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# Sarah Kofman : Effecting Self Translation

Christie McDonald

Among her many writings, Sarah Kofman produced what Virginia Woolf would have called "Life writing." One of the last books published during her lifetime *Rue Ordener, rue Labat*, in particular, was a searing, magnificent account of her childhood. Yet the slippage within her works from philosophy and psychoanalysis to esthetics and literature, to a writing of the self, emerges throughout her work. She did not set about to write about the truth of her self or her family history. Autobiographies, she announced, were false, written for the purpose of idealization of an illusory past : "*Toute autobiographie est mensongère, écrite qu'elle est dans l'illusion rétroactive et à des fins d'idéalisation*" (Kofman, 1984, p. 99). In so saying, she took her cue, in a note to *Autobiogriffures*, first from Freud in his letter to Edward L. Bernays, August 10<sup>th</sup>, 1929 : "What makes all autobiographies worthless is, after all, their mendacity." (Freud, 1960, p. 391); and in another letter to Arnold Zweig, May 31<sup>st</sup>, 1936 : "anyone turning biographer commits himself to lies, to concealment, to hypocrisy, to flattery, and even to hiding his own lack of understanding, for biographical truth is not to be had..." (Freud, 1960, p. 430). What tangles biography with autobiography for Freud is that both lie. Yet Sarah Kofman often deconstructed the sense of the strict opposition between truth and lies. In her two volume study of Nietzsche's autobiography, *Ecce Homo, Explosion I and II*, she analyzes the story of the death of the *autos* as stable subject. *Ecce Homo* is no ordinary autobiography : "*Ecce Homo est l'autobiographie la plus 'dépersonnalisée' qui soit*" (Kofman,

1992, p. 29); it spells the death of the *bios* as well if the life of the living finds its source in two parents to whom one is attached by blood.

At the conclusion of the extensive analysis in *Explosion I and II*, Sarah Kofman asks two questions : will Nietzsche have been understood? And will she, in writing about Nietzsche and his book-offspring have resisted becoming his "child"? The family metaphoric dominates here. Sarah Kofman goes on to speak about Nietzsche as mother referring to herself in the third person : "*Un enfant qui, après tant d'heures passées durant sa 'vie' auprès de sa 'mère', se trouve contraint, en fin de compte, à couper le cordon ombilical pour devenir ce qu'il est.//Et à faire peut-être lui aussi son 'autobiographie'*" (Kofman, 1993, p. 371; my emphasis). To become what one is in Nietzsche's wake, to write one's own books, for Sarah Kofman, meant granting to Freud and Nietzsche roles analogous to those played by Wagner and Schopenhauer for Nietzsche. These are the two "rival" geniuses whom she held clasped together, reading one against the other, one through the other such that neither could totally take her over, nor become totally other : "[...] *lisant Freud, je le lis avec la troisième oreille nietzschéenne, lisant Nietzsche, je l'entends de ma quatrième oreille freudienne*" (Kofman, 1993, p. 372). While Sarah Kofman found what it was that separated and linked these thinkers in her work, she did not, perhaps could not have traced theoretically how the subtle shift in emphasis from philosopher/reader/writer to biographer/"life writer"/story teller brings with it a translation that psychoanalysis could not contain.

Translation operates at several levels in Sarah Kofman's work, from a questioning of the project of philosophy as the translatability of truth, going back to Plato, to psychoanalytic and linguistic models for meaning<sup>1</sup>. It is a process through which choices, both conscious and unconscious, constitute a pained relation to any original be it in philosophy, psychoanalysis, or literature. The story of her "maternal tongue," in the broad sense of an identity shaped in language, is forked as

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<sup>1</sup> For translation, see Christie McDonald, "Lectures," *Les fins de l'homme : autour de la pensée de Jacques Derrida*, Paris, Galilée, 1981; and for discussions of autobiography and translation, see *The Ear of the Other. Otobiography, Transference, Translation. Texts and Discussions with Jacques Derrida*, Lincoln, Nebraska University Press, 1982.

she lives out the adage *traduttore traditore* with respect to her maternal line. As Sarah Kofman's work weaves together philosophy and psychoanalysis, memory and history, a form of writing emerges close to literature that can be characterized as effecting self translation.

The reference to herself in the third person ("*devenir ce qu'il est. // Et à faire peut-être lui aussi son 'autobiographie' "*"), as protective closure to the analysis of Nietzsche's autobiography, the potential of the writer *herself* to pass to autobiography, demands both a cutting of the cord and distancing. Sarah Kofman teases out Nietzsche's insistence on the coincidence of his father's birthday with the day Napoleon entered their town of Eilenburg, and his own birthday with the anniversary of King Frédéric Guillaume IV; he superimposes his father's body on Napoleon (a great man) and his own on nobility. In this "phantasmatic genealogy" (Kofman, 1992, p. 191*ss.*), Nietzsche conforms here to Freud's description of the family romance : the child raises up the father and puts down the mother once he learns that *pater semper incertus est* and that the mother is *certissima* (Kofman, 1992, pp. 194-195). But in venerating the father, he also kills him with this fictive genealogy (Burgard, 1994). Nietzsche cannot deny his physiological relationship to the mother, and he associates her with the lowliness of instincts. Kinship is not in this sense physiological; it rests on the will to be close to or distant from those from whom one descends (Kofman, 1992, p. 191). Here the Nietzschean parody of autobiography explains what a man is from his history, his experience, his origins.

Sarah Kofman adds another leitmotif : what it means to be a woman. In *L'Énigme de la femme*, she analyzes a transference (*transfert*), passing from love for the mother to love for the father (Kofman, 1980, p. 173). In modeling the development of the girl child on the boy, there is conjecture about the status of the girl's experience. Sarah Kofman points out that Freud speculates here that the girl's first love object is also the mother, or a mother substitute, but she remarks that the French translation omits the word *muss* in translating "*Auch für Mädchen muss die Mutter... das erste Objekt sein.*" That is, the translation eliminates the conjectural status of the affirmation. Freud's thought has not been confirmed by observation but by a process of reasoning whose conclusion is that both boy and girl start sexually from the same point of departure. Development differs thereafter as the girl passes from love of mother to father and then

to other paternal objects (Kofman, 1980, pp. 174-175). As Sarah Kofman guides the discussion toward the question of what is considered normal, the norm (why the child *must* choose the parent of the opposite sex in *Les trois essais sur la théorie de la sexualité*), she further notes how Freud calls on the poets to complete his discourse only to reveal their incompetence. It is at this point that she assumes Freud's voice as "her own," without quoting, and creates a narrative tongue which is neither hers nor Freud's, but somewhere between the two, one that speaks to another, "vous": "*Si, au lieu de spéculer (je l'ai fait longtemps moi-même, séduit par le 'génie' des poètes), vous [...]*" (Kofman, 1980, pp. 175-176). She phantasizes how observation might put into question "*tous vos échafaudages spéculatifs,*" doubting the primacy of Œdipus, because it is possible that both Sophocles with Œdipus, as well as Freud's hypothetical evolution of woman, have misled the "I." Sarah Kofman then turns to Freud's notion of the impossibility of comprehending woman if one neglects the preœdipal attachment to the mother (Kofman, 1980, p. 176), citing *Sur la sexualité féminine*. And, only several pages further, she identifies her voice even more strongly with that of Freud:

*Moi Freud, je ne spécule pas : je n'ai pas de parti pris puisque je suis le premier surpris par mes découvertes et que je rectifie sans cesse mes erreurs passées. Ainsi, je peux vous donner comme exemple supplémentaire d'une relation libidinale traduisant un désir passif de la fille envers la mère les sensations génitales voluptueuses ressenties par la fillette lors des soins corporels : la mère est pour la fille la première séductrice. Or pendant longtemps, j'ai accusé le père d'être ce séducteur, d'être la cause de l'hystérie ultérieure de sa fille. Puis j'ai compris que c'était là un pur fantasme de l'hystérique, expression de son complexe d'Œdipe. Maintenant je pense que ce fantasme lui-même répète déjà un fantasme antérieur, celui de la séduction par la mère comme j'estime que l'Œdipe est un simple transfert sur le père de la relation libidinale préœdipienne à la mère. Seule différence : dans le cas de la mère, il ne s'agit peut-être pas d'un fantasme mais d'une réalité. Peut-être même peut-on dire que le fantasme de la séduction par le père sert de souvenir-écran à la séduction réelle par la mère. En tout cas, ce fantasme a pour moi fait longtemps écran, m'a empêché de saisir l'importance des relations préœdipiennes de la fille à la mère. L'on peut donc dire qu'en véritable «savant» je n'ai pas épargné ma peine pour arriver à cette surprenante découverte : le caractère essentiel pour la fille des relations préœdipiennes à la mère. (Kofman, 1980, pp. 192-193; my emphasis)*

Who is speaking here? What slippage occurs from Freud to Kofman? From man to woman? To address this question requires a sense of what authorship and reading come to signify in Sarah Kofman's work.

In her posthumously published volume, *L'Imposture de la beauté*, Sarah Kofman reviews Nietzsche's rejection of Wagner and asserts: "*L'artiste, comme le public, pour aimer l'œuvre, doit au contraire en 'oublier' la genèse*" (Kofman, 1995, p. 95). In a note she broadens this comment by referring to Proust's narratological stance on the relationship between work and author in *À la recherche du temps perdu*. Inverting the move from life to work, the fictive writer Bergotte counters not only Sainte-Beuve's assertions that to understand a work, one has to know the man-author, but the move from life to work as well: "*Ah! Voilà qui donne raison à l'homme d'esprit qui prétendait qu'on ne doit connaître les écrivains que par leurs livres. Impossible de voir un individu qui réponde moins aux siens...*" (Kofman, 1995, p. 95n). As with many of Proust's artists, character like family situation is about as unrevealing of genius as one could expect (the composer Vinteuil is the best known example), making the chasm between life and work appear unbridgeable. However, the blockage of biography to work is not the same as the complex relationship between life and work proposed in autobiography. That passage, in Proust's case, occurs through reception and the artistic gift.

For Nietzsche as for Freud, on the other hand, sacralizing the artist deflects the return of religion in art. "*Ce qu'on appelle 'création', 'don', 'génie' artistiques renvoient en définitive à un jeu de forces, à un certain destin des pulsions*" (Kofman, 1995, p. 102). The enigma of art is the very same as the enigma of "*toute vie qui, depuis sa formation jusqu'à la mort, est livrée au hasard des jeux de forces et de leur rencontre.*" Life "itself" is coincident with the artist whose work is realized in written essays, as in experience, through the individual life: "*La vie de chaque individu est un des essais multiples que la vie, seule véritable artiste, réalise en son jeu*" (Kofman, 1995, p. 102). Life, without any guarantor (the artist) or guarantees (a life beyond), consists of all that is joyous and with all that is intolerable.

Sarah Kofman writes her version of an art that produces its own genesis even as it forgets it. She offers the autobiographical effect that

reading Bernard Cerquiglini's *La parole médiévale* had upon her. After reading about the incantatory evocations of the ancient fragment of language, *mar*, she dreams in a nightmare how this fragment became constitutive of medieval discourse. The dream translates a day from her past. Extending Proust's notion that all reading is a translation of the self, with the days of one's past like so many pages in a book, Sarah relives an event that took place in 1943, forty years earlier, when a man comes to warn her mother that their family was on the list that night for a raid. The family, which had lived rue Ordener, flees and goes to live on rue Labat where "*une femme nous accueillait généreusement les soirs de rafle...Le reste de la guerre, nous vécûmes cachées rue Labat, marginalement*" (Kofman, 1983, p. 110). Kofman explains that the horrible nightmare of the past helped her to overcome her present anguish. "*Seul le rapprochement de deux angoisses — dans une classe unique? — me permet de traiter avec l'intraitable*" (Kofman, 1983, p. 110). Rather than delve into the dualities of a manifest and latent content, Sarah Kofman tacitly acknowledges the untranslatability of the one into the other (Kofman, 1984a, pp. 63-64) and turns to the effects of the dream — allowing her to deal with the intolerable.

This quality of condensing two in one is rare. Rarer still this incursion into a life memory. More frequent is the evocation of contradiction, paradox, aporia in Kofman's early work. The difficulty of translating the word *poros* (expedient, exit), for example, finding a way out of an impasse, and of *aporia*, the interlocking of opposites, highlights the difficulties which plague translators of the term. The translation of *aporia* by "embarras" and *poros*<sup>2</sup> by "expedient" leave aside a network of terms from the same "family;" the example is *euporia*, the term Plato uses to describe the paradigm, resource or expedient, which intervenes to allow the interlocutor understanding of inaccessible ideas (Kofman, 1983, pp. 16-17). "*Traduire, s'ouvrir un chemin dans une langue en utilisant*

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<sup>2</sup> "*Poros, c'est seulement une voie maritime ou fluviale, l'ouverture d'un passage à travers une étendue chaotique qu'il transforme en un espace qualifié et ordonné...*" "*Dire que poros est un chemin à frayer sur une étendue liquide, c'est souligner qu'il n'est jamais à l'avance tracé, toujours effaçable, toujours à retracer de façon inédite. On parle de poros lorsqu'il s'agit d'ouvrir une route là où n'existe et ne peut exister de route proprement dite, lorsqu'il s'agit de franchir un infranchissable, un monde inconnu, hostile, illimité...*" (Kofman, 1983, p. 18).

*ses ressources, décider pour un sens, c'est sortir des impasses angoissantes, aporétiques de toute traduction. C'est accomplir le geste philosophique par excellence, un geste de trahison*" (Kofman, 1983a, p. 17). Recognizing the untranslatability of the terms that Plato borrows from the tradition, offers a displacement from or possible rupture in the concept of translation and the logic of identity that accompanies it. Referring to Parmenides and the sophists, Sarah Kofman brings out the difficulty of exclusion through an echo of Blanchot: "*Comme dans toutes les histoires de double la mort de l'un signe l'arrêt de l'autre... Renoncer à la logique de l'identité, c'est aussi perdre son identité comme assurée, son authenticité, c'est en quelque sorte se suicider*" (note to Jean-Luc Nancy, "Le ventriloque" in *Mimésis des articulations*, cited in Kofman, 1983, p. 38). Plato saves reason by a redemptive division of mimesis into good mimesis and bad mimesis which allows him to make his way through the aporias of philosophy and sophistry, "*qui se ressemblent comme deux frères ennemis*." The question of whether *poros* offers an alternative, going beyond the interlocking of opposites in *aporia*, by forcing a passage, remains open within Sarah Kofman's work and recalls how difficult it is to factor the taking of her own life on Nietzsche's birthday.

Sarah Kofman states that Derrida's originality, at least as far as psychoanalysis goes (and much the same could be said of his work on Plato) lies in putting an end to a process of translation and decision by a formal and syntactic practice of writing. Blurring the lines between what is conscious and what is unconscious, undecidability remains for Sarah Kofman as for Derrida always a double operation (Kofman, 1984a, p. 89). The unconscious in this view can only be read through the death instinct and the notion of repetition compulsion: the original conception of repetition as originary. No presence without difference and differal. "*Le double est originaire. Répétition originaire qui dit l'imagination, la mort toujours déjà inscrites dans la vie et le 'réel'*" (Kofman, 1984a, p. 57).

### ***Rue Ordener, rue Labat : A Dramatic Doubling***

In Sarah Kofman's narrative autobiography, *Rue Ordener, rue Labat*, she returns to her childhood and the moment when her father, a rabbi, was taken from their home on rue Ordener by police and sent to Auschwitz. It chronicles her life during the war and the upheaval of a life in hiding. Saved by a woman she calls "*Mémé*," Sarah Kofman tells of dramatic



doubling that constituted her life in those years and propelled within her a search for models of understanding. In the introduction to her excellent translation of *Rue Ordener, rue Labat*, Ann Smock writes that "No sense of understanding or ultimate resolution — no relief, no consolation whatsoever — mars it. It is clear" (Kofman, 1996, p. xii). Did the translator reinscribe *mar* with the kind of unconscious gesture that demarcates any translation as a new work in the language of another? Just as Smock reinscribes Kofman's dream, so Sarah Kofman writes that in order to be saved, her Jewish identity had to be hidden, erased. Changing from one home to another, Sarah must transform her Jewish signs to Christian ones, even the most untranslatable. From Sarah, her biblical name, she becomes Suzanne since all of the Jewish children's names had to be changed. She is baptized in a Christian ceremony. Yet the anguish of flight and change is superseded in the narrative first by her greatest fear, separation from her mother, and then by the conflict that takes place between Mémé and her biological mother who, because of the other, survives. In order for Sarah to live, Mémé is obliged and obliges her to "pass" for her daughter. Sarah becomes transformed in every way through this woman : hair, clothes, food. Little by little these differences separate her from her mother and from Judaism. A new autobiography is thus created for survival, one fictive and "nobler" at least in the eyes of the enemy, but not in hers. This is no phantasmatic genealogy : here the distance from Nietzsche's construction has again to do with "reality."

Mémé, despite her courageous act of salvation, was not without ambivalence concerning Sarah's Jewish identity : pointing out a Jewish nose, the stereotype of greediness, and speaking against Jewish religious dietary restrictions. Yet it is also Mémé who introduces the names of geniuses of Jewish descent : Spinoza, Bergson, Einstein, Marx. The transformation of Sarah is necessary for the duration of the war : to wipe out the family's past making what is Jewish Christian. Yet the effects continue. When Liberation comes in 1944, the relationship between the two mothers turns warlike, and Sarah finds herself in between the two. Nothing can be simple; first she moves from one to the other and is then forced to separate from the woman she believes herself to love most to live with a mother who abuses her. By displacing what is intolerable in

this personal story, the disappearance of her father, she confronts shame and guilt through the story of her survival<sup>3</sup>.

In the opening fragment of the work, Sarah Kofman writes that "*Mes nombreux livres ont peut-être été des voies de traverse obligées pour parvenir à raconter 'ça'*" (Kofman, 1994, p. 9) : the disappearance of her father. These "*voies de traverses obligées*," translated by Ann Smock as "detours", take the form of relentless analysis, in some cases of scenarios all too close to her own. Close in structure to Freud's scenario of the family romance, Kofman moves toward Nietzsche in rejecting the biological maternal side. But *who* is she? The "I" exists through the mother and the father, as always already divided. The father is dead. The mother is living (Kofman, 1992, p. 163). Since the mother gives life, is Sarah refusing life? Yes and no. Yes, because in being saved, she was forced to displace her original mother. No, because in accepting a substitute she was given life. If her vehemence like Nietzsche's betrays proximity to the mother, the unanswerable question here is proximity to which one? Because there is proximity to both.

Initiation into maternal ambivalence is played out throughout the narrative, and with particular poignancy in the sequence of chapters XIX and XX. There, Sarah Kofman describes her fascination with a moment in one of her favorite films, Hitchcock's *The Lady Vanishes*, when one woman "passes herself off" as another ("*se fait passer pour la première*"). "*L'intolérable, pour moi, c'est d'apercevoir brutalement à la place du bon visage 'maternel' de la vieille (tout dans le film suggère qu'elle est l'image d'une bonne mère...) [...], l'intolérable c'est d'apercevoir 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*" (Kofman, 1994, pp. 76-77). The English translation refuses the repetition of the word "*intolérable*" making the single statement

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<sup>3</sup> See Ginette Michaud, "Résistances du récit (Kofman, Blanchot, Derrida)," forthcoming *Biffures* (*L'Étonnement*, n° 2, 1999). Ginette Michaud (in a beautiful reading of Kofman and Blanchot) and I, without reading one another prior to writing, have picked up many of the same resonances within Kofman's work. For the relationship between guilt, anxiety and catharsis, see Kofman, 1990, pp. 48, 143.

govern the entire description and its temporality; "the part that is always unbearable for me..." (Kofman, 1996, p. 65). The repeatedly sought experience of this film gives excruciating pleasure in the memory of a transformation : "*Le mauvais sein à la place du bon sein, l'un parfaitement clivé de l'autre, l'un se transformant en l'autre*" (Kofman, 1994, p. 77).

The following chapter titled "L'idylle" (referring to Blanchot's story of the same title in *Le ressassement éternel*) is charged emotionally and sensually with repressed desire, and it describes the joy of a brief reunion with Mémé during which the little girl understood almost nothing of what she was feeling at the time : the seduction by surrogate mother (a scenario analyzed through *La religieuse* in *Séductions*). The chapter ends when her biological mother reclaims her after school one day, she never sees Mémé again, and isn't even allowed to say goodbye. "*Ce fut atroce.*"

Sarah maintains the relationship with Mémé by writing to her secretly. And later, she reclaims for herself the traditions that she had of necessity relinquished during the war : she relearns Hebrew and takes up the religious rituals of her family's early life, associated with her father. Her birthday, she notes, coincides with Rosh Hashana, the Jewish New Year. And her identity is forever cleaved, in its pain and joy.

The narrative ends there, but it began with what remains of her father : his pen. "*De lui, il me reste seulement le stylo.*" A pen into which one had to put ink in order to write. She had taken it from her mother's purse and used it all during her schooling. "*Il m'a 'lâchée' avant que je puisse me décider à l'abandonner.*" It "failed" her before she "could bring myself to give it up." This failure is a premature abandonment like the father's forced disappearance, now preempted by the narrative. And the "*voies de traverses obligées,*" the "detours" of her many books, of her life work, of her "auto" "biography" in writing are the story of the effects that remain.

This "life writing" as Virginia Woolf would have called it, is not an end commanded by a *telos*, but rather the story of forces that constituted the person, Sarah, and her works as philosopher. The two volumes written about Nietzsche's *Ecce Homo* do not explicate "How one becomes what one is." They follow the parody of a *Bildungsroman*, in

the manner of Goethe (whom Nietzsche revered). Autobiography in this sense does not lead to knowledge and mastery of the self, but to an "I" which is instinctual rather than rational and a style consisting of bursts and exclamations : from words to explosions, moralism to immoralism. For Sarah Kofman, the explosions of childhood were of anger or joy : anger and shame at the failures of her mother, joy mixed with guilt at what Mémé had given her, bringing with it the "explosive material" of the transferential relationship, those spontaneous repetitions that everyone experiences of infantile prototypes (Kofman, 1983, p. 17).

In Chapter XVIII, Sarah Kofman describes the cover for her first book, *L'Enfance de l'art : une interprétation de l'esthétique freudienne* : "I chose a Leonardo da Vinci, the famous London cartoon of the Madonna and Child with St. Anne." Analyzing the depiction of the women, the Virgin and Sainte Anne, both smiling blissfully over the baby Jesus, Sarah Kofman quotes Freud : "Leonardo's childhood was remarkable in precisely the same way as this picture. He had had two mothers : first his true mother, Caterina, from whom he was torn away when he was between three and five, and then a young and tender step-mother [...]" (Kofman, 1996, p. 63). If first and last, in the context of writing, are framed in a story without end, the title of one of Sarah Kofman's posthumously published texts (about another context), renders the sense of an affect from *Rue Ordener, rue Labat* : "*Et pourtant elle tremble*" (Kofman, 1995). Finding her way into Leonardo's picture, transferring analysis to narrative, boy child to woman, exacted a passionate detour, or "*voie de passage*," the life-long translation, both possible and impossible, of meanings already written to and about the self.

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**ABSTRACT : Sarah Kofman : Effecting Self Translation** — In Sarah Kofman's work, philosophical and psychoanalytical analysis modulate into "life writing" and create a kind of translation which neither alone can fully explain. For Kofman, translation in this sense goes back to readings

in philosophy, psychoanalysis and linguistics in order to effect change. Reading Nietzsche through Freud, and Freud through Nietzsche, Sarah Kofman unleashes powerful analytical tools from which emerge a very personal kind of writing in *Rue Ordener, rue Labat*. What is at stake is the destiny of woman, the extraordinary story of this woman-writer-philosopher and the relationship between life and thought.

**RÉSUMÉ : Sarah Kofman : la traduction de soi en effets** — Dans le travail de Sarah Kofman, un déplacement s'opère de la philosophie et de la psychanalyse vers « l'écriture de vie » qui effectue une traduction que ni l'une ni l'autre ne peuvent contenir. Traduire dans ce sens remonte aux sources des lectures philosophiques, psychanalytiques et linguistiques de Kofman pour en changer les contours. Lisant Nietzsche à travers Freud, et Freud à travers Nietzsche, Sarah Kofman déploie des ressources puissantes d'analyse dont émerge une écriture personnelle dans *Rue Ordener, rue Labat*. Il y va du destin de la femme, de cette philosophe-écrivaine, et du rapport entre des systèmes de pensée et la vie.

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