
Multilingual America
*Transnationalism, Ethnicity,
and the Languages
of American Literature*

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Chapter Twenty-one

The Languages of Memory
Cynthia Ozick's *The Shawl*

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There is One God, and the Muses are not Jewish but
Greek. —Cynthia Ozick

Since the coming forth from Egypt five millenia ago,
mine is the first generation to think and speak and write
wholly in English. —Cynthia Ozick

The first of Cynthia Ozick's epigraphic assertions concerns the relationship between Judaism and artistic representation; the second concerns the means of representation and of communication within Jewish civilization. The first concerns what Jews may say; the second, how they say it. It is clear in the first statement that there is an ethical imperative, that certain forms of representation are antithetical to Judaism. Ozick has repeatedly argued that invented fictional worlds are forms of idolatry, reenactments of paganism. Ozick's only recourse out of the paradox of inventing fictions that defy her own dictum is to seek forms that will require continuity, that will make literature liturgical in that it evokes the texts of Jewish civilization. What this means is that "liturgy" becomes a dynamic concept, one that requires reexamination within Jewish culture, and that English as a monolingual rupture with the past must be recontextualized within the many languages that have made up that Jewish culture for millenia.

To test her ideas within her own represented and invented worlds, Ozick sets up the most extreme case imaginable: she writes a novella about the Holocaust, one in which a mother is witness to the murder of her own child. The main character's loss and her subsequent idolizing and fetishizing of the child's shawl is at the center of a text that is itself a weaving together of texts in many languages that constitute one version of the fabric of Jewish civilization. *The Shawl* as a work of literature tests its readers both in terms of the idolatry of placing Holocaust representation at the center of Jewish civilization and in terms of recognizing the strands of textuality, beyond English, that comprise Jewish history and culture and that defy translation. It is as if the injunction not to create idols is ameliorated by the presence of many

languages and many texts. One of the lessons of Babel so appealing to modern readers is its denial of the rational transparency of monolingualism.¹ If the idolized shawl at the center of the text is the temptation of idolatry, then the text of *The Shawl* itself, crosshatched with the languages of Jewish civilization, requires historicity and collective memory, thereby making Ozick's work a continuous part of that civilization. "When a Jew in Diaspora leaves liturgy . . . literary history drops him and he does not last."² Intertextuality restores Jewish fiction to its Aggadic role.³

In this chapter, I will be concerning myself with fiction as a means of collective memory, and more specifically with an American Jewish writer's invented account of a Holocaust survivor's act of remembrance. In choosing Cynthia Ozick's work "The Shawl," I am interested in two aspects of this act of remembering: (1) the role played by different languages in both the invented world of the characters and the historical context of the writer, and (2) the role of language itself in the representation of mother-child bonding. Although *The Shawl* evokes and partially reproduces a multilingual world, it is written almost entirely in English. And like other works of minority discourse, it appears to be alienated from the language of which it is constituted, estranged from its own linguistic matrix. In *The Shawl* this is compounded by its subject matter, for it is the story of the murder of a child at the very moment that she is making her entry into the world of language and the prolonged grieving of the surviving mother, who denies the loss by addressing and enveloping her phantom daughter in lost languages.

I am reading Ozick's work, then, from two main points of departure: as an example of Holocaust literature in America, and as an example of Jewish-American ethnic literature to the extent that such a literature "remembers" a pre-American and non-English Jewish past. These categories dovetail in *The Shawl* in that the main character is depicted first in a concentration camp and then as an immigrant to the United States. Here, the Old World is not simply lost through the act of emigrating; it is completely annihilated physically but is present as a phantom for the survivor.

Since the early part of the century, Jewish-American writing has often located itself between languages, primarily because it was an immigrant literature.⁴ The writers who actually had some knowledge of an alternative Jewish literary tradition, in Hebrew or in Yiddish, located their own works between two traditions, the English and the Yiddish, the Christian and the Jewish. This has expressed itself not only in linguistic borrowings by incorporation of phrases from the other language but also by allusions to the other traditions, or to the borrowing of models and types from the other canon.⁵ Just as Yiddish poets in America placed themselves in the line of Whitman and Emerson, so writers like Henry Roth, Abraham Cahan, Saul Bellow, and Delmore Schwartz, composing in the English language, often drew on quotations from Jewish sources, interspersed Yiddish words, and turned their characters into types between two different frames of reference.⁶ The extent to which Cynthia Ozick engages with such material is evident in her story "Envy—or Yiddish in America," in which the imminent extinction of Yiddish language and

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culture is the very subject of the story because the Yiddish writer is left wholly dependent on translation to ensure some precarious survival.

As for the category of Holocaust literature, Jewish-American writers have felt the need to incorporate the subject of the Holocaust into their fiction, often with results that reflect their discomfort in presuming to give voice to survivors.⁷ Philip Roth, for example, has abstained from even taking that step as he focuses, instead, on the Jewish-American *response* to the Holocaust, and not the historical trauma itself. His character Zuckerman is haunted by his mother's deathbed legacy to him, a scrap of paper with the word *Holocaust* on it, a legacy that paralyzes him as an artist. Earlier, Roth gave us the fantasy of Anne Frank as Holocaust survivor in *The Ghost Writer* and the Holocaust survivor as the last remaining embodiment of authentic Jewishness for the Jewish-American community in "Eli the Fanatic." It is precisely this collapse of Jewish identity into Holocaust remembrance, with its dangers of mystification and sanctification, that has produced Bellow's antisentimental character Sammler, who shares many traits with Ozick's Rosa. Products of the Polish-Jewish upper class, of an assimilated and urbane world, Sammler and Rosa find themselves in an American urban nightmare that has embittered them further.

Let me turn to the work itself. The acknowledgment page of *The Shawl* refers to the "two stories that comprise this work" as having been previously published in the *New Yorker*.⁸ It is a deceptively simple statement, for it suggests that these two separate stories are now two parts of one artistic whole, and the relation between them is left for the reader to determine. The only connecting devices offered by the author are the title, which gives preference to the first story in the sequence, "The Shawl," and the German epigraph from Paul Celan's "Todesfuge": "Dein goldenes Haar Margarete / dein aschenes Haar Sulamith," to which I shall return. What connects these two narratives remains the central question before the reader not merely as a problem in aesthetics but as a moral problem in the representation of the Holocaust by an American author for an American audience. I believe that in this work Ozick has to date provided the most self-conscious and challenging fictional work in the Jewish-American repertoire on the subject of Holocaust representation in language.

Tying the two stories together is the assumption that there is continuity in biography, and that the narrative of two episodes in the life of one individual is sufficient to insure coherence and unity. In this particular case, the individual is a Holocaust survivor by the name of Rosa Lublin. The first story is an account of the death of her baby daughter at the hands of the Nazis in a concentration camp; the second story is a series of incidents in her life more than forty years later in Florida. The former records the child's first utterance; the latter is a fall into a babel of languages, as Rosa belatedly and compulsively communicates with her dead child. To what extent the second story can be understood only in the context of the first is Ozick's main concern and eventually ours. And if we hastily conclude that it is "necessary" to read "The Shawl" first, what does that mean? and what exactly does it explain?

In a failed attempt to protect her infant daughter from detection by Nazi guards

in "The Shawl," Rosa Lublin also denies her child's entrance into speech, into the symbolic order. The sound uttered by the one-year-old Magda that betrays her to the Nazis, "Maaaa," is a cry provoked by the loss of her shawl, but within Ozick's text as filtered through the mind of the mother, it is the first syllable of "maamaa," later hummed wildly by the electric wires against which the girl is hurled. Having retrieved the shawl too late to quiet her daughter's wail, Rosa stuffs it into her own mouth to prevent her outcry and detection by the Nazis after they have already murdered her child. Swallowing the "wolf's screech" and tasting the "cinnamon and almond depth of Magda's saliva," she internalizes both the child's cry and the child's muteness. In "Rosa," the sequel "The Shawl," and the second part of the divided text—*The Shawl*—Rosa Lublin writes letters in Polish to her imaginary adult daughter in an attempt to connect the two parts of her life, before and after the Holocaust, and to give her daughter a life in her own fantasies. The first part of the combined work, then, as an American author's account of a Holocaust experience, is the context for reading the multilingual narrative that follows.

What distinguishes Ozick's treatment of this issue from those of her fellow Jewish-American authors is the degree of her self-consciousness about the inadequacy of language to render these experiences and her choice of a female character so that the narrative circles around maternity and the woman's relation to language and loss.⁹ Let me return to that moment in "The Shawl" when the one-year-old child whom Rosa has been successfully hiding from the Nazis wanders into the open square of the concentration camp and screams as soon as she discovers that she has lost the shawl that has hidden, enveloped, and nurtured her from birth. Up to that point,

Magda had been devoid of any syllable; Magda was mute. Even the laugh that came when the ash-stippled wind made a clown out of Magda's shawl was only the air-blown showing of her teeth. . . . But now Magda's mouth was spilling a long viscous rope of clamor.

"Maaaa—"

It was the first noise Magda had ever sent out from her throat since the drying of Rosa's nipples.

"Maaaa . . . aaa!"

. . . She saw that Magda was grieving for the loss of her shawl, she saw that Magda was going to die. A tide of commands hammered in Rosa's nipples: Fetch, get, bring! But she did not know which to go after first, Magda or the shawl. If she jumped out into the arena to snatch Magda up, the howling would not stop, because Magda would still not have the shawl; but if she ran back into the barracks to find the shawl, and if she found it, and if she came after Magda holding it and shaking it, then she would get Magda back, Magda would put the shawl in her mouth and turn dumb again. (8)

Rosa at first chooses to hear the one syllable cry "Maaa" as an expression of pain for the baby's separation from the shawl. But when she fails to save the child from death, Rosa hears the electric voices of the fence chatter wildly, "Maamaa, maaamaa," a reproach to her—for if the outcry was the girl's first act of communication rather than merely a wail, if she called out to her mother, then her mother failed her.

The verbal addressed to the moment in "The Shawl" of which is dead obsessively in relation to her dead daughter.

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Before I take the shawl, I write it signifies the extension of the appears to nourish an infant of maternity, world.¹¹ Denial Magda's death cries and that. Thus, the shawl inseparability. whose cries a child or retrace believes that comfort is the Rosa believes the utterances Magda's first

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The verbal development of the infant, according to Lacan, begins as "a demand addressed to the mother, out of which the entire verbal universe is spun."¹⁰ This moment in "The Shawl" is left suspended between sound and language, between undirected pain and an appeal to the mother, the beginning of a dialogue the price of which is death. Rosa's response to that cry for the rest of her life is to answer it obsessively in the most articulate language known to her, to write eloquent letters to her dead daughter in Polish.

Her letter writing is both a repeated recognition of her child's tragic entry into language and a denial of the war that murdered her, for Rosa's letters to a daughter whom she imagines as a professor of classics, specifically a professor of Greek—a dead language (and an indecipherable one for Rosa)—are primarily elegies for the lost world before the war, a world of elegant turns of phrase, of literature and art. Magda becomes for her the self that has been stolen from her, the self that she might have become. Rosa grieves as much for herself as lost daughter as she does for herself as lost mother.

Before I take a closer look at the languages that serve as various substitutes for the shawl, I want to turn to the shawl itself. What sort of language is it? For Rosa it signifies the preverbal bond between mother and daughter, as it becomes an extension of the mother's body for the infant Magda, a miracle of maternity that appears to nurture the sucking child after the mother's breasts are dry, "it could nourish an infant three days and three nights." Yet it also seems to serve as a denial of maternity, the means whereby Magda's presence is denied to the rest of the world.¹¹ Denial of Magda's birth is Rosa's way of protecting her and herself. After Magda's death, Rosa stuffs the shawl into her own mouth, an act that muffles her cries and that, metonymically, devours her daughter and returns her to the womb. Thus, the shawl is both mother to the child and child to the mother, their prenatal inseparability. The choice before Rosa when she spies her unprotected daughter whose cries are bound to reveal her presence to the Nazi guards is to retrieve the child or retrieve the shawl for the child. Rosa does not do the first because she believes that Magda cannot be comforted by her actual mother, that her only comfort is the shawl, metonym for womb and breast. Yet when the girl is murdered, Rosa believes that the child had actually cried out to *her*, that the pause between the utterances was not the interval of a repeated and meaningless wail but, rather, Magda's first word, "Maamaa."

Attempting to swallow that sign of maternity while also becoming that lost child in the act of sucking it—this image marks the end of the account of Magda's death and the end of the first text, "The Shawl." The second text, "Rosa," is made up of a series of discourses and languages that are responses to the traumatic events of "The Shawl": the responses of Rosa to her past and the responses of the American community of which Ozick is a part.

First, there is English, the language of the novella *The Shawl*, the language that Rosa shuns, "Why should I learn English? I didn't ask for it, I got nothing to do with it." Much of the English expression that surrounds Rosa seems to mock her and her past, primarily the lingo of advertising, journalism, and psychology. Kollins Kosher Cameo in Miami appeals to nostalgia to lure clients into the restaurant.

"Remembrances of New York and the Paradise of your Maternal Kitchen." Aimed at an American-born clientele, the sign is read by Rosa knowing that she left New York because it drove her mad and that her own daughter never experienced the "paradise of a maternal kitchen." The accumulated grief and despair that drove her to destroy her own livelihood in New York is recorded in the newspaper as "Woman Axes Own Biz," an account of her action that never refers to her traumatic past. This is "Rosa" without "The Shawl." The most humiliating English discourse for Rosa, however, is that of clinical psychology's language of disease for Holocaust victims. The letters that she receives from Dr. Tree, who is applying a model of "Repressed Animation" to his study of "Survivor Syndrome," offer a catalogue of terms—"survivor," "refugee," "derangement," "neurological residue"—but never, Rosa is quick to observe, the term "human being." In short, English in this novella is represented as a language of parody, a fall from some authentic primary language. It is the place of Rosa's exile, a maimed language that distorts and perverts her experiences.

Rosa seeks her protection in languages that are never represented mimetically in the text but are there either in translation, as is the case for Polish, or by allusion, as in Latin and Greek. They represent oases of cultivation. Her father, she recalls, "knew nearly the whole first half or the *Aeneid* by heart"; her imaginary adult daughter Magda is a professor of Greek philosophy.¹² She writes to her daughter "in the most excellent literary Polish." If Magda is killed in the moment of her entry into speech, then she will be forever associated with eloquence, language cut off from the flow of life around Rosa. "A pleasure, the deepest pleasure, home bliss, to speak in our own language. Only to you." Just as the shawl signifies the prespeech bond between mother and child, these languages cut off from community—Polish, Latin, and Greek—become the medium of intimacy between Rosa and her Magda, as if they envelope Rosa in a world of her wishing. But they are not the languages of dialogue; they are the languages of the dead.

Rosa's letters to her imaginary daughter are conveyed in apostrophe, which always "calls up and animates the absent, the lost, and the dead."¹³ Addressing her child as "Butterly," she continues, "I am not ashamed of your presence; only come to me, come to me again, if no longer now, then later, always come" or elsewhere, "in me the strength of your being consumes my joy." Magda's imaginary future in America, as projected by Rosa, is an extension of Rosa's past—a non-Jewish world of intellect and aesthetics. The apostrophe to a Polish-speaking daughter who is a professor of classics is a denial of the Jewish identity that marked both mother and daughter as enemies of that European civilization by Polish and German anti-Semites responsible for her murder.

The only other language actually represented in the novella apart from English is Yiddish, much despised by Rosa and her assimilated family. "Her father, like her mother, mocked at Yiddish: there was not a particle of ghetto left in him, not a grain of rot" (21). In *The Shawl*, Yiddish is associated in the past with Rosa's grandmother, and in the present with Simon Persky, the Eastern European immigrant to America, former manufacturer, and retired widower in Miami who takes a romantic interest in her and gently admonishes her, "You can't live in the past."

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Rosa looks condescendingly at his Yiddish newspaper in the laundromat where he makes his first move.

"Excuse me, I notice you speak with an accent."

Rosa flushed. "I was born somewhere else, not here."

"I was also born somewhere else. You're a refugee? Berlin?"

"Warsaw."

"I'm also from Warsaw! 1920 I left. 1906 I was born."

"Happy birthday," Rosa said. (18).

"Imagine this," he said. "Two people from Warsaw meet in Miami, Florida."

"My Warsaw isn't your Warsaw," Rosa said. (18)

Rosa is intent on distinguishing her Warsaw from Persky's on two grounds, one prewar and one postwar:

The prewar difference is based on rank, for Rosa's denial of any knowledge of Yiddish is her badge of honor in terms of social class. Rosa stems from an affluent assimilated Warsaw home, where the family spoke eloquent Polish and was steeped in Polish culture. Her parents, she recalls, enunciated Polish "in soft calm voices with the most precise articulation, so that every syllable struck its target" (68). Considering the fate of these parents, the trope of Polish syllables striking their target works against Rosa's intense nostalgia. In America, she is deeply offended by the homogenizing of the Old World that places her in the same category with Persky. "The Americans couldn't tell her apart from this fellow with his false teeth and his dewlaps and his rakehell reddish toupee bought God knows when and where—Delancey Street, the Lower East Side. A dandy." Rosa's continuing denial of her Jewishness and her romanticizing of her Polishness results in this peculiar misplaced rage. The American tendency to ignore differences among Jews seems to her a benign repetition of European racism. "Warsaw!" Rosa argues in her mind. "What did he know? In school she had read Tuwim: such delicacy, such loftiness, such *Polishness*" (20).

The irony of Rosa's evocation of pure Polishness in the poetry of Julian Tuwim is that he was a Polish-Jewish poet who wrote in New York in 1944, "So it is with mourning pride that we shall wear this rank, exceeding all others—the rank of the Polish Jew—we, the survivors by miracle or chance. With pride? shall we say, rather, with pangs of conscience and biting shame." The man who served Rosa as the embodiment of quintessential Polishness eventually reached the conclusion that "I shall deem it the highest prize if a few of my Polish poems survive me, and their memory shall be tied to my name—the name of a Polish Jew."¹⁴

The postwar difference dividing them is that Persky, who left well before the Second World War, has no firsthand experience of the ghetto, the transports, the death camps. As she says to the hotel manager whom she accosts for the presence of barbed wire on the Florida beaches, "Where were you when we was there?"

When asked her name by Persky, Ozick's character replies, "Lublin, Rosa." "A pleasure," he said. "Only why backwards? I'm an application form? Very good. You apply, I accept." Despite Persky's amusement at her self-naming, we recognize that this is not backwards at all, that Rosa first associates herself with Lublin, with

her Polishness, and only secondly with Rosa, her Jewishness.¹⁵ In her last letter to Magda she reminds her daughter of their aristocratic background, injured by the social leveling of the Warsaw Ghetto: "[I]magine confining *us* with teeming Mockowicz and Rabinowicz and Perskys and Finkelsteins, with all their bad-smelling grandfathers and their hordes of feeble children!" But it is only Persky with his Yiddish paper and his garbled English who has the power to separate her from her Polish phantom child and bring her back to the land of the living.

Despite Rosa's rebuff, Persky persists in his attempt to engage her in conversation:

"You read Yiddish?" the old man said.
 "No."
 "You can speak a few words, maybe?"
 "No." My Warsaw isn't your Warsaw.

At the very moment that she denies any knowledge of Yiddish, in her mind she recalls her grandmother's "cradle-croonings," and Ozick adds the Yiddish words in transliteration, a rupture in the text because it is the only instance of a language other than English actually represented in the work. "*Unter Reyzls vigele shteyt a klorvays tsigele*," the first words of the popular Yiddish lullabye "*Rozhinkes mit Mandlen*" (Raisins and almonds). In this lullabye a little goat sets out on a journey from which it will bring raisins and almonds to the sleeping child who is destined to be a merchant of raisins and almonds himself but is now urged to sleep in his cradle. The cradle rhymes with the little goat; it rocks the child to sleep while the goat under his cradle is an ambassador of far-off lands of sweets, the Eastern European Jewish equivalent of sugar-plum fairies. In the story "Rosa," the almonds hark back to the previous text, "The Shawl," and to the "cinnamon and almond depth of Magda's saliva" that Rosa drank from the shawl after her child's death.¹⁶ The clear little white goat under Rosa's cradle is merged in her own mind with the little innocent child, uncradled, to whom she writes in Polish to keep her pure of the Yiddish world that marked her as a Jew, but whom she also links with her grandmother, cradle-crooner in that tongue.

The choice of "*Rozhinkes mit Mandlen*" as the only Yiddish intertext in *The Shawl* adds further to both the gender and historical dimensions of the work. The first stanza of the lullabye, taken from the 1880 operetta by Abraham Goldfaden entitled *Shulamith* (Shulamith), frames the account of the baby and the goat by depicting the following scene:

In a corner of a room in the Holy Temple [in Jerusalem],
 a widow named Daughter of Zion sits all alone
 —and as she rocks her only son to sleep,
 she sings him a little song.¹⁷

Within the masculine setting of the Holy Temple itself, a small corner has been domesticated, appropriated by mother and child. And in this woman's space the kid that is traditionally offered for sacrifice, or that takes the community's sins upon itself, has been transformed into the sustaining and nurturing creature who provides

raisins and almonds under conditions unbecomingly old-fashioned, an old sexton is suffering and dying. . . .¹⁸

While Rosa's daughter she shies away from, decades later she writes: "Wherever is . . ."

Perhaps America and assimilation are the protagonists far as far removed from themselves. But the languages such as Polish are forever in a moment of historical facts the Second World War parents or grandparents long since outgrown, in the route to Rosa's decline, through the English of the lost me speakers.

No surprise "Death Fugue" to write in the assimilated Jewish frequently dubbed language, Hebrew, using the Hebrew words of a lullabye the opposite of Hebrew. That grotesque dime

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raisins and almonds. During the Second World War, the lullabye was adapted to conditions under the Nazis—one ghetto version being “In the Slobodka yeshiva an old sexton is reading his will. . . . When you will be free, tell your children of our suffering and murder, show them the graves and inscriptions of our extermination.”¹⁸

While Rosa reminisces about a home comprising only Polish, Latin, and Greek, she shies away from any image of home that contains Yiddish. But in Miami decades later it is Persky, the Yiddish speaker, who tells her in fractured English, “Wherever is your home is my direction that I’m going anyhow.”

Perhaps American-Jewish authors writing in English have invented cultivated and assimilated Holocaust survivors like Rosa and Mr. Artur Sammler as their main protagonists for in their prewar lives these characters inhabited a linguistic world as far removed from the Jewish languages of Hebrew and Yiddish as the authors themselves. Beauty, cultivation—civilization itself appears to be synonymous with the languages of their assimilation. For many American-Jewish authors and readers, such as Philip Roth, Yiddish is a language frozen socially and historically, embedded forever in a milieu of poverty, parochialism, and salty vernacular. Regardless of the historical facts that testify to a variegated Yiddish cultural and literary world before the Second World War, for the American-Jewish writer, product of immigrant parents or grandparents, Yiddish has tended to signify a maternal embrace, a home long since outgrown. For her or him, the lure of Yiddish seems to lie in its inarticulateness, in the rusty and homespun English of its translation.¹⁹ In *The Shawl* the route to Rosa’s grandmother’s lullabye and to her own cradle is through social decline, through dialogue with the likes of a Persky. It is as if the well-crafted English of the Jewish-American fictional text is kept in its place by the admonition of the lost mother culture evident only in the scrappy sentences of non-English speakers.

No surprise then that the epigraph is in German, taken from a poem entitled “Death Fugue” by Paul Celan, a Rumanian-Jewish Holocaust survivor who chose to write in the language of his people’s murderers. For most well-educated or assimilated Jews in Europe, Yiddish was scorned as a corrupt form of German, frequently dubbed a bastard or stepchild born of writers unfaithful to the legitimate language, Hebrew.²⁰ Because Yiddish did evolve from Middle German, while retaining the Hebrew alphabet, it is indeed a joining of these two languages. The Yiddish words of a lullabye in a book recounting the murder of a Jewish child constitute the opposite pole to the words of the epigraph, which also connect German and Hebrew. That Magda herself may be the product of rape by a Nazi adds a further grotesque dimension to the linguistic and historic analogues in *The Shawl*.

Death is a master from Germany his eyes are blue
he strikes you with leaden bullets his aim is true
a man lives in the house your golden hair Margarete
he sets his pack on to us he grants us a grave in the air,
he plays with the serpents and daydreams death is a
master from Germany

your golden hair Margarete
your ashen hair Shulamith²¹

Margarete's golden hair is close enough to be that of Magda's, child of a romanticized (for Rosa) non-Jewish world that aimed to be *Judenrein*; as the object of desire of Goethe's *Faust*, Margarete is the incarnation of German romantic love. Shulamith, a "female emblem of beauty and desire celebrated in *The Song of Songs*, is an incarnation of Jewish biblical and literary yearnings. But there is a bitter difference and shocking irony in the echoing resemblance."²² One is the fair-haired maiden of the Aryan ideal, the other the darker, ashen features of the Semitic woman. Moreover, the figurative ashen hair is brutally undercut by its literal allusion to Shulamith's burnt hair reduced to ashes. In fact, this may be the source for the ash-stippled wind that encircles Magda in the concentration camp. Shulamith is associated with the "Rose of Sharon" in the biblical text, in Hebrew "Shoshana," and hence with Rosa.²³ Just as Rosa's series of letters to her dead daughter are apostrophic, so too these lines in the poem are apostrophic, animating what is lost and dead, both the language of Goethe, contaminated by Nazi Germany, and Jewish civilization in Europe. But it also implicates Goethe's language, implying that the idealization of Margarete's golden hair leads inevitably to the ashes of Shulamith's hair. To add a tragic ironic twist to this entanglement of languages and texts, Goethe translated the *Song of Songs* from Hebrew into German, and in the Walpurgis Night scene in *Faust*, the young witch's lewd remarks to Faust echo some of the most sensuous lines of the biblical text. Earlier, Mephistopheles mocks Faust's love of Margarete by his sexual jests about her body that allude to the *Songs of Songs* as well, particularly to the often-quoted lines likening Shulamith's breasts to two fawns feeding among the lilies (4:5), which Goethe translated more accurately as among the roses ("*shoshanim*"). Margarete's being identified with Shulamith as mediated through Goethe's romanticism makes her signification as the antithesis of all that is Judaic particularly striking. Celan's poem severs Shulamith from Margarete, recovering the former for Semitic civilization and implicating the latter in anti-Semitic atrocity. He sunders the German-Jewish symbiosis that yielded rich cultural products, among them the first German-language periodical for Jews, significantly called *Sulamith*.²⁴ Celan explained his own loyalty to the German language by insisting that "only in one's mother tongue can one express one's own truth. In a foreign language, the poet lies."²⁵ Bonded then to the language of the murderers of his own parents, Celan seeks "to annihilate his own annihilation in it."²⁶

As the work of a Holocaust survivor poet, Celan's epigraph lends the authority of testimony to Ozick's novella, as well as the legitimacy of rendering this subject matter in art. The link to Celan, and through Celan to Goethe, is striking in two other respects. (1) In 1943 while a prisoner in a labor camp, Celan wrote a poem originally entitled "Mutter" and then retitled "Black Flakes" ("*Schwarze Flocken*") in which his mother addresses him: "Oh for a cloth, child / to wrap myself when it's flashing with helmets / . . . hooves crushing the Song of Cedar / . . . [*sic*] A shawl, just a thin shawl." In his reply to her envisioned plea a few lines later, he offers her his poem as shawl: "I sought out my heart so it might weep, I found—oh the

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summer's breath, / it was like you. / Then came my tears. I wove the shawl." Ozick's *Shawl* is a response and continuation of the one woven by Celan. An apostrophe to his dead mother, who instilled in him the love of Goethe, his poem mirrors the apostrophic letters of Ozick's Rosa to her daughter and her fixation on her shawl. (2) In *Faust*, the imprisoned near-insane Margarete raves about her dead child as if it were alive and pleads to be allowed to nurse it. Margarete is thus not only the incarnation of German romantic love, she is also a female victim of male brutality and a child murderer haunted by her deed. Associated with the Song of Songs, victimized by forces of evil, and finally reduced to infanticide and madness, Margarete could appear to be a parallel of Rosa as well as her antithesis, were it not for the decisive and colossal difference dividing myth from history, metaphor from victim.

The medium for the coexistence of Margaret and Shulamith, Magda and Rosa, is Paul Celan's German, the medium for the story of *The Shawl* is English, and the medium for Rosa's reentry into the world of the living is Yiddish, through Perksy's gentle insistence and her grandmother's voice. And the medium for prespeech bonding is the shawl itself, not the masculine prayer shawl that it evokes by association but the feminine wimple of the cradle, the swaddling clothes that, like the tallit, also serve as a shroud. As a Jewish-American woman writer, Ozick creates a common ground in her book for her audience and her subjects, for the American readers and the Holocaust survivor protagonists, through a barely remembered mother tongue, Yiddish, and woman's translation of the tallit into the maternal wimple. Stemming from the same Persian root, the word "shawl" is used in German, English, and Yiddish for the same garment. Moreover, the word "shawl-goat," occasionally used interchangeably for "shawi" in earlier periods, refers to a goat that furnishes the wool for shawls. The "tsigele," then, the pure-white little goat in the Yiddish lullabye, can be the source of "the shawl," mother for both Rosa and Magda, and finally, not a child merchant, after all, but a provider of shawls as well as of milk.

And this brings me to my final observation about Ozick's work, namely, the dimension that she brings to this material as a woman writer. Although by now the literature of the Holocaust is voluminous, Elie Wiesel's testimony in *Night* of the murder of a child in Auschwitz remains central in any discussion of this subject, in part because it is witnessed by a child and in part because the adult who remembers interprets this atrocity as the equivalent of the death of God. No image conveys the unspeakable horror more than the murder of children. Wiesel speaks with the authority of the eyewitness; Ozick, moved to write literature about the Holocaust, must do what every fiction writer does—act the ventriloquist for characters of her own making. Faced with an ethical dilemma, the fiction writer must choose either to abstain from all fictional portrayals of the Holocaust (as Philip Roth does repeatedly by invoking the subject and then backing off), or to find a means of conveying Holocaust experience that at the same time conveys awareness of the debate on the subject. D. M. Thomas's deliberate retreat from fictionality in the Babi Yar scene of his novel *The White Hotel*, in which he substitutes the testimony of a survivor of the massacre recorded in Kuznetzov's documentary report, is,

according to Thomas, his reluctance to place his own words in the mouth of a character.²⁷ Ozick's *The Shawl* is clearly a work informed by this debate, and by the indictment of poetic language in Adorno's by now declaration-turned-axiom "After Auschwitz, it is no longer possible to write poems."²⁸

Ozick begins by placing before the reader that searing moment of the death of a child: the death of a daughter witnessed by the mother. The reader is positioned with the mother, sharing the mother's excruciating decision as to which strategy will offer more protection, and then witnessing the failure to protect. The mother, and reader, are left with the first wail of a mute child, that demand addressed to the mother from which the entire verbal universe is spun, the demand for a presence that stems from the first sensibility of absence. The silence preceding the wail, the silence of mother-child preverbal inseparability is transformed, by that one utterance of pain, into the self-inflicted silence of Adorno's dictum, as Rosa muffles her own voice and attempts to swallow her daughter back into her own body by taking the child's muteness into herself. The babel of languages in the second part, the weaving together of a text that offers a variety of languages, each with its own claim to solace or heal, does not displace the wail in Part I. Rosa's spinning out of the letters to Magda stems from her guilt-ridden decision to hear Magda's cry as the moment of her entry into language, thereby intensifying the pain of her failure to save her, and also treating that moment as the first verbal communication of her child addressed to her, which requires a lifetime of reply and denial. The Yiddish lullabye, the maternal legacy denied to Magda, is the melody (and it is as much song as it is lyrics) of the mother tongue that cannot soothe away Magda's wail. By placing us within ear's range of the child's cry and with the shattered mother, Ozick insists on demetaphorizing the language of Holocaust literature. If her subsequent evocation of a Yiddish lullabye, in what is by now nearly a dead language, in a work of Holocaust literature written by an American seems sentimental, it is also a means for that community of readers, two or three generations removed from Eastern Europe, to identify with the Old World culture that was destroyed. And if her evocation of European Jewry's entanglement in the languages and cultures of their annihilators appears to blur the lines dividing Jewish from non-Jewish culture (as in Celan's poetry), it also provides American Jewish readers with another face of that community that is no more. "Then came my tears. I wove the shawl."

NOTES

1. For the paradoxes inherent in the Babel story and the double-edged effects of multilingualism, see Jacques Derrida, "Des Tours de Babel," in *Difference in Translation*, ed. Joseph F. Graham (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985).

2. Cynthia Ozick, "America: Toward Yavne," *Judaism* (Summer, 1970), reprinted in *What Is Jewish Literature?*, ed. Hana Wirth-Nesher (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1994), p. 28.

3. For a discussion of Ozick's struggle for historicity and her relation to Jewish memory, see Norman Finkelstein, *The Ritual of New Creation: Jewish Tradition and Contemporary Literature* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992).

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4. Both Baal-Makhshoves (Isidore Elyashev) and Shmuel Niger have argued that bi- and multilingualism have been intrinsic features of Jewish literature in all periods. See Baal-Makhshoves, "One Literature in Two Languages," trans. Hana Wirth-Nesher and reprinted in *What Is Jewish Literature?* and Niger, *Bilingualism in the History of Jewish Literature*, trans. Joshua Fogel (New York: University Press of America, 1990).

5. For an analysis of poetic strategies of translation within narrative, see Meir Sternberg, "Polylingualism as Reality and Translation as Mimesis," *Poetics Today* 2 (1981), pp. 225-232.

6. Benjamin Harshav has argued that the work of many Yiddish poets in America should be considered a branch of American literature in the introduction to *American Yiddish Poetry: A Bilingual Anthology*, ed. Benjamin and Barbara Harshav (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986). For discussions of the multilingual aspects of the writings of Henry Roth and of Saul Bellow, see Hana Wirth-Nesher, "Between Mother Tongue and Native Language: Multilingualism in *Call It Sleep*," *Prooftexts: A Journal of Jewish Literary History* 10 (1990), pp. 297-312, and Hana Wirth-Nesher, "'Who's he when he's at home?': Saul Bellow's Translations," in *New Essays on Seize the Day*, ed. Michael Kramer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

7. Among the many works on this subject, the following have had a significant influence on my own writing: Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi, *By Words Alone: The Holocaust in Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980); Lawrence Langer, *The Holocaust and the Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975); Alan Mintz, *Hurban: Responses to Catastrophe in Hebrew Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984); Alvin Rosenfeld, *A Double Dying: Reflections on Holocaust Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980); David Roskies, *Against the Apocalypse: Responses to Catastrophe in Modern Jewish Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984).

8. Cynthia Ozick, *The Shawl* (New York: Random House, 1990), copyright page. All further page numbers will be cited in the text.

9. Ozick's sensitivity about representing the sufferings of Holocaust victims is evident in her letter to a survivor reprinted in Sarah Blacher Cohen, *Cynthia Ozick's Comic Art* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), p. 148.

Every Jew should feel as if he himself came out of Egypt . . . The Exodus took place 4000 years ago, and yet the Haggadah enjoins me to incorporate it into my own mind and flesh, to so act as if it happened directly and intensely to me, not as mere witness but as participant. Well, if I am enjoined to belong to an event that occurred 4000 years ago, how much more strongly am I obliged to belong to an event that occurred only 40 years ago.

10. Barbara Johnson, "Apostrophe, Animation, and Abortion," in *A World of Difference* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), p. 198.

11. Sarah Blacher Cohen traces the source of this to the account of a devastating narrative of the denial of the maternal instinct in Tadeusz Borowski, *This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen*, trans. Barbara Vedder (New York: Penguin, 1976), p. 43.

12. For a detailed analysis of the *Aeneid* as a central intertext in *The Shawl*, see Elaine Kauver, "The Magic Shawl," in *Cynthia Ozick's Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), pp. 197-199.

13. Johnson, p. 187.

14. Julian Tuwim, "We, the Polish Jews . . ." (Fragments) in *Poems of the Ghetto: A Testament of Lost Men*, ed. and with introduction by Adam Gillon (New York: Twayne, 1969), p. 83.

15. Kauver notes that the choice of the name Lublin stresses the fate of Rosa's assimilation. "Originally planned as a reservation for the concentration of Jews by the Nazis, Lublin became one of the centers for mass extermination and was the site of a prisoner of war camp for Jews who had served in the Polish army. The Nazis made no distinction between Jews who abandoned their Jewishness and Jews who celebrated it" (187).

16. Berger suggests that the cinnamon-and-almond flavor evokes the scent of the spices in the decorative box used for the Havdalah service marking the end of the Sabbath; it thereby signifies liturgy as spiritually invigorating. Kauver associates cinnamon and almond with the sacred anointing oil in Scripture and a biblical symbol of divine approval, so that Magda becomes a holy babe for Rosa. I believe that two intertexts are evoked in these two scents: the almonds are obviously an allusion to the Yiddish lullaby "Raisins and Almonds"; the cinnamon is a reference to "The Cinnamon Shops" by the Polish-Jewish writer Bruno Shultz, murdered by the Nazis and the inspiration for Ozick's novel *Messiah of Stockholm*.

17. Abraham Goldfaden, *Shulamis: oder Bat Yerushalayim* (New York: Hebrew Publishing Company), p. 10 (my translation).

18. Introductory notes for "Rozhinkes mit Mandlen," in *Mir Trogn A Gezang: The New Book of Yiddish Songs*, 4th ed. (New York: Workmen's Circle Education Department, 1982).

19. While Ozick is aware of this tendency in American-Jewish culture generally, her excellent translations of the works of Jacob Glatstein, Chaim Grade, and Dovid Einhorn are proof of her knowledge of and commitment to Yiddish literature. See also her essays on Yiddish literature and on the problems of translation, "Sholem Aleichem's Revolution" and "A Translator's Monologue," in *Metaphor and Memory* (New York: Knopf, 1989), pp. 173-198; 199-208.

20. For an excellent discussion of Celan's multilingual upbringing and its cultural resonances see, "Loss and the Mother Tongue," in John Felstiner, *Paul Celan: Poet, Survivor, Jew* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), pp. 3-22. The cultural significance of linguistic choice in Eastern European Jewish civilization is explored at length in Dan Miron, *A Traveler Disguised: A Study in the Rise of Modern Yiddish Fiction* (New York: Schocken, 1973).

21. Paul Celan, "Death Fugue," Michael Hamburger's translation, in Paul Celan, *Poems*, selected, translated and introduced by Michael Hamburger (New York: Persea Books, 1980), p. 53.

22. Shoshana Felman, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 32.

23. Cynthia Ozick's Hebrew name is Shoshana. The Hebrew original of "I am the rose of Sharon, the lily of the valleys" is "Ani havazellet hasharon, shoshonat ha'amakim."

24. Felstiner, p. 298.

25. Israel Chalfen, *Einer Biographie seiner Jugend*, 1979, quoted in Katherine Washburn's introduction to *Paul Celan: Last Poems* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1986), p. vii.

26. Felman, p. 27.

27. For a discussion of this issue, see Hana Wirth-Nesher, "The Ethics of Narration in D. M. Thomas's *White Hotel*," *Journal of Narrative Technique* (Winter 1985).

28. Theodor Adorno, "After Auschwitz," in *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 1973), p. 362. As Langer has noted, "Adorno never intended it to be taken literally as his own elaborations of the principle demonstrate" (see pp. 1-3).

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