Enigmas: Essays on Sarah Kofman (review)

Eagan, Jennifer.

Hypatia, Volume 17, Number 3, Summer 2002, pp. 271-273 (Article)

Published by Indiana University Press
DOI: 10.1353/hyp.2002.0049

For additional information about this article
http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/hyp/summary/v017/17.3eagan.html

Jennifer Eagan

What does it mean to be a philosopher? What does it mean to be a woman philosopher? What does it mean to be a post-Holocaust Jewish philosopher? These questions of particular and personal situatedness strike me as being at the heart of Sarah Kofman’s work, and are displayed throughout this collection of essays that serves as a critical tribute to her work. The editors of this volume remain faithful to Kofman’s own insistence on the relationship between life and text, between living and writing. Since her death by suicide in 1994, Kofman’s work has slowly been gaining its deserved recognition on the global scene, and this vitally interesting and diverse volume will certainly help that end.

For anglophone readers of French feminism, Kofman has so far been a figure overshadowed by such thinkers as Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva. The reason for this is that she is not clearly a feminist thinker by her own admission. Deutscher and Oliver claim that “Kofman suggested that her feminism was evident in her interest in demonstrating how the great masculine masters were governed by the irrational domain of their sexual economy” (4). For good reasons, Kofman has been primarily remembered as a scholar of Freud and Nietzsche. Yet, her persistent themes of the hidden maternal and the repression of woman throughout the history of philosophy have remained at the margins. It is clear that Kofman sees her role as a subversive woman philosopher, particularly in her reading of Freud. She writes, taunting Freud: “[f]or ‘truth,’ that metaphysical lure of depth, of a phallus concealed behind the veils, that lure is a fetishist illusion of man: a woman who gets involved with truth, with solving riddles, is a ‘degenerate’ woman, reactive and hysterical” (1985, 105). Deutscher and Oliver’s collection aims to delve into Kofman’s complete corpus as well as to show her important contributions to feminist theory. For those of us newer to Kofman’s work, the editors have included both a complete bibliography and a useful index to help us identify the various themes and figures included in Kofman’s considerable body of work.

Enigmas begins with a personal and reflective forward written by Jean-Luc Nancy, a close friend and colleague of Kofman’s (along with Jacques Derrida and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe). Nancy emphasizes that just as Kofman insisted that a philosopher’s work cannot be read outside his or her lived context, we cannot read her work outside of Sarah Kofman’s lived context. He writes, “Sarah wrote for her living, as we say of those who make it their profession, but in her case, over and above the profession, it was not just a question of ensuring a subsistence but of attesting to an existence” (viii). Nancy describes Kofman’s Nietzschean fashion of laying claim to life as truth, but truth in the sense of fidelity to the lifeworld, not a truth that is fixed or final.
This forward is followed by the comprehensive and well-written introduction provided by the editors, Penelope Deutscher and Kelly Oliver, “Sarah Kofman’s Skirts.” Here, they briefly reflect on Kofman’s life, her works on Freud, her relationship to feminist philosophy, her psychoanalytic analyses of various philosophers, and her methodology, as well as informing the reader about the thirteen essays that appear in the four sections of the compilation. This not only serves as a handy introduction to this volume, but also to Kofman’s work more generally.

Part I, “Literature and Aesthetics,” contains three essays, the first of which is a new translation of a posthumously published essay by Kofman herself, “The Imposture of Beauty: The Uncanniness of Oscar Wilde’s Picture of Dorian Gray,” translated by Duncan Large. Both a psychoanalytic and a Nietzschean reading of this novel, Kofman’s interpretation reveals an alternate moral learned from Dorian’s quest for youth. She writes, “[t]he lesson of The Picture of Dorian Gray would then be the following: the excessive, mutilating puritanism that society imposes can only lead anyone who refuses to submit to it to adopt a morbid solution (that of melancholy) and to regress to the narcissistic stage of magic and animism” (47). The secret to the novel, typical of Kofman-styled interpretation, lies with Dorian’s mother. The two other essays in this section, Ann Smock’s “Don Giovanni, or the Art of Disappointing One’s Admirers” and Duncan Large’s “Kofman’s Hoffmann” pick up on some of these same themes of double identity and facing death by honoring life in their discussions of Kofman’s literary investigations on variations of the Don Juan story and of E. T. A. Hoffmann’s novels.

The next section of the volume, “Philosophy and Metaphor,” contains four essays that explore various aspects of Kofman’s work on language as influenced by Nietzsche and Derrida. The first two essays look at Kofman’s considerable amount of work on Nietzsche. Mary Beth Mader’s “Suffering Contradiction: Kofman on Nietzsche’s Critique of Logic” and Paul Patton’s “Nietzsche and Metaphor” look at Kofman as a Nietzsche scholar who both adopts Nietzsche’s philosophical perspective and surpasses it as well. Pierre Lamarche’s “Schemata of Ideology in Camera obscura and Specters of Marx” looks at the mutual strains of influence between Kofman’s and Derrida’s readings of Marx. Françoise Duroux’s “How a Woman Philosophizes” praises Kofman’s inventive and non-systematic way of reading the tradition. Duroux describes Kofman’s position as “not a ‘feminine’ position, but one of women who philosophize from within woman’s situation rather than through its abandonment” (136).

My favorite grouping of essays, “Women, Feminism and Psychoanalysis,” includes four essays: Natalie Alexander’s “Rending Kant’s Umbrella: Kofman’s Diagnosis of Ethical Law,” Penelope Deutscher’s “Complicated Fidelity: Kofman’s Freud (Reading The Childhood of Art with The Enigma of Woman),” Kelly Oliver’s “Sarah Kofman’s Queasy Stomach and the Riddle of Paternal Law,”
and Tina Chanter’s “Eating Words: Antigone as Kofman’s Proper Name.” These essays will be of interest to feminist philosophers who want to seek for themselves Sarah Kofman’s place in feminist theory. Particularly in Oliver's and Chanter’s essays, we see the fruit of Kofman-styled analysis when applied to Kofman herself. Both of these writers situate Kofman’s work in relation to her life as it is recounted in Rue Ordener, Rue Labat, her autobiography.

The final section, “Jews and German Nationalism,” explores Kofman’s complicated relationship to Judaism and national identity. Alan D. Schrift’s “Kofman, Nietzsche, and the Jews” and Diane Morgan’s “Made in Germany: Judging National Identity Negatively” continue to reflect on the relationship between Kofman’s life and work, her own identity, and the masks of the philosophical figures that she wears.

The beauty of this volume lies in its quality and cohesiveness as a tribute to a philosopher’s life, not just her work. For me, this collection has problematized the questions surrounding what it means to be a particularly situated philosopher. I recommend it as indispensable to anyone doing work in French feminism or psychoanalysis.

Reference


Maria J. Falco

It is rare indeed that a book becomes a “classic” almost from the day it is published. For Pitkin’s Fortune Is a Woman that assessment became, with few exceptions, universal soon after the first edition appeared in 1984. Now with the second edition in 1999, one might give a number of reasons for reaffirming that status. First, the breadth of the sources Pitkin uses to critique and analyze Niccolò Machiavelli’s work spans the centuries from Aristotle to Hannah Arendt, both historically and philosophically, with minor digressions into John Locke, Immanuel Kant and Karl Marx.

Second, the unique twentieth-century lenses used to bring into focus the personal and social characteristics of Machiavelli’s work, life, and upbringing