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REVIEW ARTICLE

REENACTING TRAUMA: THE ENCOUNTER WITH SILENCE, SYMBOL AND MEMORY IN  
CYNTHIA OZICK'S *THE SHAWL*

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ABSTRACT

Against her profound belief in the inadequacy of any fictional work to perfectly represent the Holocaust, Cynthia Ozick wrote her novella *The Shawl* under the inexorable pressure imposed by her sense of belonging to the collective memory of Jewish suffering. But, unlike most of the Holocaust fiction, the two stories of *The Shawl* and *Rosa* do not so much integrate historical records of what actually happened, as much as they dramatically reenact the whole agony within a symbolic framework. Torn between the desires to retain silence and to let the world know, and between the nightmarish experience of the Holocaust and the surrealistic encounter with its memory, the stories use, evocative symbols that give the fictional world created by Ozick, its own fictive authenticity, making it as paradoxically close to and distant from the historical event. This paper shall examine the above-mentioned aspects of Ozick's imaginative experience of the Holocaust, concluding how she could reconcile between two contradictory impulses: the impulse to keep the sacred intact and the counter impulse to unload the burden of expressing the self.

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INTRODUCTION

In an interview with Elaine M. Kauvar, "Cynthia Ozick accused the Holocaust fiction of distancing the reader 'from the agony' of the first-hand experience". Ozick did not spare even herself from this accusation since her two-part novella *The Shawl* (1989), recording a direct but inventive encounter with the Nazi exterminating agency and painting a lively portrait of the Holocaust anguish, which, like any fictional work on the subject, violates the sacred shrine. The Holocaust, according to Ozick, should be kept alive through oral and written records, photo galleries and documents, contending that fiction trivializes the actual events to mere 'imaginings'. When asked if this applies to her Holocaust stories *The Shawl* and *Rosa*, Ozick admits:

Well, I did it in five pages in *The Shawl*, and I don't admire that I did it. I did it because I couldn't help it. It wanted to be done. I didn't want to do it, and afterward I've in a way punished myself, I've accused myself for having done it. I wasn't there, and I pretended through imagination that I was. I've also on occasion been punished in angry letters from people who really were there. But I wasn't there, and the story is not a document; it's an imagining. (391)

If this is Ozick's view of the fictional language that can never fulfill the requirements of representing the Holocaust, how successful and efficient is *The Shawl*, with the symbolic power dominating its stories *The Shawl* and *Rosa*, in breaking the silence?

To begin with, *The Shawl* is a tale that runs into a few pages but compact with meaning. This short story deals with one of the most poignant Holocaust scenes in which a mother, standing herself a few steps away from death, and consumed with humiliation, torture and starvation, never spares any possible effort to keep her fifteen-month-old daughter alive. She is, however, sure that sooner or later the child shall die, if not of starvation, as her dry breasts could not help quench, then in the crematorium by the Nazi soldiers. *Rosa*, her daughter Magda and niece Stella are three dancers to the music of death not

alone but zoomed in by the lens of Ozick's rhetoric in the no-time and no-place. Barbara Scrafford rightly comments: "Ozick does not explain the world we enter with her. The reader is pulled into the march without knowing where the writer is taking him or her, just as the Jews marched to their death without being told their destination" (11). Broadly speaking, the entire scene is cast against the shawl, the presence of which persists throughout the story as a central symbol wrapping the child and the text with multiple layers of meaning. Apparently, Ozick uses *the shawl* for the title deliberately to suggest its centrality over the characters and to metaphorically emphasize the religious importance the prayer shawl, often referred to in Hebrew as 'tallit', occupies in Judaism to which she always tends to be devoted. What is noticeable in the postwar Jewish context is the over-repeated use of the shawl as a motif linked with the Holocaust memory as well as the persecution of Jews, sometimes in texts written by non-Jews. In her historical novel *The Green Library* (1996), the Canadian novelist Janice Kulyk Keefer, could successfully incarnate the myth of the Jewish unique suffering by creating the scene of a Jewish girl committing suicide in order to flee from her chasers during the Nazis' occupation of Kiev. The scene becomes typically Jewish when the body of the deceased girl is depicted as covered with a shroud-like shawl which in turn becomes the target for robbery by somebody who might have needed it.

At the outset of *The Shawl*, the reader is exposed to the harshness of nature as experienced by Stella, where the shawl serves as an alternative but fragile shelter for Magda who appears "wound up in" it and both held tightly to the bosom of Rosa. Distinctively, the shawl represents the only spot of warmth framed by 'the coldness of hell'. It may derive its warmth from the mother's heart to which it is eagerly attached and which beats anxious kindness in a place where hearts have irrevocably turned into stones. On her part, Stella finds herself unable to resist the temptation of the shawl's serene haven as she yearns to shrink, to wind backward her life, and become invisible within its folds: 'Stella wanted to be wrapped in the shawl, hidden away, asleep, rocked by the march, a baby, a round infant in arms'(3). Having a jealous eye on Magda's shawl, Stella assumes a dramatic quasi-villain's position that would characterise her relationship with others. *Rosa* sees in the shawl a safe nest for her little 'squirrel', a

refuge that would keep Magda out of the Nazis' reach as long as possible. When death is inevitable, extending life one more day becomes an achievement. This is exactly Rosa's philosophy of life in a place where death is the most recommended wisdom. Rosa's predicament of hiding her child from the Nazi murderers is entangled more by observing emaciation stealing out the child's life slowly. Moreover, Magda's survival may function as a torturing memory, a reminder of her father's 'Aryan' complexion, 'dark like cholera!' After all, she is the offspring of a rape, an outcome of an offensive and monstrous sexual abuse. Still, the innocent infant has no guilt in what happened leading to her birth. Her mother is quite aware of this heart-piercing fact, so she never scruples to endow her with what every mother could do with, the only difference is that her dry breasts pump out no milk. But, does the hell created by Magda's fathers spare the heaven her mother tries to offer?

On the march to the death camps, Rosa thinks of pushing the shawl that wraps Magda into the hands of any bystander woman, but the act is not free of risk though. But if she moved out of the line they might shoot. And if she fled the line for half a second and pushed the shawl-bundle at a stranger, would the woman take it? She might be surprised, or afraid; she might drop the shawl, and Magda would fall out and strike her head and die. (4) Like any holocaust mother, Rosa is willing to choose the less-costly evil of giving away her infant rather than seeing her die before her eyes. In Alan Berger's words: "the tale's omniscient narrator outlines the 'choiceless choice' confronting Jewish mothers during the shoah" of giving "the shawl encased-infant to one of non-Jewish women watching Jews marching toward annihilation" (272). All this tragic conflict takes place silently in the head of an unhappy mother searching for a meager hope of life in the midst of death. When the entire picture assumes grotesque colours of cannibalism with Stella, like a predatory hawk, awaiting the death of Magda to pounce upon her, and when Rosa's breast, that has turned into a 'dead volcano', fails to nourish the starving infant, the shawl turns out once again as a magic source of nurture: "[Magda] sucked and sucked, flooding the threads with wetness. The shawl's good flavor, milk of linen" (4, 5). For three days and three nights, the shawl becomes an alternative symbol of a mother nurturing the infant after the undernourished Rosa is unable to do so. Paralleling the deprivation of nourishment, a deficiency of emotions occurs emptying the place of pity by replacing human concern for each other with cannibalistic self-preservation. "They were in a place without pity, all pity was annihilated in Rosa, she looked at Stella's bones without pity. She was sure that Stella was waiting for Magda to die so she could put her teeth into the little thighs" (5). Hence, Magda's life is endangered not only by the Nazis and malnutrition but also by her own people transfigured by the dire need to satisfy a natural compulsion into cannibals. All of them, however, are victims.

Gradually, the shawl starts prevailing the scene pushing both the mother and the daughter to the background. For Magda, it moves from the position of an alternative shelter to an alternative nurture and then it becomes an amazing source of fun and amusement: "The shawl was Magda's own baby, her pet, her sister. She tangled herself up in it and sucked on one of the corners when she wanted to be very still" (6). For Rosa, a strange substitution takes place as the shawl's symbolic spell blurs reality so widely that the shawl and the little infant exchange places. On one occasion, Rosa "clung to the shawl as if it covered only herself". On another, she feels "so attached to it that no one can take "it away from her". And when Magda is thrown into the electrified fence at the end, the shawl departs its usual place round the baby to fill in Rosa's mouth creating a repressed scream that surmounts the ever loudest cry of agony and anguish, a desperate woman can produce in immediate reaction to the loss of a child. The final act of devouring the shawl is a physical act that encompasses the implications of two metaphorical ones. On the one hand, it symbolizes a pragmatic self-imposed silence that conveys the above-mentioned message of Ozick which is, not to violate the sacred shrine (the Holocaust). According to David Brauner, "the story does not finish on a note of triumphant, liberated expression, but rather with another

image of repression, of (self)-enforced silence" (120). On the other hand, it enhances the theme of cannibalism but only at the symbolic level: "...so she took Magda's shawl and filled her own mouth with it, stuffed it in and stuffed it in, until she was swallowing up the wolf's screech and tasting the cinnamon and almond depth of Magda's saliva; and Rosa drank Magda's shawl until it dried. (9) Rosa's act of devouring the infant herself, poses the question as to whether a mother's mouth and belly provide the ultimate protection to a child when the whole world cannot. This is exactly what it is like to be a mother at the time of 'the hunted' that Barbara Scrafford likens to 'a cornered wild animal' (14). Unlike any other child, Magda's eyes know no tears even when the smoky wind bearing with it the black specks of human ashes cause Rosa's and Stella's tears to flow. Magda's eyes manifest the most ironic laughter. A laugh that cannot be compared to earthly laughs, nor does it come in imitation of what a child can see around since 'Magda had never seen anyone laugh' (6). Suggestively, it is a unique laugh blooming in a desert of cries and tears, not in exchange for the least of amusement or happiness but as a result of the intensity of suffering.

In *The Shawl*, the sense of loss gets enacted at several levels. In addition to Magda's loss of her shawl, Stella of her fantastic dream, and Rosa of Magda herself, there is a microcosmic world that foreshadows the image of a decomposing life: "On the other side of the steel fence, far away, there were green meadows speckled with dandelions and deep-colored violets; beyond them, even farther innocent tiger lilies, tall, lifting their orange bonnets" (8). This rhetorical juxtaposition of two images – the lively nature against the deathly steel fence – pushes the polarity of life and death a step further. Surrealistically, the coldness that the weather initiates invades the eyes of the characters and penetrates the hearts. The last fort to fall is the shawl itself after it has been pried open, torn off Magda's vulnerable skin, and stolen by the cold-hearted Stella in order to fulfill her wish of shrinking into invisibility. While Keefer's shawl in *The Green Library* is taken by a bypasser robbing the Jewish girl's body of a substitute shroud, Ozick's shawl, securing a hide for Stella, exposes Magda to the evil eyes of the slayer. At this juncture, it can be argued that the shawl stands for life: "Magda was grieving for the loss of her shawl, She [Rosa] saw that Magda was going to die" (8). Further, this incident enhances Stella's role as a villain on whom Rosa would later blame the death of her child. Obviously, the story reaches its climatic point when the mother has to choose between 'Magda or the shawl' as though she is in a task of reuniting soul and body but perplexed as to which one to fetch first. Rosa, conscious of the complementary and strong relationship between the two, knows that going to the arena first and snatching Magda up would not help stopping the latter's howling, while getting the shawl entails ensuring peaceful moments for the child.

"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, then she would get Magda back, Magda would put the shawl in her mouth and turn dump again". (9). Rosa is ignorant that fate is not so generous this time and that by having her grip on one (Magda or the shawl), she should lose the other. She goes for the soul (the shawl) and upon coming back she finds Magda, an irredeemable body travelling far away on the shoulder of the Nazi soldier, a butterfly 'swimming through the air' toward her doom in the electrical fence (9). Ironically, Rosa's miscalculated action of bringing the shawl to avoid the child's howling leads to Magda's dying, electric moaning 'Maamaa, maamaaa'. Before this last scream, Magda has been mute, deprived of a voice to tell the world her emotional anguish. It is "the very moment" remarks Brauner, "when Magda finally finds her voice that seals her life" (120). The ultimate message intended by Ozick making the shawl survive Magda and accompany the mother through "Rosa", the sequel story, however, is charged with symbolic implications. Primarily, the shawl keeps fantasizing reality by offering an alternative to the mother-daughter relationship. Magda finds in it not

only a fiasco baby-suck, but also a nurturing mother, a warm shelter, and even an umbilical cord. For Rosa, it becomes an idol surrounded by the halo of a lost daughter. Haunted by the guilt of failing the child, and the psychological trauma of survival, the psychotic mother appears in "Rosa" either waiting for the grown-up Magda to return home or covering the handset with the shawl assuming that Magda is talking. From a different perspective, the shawl is an embodiment of death rituals, an intensified memory of the Shoah which every pious Jew comes across daily in the form of the prayer-shawl 'tallit'. But most of all, it covers the human vulnerability and weakness as well as protects man from bestiality and cannibalism.

As the miserable Magda is forced to depart life only fifteen months after seeing the light of its sun (though what she has seen cannot be called light at all), a vital part of Rosa seems to die along with her. Ozick explores the irrevocable damage of this event in the sequel story 'Rosa'. Set thirty-five years later, *Rosa* dramatizes the price of survival that Rosa Lublin has to pay living dependent on her niece Stella in one of Miami's dark hotels. Though there are neither Nazis nor concentration camps here to threaten life, the encounter with memory proves to be more fatal as it drives Rosa out of her sanity. "Rosa Lublin, a madwoman and scavenger, gave up her store – smashed it up herself – and move [sic] to Miami" (13). She is unable to live with the reality of her daughter's death, so she must fabricate her own reality in order to reconcile to the fact that she lived, while her daughter died. Like Moses Herzog, the protagonist in Saul Bellow's novel *Herzog* (1964), Rosa is afflicted with the mania of writing letters to her deceased daughter Magda the act that, to a greater or lesser degree, implies a repressed self-expression. In a letter to Stella, Rosa sums up her present condition that represents a demonic extension of the Holocaust itself: "Where I put myself is in hell. Once I thought the worst was the worst, after that nothing could be the worst. But now I see, even after the worst there's still more" (14).

In the new world, Rosa appears consumed with despair, unable to come to terms with a meaningless life in the midst of people who can never imagine the evil experienced by her. Her whole life, gets reduced by her distressed memory to nothing but a moment of facing death in a concentration camp: "Before is a dream. After is a joke. Only during stays. And to call it a life is a lie" (58). This existential dilemma colours even the way she sees the world around. All people of Florida seem to be shadows of something left behind, "scarecrows, blown about under the murdering sunball with empty rib cages" (16). Her condition is, reminiscent of Sol Nazerman in Edward Lewis Wallant's novel *The Pawnbroker* (1961). Both are Holocaust survivors and both shun people who come to their shops, by maintaining a necessary gap of communication because, no matter how these people tend to show understanding, they actually know nothing about the horrible past hidden deep in their memories. In an attempt to widen that gap more, Rosa, smashes up her store justifying: "whoever came, they were like deaf people. Whatever you explained to them, they didn't understand" (27).

There have been attempts to break the shell Rosa has built around herself, but they prove, somehow, to be futile. For, closer the people approach her, the farther she recoils. In her letter to the absent Magda, she explains how strangers constantly try to spoil her serenity: "Strangers scratch at my life, they pursue, they break down the bloodstreamsentries" (39, 40). James W. Tree's letters dehumanize Rosa as they reduce her to a mere experimental sample; a 'survivor' and a 'refugee' but not a human being. In her psychological disorder, Rosa is obsessed with Tree's pursuit to a point that his self-interested scientific objectives to fulfill a study on the socio-psychological subject of 'Repressed Animation', are no better than the Nazi's extermination methods. Indicatively, the comparison is perceptible when Rosa likens the terms used by Dr. Tree to the humiliating numbers tattooed on the skin of the Holocaust victims in order to be identified: "Consider also the special word they used: *survivor*... A name like a number – counted apart from the ordinary swarm. Blue

digits on the arm, what difference?" (36). Likewise, Simon Persky's persistent penetration into Rosa's seclusion yields nothing but more xenophobic attitude on her part. To her, Persky is no exception in imagining her past. While he always tries to see what is common between them, Rosa insists on highlighting the differences: "my Warsaw is not your Warsaw" (19). Her paranoid suspicion does not stop at denying Persky's proceedings but aggravates into accusing him of stealing her underpants. Such a baseless charge casts some light on the memory of rape bringing back intense feelings from the Holocaust repressed in Rosa's unconscious. What Rosa tries unknowingly to keep concealed, gets manifested in the form of an empathetic reaction to what her hallucinating imagination renders a similar incident. She immediately feels "shame," "pain in the loins," and "burning" (34). Though Rosa later admits that she was raped, she suppresses any feelings about this: "Whatever stains in the crotch are nobody's business," she thinks (34).

What surfaces in *Rosa* is the prejudiced sense of repulsion and hatred she holds against Stella posing the question of how fair both Rosa and the omniscient narrator are to her. Stella's double-oppression by the Nazis and by Rosa's paranoid bias, represent a real scapegoat. In spite of her generosity to Rosa, the latter never stops from making her a 'bloodsucker', 'the Angel of Death' and having "black will". All feelings of Rosa's spite and malevolence against Stella get incarnated in the former's committing a psychological murder in the form of the cannibal dream of "boiling her tongue, her ears, [and] her right hand" (15). Nevertheless, a close examination of Stella's character reveals that what seems to be villainy is in fact a shifting of blame from the real perpetrator to transmutation of anger in fear of him. For, Stella's cannibal impulse that can be detected in *The Shawl* is not a natural instinct but the unbearable starvation she undergoes. Her case, therefore, is a true reflection of what the situation was like during the Holocaust, a mirror through which the reader can see how the hunted people felt and behaved. The letter Stella writes to Rosa, reveals the nature of their relationship from her perspective this time. In spite of being inconsiderately shocking to Rosa, the letter rationally records what looks like a bitter truth. Stella thinks that thirty-five years are enough for Rosa to forget and live her own life, and to stop behaving like a crazy woman, idolizing nothingness: "Your idol [the shawl] is on its way, separate cover. Go on your knees to it if you want. You make yourself crazy..." (31). Stella is not only burdened by the jobless Rosa's complete dependence on her, but also troubled by the latter's insistence on staying away and refusing to change her life. Both Rosa and Stella find it difficult to bridge the emotional gap separating them, the 'long distance' in Stella's words.

Arguably, it is a distance of time rather than space that keeps them apart. While Stella lives in the present, Rosa dwells in the past unwilling to depart from it. In Peter Kerry Powers's view, the ultimate and tragically ironic implication of Rosa's, Stella's and Mr. Persky's response to the past is that the Holocaust has done its work, precisely because it has been able to create an unbridgeable rupture in the stream of Jewish memory. All three distance themselves, to varying degrees, from history. For Rosa, the past is devoid of responsibility to those who live in the present. But while Stella and Persky's response to the past is shallow and naive, Rosa's is fatal in assuming that she must deny the present and be sucked into the 'during'. "If Stella and Persky make idols of the present moment by freezing it apart from all other moments of the past and future, Rosa makes an idol of the past by believing the present and future cannot matter" ( Powers 90). Ozick deliberately makes Rosa speak the silent language of the Holocaust trauma, which, more than maintaining the sacred rituals of suffering, is able to "tell everybody –not only [her] story but other stories as well" (66). Polish, her 'own language,' embodies that silent language as it has been effective only when writing to her dead daughter Magda and through which the reader gets an insight into Rosa's past. English is a superficial language to communicate with a superficial world. This leads to a duality in expressing the self, perplexity, and thus dishonesty in reporting the past events. Writing, therefore, can become a fictional re-enactment of

the primary trauma from which the individual cannot break free: "she was writing inside a blazing flying current, a terrible beak of light bleeding out a kind of cuneiform on the underside of her brain. The drudgery of reminiscence brought fatigue, she felt glazed, lethargic" (69). Psychologically speaking, the moment of conjuring up the trauma is reinforced by words that articulate an unconscious expression of the repressed trauma itself. Yet, what is more frustrating is the condition when words fail to describe the horror of the Holocaust in the act of retrieving scenes from a wounded psyche.

There can be other ways of repressing, projecting, and acting out trauma. This gives clue to the narrative's tension between the desire to speak – to break the silence – and the compulsion to preserve intact the unspeakable world of trauma. Rosa's letters to Magda, though the outcome of a psychotic mind, diagnose the malady from the viewpoint of what the world sees in a madwoman. The atrocities of Jews being rounded up by Nazis in Warsaw's Ghettos, all find an outlet in writing to the dead since those alive cannot digest them. They all tend to forget while Rosa alone is bound to remembering, so she has no place among them. She, whose home has been taken by the thieves, finds no place to live in except her own thoughts with the shawl functioning as a stimulus for interacting with the past symbolized by her lost daughter, Magda. No mortals are permitted into this world. That is why when Mr. Persky, at the end of the story, is allowed to enter, Magda flies away which suggests a possibility of arriving at a compromise with the past, though not with certainty. Like many of Ozick's stories, *Rosa* ends with some ambivalence. Finally, one question remains unanswered: is the shawl, a dominant symbol in the book, an agent of illusion in a world of reality or quite the vice versa? For, throughout the book the borderline between reality and illusion remains blurred with no clear-cut distinction. In *Simulation and Simulacra* (1980), Jean Baudrillard elucidates how the precision of simulacra in art can lead to confusion between the real and the hyper-real. Baudrillard cites Disneyland as a contemporary example of the fictiveness that could create some counterbalancing reality to what the actual America is (422,423). Applying Baudrillard's theory to *The Shawl*, Ozick, who in the interview quoted above insisted that fiction

was an inadequate representation of reality, could paradoxically achieve mastery over recreating a fictive but more precise and impressive facet of reality. She is not interested so much in producing a historical authenticity of the Holocaust as much in repeating and replicating the working-through of trauma partly with evocative symbols and partly with disrupting language while making the picture speak. The shawl, thus, is a double-agent, by means of which, Cynthia Ozick makes Rosa, and with her the readers, move freely between two worlds at several levels; the worlds of reality and illusion, of fact and imagination, and of speaking and silence.

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