

〈Research Article〉

Cynthia Ozick's Attempt toward "New Yiddish Literature"

「新イディッシュ文学」に向けて—シンシア・オジックの試み

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【要旨】

ディアスポラの民であるユダヤ人にとって、アイデンティティの問題は歴史と宗教に関わる複雑な問題であるが、生まれ育った国の文化への同化に成功したユダヤ人が、移民を余儀なくされた場合は更に複雑である。シンシア・オジックは、『ショールの女』においてユダヤ性を否定する同化したユダヤ系ポーランド知識人が、ナチスの法律によってユダヤ人としてのアイデンティティを課せられ、ホロコースト生存者としてアメリカで孤絶した生活を送るという過酷な状況を設定し、その中でアイデンティティと贖いの問題を追究している。本稿では、同時期に執筆されたオジックのエッセイを参照しながら、オジックが唱える新イディッシュ文学の一つの試みとして『ショールの女』を読み解いていく。

キーワード：シンシア・オジック、ユダヤ人のアイデンティティ、イディッシュ語、ホロコースト、『ショールの女』

1. Introduction

Jewish identity is very complicated because of the Diaspora. What defines them as Jewish, those who do not have a country except for Israel: blood, faith, or tradition? The simplest way to be Jewish is to be Orthodox in ritual (Bell 472), while a different mode of Jewish identification is to accept the ethical content of Judaism when rejecting the ritual (473). The ethical, however, can “dissolve the parochial, and takes away from individuals that need for the particular identification which singles them out and shapes their community in distinctive terms” (473). The Jewish past and memory are indeed crucial for Jewish identity, giving Jews a sense of continuity with their ancestors. Modernity, however, gave birth to the intellectual, for whom

the past is only allowed to come back in the form of self-hate, shame of one's parents, the caricaturing of Jewish traits (most notably verbal agility), exaggerated thrust of ambition, the

claims to superiority by the mere fact of being a Jew, and all the other modes of aggression that arise from the refusal to accept the tension of being in a minority, and the need to balance the insistent demands of the past with the needs of the present (475).

This kind of repression of the past can lead to “alienation from Judaism,” giving rise to the alienated “Jewish orphan” who “comes ‘out of himself,’ rather than out of a past” (475). This problem was particularly common in Central Europe in the early 20th century.

Cynthia Ozick (1928–) can be classified as the second type of Jew, who attempts to establish Jewish identity through Jewish ethics. She defines herself as “an autodidact” to whom “the synagogue at present does not speak,” who has “no divine shelter other than reading” and for whom “at the moment print is all my Judaism” (“Toward a New Yiddish” 157). Therefore, she reads “mainly to find out not what it is to be a Jew... but what it is to think as a Jew” (157).

She clearly recognizes the danger of universalism, which can “dissolve the parochial” of Judaism. She asserts that after Emancipation, the Enlightenment offered Jews, on the one hand, citizenship and access to the splendors of European art and culture from the spirit of Liberty, Fraternity, and Equality, while on the other hand, it caused self-negation and de-Judaization. Ironically enough, “an abundant and spacious theory of civilization embracing the whole range of human culture...reduced and cramped Jewish creative space” (“Bialisk’s Hint” 230) and caused the “narrowing of that Jewish world in the mind of modern Jews” (232).

English, an influential language with universalizing power, also endangers Jewish identity in America. Ozick explores how to maintain Jewish identity while writing in English instead of Yiddish. She considers the issue in several essays written in the 1970s, paying special attention to the Second Commandment against idolatry as a momentous Jewish standard, one that clearly separates Judaism from Christianity. For Ozick, idolatry is a grave matter, concerned with the validity of creation as a Jewish writer as well as the identities of her characters.

This paper focuses on Ozick’s “Rosa,” a short story in *The Shawl* (1980), which Ozick wrote at roughly the same time as her essays. The protagonist, Rosa, is an alienated Jewish orphan whose high status in Poland and her concomitant superiority caused her to reject everything Jewish and Yiddish, an identity imposed upon her by the Nazis’ legal strictures. She also refuses to learn English and to adjust to America, where she lives as a Holocaust survivor. Ozick describes this isolated woman rejecting her Jewish identity despite sharing the Jewish fate from a comic perspective. I explore Rosa’s consciousness of identity and her relationship with others by analyzing metaphors, regarding *The Shawl* as an attempt at “New Yiddish Literature” that Ozick proposes in her essays written at roughly the same time as the work.

2. Yiddish and Liturgical Literature

Cynthia Ozick was born to Russian immigrant parents and brought up in the Bronx. As a child she attended heder, the Yiddish-Hebrew “room.” Enthralled with the Latin poets at Hunter High School, Ozick chose to study English and American literature. Later, however, she had the opportunity to return to her Yiddish roots through translating Yiddish poetry, collaborating with Saul Bellow and Irving Howe.

The role of the translation of Yiddish into English in America changed between the first immigrant generation and the second one. According to Barry Davis, the aim, at first, is to convey literal meanings without caring to leaving a Yiddish trace or even attempting to wipe away all evidence of Yiddish in fear of Antisemitism. The next generation, such as Saul Bellow, Irving Howe, and Cynthia Ozick, however, found symbolic meaning in their translation, regarding Yiddish as a sacred touchstone of Jewish identity (Davis 13-15).

The translation represents their necessity of assimilating into the dominant society and preserving their culture in a form that is available to posterity without knowledge of Yiddish and the wider audience. It, however, caused the Jewish community to struggle because it cannot completely convey the essence of their culture and can even distort it as an organic unity of sound and meaning in Yiddish cannot be completely transformed into English. Bellow’s translation of *Gimpel Tam* by Isaac Singer symbolizes this issue. Although Bellow’s translation led to Singer’s great success, Bellow is accused of turning “Hebrew liturgy into Christian parlance” (Wirth-Nesher 217) through the avoidance of “phrases parodying Jewish religion” and eliminating “the disparaging references to Jesus and his parentage” (Davis 16).

Ozick successfully depicts this dilemma of translation of Yiddish into English in her celebrated story, “Envy, or Yiddish in America” (1969), where an untranslated Yiddish poet, Edelstein, envies a successful Americanized Yiddish novelist, Ostrover, a character who is considered to be based on Singer. A Yiddish poet, Jacob Glatstein, saw himself in this story and bore a grudge until his dying day (Lowin 9). Her work also offended the Yiddish community, which called her and the magazine publishing the story “enemies of Yiddish” (23).

However, she created the story not as a satire on the complaint of the unsatisfied Yiddishist but as “an elegy, a lamentation, a celebration” (Lowin 23) of the language. Ozick translated some Yiddish poetry, including Glatstein’s one, into English about that time and published them in *A Treasury of Yiddish Poetry* (1969) and *Voices from the Yiddish: Essays, Memoirs, Diaries* (1972) edited by Irving Howe and Eliezer Greenberg. In a speech, “A Bintel Brief for Jacob Glatstein,” she explains that her story was intended as homage to Glatstein, regarding him as the greatest Yiddish poet who played a crucial role in the rise of Jewish-American literature. While what drove her to the translation is “the fury of lost love” (“TNY” 172), translating Yiddish poetry made her recognize all too well how impossible it is to

render fully a Jewish idea into a Christian medium. She writes that “translation would never, never engender the splendor and richness and dearness and idiosyncrasy of Yiddish” (Lowin 23).

For Jewish people who have been pressured to assimilate into their surrounding culture, choice of language is pertinent to their identity. Ozick asserts that, for Jewish people, speaking English is tantamount to “envying,” “flattering,” “aping,” or “parodying” English or Christian culture (“TNY” 177). Instead, Ozick finds a new possibility of retaining and cultivating Jewish culture in the idea of “a New Yiddish.” Just as by pouring “Jewish ideas into the vessel of German they invented Yiddish,” Jews can “achieve the profoundest invention of all: a language for our need, our possibility, our overwhelming idea” through pouring “not merely the Jewish sensibility, but the Jewish vision, into the vessel of English” (“TNY” 176).

Ozick thinks that a New Yiddish will be “the language of a culture that is centrally Jewish in its concerns and thereby liturgical in nature” (“TNY” 174). Liturgy is “in command of the reciprocal moral imagination,” “a choral voice, a communal voice: the echo of the voice of the Lord of History,” and in all of history “the literature that has lasted for Jews has been liturgical” (169). The liturgical literature produced by a New Yiddish will “passionately wallow in the human reality” and “be touched by the Covenant” (175). Ozick asserts that “liturgical novels will be capable of genuine comic perception in contrast to the grotesqueries of despair that pass for jokes among our current Gnostics and aestheticians,” and “because of its special view of history, will hardly be able to avoid the dark side of the earth, or the knife of irony” (175).

The Shawl wholly mirrors liturgical literature in a New Yiddish. “The Shawl,” one of the two stories in the volume confronts horrible inhumanity in a concentration camp during the Holocaust, and “Rosa,” the other one, depicts the desperate isolation of the protagonist, Rosa, after the war with genuine comic perception.

Rosa’s family were successfully assimilated Jewish Poles who spoke sophisticated Polish before the Holocaust. Warsaw was “the great center of Jewish culture” in the 1920s: the Pilsudski regime was very friendly to the Jews of Poland, so that by 1931, “56 percent of [Poland’s] doctors, 33.5 percent of its lawyers, and 22 percent of its journalists, publishers, and librarians were Jews” (Strandberg 204). Jerzy Kosinski, a Polish-American novelist, reminded Ozick that “not all East European Jews fit the *shtetl* stereotype” because of “the richness of the Polish language and of its Jewish adherents” (Bernstein 14). Rosa, following her parents, mocks Yiddish language and culture. Her father was the director-general of the Bank of Warsaw and called himself a “Pole by right” (“Rosa” 40), and, despite being born in Yiddish-speaking community, “there was not a particle of ghetto left in him, not a grain of rot” (21). Rosa also observed that other vestiges of Yiddish, such as the cradle-crooning that Rosa heard her Minsk-born grandmother hum, were despised by her mother (19). As Friedman points out, ignorance and disdain of Yiddish are, for Rosa, only positive indicators of social status (119).

Simon Persky, who reads Yiddish newspapers and goes to Kosher restaurants, happens to meet Rosa at a laundry in Miami and assumes her to be Jewish from her immigrant's English. Knowing that both of them come from Warsaw, he is thrilled by their fortuitous meeting. Rosa, on the other hand, repeatedly claims that her Warsaw is not his Warsaw. She imagines the Warsaw that Persky, who was born in 1906 and left there in 1920, experienced:

...what bitter ancient alley, dense with stalls, cheap clothes strung on outdoor racks, signs in jargoned Yiddish. Anyhow they called her refugee. 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 or where.... (20)

This Warsaw includes the ghetto where Rosa's family was shoved, alongside the "old Jew peasants worn out from their rituals and superstitions, phylacteries on their foreheads sticking up so stupidly, like unicorn horns, every morning (67)," relics which she looked down upon. Ozick perceived that "(t)he distastefulness of the portrait, its emphasis on pettiness and cowardice, coincides remarkably with that of the classic anti-Semite" and is "a description frequently in the mouths of some English and American Jews as well" ("TNY" 156), one she portrayed in Rosa's prejudice against the Jewish.

Rosa's reluctance to use English prevents her from acclimating herself to America. When Persky indicates that her English is not better than any other refugee's, she asks, "Why should I learn English? I didn't ask for it, I got nothing to do with it" (23). For her, the New World expressed in English is made up of lying theories by lawyers and university people. To Rosa, the English world represents the reality that she can never accept, including the fact that her infant daughter Magda is dead. "A revulsion against the values... of the surrounding culture itself... against Western civilization" ("TNY" 156) is a problem of the Diaspora that Ozick recognized, and it is reflected in Rosa's maladjustment to America. Only when writing to her dead daughter in her native tongue of Polish does Rosa express herself freely and eloquently. Her stubborn language preference isolates her from her fellow community in the New World and deepens her solitude.

3. Metaphor and Sympathy

In her other essay, "Metaphor and Memory" (1986), Ozick focuses on the function of metaphor in envisioning a stranger's heart. She assumes that the Jews' memory of their slavery in Egypt over thirty generations has been passed on and has become "a means to understand what it is to be an outcast, a foreigner, an alien of any kind...a serious moral instrument" ("MM" 278). She cites the compelling words of Leviticus 19, verse 34, where history becomes metaphor, and memory is raised to parable:

“The stranger that sojourneth with you shall be unto you as the homeborn among you, and you shall love him as yourself; because you were strangers in the land of Egypt” (279). Ozick states that “(w)ithout the metaphor of memory and history, we cannot imagine the life of the Other” (279). Metaphor also “transforms the strange into the familiar,” leading to “clarification and human conduct” (280-81). She continues:

Metaphor is compelled to press hard on language and storytelling.... Novels, those vessels of irony and connection, are nothing if not metaphors. The great novels transform experience into idea because it is the way of metaphor to transform memory into a principle of continuity. By “continuity” I mean nothing less than literary seriousness, which is unquestionably a branch of life-seriousness. (282)

Metaphors play a crucial role in *The Shawl*, where “the two stories are yoked by corresponding images, and unified by a commanding metaphor” (Kauvar 179). Rosa divides her life into three phases, with the Holocaust at the center: “Before is a dream. After is a joke. Only during stays. And to call it a life is a lie” (58). These three periods are consciously clearly separated but unconsciously fused by images. Before the war, her family belonged to Polish high society. In letters to Magda, she describes her old life as a Pole and her family’s sudden downfall into a ghetto with religious Jewish peasants. In postwar America, after demolishing her own secondhand furniture store in Brooklyn, Rosa was sent to Miami under the patronage of Stella. Because “real life” for Rosa is in old Poland, she feels her life is stolen and that she should have become a scientist, like Marie Curie, so that her daughter could have become a doctor or a professor. The comical style of “Rosa” portrays her current life as a joke. The “during” refers to her life in the concentration camp, which is never directly remembered but suddenly called back to Rosa’s mind like flashbacks. The images haunt her without the medium of language—the barbed wire terrifying her, the design of stripes disgusting her, and a butterfly that represents her dead daughter, Magda, constantly touching her soul. Rosa cannot forget the image of Magda, her small body thrown through the air toward the electrified fence by a German soldier. In Rosa’s reflection of that fleeting and horrifying image, Magda morphs into a butterfly and continues to appear in Rosa’s vision. The unspeakable horror of the concentration camp is captured through her five senses, and the figurative images lie deep in her, described indirectly through flashbacks and visions.¹

Another important metaphor in the story is the button. Rosa describes the everyday as “an ordinary button” and draws a metaphorical comparison of “an ordinary button” to Persky, who had run a factory producing notions, including buttons:

She considered Persky's life: how trivial it must always have been: buttons, himself no more significant than a button. It was plain he took her to be another button like himself, battered now and out of fashion, rolled into Florida. All of Miami Beach, a box for useless buttons! (55)

Rosa regards herself as anything but ordinary, so she wholeheartedly appreciates Persky when he invites her to drive to the library because she thinks "(h)e almost understands what she was: no ordinary button" (57).

The concept of "ordinary" is important in the interpretation of "Rosa," as it reflects the protagonist's perception of the surrounding world and her status there. In her letter to Magda, Rosa explains her family's situation in prewar Poland, telling her that "your father and I had the most ordinary lives—by 'ordinary' I mean respectable, gentle, cultivated"(43). In the ghetto, the most astounding thing was that the most ordinary streetcar, bumping along on the most ordinary trolley tracks, and carrying the most ordinary citizens going from one section of Warsaw to another, ran straight in to the place of our misery," carrying "all the sort of plain people of the working class with slovenly speech," who "were considered better than we, because no one regarded us as Poles anymore" (68). Those plain women on the tramcars had shopping sacks with green lettuce that left Rosa "aching for that leafy greenness" so much so that her salivary glands almost split. But now, in Miami, she laments that she has become "like the woman who held the lettuce in the tramcar" (69), relegated to an ordinary life because she is Jewish, unable to achieve her dream to become anything significant like a scientist.

What "ordinary" means to Rosa varies according to her situation. She idealizes the ordinary life that she and her fiancé led before the war, a life not considered ordinary by most. Rosa despairs that the most ordinary citizen on the most ordinary streetcar is just a plain member of the working class whom she condescends to, though the situation seemed enviable to her when she was struggling in the ghetto. "The woman who held the lettuce in the tramcar" symbolizes mediocrity to which Rosa used to feel superior. When she is ousted from high society into her current subhuman situation, however, even mediocrity seems bright.

Ozick explores the issue of the ordinary in her 1975 essay, "The Riddle of the Ordinary," by categorizing it into three phases and finally connecting it to Judaism. She argues that first, we do not always notice the Ordinary because it is around us all the time, and we often fail to take note of the status quo and the expected, rarely thinking of them as a gift (201). Ozick warns, however, that "it is sometimes extraordinarily dangerous to notice it" because we tend to be conscious of our own Ordinariness and feel more relief than gratitude, especially when we compare our lot with the extraordinary misfortune of others. She calls this consciousness of Ordinariness "the consciousness of exemption" (202). Third, noticing the Ordinary can be more dangerous in another way, through supreme aestheticism "making the Ordinary into the Extraordinary" (203). In this section, I examine the first two

aspects of the ordinary through Rosa's consciousness, and in the next section, I explore the third aspect in connection with idolatry.

Rosa's feeling toward the ordinary is complicated. She originally considers her family extraordinary and splendid; she and her family looked down at ordinary people. Just after she loses the life that she considered ordinary, the ordinary life of those who were exempted from the doom that befell the Jewish seems superb to her. Spared from death while watching her baby electrocuted before her very eyes, Rosa has been tormented by a sense of exemption, one that turns into guilt in postwar America. The woman with the lettuce in the tramcar represents the guilt she is afflicted with by being exempted from death in the concentration camp as well as the ordinariness that Rosa despises.

Ozick furthermore examines this concept through human behavior, especially in an extreme situation such as the Holocaust. In the prologue to *Rescuers: Portrait of Moral Courage in the Holocaust*, which is a record of rescuers during the Holocaust, Ozick categorizes those who were involved into three types: "criminal, victim, bystander" (xiv). Most ordinary people belong to the category of bystanders who are exempted from the disaster. Ozick, however, suggests another type of people, though their number is so small that it cannot be called a category: rescuers. Rescuers' behavior, that is, risking their lives to save others, is extraordinary. She quotes from an article written by the director of the Department for the Righteous at Yad Vashem to consider the nature of the ordinary through adducing extraordinary behavior by ordinary people. According to him, "we tend to 'search for some hidden motivation, some extraordinary explanation, for such peculiar behavior' of benefactors as heroes," while "(w)ittingly or not, together with Hobbes and Freud, we accept the proposition that man is essentially an aggressive being, bent on destruction, involved principally with himself, and only marginally interested in the needs of others..."(xv). He, however, questions that their benevolent and altruistic behavior is so outlandish and unusual that it needs the reasons to justify the motivation (xv). Ozick completely agrees with his question and infers, "it is the rescuers who are in possession of the reality of human nature, not the bystanders; it is the rescuers who are the ordinary human article," and "(t)hey are not to be considered 'extraordinary,' 'above the merely decent'"(xv).

Although it may be an overstatement to call Persky Rosa's rescuer, "his very ordinariness contains a grain of Jewish heroism, Persky's outlook of life—one is tempted to call it a philosophy—is based on his simple humanism," which in turn puts a high value on "moderation" (Lowin 115). Persky's wife is in a private hospital because of her mental condition, about which he says, "She mixed up that she's somebody else. Television stars. Movie actresses. Different people. Lately my cousin, Betty Bacall. It went to her head" (27). Her mental condition is similar to Rosa's; neither can accept what she is now, and both feel they should have been someone else. Persky's wife may also feel that her life is stolen for perhaps the same untenable reason as Rosa. Referring to the place where his wife is, Persky merely mentions the cost, "A private hospital, it don't cost me peanuts" (27). This sheds light on their

relationship—the husband who is too busy running his factory to take care of his wife or visit the hospital and the wife who has no one to understand or listen to her. The fact the he could, seemingly, not support his wife mentally could be a reason why he tries to understand Rosa, as if in atonement for his failure to save his wife. His kindness and courtesy to Rosa could be not only for her but also for his own redemption. As Ozick states, “Metaphor is the reciprocal agent, the universalizing force: it makes possible the power to envision the stranger’s heart” (“MM” 279). Here the metaphor of “a crazy woman whose life is stolen” awakes sympathy in Persky and gives him a chance to atone for his likely past sins.

Seeing her reflection in a cafeteria window, Rosa notices that her dress is missing a button. As Kauvar pointed out, citing Primo Levi’s memoir,² missing buttons can be a metaphor of “helplessness and vulnerability” of concentration camp victims. When Persky notices Rosa’s careless lack of a button on her dress, Rosa feels a sense of shame. Persky’s shrewd recognition of her missing button on the waist shows his scrupulous alertness to the most minute and quotidian detail, and this attention to such details leads to the third aspect of the ordinary, discussed in the next section.

4. Idolatry and Aestheticism

As stated above, the Ordinary has another aspect, one related to supreme aestheticism. Citing Henry James’ advice to “(b)e one of those upon whom nothing is lost” (James 66), Ozick urges us to notice the Ordinary as much as possible “for the sake of becoming sensitive, at every moment, to every moment, for the sake of making life as superlatively polished as the most sublime work of art” (“Riddle” 202-3). Ozick develops this idea of the Ordinary through a Victorian aesthete, the great experienter, Walter Pater, who claims, “Not the fruit of experience, but experience itself, is the end,” which means art “is first noticing, and then sanctifying, the Ordinary. It is making the Ordinary into the Extraordinary” (203).

Interestingly enough here, Ozick finds similarity between Pater’s aestheticism and the Jewish understanding of the Ordinary:

With David the King we say, “All that is in the heaven and the earth is thine,” meaning that it is all there for our wonder and our praise. “Be one of those upon whom nothing is lost”—James’s words, but the impulse that drives them is the same as the one enjoining the observant Jew (the word “observant” is exact) to bless the moments of this world at least one hundred times a day. One hundred times: but Ordinariness is more frequent than that, Ordinariness crowds the day, we swim in the sense of our dailiness; and yet there is a blessing for every separate experience of the Ordinary. (204-5)

Ozick explains that the Jews are not unlike artists in their efforts to have nothing lost on them, bringing

their minds and senses to bear on noticing the Ordinary. She claims, however, that artists are definitely different from Jews in that artists are idolators. An idol, Ozick states, is “anything that is allowed to come between ourselves and God” (“Riddle” 207). As Klingenstein points out, “toward the beginning of her career as a writer, she had infamously called art an ‘idol,’ a ‘product of the demonic yetzer ha-ra,’ which is the evil impulse or the unbridled imagination” (104). Ozick’s essays show that she was tackling this problem in approximately the same period as the one in which she was writing *The Shawl*.

Rosa is described as an idolator, and what comes between her and God is Magda’s shawl. Her way of cherishing it is called “trauma, fetish” by her niece Stella, who finds Rosa’s behavior distasteful. Stella writes about the shawl in a letter she sent to Rosa:

... Your idol is on its way, separate cover. Go on your knees to it if you want. You make yourself crazy, everyone thinks you’re a crazy woman.... You’re like those people in the Middle Ages who worshiped a piece of the true Cross, a splinter from some old outhouse as far as anybody knew, or else they fell down in front of a single hair supposed to be some saint’s. (31-32)

Rosa inherits her inclination to idolatry from her mother, who “wanted so much to convert” and “let the maid keep a statue of the Virgin and Child in the corner of the kitchen” (14). The image of the Virgin and Child inscribed upon Rosa is also incorporated in the formation of her identity as a mother. In a typical Ozick story, idol worship signifies moral transgression (Friedman 8).

Ozick, who takes idolatry seriously, claims, “The Commandment against idols is above all a Commandment against victimization, and behalf of pity” (“Literature as Idol” 190). She states:

In the absence of the Second Commandment, the hunt for victims begins. The Second Commandment is more explicit than the Sixth, which tells us simply that we must not kill; the Second Commandment tells us we must resist especially that killing which serves our belief. In this sense, there are no innocent idols. Every idol suppresses human pity; that is what it is made for. (190)

The shawl as an idol impedes Rosa from establishing relationships with others and from accepting her present life and the blessings in it. In contrast, Ozick describes older Jews in “Rosa” as so strenuous and vigorous that they forget “about impermanence” and believe “in the seamless continuity of the body” (28). To wit:

Little by little they were forgetting their grandchildren, their aging children. More and more they were growing significant to themselves.... Every table surface a mirror. In these mirrors the guests appeared to themselves as they used to be, powerful women of thirty, striving fathers of thirty-five. (29)

Persky adopts this approach, saying to Rosa, who is obsessed with the past and rejects the present, “Sometimes a little forgetting is necessary... if you want to get something out of life” (58). Victor Strandberg calls this attitude “the L’Chaim! Principle as a spontaneous philosophy of life” (149). Persky, who is an ordinary man, not an artist or hero, who fulfills his present life by paying close attention to the ordinary, can bring Rosa to the present.

5. Conclusion

At the end of the story, when Rosa is so fatigued by talking so unrelentingly to Magda that her consciousness dims, the phantom of Magda, a butterfly, turns away, almost disappearing. While Rosa is calling her back, the telephone rings to announce Persky’s arrival, and the vision of Magda completely vanishes. Because Magda is already turning away, Persky’s arrival and Rosa’s acceptance of it are not necessarily the cause of Magda’s disappearance. More important here is that the ring causes a kind of iconoclasm:

The shawled telephone, little grimy silent god, so long comatose—now, like Magda, animated at will, ardent with its cry. Rosa let it clamor once or twice and then heard the Cuban girl announce—oh, “announce”—Mr. Persky: should he come up or would she come down? A parody of a real hotel!—of, in fact, the MARIE LOUISE, with its fountains, its golden thrones, its thorned wire, its burning Tree!

“He’s used to crazy women, so let him come up,” Rosa told the Cuban. (70)

The shawl evokes the vision of Magda, cutting through the conversation between Rosa and her niece Stella on the phone, and transforms the phone into a kind of god. The ring breaks off with the visionary retrospective world apotheosizing the shawl; it can be considered iconoclasm.

Rosa here identifies herself as one of the “crazy women,” not as a “refugee,” “survivor,” “woman,” “human being,” or “mother.” The two metaphors of a “crazy woman whose life is stolen” and an “ordinary button” bind Rosa and Persky and raise the possibility of a reciprocal relationship. Reciprocity through imagination can bring about redemption. Ozick believes that long-lasting literature should show a promise of redemption (“Innovation and Redemption” 245). Redemption means “fluidity; the notion that people and things are subject to willed alteration; the sense of possibility; of turning away from, or turning toward; of deliverance; the sense that we act for ourselves rather than are acted upon” (245-46). Rosa’s way of thinking, fixed by prejudices and stereotypes, has not changed in the text. Ozick, in an interview, categorizes Rosa with the universalists who “have not really understood that the moral life has ‘a habitation and a name,’” and states:

All the Jews that died rend our hearts, our sense of mercy and of justice.... But I think the Jews who went to their deaths not knowing why, but knowing the meaning of their lives as Jews, were in some sense more redeemed in the eyes of history than those who went with a sense of mistaken identity. (Bernstein 14)

Rosa's desperate isolation can be regarded as one of the expressions of Ozick's judgment on Rosa's rejection of her Jewish identity and her inclination to idolatry. Ozick, however, keeps open the possibility of redemption in Rosa's reciprocity with Persky and makes the story liturgical—a New Yiddish literature.

Notes

1. In my former article, "Imagination for the Unspeakable: Figurative Representations in 'The Shawl,'" I analyzed poetic images in "The Shawl."
2. Kauvar states, citing Levi, "(p)art of the hell of Auschwitz, Primo Levi observed, had to do with the 'infinite and senseless' rites of the camp such as the 'control of buttons on one's jacket, which had to be five'" (29). He goes on to say, "The absence of buttons becomes a sign of the helplessness and vulnerability of those who were forced to leave the camp's infirmary, 'naked and almost always insufficiently cured'" (187).

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Cynthia Ozick's Attempt toward "New Yiddish Literature"

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Abstract

Jewish identity is very complicated because of their history, religion and the Diaspora. The situation is more intricate for survivors who have to immigrate into another country after the Holocaust though they succeed in assimilating into their original society. Cynthia Ozick explores the identity and redemption of an assimilated intellectual Jewish Pole who is imposed a Jewish identity by the Nazis though she disdains and rejects everything Jewish, and leads an isolated life in postwar America in *The Shawl*. This paper aims to regard *The Shawl* as an attempt at "New Yiddish Literature" that Ozick proposes in her essays written at roughly the same time as the work.

Key words: Cynthia Ozick, Jewish identity, Yiddish, Holocaust, *The Shawl*