, despite the upset stomach, Sarah managed to eat the eggs *à la neige* (floating isles) this stranger kindly prepares for them. Sarah and her mother go back only once to their old apartment to find it destroyed by the six Gestapo men who had come to look for the woman and her children. So the geography switches for good: a destroyed home is left behind and a new safe one is where the girl is now bound to be. Kofman will visit the apartment of rue Ordener only in her dreams, she tells us.

The shelter at Madame Claire was supposed to be "provisoire" (temporary) but it will last for the remaining of the war. Just as the lady was supposed to be a temporary figure, but instead she will remain in Sarah's life forever.

Chapter XI, marks the beginning of a new phase in the girl's life and in her identity. In the lady's loving embrace, the girl will find safety and at the same time shed an identity that was profoundly connected to her father (and mother), and Judaism. "La dame" of rue Labat, who asks Sarah to be called "mémé," is instrumental in separating the girl from her Jewish identity via the separation from her mother.

As (another) temporary tactic Mémé decides to baptize Sarah. "Elle [the lady] parvint à convaincre ma mère" (*RO/rL*, 44): however, in this instance, the girl's capacity to resist, to oppose her firm will against an adult world that claims total control over her, shows itself again. While the mother is still working out the details with the lady, torn about accepting her proposal, the daughter anticipates the mother's fears and doubts and, as many times before, turns her body in the *port-parole* of her opposition: "Il [the priest

supposed to perform the baptism] m'avait fait peur et j'étais envahie d'un étrange malaise. Je sentais vaguement que se trouvait en jeu, cette fois, autre chose que la simple séparation d'avec ma mère" (*RO/rL*, 45). In this scene the daughter repeats the pattern of holiness set by the father vis à vis Judaism: and again, the mother's realpolitik (which goes against that holiness, in the name of saving a/her daughter's life) is shown in passing as a treacherous sign.

Nevertheless, Mémé will symbolically end up baptizing Sarah by renaming her—again as a tactic to keep her safe?—with the name of that saint that was the closest to her own on the Christian calendar: Suzanne. Quite poignantly, Stanislawski asks regarding the question of Sarah's name: "[…] whether Kofman knew it or not, St. Claire and St. Suzanne share the *same* date on the Roman Catholic saints' calendar: August 11; did Kofman, with her delight in Nietzscehian paronomasia, ever ponder that *mémé* is ever so close to *même*?"[253] To which, as way of alternative interpretation, I find important to add, considering Kofman's full immersion into Hebrew and Yiddish language long before entering French, that Suzanne is the Latin translation of the Jewish name Shoshannah. So in a way, the paradox of this "baptism" is in the double pull away and toward herself/Judaism.

The next step, and ultimate intervention, will involve the most symbolic realm in Kofman's identity: food. One of the reasons that makes hiding with Mémé so appealing at first is that it allows Sarah to continue to eat the kosher plates prepared at home by her mother. Until Mémé declares this kind of food deleterious for the nine-year-old's health: "Mais, très vite, mémé déclara que la nourriture de mon enfance était pernicieuse pour la santé; j'étais pâle, 'lymphatique', il fallait me changer de régime. C'est elle qui désormais

[253] Sanislawski, *ibid.* (2004), 162.

allait s'occuper de moi" (*RO/rL*, 48). As part of this vital care, Mémé also decides to pass the girl off as her own daughter.

We have already been signaled by Kofman in earlier chapters, how all female maternal figures dispense their good (nourishment/nurture) accompanied by a token of bitter aftertaste. For example, the adored elementary school teacher, Madame Fagnard who vocally resists the Vichy regime, who teaches her students to give to the poor, to feed the hungry, who takes care of Sarah and her siblings. For madame Fagnard, Sarah had a true veneration (*RO/rL*, 25). "Elle n'était pas seulement une institutrice remarquable, mais une femme pleine de bonté, attentive à toutes les détresses" (*RO/rL*, 25). This woman had given her the only doll she had not been afraid of : which indirectly indicates that Kofman, among the many other phobias counted also a fear of dolls. And of course one of the many women from which Sarah had always received books: her passion for reading remains her most cherished pleasure—which she always links with the memory of a (female) teacher or giver of books. ("[E]n lisant *Merlin l'enchanteur*, j'avais été tellement absorbée que, me balançant sur une chaise, j'étais tombée dans le feu de la cheminée sans m'en apercevoir, et avais tranquillement continue ma lecture", *RO/rL*, 26-27.) Madame Fagnard, a first surrogate mother, becomes closer and closer to the girl until the two metaphorically blend into one when—given the option of choosing a name for the fake Aryan documents the Jewish communist organizations will provide her mother and siblings with—Sarah chooses the surname "Fagnard." And yet, even a "place" as safe as Madame Fagnard's is not free from danger for Sarah's selfhood—and this danger arrives, not surprisingly, in the form of food, through the mouth, reaching deep into her body which promptly somatizes the frighteningly alterity and spits it out:

"Dans la cour de l'école, lorsqu'elle distribuait les gâteaux caséines et le lait écrémé, elle m'en servait à volonté, bien plus que les portions réglementaires. Un jour, […] j'avais bu tellement de lait pendant la récréation que je vomis en plaine classe: je fus mise au piquet et à genoux. Je fus d'autant plus accablée de cet incident que dans ma famille on m'avait toujours interdit les génuflexions chrétiennes, trop chrétiennes" (*RO/rL*, 28). Notably, the French word for school break is "recreation": somewhere in this re-creative act Madame Fagnard has pushed too far, or the girl has let herself go (in her adoration of this teacher) too far. She has overfed on this maternal body: to the point of self-endangerment. The law of the father (which is the law of the family) forbids such acts of worship of "pagan idols"… Going against this law means pain and death. "What can be more maternal an image than feeding a child milk"[254] like Madame Fagnard does?

The connection between food and mother is reiterated over and over in this text. When Sarah is sent not far from Nonancourt, where a family of peasants agreed to hide her from the Nazis, she discovers the hearty life of countryside: long walks to school, the farm animals the rhythm of the country life, and of course the "nourriture paysanne" that the girl outright rejects. "Je passais mon temps à pleurer et refusais de manger, particulièrement la viande de porc qui m'avait toujours été interdite. Ce refus qui prenait le prétexte de l'obéissance à la loi paternelle devait aussi, sans que ce soit tout à fait conscient, me servir de moyen pour retourner à la maison, auprès de ma mère" (*RO/rL*, 30). Again food and mother: one leads to (or away from) the other. It is the girl's perennial strategy to negotiate her boundaries with people around her and to exercise power via the control of this important oral metaphor.

[254] Stanislawski, *ibid.* (2004),159. Stanislawski also points out: "Only later in the autobiography will Kofman reveal to us, if in a highly muted way, that her own hysterical vomiting was indeed coupled first with thumb-sucking and then with homosexual attraction to her surrogate Christian mothers" (159).

In 1987, Kofman published a short autobiographical essay entitled *Sacrée Nourriture*,[255] in which she sketched the triangulation mother-father-child in connection to the element of food which functions as the force that holds the triangle together and tears it apart contemporarily. Because of its length and the quality of the prose (extremely poetic), this essay could easily have been incorporated as a chapter in *Rue Ordener, rue Labat*. It reads as utterly complementary to it: it does not reveal anything we don't already learn from the autobiography while adding important details to the picture, especially of her early childhood when the father was still alive.

In *Sacrée nourriture*, Kofman recalls the origins of her personal rather unhealthy relationship with food, placeing the roots of this relationship in the Law.

"Sacrée nourriture! Et deux fois sacrée" the essay, or prose poem, opens with these sibylline words.

This initial play on words sets the tone for the entire piece which is a complex mixture of intended double-ententes, subconscious parapraxis, and indicative lapses.

Although the English translation of this essay is "damned food" it is inevitable to catch an immediate double entente in the original "sacrée nourriture" where the French word *sacrée* when not used idiomatically literally means "sacred" (as Stanislawski points out, a double meaning present also in the all-important Hebrew "*qadosh*"). Sacred food, like sacred is the food of Judaism, the food *made* by the mother in the kitchen, and the food *made* by the father via the recitation of a prayer (sacred Word) through ritual killing (sacred blood).

Sacrée nourriture! Et deux fois sacrée.
-Il faut manger, disait ma mère. […]
-Il ne faut pas tout manger, disait mon père.

[255] Here, I use the edition of the text printed in *Sarah Kofman*, in *Les Cahiers du Grif* (1997), 167-168.

Kofman sketches an image of Jewish mother almost too closely adherent to the common stereotype of the obsessive feeder: "Et elle nous bourrait, bourrait. Pas risqué, avec elle, d'être privée de dessert."

The Jewish mother's nurturing nature is a salient feature in Jewish literature, particularly male literature (it's enough to think of Sholem Asch's Yiddish classic novel *The Mother*). Kofman makes it very clear that she hates food: she tries in all possible ways to break free from it. And her rejection finds the most successful expression in vomit. Perhaps, rejecting the food of the mother is also to be interpreted not simply as a rejection of the mother but as a complex route toward expelling those fears that the mother has for her child and that she fences off by way of food-offering: fear of starvation, sickness, and of de-judaization. "Etait-ce crainte de transgresser quelque interdit ou conséquence du bourrage, le fait est que je n'avais guère d'appétit et résistais de toutes mes forces à l'impérative maternel catégorique" (*S.n.*, 167). The maternal categorical imperative being "eat!," i.e., "live ! be healthy ! be Jewish !"? However, it would be misleading to read in this rejection an act of resistance solely against the mother, as Tina Chanter for example does in her "Eating Words: Antigone as Kofman's Proper Name."[256] The categorical imperative of the mother is only one aspect of the Jewish categorical imperative, whose holder is always and ultimately the father. It is the father who decrees the Jewish law and the way in which *kashrut* marks each Jew by controlling (dominating) his mouth, what he can introduce inside his body and can't. *Inter alia*, *kashrut* is also, as Sarah realizes as soon as she is out in the French world, a set of laws that by delimiting what a Jew should and should not eat further sets aside the Jews from

[256] In *Enigmas: Essays on Sarah Kofman* (1999).

other people in the surrounding society. The Jews obey 613 commandments: 248 of which are positive (*mitzvot aseh*) and 365 negative imperatives (*mitzvot taaseh*): so, both "do" and "don't" are part of one same legal code. Understood this way the opening paragraph of Kofman's alimentary autobiography shows clearly not simply the author's rejection of the mother as it confirms the author's incapacity to articulate otherwise than via a reversal, by pardox, a rejection of the father. Kelly Oliver asks in his article "Sarah Kofman's Queasy Stomach": "[…] might the rejection of the mother cover up the rejection of the paternal law?"[257] To which I would definitely answer yes.

"Il faut manger" and "Il ne faut pas tout manger" are part of one single order: "be Jewish". And the privileged altar where the ceremony of Judaism is performed in the house, especially as far as a girl is concerned, is the table. On 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 (*shohet*) in his studio. "Ma mère, grande prêtresse, officiait dans la cuisine, où il n'était pas rare de voir un morceau de bœuf salé dont le sang dégoulinait des heures entières, […] tandis que mon père, rabbin shoreth, tuait dans les cabinets les poulets selon le rite." The priest and the priestess work in unison: yet the priestess is more of an executioner of the priest's orders who represent the last word for the entire family. This becomes very clear in the following scene, in which we witness a reversal of roles (rules). The war has already started and during their "exodus" to Brittany, while on the train, the family bumps into the volunteers of the Red Cross who are distributing to the hungered French population some ham-and-butter sandwiches: the mother instinctively says to her children "Don't take them." Surprisingly, the father intervenes and nullifies her order:

[257] "Sarah Kofman's Queasy Stomach," in *Enigmas*, *ibid.*, 182.

"Laisse manger les enfants." Kofman remembers greatly enjoying the delicious taste of the prohibited food: she interprets that pleasure as deriving not so much from the *treife* itself as from the victory of the father's word over the mother's: "Je trouvais délicieux ce jambon-beurre naguère décrété impur, purifié par les circonstances et l'autorité paternelle" (*S.n.*, 168). So the priest and the priestess here switch role: who used to say "do" now says "don't" and the one characterized by his "don'ts" now orders "do". By way of this turnabout, is Kofman implicitly underlining how the kosherization of food is but an act of *permission*? It's about imposing or lifting a ban, *verbally*. It is a question of power. And the father's power wins, always.

Furthermore, that last sentence "purifié par les circonstances et l'autorité paternelle" is particularly desquieting because of the logic implication: father *and* war purify? Father *and* Nazism purify pork, expand the range of the edible beyond the confines of the law? Is this the same man who goes beyond the call of religious duty to observe the holy rest of Shabbat at the price of his own life, but who applies *pikuah nefesh* when completely unnecessary? And therefore his act is again transgressive rather than respective of (his own) law.

If we read further, it becomes clear that in what follows the non-said is the central core of a subconscious knowledge that Kofman seems to have fought against and suppressed at least in this work, if not in all of her writings. The father's authority is a dangerous delusion. "The circumstances" that seemed so favorable when it came to permitting a momentary lifting of the mother's imperative (which in this case is a contradiction, since the mother in the train scene is not typically stuffing up the kids but on the contrary is doing just what her husband would have normally done, she is again

interpreting him), those same circumstances impose a graver ban: the death of the father. "Quelques années plus tard mon père fut déporté." And at that point, "on ne trouva plus rien à manger"—and the sandwich per se had made no difference between life and death, but it had opened a breach in the sense of self as Jew in at least one of the children, Sarah. At that point to the girl must have been obvious that if "kosher" is only a verbal imposition, and verbal imposition can be resisted, then also being Jewish could be resisted.

Once the father is gone, the mother's word remains nullified: when in hiding in the apartment of the Christian woman (the equivalent of that well-meant Red Cross that saves those children who are willing to taste ham and butter), the mother will have to yield to the power of Mémé who feeds Sarah her *treife* in order to make her healthy (in the body and the spirit), i.e. to dejudaize her through the most Jewish of her traits: food. The food (the mother) must be defeated by complete replacement. So the one who results suffocated by words not expressed, by a power constantly taken away from her, is the Jewish mother. And the daughter's persistent suffocation (vomit, nausa) might be also interpreted as her incapacity to recognize the martyrdom of the living mother.

"Après mille péripéties, je fus 'sauvée' de justesse par une femme qui me garda chez elle, en plein Paris, jusqu'à la fin de la guerre" (*S.n.*) recalls Kofman, surprisingly editing out of this scenario her mother who was also "saved" by Mémé who kept both of them in the very eye of the storm. And why "saved" in quotation mark? The Latin meaning of the verb "sauver" is "to make safe" or "healthy" (*salvare*, *salus*, *salvatio*), where "health" is also intended as spiritual safety. If it is undeniable the heroism and generosity with which Mémé saved the little Jewish girl and her mother, it is also true

that her intervention was not salvific from a spiritual point of view in the connection between the two victims.

> En même temps qu'elle m'apprenait ce qu'était qu' « avoir un nez juif », elle me soumit à un tout autre régime : la nourriture de mon enfance fut décrétée pernicieuse pour ma santé […] ; de la viande rouge, bien saignante […] devait me « refaire la santé ». Ce fut désormais mon lot quotidien […]
>
> Soumise à un véritable « *double bind* », je ne pouvais plus rien avaler et vomissais après chaque repas.
>
> *Sacrée Nourriture*.

Mémé changes her diet as a way of saving her: Nazi occupation and the final solution required a change of identity which Mémé interprets too literally. It is not enough to give shelter to the Jewish girl, it is necessary to dejudaize her. Kofman talks about a change of diet which in French is expressed by the same word as for regime: régime. There certainly occurs a change of regime together with the change of diet: Mémé takes over the father's role with all that it implies, which is the priestly officiating over foods. The mother loses her power (a pseudohegemony as we have seen) and the girl is now under the Law of the Other. The last sentence of this haunting mnemonic revisitation is separated by the previous paragraph by a double space (lost in the English edition). Thus two sentences, the first and the last one of *Sacrée nourriture* ("Sacrée nourriture! Et deux fois sacrée//…// Soumise à un véritable « *double bind* », je ne pouvais plus rien avaler et vomissais après chaque repas"), constitute the thin frame around a story which is divided into two main paragraphs. This closing phrase, which sounds like a confession from which trauma and guilt are not completely absent (*soumise*), refers not only to the régime of Mémé, or that of *maman* and the father, but to an entire life's regime which makes each bite indigestible because it forces it with violence and overpowers the girl whose

submission is no escape: the body will by itself, on its own will, reject what the voice cannot refuse.

Sacrée nourriture! Et deux fois sacrée. "Bloody food" in the English translation creates an extra metaphor, absent from the French, quite pertinent to the context and helpful to the meaning of the story. "Bloody food" reminds us of the blood taken out in the kosherization process, of the blood it takes to kill animals the ritual way, of the blood left in by the nonkosher preparation of Mémé, and most importantly of the sacredness (blood-line) of the link between those who give food and those who receive it. The food of her memory is twice sacred/bloody because there are two victims behind it (mother and father) as well as two saviors (the two mothers): two ways of conceiving food and nutrition (Christian and Jewish, maternal and paternal/legal). This double bind does not save the girl, it condemns her to anorexia and aphasia, i.e. suffocation: to self-rejection via the vomiting of any in-take.

Sacrée nourriture: the father makes the food sacré (sacred) and the mother makes it "sacré" (damned)… Or the other way around? The father also makes it "bloody" ("il égorgeait les poulets selon le rite") and so does the mother ("ma mère laissait dégouliner des heures entières des morceaux de bœuf"). The prohibitions against food (prohibitions of the father) are the way in which the father puts himself between child and maternal body.[258] The maternal body is turned into the instrument of the law/Name of the father: so it has to be rejected as well. « Thus, the maternal body is used in the service of a paternal law that outlaws the very body whose authority is invoked in order to enforce the law."[259]

[258] See Oliver, *ibid.* , 188.
[259] Oliver, *ibid.*.

The law of the father, in its alimentary incarnation, is not perceived as carrying a danger: it is an imposition that can be resisted. What is felt as a threat to one's being however is the separation from the (any) mother which food can help, strategically, to mend. "Le vrai danger: etre séparée de ma mère" (*RO/rL*, 33). Until the age of eight, Sarah would enter into a hysterical state any time something threatened the proximity to her mother. And also later on in the story, once the biological mother is rejected, in order to be able to reject with/through her the father, Sarah will use food (this time, refusing to eat) in order to be reunited with the surrogate mother.

Needless to say, once in rue Labat, Kofman's mother does not like the idea of Sarah being exposed to the licentious behavior of Mémé (once a week she receives the nightly visit of her boy-friend), the imposition of nonkosher foods, and especially "la tendresse" that Mémé manifests toward the girl, "qu'elle estimait excessive" (*RO/rL*, 49). "Pourquoi m'embrassait-elle si souvent? Au lever, au coucher, à la moindre occasion! Et, en effet, à la maison nous n'avions été habitués ni aux baisers rituels du matin et du soir ni à tant d'embrassades et de câlineries" (*RO/rL*, 49).

In the paradise of rue Ordener, where the laws were clear and their observance guaranteed the falling into place of all aspect of domestic life and the standing of the architecture of Jewish ethics, no one had inserted physical love (or at least, the narrator's reconstruction suggests so). The morning and night rituals in rue Ordener were probably the blessings and the Shemah Israel; while in rue Labat they turn into physical externations of love. In order to corroborate the idea of the discrepancy between the non-Jewish and Jewish family rapports, Kofman juxtaposes this impression of Mémé and the French family with the story of her own family:

> À L'Haÿ, je découvris ce qu'on appelle une famille et l'esprit de famille. J'étais étonnée qu'il fut possible de rassembler plusieurs générations. Sauf en photos, je n'avais jamais connu mes grands-mères, mes oncles ou mes cousins. Tous (ou presque) étaient morts au ghetto de Varsovie. […] Sur les dix frères et sœurs de mon père, un seul en réchappa car il vivait en Yougoslavie. Mais il fut fusillé par les nazis. Marié à une non-Juive, il avait été rejeté par les siens, sauf par mon père qui alla vivre chez lui pendant deux ans, entre seize et dix-huit ans je crois […]. Plus tard, lorsqu'il lui écrivait de Paris, il dessinait nos petites mains sur les lettres en guise de signature. […] Ma sœur Rachel […] put récupérer des photos de mon père que nous ne possédions plus et voir les lettres écrites en yiddish avec les dessins de nos mains. Nous avions tous oublié ce geste si délicat de mon père, et il me revint alors brusquement que pendant toute la durée de la guerre je n'avais cessé moi-même de dessiner mes mains.
>
> *Rue Ordener, rue Labat*, 62-63.

Should this description of the Kofmans prove that her (Jewish) family was devoid of that physical warm love which Mémé's (non-Jewish) family overspills? On the contrary, there is great tenderness inherited from her family (the family from before the *Hurbn*) expressed in those affectionate drawings of children's hands: a tenderness the girl desperately wants to last, and in order to keep it alive she draws those little hands throughout the period of the war. The one thing that noticeably stands out in this passage is, however, the total absence of any trace of the maternal side of the family.

Kofman's past is rooted in suffering, exile and death. Family photos of massacred people don't make for a true "esprit de famille." The only positive picture that remains for Kofman is one of her father from before the war:

> De cette période de la vie de mon père, antérieure à son mariage, il me reste une vieille photo marron tout abîmée qui me bouleverse encore aujourd'hui intensément et me serre le cœur. Il a les bras croisés et l'on voit nettement l'une de ses mains. Elle me parait immense, comme une main de Kokoshka. Je le reconnais surtout à son sourire, au plissement de ses yeux derrière les lunettes. Il ne porte pas encore la barbe ni le chapeau. Il ne sait pas encore ce qui l'attend.
>
> *Rue Ordener, rue Labat,* 64.

So described, this is a photograph of happiness and beauty: it could be, if read out of this context, the picture of a non-Jewish father. No distinguishing Jewish traits here: no hat, no *kippah*, no beard, no *peyes*; no reference to food, rituals, orders either. These, on the other hands, are elements that only in the context of "ce qui l'attendait" (what was awaiting him) emerge very powerfully in the memory of the daughter. The Jewish traits seem to belong to the Shoah memory only: and this appears to be just as true for the memory of the mother and of herself. In this image, Berek Kofman is just a young man. Before he joins the rabbinate, before he's even a father, before the mother makes it into the "picture," before the emigration to France, before being brought back to his place of origin (Poland) by force to be barbarically murdered there. (Another myth, Sisyphus, comes to mind.) It's clear that in hindsight, especially in the light of the early part of the book on the idyllic childhood of rue Ordener, a photograph of the father, any photo of him, should rekindle unimaginable pain: but why using this picture as the proof of the contrast between "rue Ordener" "rue Labat", *maman*'s world and *Mémé*'s world? Maybe, this is again a paradox: by using the *catastrophe* (overturning) of a photograph she reestablishes the stability, "normality," possibility of her origins—origins that are made to look abnormal by the distorting light thrown on them by the Shoah, the war and Mémé's understanding of her and her Jewishness (i.e., her relation to her mother).

This profoundly stirring memory of family's spirit and spirits is followed by the pivotal chapter called, quite tellingly, *Paravant*. And indeed, the event narrated in it functions like a screen against the too-painful-to-bear memory of the father's hands, children's hands, the Shoah's hands that again reach deep and far fifty years after the facts. A shift is inevitable, for the narration to go on, for the child's spirit of survival to

make it through the unbearable: and the shift has to be, at least temporarily, from Thanatos to Eros.

In order to do this, to regain completely and fully one's happiness, it is necessary to completely and fully remove the mother (the past). This happens one night when on the way back from the countryside with Mémé, the woman decides that it'd be safer for herself and the girl in her care to spend the night at a hotel. The day after, when they finally return home they find Sarah's mother (who could obviously not go to the police to denounce their disappearance) crazed with anxiety and fear. "Je l'avais complètement oubliée. J'étais tout simplement heureuse" (*RO/rL*, 66). The direct object pronoun "le" refers to the mother (I had forgotten *her*) but, perhaps, subconsciously, also to the police (a feminine noun too) which is mentioned in a previous sentence: and by extension the war, the Nazis, the Shoah, the father… in other words, pain. Just as it had happened the first night she had run to Mémé with her mother, just before the Gestapo arrives to arrest them, and Sarah, in seeing the lady of rue Labat, wearing a "peignoir," completely forgets what has brought them there.[260]

Most important, this episode recalls the night when the girl shares the bed for the first time with Mémé. An experience of such shattering excitement that all details of it have been completely removed from memory: too overwhelming an experience to be remembered. "De cette nuit aux Gobelins, il ne me reste aucun souvenir, si ce n'est celui de cette scène de déshabillage derrière le paravent" (*RO/rL*, 66). It is clear at this point that happiness with Mémé is sensual (sexualized) happiness:[261] Mémé who walks around

[260] "Elle était en peignoir, je la trouvai très belle, douce et affectueuse. J'en oubliai presque ce qui nous avait conduit chez elle, ce soir-là" (*RO/rL*, 40).
[261] Cfr., Oliver: "Mémé becomes the good mother, the desirable mother, close to whom Sarah experiences unfamiliar sensations in her body" (*ibid.*, 185).

the house in her unbuttoned pajamas that show through her naked breasts—which Kofman remembers of finding fascinating to look at. Mémé who dresses the girl, braids her hair and dolls her up like a poupée. Mémé who is not afraid of hugging and kissing night and day. And of course, Mémé who sleeps in the same bed with her putative daughter and undresses in front of her. A scenario, that of the seduction between surrogate daughter and surrogate mother analyzed by Kofman in *Séductions* (1990) already.[262] The betrayal of the mother is complete.

Sarah's tonsillectomy (chapter XII) had already created the central opportunity for a scene that better than any other represents this symbolic detachment from one source of good food turned indigestible to another source of food now desirable: the passage from mother to mother, from biology to society, from survival to life. "Quand j'étais malade, à la différence de ma mère, mémé ne montrait pas le moindre affolement […]. Je pleure et crie de douleur. Ma mère se met à parler très fort et me plaindre en yiddish et veut alerter le médecin. Mémé, très calme et souriante dit : 'Ce n'est rien, et tu vas pouvoir sucer beaucoup de glace !' Je cesse aussitôt de pleurer. Je ressens vaguement ce jour-là que je me détache de ma mère et m'attache de plus en plus à l'autre femme" (*RO/rL*, 52-53). Sarah leaves behind the y*iddishe mame* and her smothering apprehension, and embraces the French mother and her promises of (self-)fulfillment and *jouissance* (pleasure plus pain beyond the pleasure) implicit in her offer.

The "betrayal" of the mother reaches its apex after the tonsillectomy with the symbolic choice of a card for Mother's Day. Chapter XIII "La fête des Mères": the girl takes some money and alone (in Nazi occupied Paris) goes to buy two cards for her two mothers. She chooses to give the most beautiful one to Mémé and the least pretty one to

[262] Cfr. Christie McDonald, "Sarah Kofman: Effecting Self Translation" (1999), 194.

her mother. Ironically, a memory occurs to the narrator about a recent pre-war Mother's Day, just a few years earlier, when she had won the school's first prize (an illustrated volume of La Fontaine's tale *La Cigale et la fourmi*) for the best letter by a student to a mother. "J'ai honte et je me sens rougir dans la boutique. Mon choix vient bel et bien d'être fait, ma préférence déclarée" (*RO/rL*, 55). Between the mother who stays home in hiding, suffering in the isolation of a room, trapped in her Jewish looks and Jewish language (her thick Yiddish accent, and barely usable French), without her husband, and the French woman who moves around freely in the majority world which is hers and to which she belongs and fits in perfectly, the Christian world of salvation and redemption, the child can only choose the freedom (and promise of life) incarnated by Mémé.

"[M]on plaisir le plus grand était d'aller faire les courses avec elle [Mémé], de l'entendre me faire passer pour sa fille auprès des commerçants, et de porter au retour les canettes de bière" (*RO/rL*, 58). And of course, there's the pleasure of sleeping in the uncensored embrace of the surrogate (m)other.

Mémé is the passageway to French culture (the Other's world) for the small girl: she introduces her to books, the richness of crosswords, dictionaries and encyclopedias, to "la grande musique" (in particular Beethoven) and the charming *chansonniers*, and the geniuses of Western civilization (Spinoza, Marx, Bergson, Einstein) whom the lady uses as paradigm of Jewish people's exceptional intelligence while by the same token undermining Jewish people's worth describing the entire race as deicide, stingy, pushy and physically ugly (big Jewish noses). Mémé embodies the promise of life, of a future: while the mother represents survival and a past lost for good. Mémé's love envelops Sarah so completely that the girl falls under the spell of seeing herself as one with her

protector: this way, from the safety the presence and symbiosis with Mémé allows her, the girl explores the French world where even the war stops being scary and too close. Kofman remembers how well they still ate until the liberation thanks to the abundant food that Mémé's relatives kept sending them from the farms. The biological mother though does not participate in this game: she does not accept the camouflage that is available to Sarah and therefore has to be eliminated altogether from the scene. The mother remains a threat to the girl's illusion, as well as to the girl's life. Segregated in the adjacent room, Madame Kofman "ne participait en rien à notre vie" (*RO/rL*, 59).

> Ma mère souffrait en silence: pas de nouvelles de mon père, pas moyen de rendre visite à mes frères et sœurs, aucun pouvoir d'empêcher Mémé de me transformer, de me détacher d'elle et du judaïsme. J'avais, semble-t-il, enterré tout le passé : je me mis à adorer les beefsteaks saignants au beurre et au persil. Je ne pensais plus du tout à mon père, je ne pouvais plus prononcer un seul mot en yiddish tout en continuant à comprendre parfaitement la langue de mon enfance. Je redoutais maintenant la fin de la guerre !
>
> *Rue Ordener, rue Labat,* 67.

Yiddish: the incarnation of a language that can not be transmitted culturally: the liquid territory of maternal sonority. The most concrete expression of Lacanian "lalangue": the language of origins, the fundamental language, "langue archaïque qui fait lien avec le corps de la mère, se traduisant par toutes sortes d'affects qui restent énigmatiques"[263] as Robert Samacher defined it. Sarah lets go of this territory as well: the last limb holding her to a past that she wants to escape from. The end of the war threatens to kill everything the girl has struggled to become during the war, and because of it. Mémé's love has normalized the abnormal (the war): without Mémé and the war, the girl will be forced to enter a dark area which can be metaphorically understood as a territory of death. Since

[263] Robert Samacher, "L'inquiétante étrangeté du 'lalangue'", in *L'inconscient du Yiddish* (2002), 116.

the status ante, the life from before, is undeniably irrecoverable, what does it mean to "go back to normality" at war ends for the Jewish girl whose father will never return from Auschwitz, whose alimentation has been declared murderous, and whose mother's language is no longer her own?

Language leaves such an empty space in the center of this text. So little is said about language that, in a text about omission, de-fusion, it becomes evident that this "omission" is one of those significant narrative mines that, unseen, threaten to explode the field of the apparent text, underneath which they brew. In fact, language bears a heavy impact on the subconscious and literary stylistic level. One window on the *situation* of language between mother and daughter is pushed open by the description of a very important occurrence in the life of both. During the still idyllic phase with the mother—before Mémé's appearance on the scene, but already after the father's arrest—Sarah had taught her mother to write and read in French (*RO/rL*, 34). We know that her parents spoke Polish and Yiddish and that Yiddish was the language in the house. To which we must add that the children and the father, we don't know about the mother, all knew Hebrew. Her mother must have spoken to Sarah in Yiddish all along, and her knowledge of French after only 11 years in Paris, in a state of total non-assimilation, had to be fairly poor. How does language play a role in this woman's relation with Mémé? And her more and more French daughter? Again an early episode, retold fleetingly, seems to bear a paramount importance in the splitting up of another bond, the linguistic one: determining the passage from yiddishkeit to Frenchness in the identity of the girl.

> Nous ne revîmes, en effet, jamais mon père. Aucune nouvelle non plus, sauf une carte envoyée de Drancy, écrite à l'encre violette, avec un timbre sur le

> dessus représentant le maréchal Pétain. Elle était écrite en français de la main d'un autre. Sans doute lui avait-il été interdit d'écrire en yiddish ou en polonais, langues dans lesquelles il communiquait ordinairement avec nous. Émigrés en France depuis 1929, mes parents n'étaient guère « assimilées "et nous tous […] apprîmes le français à l'école. Dans cet ultime signe de vie […] il annonçait sa déportation […]. Et il recommandait à ma mère de bien s'occuper du petit dernier. À la mort de ma mère, il fut impossible de retrouver cette carte que j'avais relue si souvent et que j'aurais voulu conserver à mon tour. C'était comme si j'avais perdu mon père une seconde fois.
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> *Rue Ordener, rue Labat*, 15-16.

It's worth pointing out the linguistic and thematic leitmotifs that compose but also perturb the episode: again the centrality of the "ink" in the memory of the father; the return of that same maréchal Pétain, who had created the national school prize for best mother's-day composition and whose effigy was probably stamped on the official arrest and deportation papers of all Jews, who now symbolically accompanies the father home for a last good-bye and blessing; the expression "he announced his deportation" which recalls the previous voluntary "Ecce Homo" scene when the father gave himself up to his destiny; and the recommendation to take care of the last-born, a son. In fact, the reader is never told about the fate of this baby and why the mother did not take him into hiding with her as well. All the other children are really absent from this story: we hardly know anything about Sarah's siblings and nothing at all regarding their relationship before during or after the war.

At the beginning the book is marked by the overwhelming presence of the father: his pen, his rituals, his laws all intact. Then the father physically disappears and his textual presence begins to fade too as the figures of good-hearted helpers/women, the mother and Mémé make in onto the scene more and more fully. Before complete disappearance (silence, death), all that remains are his words in the form of this last post-

card. A card that only an interpreter could read and make readable to the anguished addressee, his "mute" wife. (Mute because she cannot answer it, and because the unfamiliar language of the card entraps her into silence.) Who is the interpreter of the message? Presumably, the daughter herself, though it is not explicitly clarified by Kofman. The daughter translates, connects and separates. And at this level, she is still part of the circle mother-father-child. A circle from which she must break free. The father, deprived of his language, in this very last missive to his family is symbolic of the impossibility to return to that language for the daughter afterwards, after Mémé, after surviving the organized murder of all the bearers of that culture, the speakers of that langauge. That linguistic realm in which mother and father remain enveloped and which exhales the fumes of hell and the sounds of death, a dead language of a dead people (Ashkenazi Jewry), has to be left behind and overcome for the girl to survive. The loss of the father, then, demands the rejection of the mother—who, through her Yiddish, her Judaism, her foreignness will always remain part of the father's world, not of the French world the daughter aspires to join. And to conclude the circle of this painful metaphor, we are told that after the death of the mother—who we are given to understand was the keeper of the father's last postcard from Drancy—the card was never to be found again! And the way in which the narrator formulates this second loss (death of the mother) is by enlacing it into that of the father which thus becomes a "double death," "double loss." "It's as if my father died a second time": when in fact, the narrator is overimposing, transferring (translating?) onto her father's one and only death the one of the mother—which thus remains unprocessed. She seems to be able, or willing, to mourn only the loss of the father. The mother's death is mentioned only in relation to the loss of the father's

postcard. Isn't this disappeared post-card the mother's revenge, in Oedipal/Freudian key, for the pen (*stylo*) the daughter had stolen for herself? (The pen through which the daughter writes and speaks the mother who, deprived of language, remains silent and perpetually "in hiding"—as subtext of all the daughter's literature?)

Between the silence heralded by the last post-card and the death of the mother, there is a space exemplified by silence : "Ma mère souffrait en silence" (*RO/rL*, 67).

The apparent erasure of all memories of her past, is also an aspect of this silence affecting the young girl: "J'avais, semble-t-il, enterré tout le passé" (*RO/rL*, 67).

The drama of separation between mother and daughter, past and present explodes with full strength when the war ends: the mother is eager to reconstruct as much as possible her world the way she had known it—taking back all her children, returning to speak only Yiddish, going back to observing Jewish laws, forgetting about Mémé and the French world which had both saved and damned them. But the daughter resists this pull toward a past she has shed because of the unbearable trauma it signifies. At this point, a new battle begins. Or rather, while the one universal war ends, the personal, psychic one keeps going on. With the liberation of France, an open conflict begins between Sarah's mother and Madame Claire for the custody (mothership) of the child.

In chapter, XVII ("Libérations"), Kofman's memory lingers over scenes of entrapment, claustrophobic anguish, i.e. the exact opposite of what the title would suggest.

After attempting to live in a hotel and pick up the pieces of a shattered life, madame Kofman (who, we are told, by then despised the woman who had saved their lives) is forced to keep Mémé in the picture because of practical difficulties and because

of the daughter's resistance to the unbearable separation from that woman whom she now loves more than her own mother (*RO/rL*, 69).

"Je dus partager le lit de celle-ci dans une misérable chambre d'hôtel rue des Saules "(*RO/rL*, 69). Not only does the girl refuse to leave Mémé but she interprets the separation as (sexual) betrayal, by sharing the bed with "another" woman, in another (this time, shabby and undignified) hotel (around Pigalle). This scene, as if seen through a camera obscura, refracts inverted, in a photo negative, the previous idyllic scene with Mémé in the hotel around the Gobelins (an area associated with royal artifacts and tapestry dating back to Louis XIV). The triangulation of the relation is also mirrored in the topography of the events. To the bipolar axis rue Ordener-rue Labat, a third (sexual) point is added: be it rue des Saules (Weeping Tree Road!) or hotel at the Gobelins, a point outside of the "ordinary" domestic (asexual) act.

Food remerges as symptom of rejection, as Sarah's way of fighting with the surrounding world, and, specifically, with her mother. She is not allowed to see Mémé and therefore she stops eating, until the mother is forced to give in to the daughter's blackmail. "'Une heure par jour' décréta-e-elle. […] Si je prolongeais de quelques minutes, j'étais accueillie à coups de martinet. Curieusement, ma mère avait pensé l'emporter avec elle le jour où nous étions passées par la fenêtre donnant sur la véranda… Je fus très vite couverte de bleus et me mis à détester ma mère. La vie à l'hôtel, avec elle, devint intolérable" (*RO/rL*, 69).

The mother's permission is not enough: Sarah escapes to Mémé and "Celle-ci ne demandait que ça: me garder!" (*RO/rL*, 69-70). Here we have again "ça": the crux of the story. Mémé demands something of Sarah, just like her father's pen does: they both

demand "ça." *Ça* is sacrifice, unbearable effort, intolerable "either/or" choices that know no ambiguities or flexibility.

Accused of child abuse, madame Kofman is brought to a military court by Mémé who requests legal custody of the child.

Once in the tribunal the daughter is again shocked (embarrassed) by the mother for what she says about Mémé. Again embarrassed by the word of the mother, just as when in rue Ordener the cop had come to arrest her father and his wife had come up with an "embarrassing" lie ("embarrassing" also because it had something to do with sex?, with the threat of the mother being pregnant?). Except that now the mother is telling the truth : she is telling the story of how Mémé has stolen her daughter away from her taking advantage of their powerlessness.

> Je ne comprenais pas très bien ce que celle-ci [her mother] voulait dire par le terme 'abuser', mais j'étais persuadée qu'elle mentait. J'étais outrée de la voir accuser faussement celle à qui nous devions de n'être pas mortes, et que j'aimais si fortement !
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> *Rue Ordener, rue Labat,* 70.

This special mention of Mémé's role as savior will also return at the very end of the book in the words of a priest who, on Mémé's tomb, will recall her war-time heroism. Therefore, the narrator's description of the woman during the trial scene certainly foreshadows (and maybe via authorial ventriloquism echoes) the role of the priest in the last sentence of the book. She, the daughter of a priest and priestess (*Sacrée nourriture*), ultimately, also officiates: through the pen of the father, sacred instrument for the writer's rite, she officiates the absolution of Mémé (même?). But why not the absolution of *maman*? At the beginning, we were offered some parallels between the memory of Kofman's personal story and that of the *Akedah*. It is possible that this tribunal scene

subconsciously brings back the same connection: Mémé (Isaac) is spared but in her/his stead something else (the mother) has to be sacrificed. It is again "ça," sacrifice, that demands of the daughter an uncompromising choice.

This highly dramatic moment in the F.F.I. court seems to latch onto another similar story from a different repertoire: "Later two prostitutes came to the king and stood before him. The first woman said, 'Please, my lord! This woman and I live in the same house; and I gave birth to a child while she was in the house […] this woman also gave birth to a child. […] During the night this woman's child died, because she lay on it" (1 Kings, 3:16). Two women fighting in front of King Solomon over a surviving child: "Fetch me a sword […] Cut the live child in two, and give half to one and half to the other" thunders the famous solomonic judgment. The real mother of the child pleads with the king to let the child live and give it to the other woman, who instead, revealing her imposture, agrees with the king's decision to kill the child if she can't have it all for herself. A first question that arises from this parable is whether this story presents the two women as harlots in order to eliminate any possibility for the existence of a father? Can women have the child for themselves only once the father is killed? Metaphorically also in Kofman's story we have a "dead" child (Jewish Sarah) and a surviving child (Mémé's Sarah) that is being fought over by two women. The metaphor tragically brings to the fore the fact that a survived child is also partly a dead child—death being premise of survival. There is no survival of the Shoah, of such monstrous trauma, without a price of (partial) death.

Mémé, in the French court, gets the child, thanks particularly to the testimony against her own mother by Sarah who shows to a shocked tribunal the bruises on her

body. “The Free French tribunal decided to entrust me to mémé” (“Le tribunal F.F.I. décida de me confier à mémé,” *RO/rL*, 70). The French tribunal, meaning the non Jewish world: the cultural development and passage from Jewish (outside of French culture) to French (*in* culture) is ripe. From “Metamorphosis” (chapter XII) to “Libérations” the circle is complete.

The love between Mémé and Sarah is victorious—to the eyes of the (French) world: the idyll can now go on ever after. Instead the girl starts not feeling that well, mainly, it should come as no surprise, in her stomach. “Je ressens un très étrange malaise […] je ne me sens ni triomphante, ni parfaitement heureuse ni tout à fait rassurée. […] [J’]avais l’estomac serré, j’avais peur […] comme si je venais de commettre un crime, comme si j’étais de nouveau ‘recherchée’” (*RO/rL*, 71). But when she had been « recherchée » previously, that is by the Nazis, she had *not* committed a crime. Is being sought by the mother the same as being sought by the Gestapo?[264] Is the girl’s “crime” in both cases the same? The crime she is guilty of—and that is at the origins of her malaise—has got to do with her Judaism. And this becomes clearer, when, through an intricate hyperbole, this malaise is connected to the subsequent scene of the “sentence” of the mother.

Moments after the judges’ decision, the mother kidnaps Sarah away from Mémé, helped by two friends of hers.[265] Tellingly, just as the lady and Sarah are on the stairs about to enter the apartment, i.e. at the threshold of the paradise of rue Labat. (“Au cinquième étage de la rue Labat” Kofman says, where “rue Labat” stands symbolically for a street, a mother, a building, a sexual alcove, assimilation, “liberations.”) The scene

[264] “Her mother wanting her back is thus equated with the Nazis ‘wanting’ her” (Stanislawski, *ibid.*, 168).
[265] Note that the angels-helpers on the side of Sarah are always and only women. Two men appear here to help the mother “against” Sarah.

is not without hysteria and great drama: the *yiddishe mame* resurfaces: "Ma mère me frappait, hurlant en yiddish: 'Je suis ta mère! je suis ta mère ! […] tu m'appartiens !" (*RO/rL*, 71).

Here is the mother's final "sentence": You belong to me. A sentence to death and life, at the same time. The acceptance of this sentence annuls the crime: being Jewish, within the frame of the mother, is no longer a crime. The child can now relax. "Je me débattais, criais, sanglotais. Au fond, je me sentais soulagée" (*RO/rL*, 71).

The sentence is delivered in Yiddish. The dead language has reemerged. The dead speak. The past is now stronger and returns with a vengeance. (We will read in later chapters that during the post-war years in the custody of her mother, Sarah returns to Judaism, relearns Hebrew and begins to observe again all the laws and interdictions of her childhood—before leaving all this behind for good a second time once she finishes school.)

" Au fond, je me sentais soulagée." Her upset stomach will relax and the queasiness pass. "Deep down, I was relieved" –deep down where? At the roots? The Jewish roots? Yes, maybe.

Perhaps, as when faced with the priest who was about to convert her—"Je sentais vaguement que se trouvait en jeu, cette fois, autre chose que la simple séparation d'avec ma mère" (*RO/rL*, 45)—Sarah understands that something more than just the separation from her mother was at stake in having been legally "won" over by Mémé. So real separation from the mother is not good: only symbolic or pseudo-separation is what the girl needs. She wants separation but with the umbilical cord still intact. As we will seen, only adulthood (which in this book means access to higher level of education, i.e. access

into the intellectual world, which is the world of art and philosophy) will force (help?) her to take a final decision: to detach herself from both mothers once and for all.

The intense chapter "Libérations" (note the plural of the noun) is followed by the brief yet central artistic intermezzo[266] of chapters XIX and XX, "Les deux mères de Léonard" (on the painting *The Virgin and Child with Saint Anne and St. John*) and "Une femme disparaît" (on Alfred Hitchcock's film *The Lady Vanishes*), after which the autobiography proper resumes: and it will conclude on a fast-forward mode in a quick anti-climatic epilogue.

Once kidnapped back by her mother, Sarah will keep seeing Mémé helped by a small legions of accomplices, of good angels (as in her early childhood always incarnated by maternal women). Their encounters are described as idyllic by the narrator: made so divine by the explicit contrariety of the mother who has to concede to this relationship only out of extreme need and the concrete daily hardship of the post-war era. For some time, Mémé takes care of the girl, picking her up from school and spending with her wonderful afternoons buying crayons, toys, strolling around Paris, reading, "sleeping together" and so on. "Malgré un arrière-fond d'angoisse, notre joie fut intense et pendant toute cette période, à peu près un mois, nous dormîmes dans le même lit, dans sa chambre, pour n'être plus, cette fois, séparées ni de jour ni de nuit" (*RO/rL*, 79). The way in which the narrator describes this intense pleasure of reuniting with the love object traces the modes of a romantic love story and the (home)sexual undertones are apparent: "Je me souviens surtout de la première nuit où mon émotion et mon excitation étaient très fortes. Me sentir simplement si près d'elle me mettait dans un "drôle" d'état. J'avais chaud,

[266] Let us remember en passant what Kofman says about certain digressions: "The summary's explanatory aims are revealed by a certain number of 'digressions' designed to supplement the absence of authorial explanations and throw light on the hero's behavior" ("Summarize, Interpret: *Gradiva,*" 98).

j'avais soif, je rougissais. Je n'en dis mot et j'aurais bien eu de la peine à dire quelque chose car je ne comprenais pas du tout ce qui m'arrivait" (*RO/rL*, 80).

Like all other idyllic moments in the girl's life also this one is about to be taken away. The Hitchcock scenario materializes: one day, after school, the girl runs out excited at the idea of finding Mémé waiting for her, and instead she finds the loving and sweet face of Mémé replaced by that of her mother. "Ce fut atroce. Je n'eus Mémé pas le droit d'aller rue Labat dire au revoir" (*RO/rL*, 81). Thus the mother, for the nine-year-old girl, ends up metamorphosized into Maredewitchale[267]: in the Yiddish folklore a witch that snatches the (bad) children and steals them away from their homes. A bearer of death and despair—like her biblical avatar, Lilith. This part of the story is perfectly accessible to the reader who has just been provided with a clear interpretative key by the narrator.

In fact, chapter XIX, was the warm-up for this climax. In a separate chapter, Kofman discusses Alfred Hitchcock's classic *The Lady Vanishes,* one of her favorite films. A movie played out on the theme of switched identity, or as Žižek describes it, "the most beautiful and effective variation on the theme of the 'disappearance that everybody denies."[268] On a train, the heroine of the film (Iris) meets a lovely old lady with a maternal face (Miss Froy) with whom she happily shares the compartment: while Iris

[267] "Three months after having this nightmare [Briefly: War time; an awful bird enters the room where Kofman, her mother and siblings are hiding and loudly says "Woe unto you!" twice: mother and daughter terrorized run outside on the street together; Kofman wakes up and is in great anxiety] I discover in reading *Lilith or The Dark Mother* that one of the privileged representations, in Jewish folklore in particular, of Lilith, the first seductive and devouring Eve, is the bat. One of the avatars of Lilith is *Marewip*. […] The Indo-European root of *mare* is *mer*, from which all sorts of words evocative of death derive, and, more precisely, of slow death by eating or suffocation—for example, undoubtedly the word *Maredewitch*. The spirit of *Maredewitch*—that other avatar of Lilith—haunted my entire childhood. When I was bad, my mother locked me in the dark closet where "Maredewitchale" was supposed to come, if not to eat me, at least to take me far away from home: that was the threat. I imagined her to myself, not as a bat, but as a very old woman. My unconscious possessed an 'unofficial knowledge' that knew much more than the 'official knowledge.' The dream-work was able to condense in one image the two terrifying figures of my childhood: the man from the *Kommandantur*, the bird of misfortune; and the old sorceress *Maredewitch*." *Selected Writings,* 254.

[268] Slavoj Žižek, *Looking Awry* (1992), 79.

dozes off momentarily, the place of the old lady is taken over by a (dislikable) woman dressed exactly like the disappeared character. The protagonist refuses to believe the new truth laid in front of her by a conspiracy of impostors, according to which the good lady (she is now looking for everywhere) never existed: that she was only a figment of her imagination. The replacement of the good face by the bad face is there to cause great anxiety in the viewer. " L'intolérable, pour moi, c'est toujours d'apercevoir brutalement à la place du bon visage 'maternel' de la vieille […] brusquement le visage de sa remplaçante […] ; visage effroyablement dur, faux, fuyant, menaçant, en lieu et place de celui si doux et si souriant de la bonne dame, au moment même où l'on s'attendait à le retrouver" (*RO/rL*, 76-77). The uncanny in the movie is provoked by the replacement: "Le mauvais sein à la place du bon sein, l'un parfaitement clivé de l'autre, l'un se transformant en l'autre" (*RO/rL*, 77).

How do we know that the good lady is in fact "good," the imago of a good mother? Because: "elle [the maternal lady] a toujours sur elle des réserves de nourriture." The answer passes again through oral symbology. Kofman draws a relation between good-mothering and food.

We will return to this entr'acte, that, in my opinion, holds one of those tightly knotted strings which, as Schulz had rightly described, we work at untying, seeking an end, and out of which only more art will reveal itself.

So, the estrangement from this "foreign" mother promptly shows through Sarah's feelings of detachment and shame. "Ma mère, toute fière, criait tout haut: " 'C'est ma fille! c'est ma fille!' J'avais honte. (À la fin de la terminale, au lycée Jules-Ferry, […], à

l'appel de mon nom, ma mère répéta la même scène, tandis que moi, sur l'estrade, j'aurais bien voulu disparaître sous terre)" (*RO/rL*, 90).

Quickly, the girl attaches herself more and more to a new interest: studying. Her love and dependence on books, teachers and mentors, recall the days of her pre-war life.

The high-school years are a real struggle for the girl, who is able to graduate thanks to the help of Mémé and the understanding and support of the high-school teachers. (All good fairies, interjecting in her favor, to save her from Maredewitchale.) "Entre ma mère et moi, il y avait, au cours des repas, des scènes terribles. Je faisais souvent la grève de la faim, et dérobais du sucre en cachette " (*RO/rL*, 97) ; "À la fin de ces deux années, j'avais maigri de sept kilos et avais cessé toute pratique religieuse" (98). Apparenlty, the mother no longer falls prey to her daughter's alimentary blackmailing: "Ma mère me coupait l'électricité tôt le soir; je me souviens d'avoir lu, sous les draps, à l'aide d'une lampe électrique, *Les chemins de la liberté* by Sartre" (*RO/rL*, 98).

Ready again to reject uncompromisely one thing in order to embrace undividedly another, the girl lets herself be saved by Sartre. Sartre takes over Moses, but also Jesus, since as soon as Kofman enters college, Mémé must be let go of as well. Should we assume that now that good father(s) have taken over again, slowly she can excise all contacts also with the good mother? Sarah can not stand to be called "lapin" or my "petite cocotte" by Mémé anymore and can no longer bear to be reminded of the old days.

Here the story ends. We are told that when Mémé died, not long before the book in our hands was written, Kofman, the adult writer, did not attend her funeral. (Because, the narrator says, she couldn't—meaning, perhaps, that she was again "sans pouvoir" vis à vis "ça"?) But she knows that the priest has made sure to remind everybody that this

lady "avait sauvé une petite fille juive pendant la guerre" (*RO/rL*, 99). The estranging sarcasm of this last sentence is so powerful that has a somewhat disturbing (in that, unsolvable) effect on the reader. What are we supposed to make of it? Is Kofman suggesting that even if she did not do the "remembering" someone else would inevitably do it for her? (Thus annulling the authority of her replaceable words.) I have already pointed out, though, how this priest's words of praise for madame Claire, which in this last sentence sound so ambiguous, are in fact the same Sarah had used herself to exculpate Mémé from the accusation of her mother in front of the military tribunal. This is then one more question left open by this text.

Here my summary ends, as well as the summary of her own life by Kofman. As just shown, "The summary is already an explanation […] the transformation of the text involves replacing descriptions and metaphors by concepts designed to make them intelligible."[269]

From Kofman's Freud a reading key to Kofman's Kofman emerges: "By calling things by their proper names, Freud prevents the reader from falling into a delusion, from falling asleep, from dreaming, from falling under the spell of the text's poetry."[270] By doing so herself, Kofman prevents the reader from falling under the spell of the survivor's "love story": the child saved, the good Frenchwoman who mends what an entire nation had savagely ripped apart, the sanctity of a double motherhood—one symbol of the world (biological mother, St. Anne) and one symbol of the heavens (savior mother, St. Mary). At the same time, this trick functions as an impediment to the

[269] "Summarize, Interpret: (*Gradiva*)," 97
[270] *Ibid.*

autobiographer's self-complacence: her own falling in love with the poetry/horror of her past.

If, as Kofman affirms,[271] poetry contains a truth that science (Freud, in her study) delivers in clear terms, then Kofman's appeal to philosophy ensures rejection of science's resulting unoppositional truth. The existence itself of (a) truth is drawn into question. The way in which the truth is drawn into question in *Rue Ordener, rue Labat* is also narrative not merely philosophical. The text itself, when observed as we just did very up close, shows contradictory and illogic lacunae that put into question the historicity itself of the récit. So for Kofman, the raison d'être of the event and its récit is rooted in a search for the self, not for a universal truth—it is an enigma, not the answer to it: «Un événement n'est pas ce qu'on peut en voir ou en savoir, il est ce qu'on en fait dans le besoin qu'on a de lui pour devenir quelqu'un."[272] Obviously, for Kofman, memory is not something that one goes back to or that comes back to us—as if out of a depository in which we let it stand and from which it can be summoned at any point. (A "scientific" memory.) Memory is a process of construction, formation not emergence. Its topography evolves and changes with the changing of our inner psychography and outer biography combined. "For years before writing her autobiography, Kofman denied that such a feat was possible."[273] Until, as a last *griffure*, she decides that although *impossible* it is necessary, that in fact it's always "partly" been there—as part of her philosophical opus—just as her other writings were not at all "other" but part of her story.

> There can be no analytic interpretation without counter-transference: the analyst's unconscious, like everyone else's, reduces its undecidablity, if it makes the text pass from obscurity to clarity, if it destroys the plurality of

[271] *Ibid.*
[272] *Le murmure des fantômes* (2003), 105.
[273] Stanislawski, *ibid.*,140.

> textual codes and favours one alone, then it is a 'dangerous supplement'. It remains a victim of the metaphysical opposition between the mad and the rational, poetry and science, conscious and unconscious. In this case, its claim to save the text from its delusion, to put it back on the straight and narrow by restoring a 'correct' understanding of it, is illegitimate. By making the text 'talk', it stops the play of writing.
>
> Summarize, Interpret: (*Gradiva*), 116.

In a highly Freudian text, Kofman uses her life-script in a radical way to show the partiality of Freud's analytical method.[274] In order to do so, she utilizes what Aristotle himself considered a most ambiguous rhetorical figure: the paradox. And we know that in moral philosophy the paradox holds a central role—pivotal, not by chance, in Emmanuel Levinas' new humanism. The fact that *Rue Ordener, rue Labat* begins with a reference to the *Akedah* (or the story of the sacrifice of Isaac) is more than just a metaphor of faith: it sets the ethical as the paradox on which old and new Truths must be constantly negotiated. And ultimately, through paradox, Kofman challenges and shakes at its roots the Law of the father.

As Jean-Luc Nancy has written, Kofman points to the guilt of the father/philosopher for repeatedly having to kill the woman: she "never ceased to analyze the father of analysis, and in particular to show how he attacks the woman in order to 'fix and freeze her definitely in a type that corresponds with his 'ideal of femininity' (Kofman 1985a, 222). […] The woman, of course is Sarah 'herself.' "[275] Or, as Penelope Deutscher and Kelly Oliver described it, Kofman's project is "of destabilizing the pretensions of traditional philosophers,"[276] that is, to break the binary opposition of metaphysics between the masculine (intelligible) and the feminine (sensible) realm of

[274] Sarah Kofman had explained: "to be both for and against Freud—that is the ambivalence of my position" (*Shifting Scenes*, 109).
[275] *Enigmas*, xiv.
[276] *Ibid.*, 4.

experience. The feminine gesture of Kofman's *écriture* lies in the way it writes the mother and the relationship among women in terms that are outside of the case-boxes predefined by Freud's limiting obsession, his master-concept (penis envy). Furthermore, I believe, she also adopts the perfect Freudian script to prove that there isn't only *one* Freudian script: that Freud's interpretative method leaves out just as much as it tries to count in. She puts at the center of memory and the self the (deadly) ambiguities in the dialectics between Pathos and Eros, Logos and Sophia.

Through *Rue Ordener, rue Labat*, Kofman has reached deep into the heart of twentieth-century philosophy. To quote another great thinker who shared with Kofman a taste for paradoxes in pointing at "the way out of the fly bottle" to the puzzled philosopher:

> The problems arising through a misinterpretation of our forms of language have the character of *depth.* They are deep disquietudes; their roots are as deep in us as the forms of our language and their significance is as great as the importance of our language.—Let us ask ourselves: why do we feel a grammatical joke to be *deep?* (And that is what the depth of philosophy is.)
>
> L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (1958: 111)

As Aristotle teaches, the paradox is a rhetorical problem, an issue of language: it is the way in which language can offer new pathways to a different knowledge and thinking. The paradox is an attempt to discover new truths.[277]

How else could we understand the passage from a lifetime of heterogeneous thinking, writing and living—an inclusive feminist approach to knowledge that tries to acknowledge the contribution of the individual parts to the always-partial "whole"—to an autobiography that plays exactly, if taken at face value, with the opposite: the refusal of

[277] Mark Paul Moore, "Rhetoric and Paradox: Seeking Knowledge from the 'Container and Thing Contained'" in *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* (1988).

ambivalence, the radicalization of separation and distinction? The father who consigns himself to the authority and to death for a God who forbids one to waste life (one's own or others) and allows for breaking his own commandments (*pikuah nefesh*); surrogate mothers who are worshipped as saviors even though their mercy is never devoid of some malign aftertastes[278]; a mother, rejected because she lies at the very beginning of the story *and* because she tells the truth at the end of the story; Mémé, seraphic and so different from the choleric *yiddishe mame*, and who is such a great cook… yet whose food remains indigestible to the girl: "Je *vomissais* fréquemment et mémé se mettait *en colère* […]. *Elle était pourtant excellente* cuisinière" (*RO/rL,* 51);[279] and on and on, one contradiction and one non-existing distinction after the other. Which should the reader believe? Or is the reader asked exactly *not* to believe?

There is unquestionably a translation of her own life going on in the text: and the distance the translator keeps from the "original" spares her and the reader the pain of getting too close to the heroine's shifts from fantasy to real, from safety to death.

Her autobiography breaks the "contract"[280] (the tacit bond) with the reader as much as Jensen's text does in Kofman's own words:

> [T]he reader, believing himself to be normal, the standard of humanity, can no longer identify with the protagonist once he realizes that, in fact, he is dealing with someone suffering from delusions. He has been duped by the author: the hero's madness is too private and peculiar for it to coincide with the reader's own fantasies and arouse his interest. By voluntarily stripping the text of its charm, Freud denounces the unacknowledged mercantile relationship between author and reader, and the opposition between the normal and the pathological on which it rests.
>
> Summarize, Interpret: (*Gradiva*), 92.

[278] Stanislawski, *ibid.*, 158-159.
[279] Emphasis mine.
[280] The Greeks called *anank*e (Ἀνάγκη) the special bond between the gods and man, the breaking of which would cause great grief and tragedy—and certainly this Greek idea is the undertext of much of what both Freud and Kofman write in analyzing *Gradiva*.

Kofman "dupes" the reader into believing there would be some aesthetic pleasure (the pleasure of the release of repressed impulses)[281] in return for the reader's entrance into the text's world in which sympathy and identification are necessary premise for the enjoyment of the journey. The journey into the text is bonded to the will of a reader to assume the position of the heroine of the story—be it normal or pathological. "To refuse to identify with Norbert is to refuse to acknowledge there is only a difference of degree between so-called 'normal' passion and delusion. The lover too is possessed and fascinated by his object and, like Norbert, in search of a lost object, one loved during childhood. Norbert's obsession with the stone image is no more than a magnifying paradigm of all love."[282] Kofman's self-injuring melancholia for the lost mother is a paradigm of all existential angst. Thus her story reunites with the universal and general. But because her autobiography is but a summary of her life (i.e., a barren reproduction full of intentional "traps" left behind by the translator), the reader is forced to renounce this identification and the pleasure the sharing of a textual fantasy entails:

> To change the text is to force the reader to renounce his illusion and the enjoyment of his fantasies. It forces him to confront his own lack of superiority: textual transformation has a purgative function. However, if it deprives the reader's ego of its bonus of seduction, it does offer him some compensation. If instead he turns his attention to the search for the real meaning of the text, he will experience the 'intellectual' pleasure of solving a mystery. The mystery of the delusion, of the literary text whose 'form' is a facade, a veil that must be unraveled thread by thread. To summarize the text is to work simultaneously towards the erosion of three delusions—those of hero, author and reader. It is to shatter the complicity of a seamless text which by its very coherence conceals the fact that it is enigmatic. To dissect the text is to bring to light its lacunae, the absence of links between certain events or the substitution of fictitious links for those which really exist. Deconstruction of the text is an essential first step in

[281] "Summarize, Interpret: *Gradiva,"* 91.
[282] *Ibid.*, 92.

> the reconstruction of another, different text, by weaving different connections between events and introducing a new necessity. To summarize is to isolate the different elements from the narrative web in which they are caught and to weave them together to form a different pattern.
>
> Summarize, Interpret: (*Gradiva*), 92-93.

To dissect one's biography then by way of summarizing it i means as well to bring to light the lacunae of one's life, and to establish links where there are none or to pick up on those links that one thought absent. By deconstructing the text of her life she constructs another. The one of her psyche? The one of her repressed story which refuses to become real? Or simply, "ça"?

What Kofman had written about *Tomcat Murr* by E.T.A. Hoffmann can be turned around and applied to her: "Son écriture [the cat's] relève d'un projet que l'on peut qualifier de paranoïaque" [certainly, the cat is the paranoiaque par eccellance, with its night sight and an eye that changes that adapts to the change of the light around]. "Double écriture, […] l'une contredisant, défaisant, décousant l'autre, d'une façon non simple: tantôt la griffe du chat déchire le livre de l'homme, tantôt au contraire, elle tente d'écrire un livre sans accroc, plus 'humain' que celui écrit par le biographe de Kreisler, véritable rhapsodie faite de pièces et de morceaux. Double écriture, double biographie – au moins."[283]

What the reading of her text does to the reader therefore, like the *unheimlich* in an experience, is to activate our reaction from the standpoint of Eros, not of Logos (appeal

[283] *Autobiogriffures*, 17-18.

to reason).[284] It is a journey back to primordial feelings, to prelinguistic tensions, towards death *and* towards life, to *and* away from the mother.

The cat is the woman in Kofman's Hoffmann: Kofman reads the story of the Tomcat Murr through the (scratchy) irony of a feminist lens. "Incrédulité donc quasi générale sur les possibilités d'écriture du chat. Bien plus, hostilité: écrire, c'est s'emparer d'un privilège humain, c'est porter un rude coup au narcissisme de l'homme en le détrônant de la royauté de l'univers. Faire écrire un chat, c'est inscrire l'écriture dans la vie même et c'est, d'un seul geste, barrer l'opposition métaphysique de l'instinct et de l'intelligence, dénoncer la problématique cartésienne en se plaçant sur un autre terrain que celui de l'entendement et de la science."[285]

Not only Kofman has searched into the texts of Freud to be able to find herself while discovering Freud, but she has pointed them to us in order for us to find her.[286] By pointing at Freud (or Nietzsche, Leonardo or Antelme), she is pointing at herself: we no longer see Freud, we see Kofman. We see Kofman seeing herself reflected in the Father's text. In fact, we only possess a reflection. And the reflection is a summary.

Her auto-bio-biblio-griffure can not be written, if not as summary, as void, as subtraction.

> The aim of the summary is to make the text intelligible by ignoring what is considered to be superfluous. […]

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[284] "For Freud, works of art are like all other psychic productions insofar as they are compromises and constitute 'riddles' to be solved. Thus, the interpreter of these productions is a new type of mediator, working on behalf of Eros: to solve the riddles is to reestablish a contact" (Kofman, "The Double Reading" in *Selected Writings*, 39).

[285] *Autobiogriffures*, 60-61.

[286] Kofman writes about Blanchot using the same style he uses; she writes about Freud in a way that is hard to distinguish what is being said by Freud and where the commentator's voice takes over: she blends in her *scriptural* voice totally with that of the text being commented on.

> In fact, what is treated as a facade, what the summary sets out to explode, could perhaps serve another function within the narrative: to reply to a need that is both psychological and structural. Psychological, because the spacing of events indicates the distance that separates the hero from a full understanding of his behaviour, a distance filled not only with a series of rationalizations but also with events that could lead to the resolution of his delusion. Structural, because, in order for the narrative to be able to continue, it is necessary for Norbert not to understand what is happening and for the reader to remain uncertain what literary genre he is dealing with"
>
> Summarize, Interpret: *(Gradiva),* 94.

The way in which she has learned to read philosophy and psychoanalysis is the same she applies to read herself. At the same time, the way in which her life has left readable marks on her is going to influence her reading of philosophy and psychoanalysis. She uses the "marks"/griffures of life (written on her body, so to speak, the way in which in Kafka's *Penal Colony* the criminal bears inscribed on himself the "life sentence") like "judas' holes," a camera obscura, through which she looks at Freud, Nietzsche etc., who would be not understandable the "kofmanian way" without that kofmanian lens. So, in reading Freud with her, we read Kofman's Freud: the way in reading Jansen with Freud we in fact read Freud's Jansen—which is a Jansen that gets marked by the griffures of Freud's own life.

Going back to Freud, Kofman shows how the scientist by transcribing into his summary the feelings of Jensen's protagonist (Norbert) ends up depriving the transcription of that pathos and specificity proper of the "original". The art of Jensen is impoverished by its transcription into a different "language". "Transcribed into the summary, Norbert's terror becomes a feeling of the vaguest kind."[287] So the generalizing power of a summary necessarily works towards a universalization of the story: "And does

[287] "Summarize, Interpret: *(Gradiva)*," 97.

not this passage from the singular to the universal, the concrete to the abstract, indicate resistance to a certain interpretation?"[288]

The summary prepares to the work of analysis.[289] Yet, in order not to kill its true pathos, this text resists resolution, interpretation. Freud remarks the mutilation of Jensen's text, and Kofman's reader must cope with the mutilations in Kofman's narration. This way, Kofman indicates that absence becomes the common denominator between life and art. In her case, literally, the summary has proven deadly: "The summary is deadly, not by virtue of its brevity, but because it effects a transposition from one language to another: to a much more univocal language which forces the text out of its undecidability" ("Summarize, Interpret: (*Gradiva*)," 99).

Kofman's summary of her own life moves in the direction of the singular (and isn't so for any autobiography/bio-summary?): from the universal (the Fathers/Philosophers) to the personal (the woman philosopher, Sarah Kofman). Yet in the coming together of her autobiography (life's summary) there is a "natural" push away from the particular again towards the outside, towards the general and abstract. The reader understands to be integral part of a play, to be dealing with symbols, metaphors, signs of a different language from the one stated by the text. A subconscious language that speaks by lapses and omissions and that pushes back the repressed that risks to reappear as the real.

As Slavoy Žižek explains in interpreting Lacan, "the Real […] is *in itself* thwarted, the name for the gap of a radical 'negativity,' it stands for a paradoxical (non)entity that

[288] *Ibid.*
[289] *Ibid.*

has no ontological consistency in itself, but can only be discerned retroactively, from its effects, as their absent Cause."[290]

Kofman's memory is one of per-*version* (throughout-translation) and hysteria (exemplified in the feminine[291]): one containing a large proportion of life read not through the Real (the deep place one should not even try to reach, according to Lacan) but its symptoms. "Le récit met en scène des faits réels dont la signification dépend de ceux qui en parlent. […] Son monde se vide sans traumatisme apparent. La déchirure est énorme, invisible, et l'enfant ne comprend rien parce qu'on ne peut pas observer quelque chose qui n'est pas là."[292]

Freud (in explaining his refusal to write an autobiography) wrote that for a biography to subsist it has to meet two necessary conditions: that the subject of the autobiography participated in some important events, and of some import for the entire world; and that the autobiography be a psychological study—which, according to him, would put at grave risk the autobiographer's relationship with those close people whose private life (flaws) would be exposed to the world (Letter to Edward L. Bernays, August 10, 1929)[293]. Of course, he also adds that "what makes all autobiographies worthless is, after all, their mendacity." And on this point, Kofman might have agreed but found that is exactly the "mendacity" that makes them worth our while.

Of course, hers is not autobiography, at best *autobiogriffure*: but neither could it portend to be. Hasn't Freud himself killed the possibility for the subject to name himself

[290] "Notes on a Debate 'From Within the People'" (2004), 661.
[291] "[N]eurosis (as exemplified by the feminine hysteria) is a compromise formation, a half-protest against the oppressive Law that simultaneously remains attached to it, while a perverse subject 'goes to the end,' directly enacting what the neurotic subject is only able to fantasize about" (Slavj Žižek, *ibid.*, 662).
[292] Cyrulnik, *ibid.,*105.
[293] Sigmund Freud, *Letters of Sigmund Freud*, 391.

with absolute certainty ("anyone turning biographer commits himself to lies […] for biographical truth is not to be had […] [t]ruth is undomitable"[294]), and hasn't the Shoah killed the possibility of *naming*, telling, altogether? So either she has no "biography" or if she has one it can only be of this kind: in-credible, impalpable, phantasmic in that based on a re-construction of memory which is always a deconstruction.

I agree with Stanislawski's analysis according to which, "In *Rue Ordener, rue Labat* Sarah Kofman demonstrated, perhaps to her own profound dismay, that she had a singular gift to do two things she held to be philosophically impossible: first, to articulate a highly idiosyncratic 'selfhood'; and secondly, to do so in a narrative form she believed to be untenable after Auschwitz. Both these claims were […] incorrect. However fashionable and oft repeated, the notion that autobiographical narrative, philosophical analysis, or poetry were impossible 'after Auschwitz' was never philosophically serious, and […] I firmly believe that the counter-Enlightenment analysis upon which it is based has served to mute, rather than advance, our ability to understand the horrors of the Holocaust […]."[295]

Stanislawski's conclusion on the meaning of that "ça" from the beginning of *Rue Ordener, rue Labat* is that "the 'it,' the ç*a* […] is clearly the story of her relationship with mémé, not that of her father's death" (161). I say that it is *also* this: it is this and that and everything else *writing* can contain. It is writing about writing. I agree with Stanislawski's intuition of the "falsity" behind this auto-*graphing* of one's bios (autobiography): and "ça" is the reservoir of impulses[296] from where writing (telling) emerges (returns) and what this return costs. Christie McDonald has observed about

[294] Sigmund Freud, Letter to Arnold Zweig (May 31, 1936), in *Letters of Sigmund Freud*, 391.
[295] Stanislawski, *ibid.,*175.
[296] Cfr. Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits II*, 136.

Kofman that, "By displacing what is intolerable in this personal story, the disappearance of the father, she confronts shame and guilt through the story of her survival."[297] "Telling" about mémé is another "falsity," as it is telling about a daughter's duplicitous feelings towards *maman*, and even more so telling about one's father's death in Auschwitz: all stories impossible to tell, impossible to remember, impossible to let emerge but only possible to reconstruct. *Ça* signifies also this impossibility: writing as impossibility as long as it portends to a true telling: "I ceased to talk […] when I gave myself up to the play of language, that is, writing."[298] After Auschwitz, there is no "true telling"; But the necessity of telling; the necessity of writing. A writing "sans (le) pouvoir."

Lacan's definition of Ça (Es, Id) is particularly helpful for our understanding of Kofman's « ça » as well:

> Pensons à la boite aux lettres, à la cavité intérieure de quelque idole baalique, pensons à la *bocca di leone* qui, de les combiner, recevait à Venise sa fonction redoutable. Un réservoir oui […] voilà ce qu'est le Ça, et même une réserve, mais ce qui s'y produit, de prière ou de dénonciation missives, y vient du dehors, et s'il s'y amasse, c'est pour y dormir. Ici se dissipant l'opacité du texte énonçant du Ça que le silence y règne : en ce qu'il ne s'agit pas d'une métaphore, mais d'une antithèse à poursuivre dans le rapport du sujet au signifiant, qui nous est expressément désignée comme la pulsion de mort.[299]

The riddle of *Rue Ordener, rue Labat* is also the riddle of genre. Is this one of those "bastard books" of which Kofman herself proudly admitted to "maternity" (authorship) during the interview with Alice Jardine? "In *Autobiogriffures*, my book on Hoffman's *Kater Murr, the Educated Cat*, I pointed out what editorial problems

[297] Christie McDonald, *ididem*, 192-193.
[298] Jardine, *ibid.* (1991), 105.
[299] Jacques Lacan, *ibid.*,136.

are provoked by any unusual writing, for instance that of a cat that tears and rips to shreds all received categories: any free 'bastard' book, written by at least two hands, is in this day and age unclassifiable. That's what is happening right now with most of my books."[300] Like Hoffmann's Tomcat Murr, also *Rue Ordener, rue Labat* is a "double text" in more than one way. Doubleness is a constituent motif.

And the best way of exploring this leitmotif narratively is perhaps by going back, in light of what we said so far, to the intermezzo on Leonardo that Kofman had strategically planted after the pivotal chapter "Libérations." The fact itself that there is a parenthesis, a hole, within the autobiography proper is quite significant: this parenthesis opens up a new space within the space of the autobiography. It has to do with it while "looking" as if it didn't. It brings us into the world of the adult writer, the philosopher Kofman who is trying to tell us about the child Kofman. This way, art opens the largest breach within the autobiography: it's as if a deeper *griffures* on the page (and we should remember that these griffures happen via the pen of the father) has finally allowed for this "undertext" to emerge: and this undertext speaks, again, of the life from two mothers. So, jumping from the painful world of personal memory (*Libérations*) to that of artistic sublimation, Kofman thinks back to her very first book for which she personally chose a cover: a reproduction of Leonardo da Vinci's *The Virgin and Child with Saint Anne and St. John* (1499-1508 ca.)[301]. After a brief introduction (the whole chapter is a short one page and a half), she lets Freud talk, in a long quote, about this painting and how it reflects Leonardo's childhood and displacement into art of his threeprong affection for three motherly figures (the biological mother, the step-mother and the paternal

[300] Jardine, *ibid.* (1991), 110.
[301] See Table 1 and 2.

grandmother). "*L'enfance de Léonard*" says Freud as quoted by Kofman, "*fut aussi singulière que ce tableau. Il avait eu deux mères […] Quand Léonard, avant sa cinquième année, fut recueilli dans la maison grand-paternelle, sa jeune belle-mère Albicia supplanta sans aucun doute sa mère dans son cœur"* (*RO/rL*, 74).

Leonardo's work *Sant'Anna, la Vergine, il Bambino e san Giovannino* (London, National Gallery) was a *bozza* or draft drawing for the final painting *Sant'Anna, la Vergine e il Bambino con l'agnello* (1510-1513, Paris, Louvre). Leonardo thought that his *disegni*, his drawings, should remain unfinished and that he had the right and duty to perennially

Table 1
Sant'Anna, la Vergine, il Bambino e san Giovannino
(London, National Gallery)

Table 2
Sant'Anna, la Vergine e il Bambino con l'agnello (Paris, Louvre)

work on them, modifying them and redefying ever more profoundly the characters. Leonardo can certainly be considered the greatest *disegnatore* of all times. And it is interesting that Kofman's choice for her first book-cover should fall on the drawing (the *matrix*!) rather than on the finished painting by the Italian maestro; i.e., on the incomplete oeuvre with its in-progress, *in divenire*, quality. The differences between the two works (the matrix and the final product) by Leonardo are indeed astounding. Especially in the visual relation between the two women. In the draft, the two women's heads seem to belong to one body, to spring out of one same torso. A special unison is noticeable between the women while the child seems to belong into a separate space of its own, which he shares with Saint John. Mary looks with distracted passion and affection to the children while the tension of her attention is drawn to what her mother has just whispered to her—like a trace left behind, the secret that that the older woman has shared with the younger one has left a sign of itself: in the finger of St. Anne still illustrating her words long after they've ceased to resound, pointing significantly to heaven. And that gesture, which says what words cannot express in the economy of the canvas, creates a point of triangular convergence that unites child, mother and heavens. If we draw an ideal line from the tip of St. Anne's finger to the eyes of Mary and to the eyes of the child, the triangle geometrically encapsulates the psychic and here spiritual bond between a genealogy that departs from God, passes through Woman (notice that the side of the triangle that goes from the tip of the finger to Mary's eyes pierces through St. Anne's gaze too, weaving it into the triangle as well), and meets its final purpose on the child. According to Freud, St. Anne (Jesus' grandmother) in Leonardo's painting would be the figuration of the painter's true mother.

The immensely sad sweetness that St. Anne's revealed secret seems to provoke in Mary is expressed by one of Leonardo's enigmatic smiles: a smile of *entente* as well as a smile of humble renunciation. Renunciation of completeness, knowledge, ownership even of one's own body. In the original *disegno*, Mary is portrayed in the psychological act of already letting go of a child that is no longer exclusively hers (isn't this the message she just received from St. Anne?): that belongs to the Father and for whom the Father has a plan (sacrificial killing) that she won't be able to affect.

In the final canvas, St. John is replaced by a lamb—which is a stand-in for (dead) Jesus. The child Jesus and the lamb are the same thing: here the child is trying to resist his fate, his destiny by (playfully?) killing the lamb. Which in turn, paradoxically, only accelerates the precipitation of this fate: the sacrificial lamb is there to be scarified. Jesus will have to kill the lamb, himself, eventually. Mary in her loving act of stopping the child and pulling him back to herself and away from the lamb is affecting time, history, and the child's destiny. She is the center of the painting. She is giving the child back onto the normal course of things: she is struggling to keep him longer and at the same time she is thus an agent of the divine plan that programmed a different plot for the Son's story.[302] St. Anne's only visible arm is in the exact opposite position than in the original drawing, as if Leonardo had eventually decided to turn the attention away from God and onto the exclusively human and maternal. There is a silent, mute dialogue of gazes going on. The intensity of mother-son gaze plunged into each other, and the symmetrical position outside of that frame of the other (containing) frame, represented by St. Anna-Lamb. The

[302] Notably, Freud interprets the figure of St. Anne as being Leonardo's biological mother, and Mary as his step-mother: the two women though do not show any different in age—just as in Kofman's *Rue Ordener, rue Labat*, someone called Mémé is associated immediately by the reader with the figure of an older lady ("la dame de rue Labat") when in fact she is about as young than Sarah's mother.

contrasting and pulling forces that characterize Leonardo's graphic in the disegno (London carton) are in fact still present though harmoniously organized in the color canvas: the surrounding wilderness, almost prehistoric in its inhabitable duress and the intense and in fact extreme humanity of the four figures in the foreground which are the extreme symbol of human culture: a world in which language (God's word) has made its entrance. As Kofman says in *Mélancolie de l'art* (1985) "the maternal pedagogy is always only a visual pedagogy later made scientific through male articulation. Science, including psychoanalysis, has its origin in this maternal pedagogy"[303] (Oliver "Sarah Kofman's Queasy Stomach," in *Enigmas*, 176).

And what better way for the maestro of il Cinquecento to epitomize the apogee of human renaissance (scientific articulation over maternal pedagogy) than by a human all-too-human smile? The most complex symptom of man's sophisticated psyche. A symptom which hides as much as it reveals. Acceptance as much as resistance and refusal can be read in Leonardo's smile (that has become part of our collective imaginary): it is uncanny because we recognize it and at the same time we are unable to translate it, it stirs an anxiety that comes from far away, and that tells us that we are outside of a secret while being the secret. The secret is death. "Ça"?

In a way, the story of one canvas cannot be told without the story of the other: each bears *in pectore* the void, absence, of the other. We encounter that enigmatic smile turned towards us in Kofman's paradoxes as well. *Rue Ordener, rue Labat* : the comma between the names of the two streets is like the thin and circular rim of a coin. One side Rue Ordener, one side Rue Labat. And neither can be read without the other. They stand back to back, the two heads of the coin coexist, but never face and see each other. The

[303] Oliver, *ibid.* (1999), 176.

logic of the bildungsroman or künstlerroman could have suggested a title like "from Rue Ordener to rue Labat": but this is not the sense of this *roman*. From rue Ordener, (Judaism-Father, mother-daughter oneness), to Rue Labat (Frenchness, de-judaization, matricide) there is a painful path (which passes through two metro stops, two homes, two mothers, and the many doublings of death). Although the narrative's trajectory goes from rue Ordener to rue Labat, in the reality of the psyche there is no real departure or arrival, but a circular circuit, a concentric ring equidistant from the father (the center—that will never be crossed), along the perimeter of which at any given point there is the mother. Rue Ordener and rue Labat are the two faces of the currency of childhood. The adult narrator invests this currency in the formulation of her origins: her childhood bears the imprimatur of a double impression. In her identity these two aspects, these two images, are not separable (like the two saint mothers' heads springing out of one torso): she does not really go from one to the other, she owns them both but can only face one at a time…

Until they are rationalized by the translation into the new language of the summary (autobiography). In the text, things are forced to stay apart. In the case of her father, the child must hold on to the unified, unambivalent *récit* of him she made for herself, for fear of losing him a second time. Likewise, the mother cannot be understood as both good and bad, a savior just as much as mémé, because understanding the two mothers under the twinkling light of ambivalence would mean to risk losing Mémé. And her attachment to Mémé allows her not to have to cope and elaborate her father's loss continuously. The pain provoked by the experience of loss and life-threatening circumstances makes "ambivalence," conflicts and ambiguous dialogues or behaviors unsustainable in the narration: they must be done away with in order to allow the images

to make sense, not in relation to one another, but in order to coexist, and create an ekphrastic series of "vignettes" each telling of one specific, self-standing, emotion and emotional re-evocation (the 23 chapters with distinct titles, headlines). Talking about the relation between internal and externalized narration of painful memories, Cyrulnik writes that "Le cheminement le plus sain et le moins coûteux est constitué par la narrativité. Cette compétence au récit de soi est nécessaire pour se faire une image de sa propre personnalité. […] Mais se rappeler sans cesse un épisode douloureux, faire revenir les images tristes, retrouver les dialogues conflictuels et en imaginer d'autres provoque une déroutante émotion de bienheureux chagrin. Et c'est probablement cette étrangeté qui permet de comprendre la fonction de la narration intérieure : reprendre en main l'émotion provoquée par le passé et la remanier pour en faire une représentation de soi intimement acceptable."[304]

The way in which Leonardo would go back to his works, and correct them, retouch them, never considering them finished, so Kofman returns a thousand times over her story, her *Ur*-story. Her philosophical work is part of it, as much as her autobiographical story is part of her philosophical work. In each academic, "scientific" text she writes, she is in fact retouching, reconsidering, retelling her most intimate and private story, *ça.*

In a compelling intertextual and metatextual twist, what Freud writes about Leonardo can be appropriated here and applied to Kofman: the III-type typology studied by Freud would classify both Kofman and Leonardo as those who sublimate most of their

[304] Boris Cyrulnik, *ibid.*, 103.

libido into voracity for knowledge and research.[305] Oliver again asks an interesting question: "But, as Kofman asks, can the mother/death be sublimated? Can science 're-present' either the mother or death, either the experience of birth or the experience of death?"[306]

Kofman—who held a position at the very center of the postmodernist current as friend and peer of Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze, Jean-François Lyotard, Jean-Luc Nancy—embraces with this text a marginal position in which to lock herself up. Instead of the open derridian text (one without "no more frame, no more border […] no longer a sure boundary between a text and its outside, between the end and the beginning of a text, between the unity of a corpus, the title, the margins, and so forth"[307]) she builds, paradoxically, a fortress of isolation. That same isolation reflected in her life as an unrecognized professor, in virtue of her gender and a sexist academic system which made sure to keep her apart, at the margin, for as long as possible. ("I'm a university professor but only a *maître de conférences* in spite of my nineteen books—this must be kept in mind.")[308]

And keeping this in mind, *Rue Ordener, rue Labat* plays a strange and estranging trick on the reader: one has the impression of peering all the time through a judas-hole. (Judas-hole: the perspective of the traitor?) Sarah textually closes the universe around herself so that no way-out, no room for escape, can be let to this girl/Woman who's performing an auto-da-fe', who is consigning herself to us as guilty of her own story (and/or its untellability, "falsity"). Hence the sense of claustrophobia and suffocation: the

[305] Freud, *Un ricordo d'infanzia di Leonardo da Vinci*, in *Opere 1905-1921* (Rome: Newton Compton, 1992; 375).
[306] Oliver, *ibid.* (1999), 176.
[307] Sarah Kofman, *Ça cloche* in *Selected Writings* (2007), 90.
[308] Jardine, *ibid.* (1991), 107.

intense boundary raised between the reader and the page by the explicitly untold, the hidden, the "out-of-sight," leaves the expectations of the reader in the story unmet. No room is left for compassion or auto-identification or sympathy. The author wants us behind that door: she offers herself and her story to us like a dream. One of those typical oneiric moments when we see a scene unfold in front of our eyes without being able to affect it, without feeling it *ours*. We feel its impressions on us, it scratches us with its roughness, but we can only live it passively… and we wake up in a profound state of anxiety. She arouses in us an *unheimlich*, whose roots are in alterity. And alterity is the condition of Eros—its event.

Kofman, by her act of encrypting her biography into her bibliography and vice versa, affirms the inalienability of one's "presence" from those discourses (rationality, metaphysics, philosophy, psychology) which traditionally have seen themselves as the ultimate universal, meta-personal, truths. She points the reader to the fact that Reason as universal language has strong autobiographical roots which breaks down reason's universality, resizing it to the level of the subjective self-identity. As Robert Smith says "rationality can never be general enough"[309] and this woman's autobiographical outburst in the heart of reasoning is a powerful irritant.

I cannot help myself from reading *Rue Ordener, rue Labat* and thinking that the author is teasing me as her attentive reader who ends up turning each page with the hope of understanding something that instead remains elusive to the very end. What else is the autobiogriffure but "Ecriture qui glace comme la Méduse ou qui entraîne homme et chat dans la dérision du rire"?[310] It is meant as a ruse against oneself and against the self-

[309] *Derrida and Autobiography* (1995), 5.
[310] *Autobiogriffures*, 152.

secure signature of the great masters—behind whose homogeneous names on the frontispiece of their texts, Kofman had tried all her life to show an uncanny double, the ambiguity of subconscious forces in conflict.

As explained in *Camera Obscura of Ideology* (again we must bring in more of her texts to read her other texts, which are *her*), Kofman invites us by this plain game of self-exposition to mistrust the clarity and transparency of what appears. ("The camera obscura functions like an unconscious which can, or cannot, accept the sight of this or that reality".)[311] We are always to be reminded that between the projection (text) and the projector (narrator's memory) there is a medium—a pen: the author's hand (which is the hand of woman which like a cat scratches—*déchire*—the pages as it writes it).
Doubleness and ambiguity trickle down from a philosophy of writing to the narrative content of her writing. And, as I suggested earlier, their most explicit sign is to be found in the pivotal chapter on Hitchcock's *The Lady Vanishes.*

That other strange and overbearing intromission within the text, as I pointed out, provides in an almost patronizingly way (too paternal towards the reader who'd rather play with a text the way Sherlock Holmes plays with a mystery case) the light under which subsequent chapters will appear with blinding clarity. However, even that explanatory intermezzo does not explain "the whole story" until and unless we read it against yet another text by Kofman. Just the way we must go back to Freud's Leonardo, and da Vinci's drawings, in order to get closer to *Rue Ordener, rue Labat*'s Leonardo entr'acte. Again, meta-auto-biblio-graphy is key to this author.[312]

[311] *Camera Obscura of Ideology*, 17.
[312] "All we can know for certain about her life is her bibliography, which she claims constitutes her true self, but which now necessarily and only seemingly paradoxically includes this autobiography" (Stanislawski, 173).

So, the Hitchcock parenthesis returns, quoted *à la lettre*, in chapter VI, "Angoisse et Catharsis," of Kofman's wonderful work *L'Imposture de la beauté* (1995), which she finished writing just before committing suicide and handed into the care of her editor at Editions Galilée who faithfully published it posthumously. Here she goes more at length in discussing this film.

"Et pourtant Miss Froy n'est pas aussi 'bonne' et parfaite qu'il peut le sembler:"[313] she is a British secret agent (*espionne*) against the Nazis. She is not that "good" because she has lied about her identity: and this identity has also been contaminated by the simple fact that a replacement for her exists—the bad lady. The bad lady (Miss Kummer/Mrs. Kofman)[314] has contaminated the purity of Miss Froy (Mémé), more than Miss Froy herself has done by lying. Purity and contamination are two central leitmotifs of Kofman's texts. Let's think back to the scene, also taking place on a train, of when her father had allowed the children to eat pork and cheese thus "purifying" what had been impure that far. And how we are told in *Rue Ordener, rue Labat* that the mother's lie contaminates the perfection of the father's world. "Elle [Miss Froy] n'a plus la pureté de l'idéal ni sa perfection: elle a failli mourir, et elle perd, au cours du voyage, sa puissance protectrice. C'est, au contraire, la jeune fille qui la sauve des mains des comploteurs » (*L'Imposture de la beauté*, 142).

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[313] *L'Imposture de la beauté*, 142.

[314] Kofman had a special weakness for the interpretation of her own name in kabbalistic key: in an essay (*Tombeau pur un nom proper*), inspired by one of her dreams, she relates it to the name Kafka, playing with the signification, shape and numerological value of the Hebrew letter "kof" (K). The fact that the bad lady in Hitchcock's movie has a name also starting with "kof" and containing the letter "mem" (M) (like Kofman)—not to mention the important Indo-European word "*mer*" to which so many modern European words are still attached (*Nightmare: At the Margins of Medieval Studies*)—could be the piece of a longer interesting analysis which I presently must defer to another occasion.

"[L]a généralisation de la 'méchanceté' à tous les visages est une 'ruse' du cinéaste et du psychisme de l'héroïne pour la convaincre que la bonne image originaire était bel et bien et seulement de type hallucinatoire » (*L'Imposture*, 143). In order for mémé to keep being good, *maman* has be to bad—she has to pay the price of the daughter's need for generalization in order to maintain the plausibility of her "hallucination". Then, Kofman raises the central question which we can appropriately re-route towards our analysis of *Rue Ordener, rue Labat*: "la jeune fille n'est-elle pas pour 'quelque chose' dans la disparition de la 'bonne' dame et dans sa transformation?"[315] The unconscious guilt of Iris/Sarah is the purple thread in the events of this "journey." The heroine herself shows a not-so-good face: at closer examination, she has also been unpleasant and unreasonably unkind and difficult. She is not *sans tache*. "La veille du voyage [..] elle s'était montrée détestable, intolérante […]. Elle avait corrompu le maitre d'hôtel […] se comportant comme une enfant riche et 'gâté' à qui l'on doit passer tous ses caprices, et qui ne peut supporter la présence d'un nouveau venu, véritable trouble-fête : la venue d'un 'frère' avec qui il serait insupportable de partager le sein maternel ?"[316] Hadn't also Sarah, the capricious daughter, erased the good mother's face as soon as she threatened to be pregnant with another brother?

Kofman's analysis of Hitchcock provides us with more interesting clues to understanding her text: "Ce sont ses propres pulsions de mort, projetées à l'extérieur, qui transforment les autres voyageurs du compartiment en persécuteurs menaçants, complotant contre sa sécurité. Cette projection est responsable du devenir 'mauvaise'

[315] *L'imposture de la beauté*, 143.
[316] *Ibid.*

mère de la 'bonne' Lady, même s'il faut aussi une certaine 'complaisance' du réel (Miss Froy n'est pas parfaite) pour autoriser la métamorphose fantasmatique."[317]

Anagnoresis though does not reverse our text's plot. "La culpabilité inconsciente d'Iris l'incite donc à 'réparer' la 'mère'. Elle ne peut pourtant parvenir à ses fins qu'avec l'aide du clarinettiste, d'un élément masculin perçu tout d'abord comme ennemi."[318] Kofman's male helper will be an entire history of philosophy and the "guardian fathers" through whom—via re-writing them, de- and re-constructing their Word—she saves, ultimately, the Mother.[319] Using Žižek's interpretation of *The Lady Vanishes*, we can say that through her text, Kofman, much like Hitchcock's movie, affirms that Woman who according to Lacan does not exist, in fact exists. But there is no happy ending to the story. "The happy ending is never pure, it always implies a kind of renunciation [again, *ça*]—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."[320]

Sarah has the father's pen on the desk in front of her and she writes with it, through it, because of it. What has she inherited from the father? Smothered words. Void which she fills up by reconnecting, or regeneologizing herself in connection with other lines of fatherhood. By rerooting her paternal origins into different genealogical-philosophical lines (Freud, Nietzsche, etc.). But what does she ask these fathers? She

[317] *Ibid.*, 144.
[318] *Ibid.*
[319] Alice Jardine, in "Pre-Texts of the Transatlantic Feminist," poignantly writes: "[T]he woman writer who has been both excluded from and forced to conform to the symbolic system, drawn towards and yet forced to exclude (ignore/repress) her attachment to the mother, is in exile. From this exile, the primary *loci* of signification (music, movement, gesture, color), violence, an emphasis on voice, refusal of and desire for the signifier, are inscribed, either implicitly or explicitly, in another register, to an *other* degree" (1981: 230).
[320] Žižek, *ibid.* (1992), 82.

interrogates them like oracles. They answer with an enigma: she asks these oracles about Woman: and the riddle she receives in answer regards, contains, as much as is unlocked by Mother. So the pen of the father—a phallic symbol that connects to Judaism, Word, Writing etc—compels her to write about and investigate the Mother.

Kofman, unlike Nietzsche and Freud who give up their maternal genealogy, picks up her maternal genealogy: in fact doubles it. Two mothers: one from which biological birth and the other from which what Nietzsche calls the "Yes to life" (a phallic life-force Psychic and of conscious self-affirmation) bursts forth.

Kofman's project is one of uncovering the riddle of femininity by accepting the matricidal and incestuous instincts as part of the dialectic of Eros.

The Apollonian mask is the paternal mask and this inscribes "maternity and childbirth onto the male body and masculine psyche."[321] The maternal force is Dionysian. A naked force, which is as equivocal as it is vital: "Dionysus' nudity is not that of reveleation, of an unveiling of truth, but the uncloaked affirmation of appearance. […] Dionysus' nudity is his most solid mask, […] is the fetish which would put an end to all fetishism."[322]

The call of life comes from death: a pen, in *Rue Ordener, rue Labat*. The daughter uses the pen to enforce the paternal law, yet she contravenes this law by her act of appearance in the *griffures* made by the pen's passage on the page/text: the text *of* the mother.

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[321] Oliver, *ibid.* (1999), 181.

[322] *Camera Obscura of Ideology*, 45. In *Eros and Civilization*, Herbert Marcuse writes that it is the figure of Narcissus (and Orpheus) that reconciles Eros and Thanatos: "But the Orphic-Narcissistic images do explode [reality]; they do not convey a 'mode of living'; they are committed to the underworld and to death. […] But they do not teach any 'message'—except perhaps the negative one that one cannot defeat death or forget and reject the call of life in the admiration of beauty" (149-150). This is ultimately a key to Kofman's last *translation* in *Rue Ordener, rue Labat*.

The daughter accepts the injunction to write that emanates from the memory of the murdered father (his pen on her desk). And with this pen, Kofman wrote dozens of academic books on Western philosophy and cultural production. Yet, the Judaism she inherited from father as well as the French (male) culture she embraced are all forces that work against her female presence, her act of testimony. It is only with this last book, that she finally decides to openly tell *ça*: and as I pointed out, *ça* is a sacrifice. The sacrifice of writing, witnessing, remembering; most of all the *sacrifice of her mother* (intended both as the sacrifices the mother made and the daughter's sacrificing the mother), and the author's own sacrifice of her past in order to survive. Between birth and death, matricide and suicide, we are left with the ultimate enigma that resists all interpretation.

> 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 … they were unable to refrain and winked at her … Their mocking complicity behind my back and connivance greatly irritated me. … '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*

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