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Between Nostalgia and Self-Hatred: The Problem of Identity in Cynthia Ozick's *The Shawl*

Abstract: Drawing on theoretical works by Stuart E. Rosenberg, Sander L. Gilman and Svetlana Boym, the article reconsiders Cynthia Ozick's diptych *The Shawl* as an instance of narrative that problematizes the notion of Jewishness in the twentieth century in the USA and pre-WW II Poland. It is argued that the key concepts of nostalgia and self-hatred offer a new perspective on the interpretation of a text that for almost forty years has been treated as a staple work in the cannon of American Holocaust fiction.

Keywords: American Jewish identity, assimilation, the Holocaust, nostalgia, Jewish self-hatred

In the present article I argue that the concepts of nostalgia and self-hatred offer so-far-poorly explored interpretive keys to Cynthia Ozick's *The Shawl*, the diptych about Rosa Lublin, "a madwoman and a scavenger" (13), that since its publication has attracted huge interest from commentators and literary critics, and whose secure status as a staple work in the canon of American Holocaust fiction is not questioned today. Particularly, it is my intention to demonstrate that the workings of nostalgia and self-hatred (the former sentiment being at the same time re-invigorating and deleterious, soothing and infuriating) are represented in Ozick's short narrative as originating from three distinct, yet not always unrelated sources: from the yearning for the time before the trauma of the Holocaust, the incident of rape and the death of Rosa's child, and—notably—from the confusion concerning her ethnic identity. As the last element on this list has been, in my opinion, notoriously misread and unnecessarily turned into a didactic/moralizing agenda by Jewish-American literary critics, it is given due prominence in my analysis so as to suggest yet another interpretation of *The Shawl* and, perhaps, to slightly weaken the book's rigid classification as a Holocaust text *per se*. Although prompted and inspired both by Svetlana Boym's reconsideration of nostalgia and Sander L. Gilman's seminal study of the notion of Jewish self-hatred, my interpretive strategy is not dogmatically restricted to any specific theoretical perspective—instead, it entails taking issue with the arguments advanced in selected criticism on Ozick's prose, and, more importantly, it encompasses a brief sketch of the situation of Jews in the USA in the twentieth century and Polish Jews in pre-WW II Poland as necessary contextual prerequisites to understanding the predicament of the exiled Holocaust survivor depicted in *The Shawl*, in particular her conflicted identity.

Throughout history, the bonds or even elected affinities between Jews and America have sometimes assumed truly curious forms. They have entailed, as Michael P. Kramer has it, "the various ways Jews in America tried to make sense of America's place in Jewish history and the place of the Jews in America" (16). If we regard both cultural traditions together, we may note that to a certain extent they are informed by exactly opposite tendencies. Namely, while the history of the United States, especially from the late eighteenth to the early nineteenth century, reveals at its core consistent efforts to estrange the fledgling nation and its culture from the enslaving bonds with the Old World, Jewish tradition—a portable homeland—equally strongly revolves around the issue of continuity, and advocates the preservation of links with the past. Apparently then, the mindset prevailing in America in the period under consideration did not provide conducive circumstances for the development of Jewish communities in so rigid a form as was possible, say, in pre-WW II Poland. The point of the alleged convergence between the history of America and the history of diasporic Jews is symbolically encapsulated and arbitrarily interpreted in Emma Lazarus' sonnet "1492":

> Thou two-faced year, Mother of Change and Fate,
> Didst weep when Spain cast forth with flaming sword,
> The children of the prophets of the Lord,
> Prince, priest, and people, spurned by zealot hate.
> Hounded from sea to sea, from state to state,
> The West refused them, and the East abhorred.
> No anchorage the known world could afford,
> Close-locked was every port, barred every gate.
> Then smiling, thou unveil'dst, O two-faced year,
> A virgin world where doors of sunset part,
> Saying, "Ho, all who weary, enter here!
> There falls each ancient barrier that the art
> Of race or creed or rank devised, to rear
> Grim bulwarked hatred between heart and heart! (Lazarus)

In 1492, after the long-awaited re-conquest of Muslim Iberia by Christian kingdoms, the Alhambra Decree ultimately sanctioned hostility against Jews who had been living in enclaves in Muslim Iberian cities, ordering them to leave the territories of the Kingdoms of Castile and Aragon. Emma Lazarus, herself a descendant of Sephardic Jews, elaborates on this coincidence between the expulsion of her ancestors and the discovery of America. In a powerful rhetorical gesture, the plight of perennial outcasts and the emergence of what was soon to become a desired haven for immigrants are locked in a seemingly necessary correlation ordained by Fate. Thus, the poet re-makes American mythology as being marked by the Jewish spirit—the tale of American origins begins with Jews. Lazarus' thinking is by no means unique. Displaying an analogical mindset, Mordecai Manuel Noah (1785–1865), a diplomat, journalist, playwright, and a significant figure in nineteenth-century

Jewish American history, who is remembered as of one the first Jewish dramatists in America (authoring *She Would Be a Soldier* in 1819), became famous for his utopian, visionary project that anticipated modern Zionism. Deeply convinced that America was not a place of exile like any other but one destined as a milestone on the way to reaching the promised land, he attempted to purchase Grand Island in the Niagara River, near Buffalo, as an autonomous territory for Jews who wished to be later relocated to Palestine. Making use of the associations his surname evoked, he called the planned colony "Ararat." Even his "ambitious" research into the origins of the American Indians—a truly outstanding instance of utterly misdirected efforts, flamboyantly entitled *Discourse on the Evidences of the American Indians Being the Descendants of the Lost Tribes of Israel* (1837)—stemmed from his "best" intentions to highlight links between American and Jewish history.

The doubleness inscribed in the fact of being an American Jew finds illustrative expression in the architectural design of Touro Synagogue, the oldest synagogue building still standing in the United States, and the oldest surviving Jewish synagogue building in North America. It neatly conveys the Jewish sense of vulnerability. Namely, it looks like a simple colonial building, not displaying any religious symbols, and a passer-by would not presume it a sacred space. You are a Jew inside the premises, an American when you leave it. But sometimes the sense of the vulnerability of Jews in America would give way to the desire of newcomers (or of descendants of newcomers) to appropriate (and even discursively conquer) the host culture. One of the most profound (and radical) formulations of the "sense of America's place in Jewish history and the place of the Jews in America" came in 1916 from Louis Brandeis, an Associate Justice on the US Supreme Court, who—himself a Zionist—propagated the idea of perceiving Palestine as the *extension* of the American Dream.

The question of whether, after several generations on the American soil, American Jews have retained any fixed identity and ethnic/cultural distinctiveness may appear unacceptably reductive in its implied attempt to squeeze a natural "richness" into a clear-cut, all-encompassing formula. The problem's complexity stems from the fact that Jews, being proverbial "wanderers," were historically fated to operate (in a significant part) in a diasporic context, as well as from the very nature of America itself—a melting pot of nations, where, for the Ashkenazi and the Sephardic, cultural patterns of adaptability were understood differently than in Europe, and where practically every newcomer was confronted with the monolithic cultural hegemony hidden in the federalist motto "E Pluribus Unum." Nevertheless, if we take into consideration, for example, the historical and contemporary notions of American Jewishness within American society, as well as the fields of Jewish American Studies, or Jewish American Culture and Literature within the world of academia, it turns out that they are still spaces of definable processes and phenomena, of exploration, and of constantly updated critical reflection.

In 1985, Stuart E. Rosenberg made a fundamental distinction between two variants of American Jewish identity, or better: the two most prevalent ways of

defining the term, which were noticeable throughout the twentieth century (ix-xiv). The "classical" definition, which was inspired by the observations of the sociologist Seymour M. Lipset, and which—allegedly—remained valid until the 1960s, assumes that while in America Jews were driven by the conscious or unconscious wish to be accommodated within the host society and culture; therefore, in most individual and group cases, their behavior was subordinated to the principle "the less Jewish, the more American." Particularly, the "classical" view recognizes the strength of institutional pressure—most palpable at the dawn of the previous century—to turn the USA into an undifferentiated culture, i.e. *without* subgroup loyalty and *with* a universal educational system). In 1894, Theodore Roosevelt had no doubts whatsoever that

> the man who does not become Americanized nevertheless fails to remain a European, and becomes nothing at all. The immigrant cannot possibly remain what he was, or continue to be a member of the Old-World society. If he tries to retain his old language, in a few generations it becomes a barbarous jargon; if he tries to retain his old customs and ways of life, in a few generations he becomes an uncouth boor. ("True Americanism")

Consequently, the notion of "Americanization" was prevalent in the media and public, political, and social discourse at the turn of the nineteenth century and during the following decades, when immigration was a serious social issue in the USA. The contention that emerged as a result was one between the "eugenics" argument and the "ethical obligation" to welcome immigrants. Later, and not without significance, was the impact of the radical left in the 1930s, which would take it for granted that all language, ethnic and religious barriers within American society were of lesser importance than the differentiations of social and economic class. Rosenberg sees the aforementioned "survivalist" attitude as no longer applicable.

The beginnings of the second, "new," formulation of Jewish American identity date back to the 1970s, i.e. to the time after the Vietnam war, and, perhaps more importantly, after the trailblazing rise of "Black Power," which liberated the notion of *any* ethnicity from the apparently unavoidable associations with ghettoization and self-enclaving subgroups. At a time when America's political greatness was seriously undermined, the model of centralized national patriotism (or citizenry) was gradually giving way to a new organizing pattern for a nation that had finally recognized itself as comprising numerous self-interested minorities. This "new" understanding of American Jewish identity sees the process of adaptation as dynamic and diverse, taking into account those elements of the host culture that over the years were accepted at face value, ignored, rebelled against, or transformed in the process. Particularly, the strategies of resistance and transvaluation may be instrumental in understanding the integrity of those Jews in America, who developed an ability to assimilate partly and, in consequence, to operate in two cultural spaces simultaneously.

The above, out of necessity sketchy, treatment of the way the notion of Jewishness developed (or, perhaps, the way it was looked at) in America in the twentieth century can be extrapolated as a springboard for a much more general reflection on the problem at hand. As I argue below, in the context of diaspora, Jewishness can often be seen as a rather cloudy identity label, defying as it does the rigid pigeonholes of ethnicity, religion, or culture. To exemplify the constructed nature of the term, I choose a piece of fiction (rather than a theoretical purview), which, in my opinion, synecdochically merges American and Eastern-European perspectives considered historically.

Published in book form in 1989 (the two stories comprising the slim volume appeared originally in *The New Yorker* in 1980 and 1983, respectively), Cynthia Ozick's *The Shawl* is a notable text in the history of American Holocaust fiction for at least two reasons: it introduces a female narrative perspective and, more importantly, brings up the issue of rape as part of the Holocaust tribulations. As Helene Sinnreich notes, forced prostitution and other forms of sexual abuse against Jewish women in the 1940s still constitute at most a marginal part of historical reflection (1). The official Nazi policy and propaganda codified a series of legal barriers that rendered close bonds between Jews and subjects of the Reich prohibited on penalty of hard labor. Introduced in 1935, the Law for the Protection of German Blood and German Honor excluded the mixing of races through marriage, cohabitation, sexual relations and procreation. Theoretically then, Jewish women, considered as sub-humans, could not have been perceived as targets of sexual assault. There exists, however, a substantial body of evidence that wartime rape was a common occurrence, often committed in a planned way and on a large scale. Sexual exploitation was carried out in the Łódź ghetto; Jewish councils were asked to supply Jewish girls for German brothels in Warsaw and Vilnius; sexual orgies were almost a routine in a labor camp in Skarżysko-Kamienna and even in some concentration camps (Sinnreich 8-15). The problem had remained seriously under-explored for decades due to a certain gender prejudice in the field of Holocaust studies: it was assumed that letting "gendered histories" into a much broader historical narrative of the genocide would unnecessarily belittle the fact that the Nazi persecutions were directed at all the people of Jewish descent. Instances of rape had long been perceived as personal (and casual) experiences rather than part of the collective ordeal caused by a methodically applied plan of extermination. Not without significance was also the fact that an act of sexual aggression often plunges the victim into a state of overwhelming disgrace and leads to self-censorship. The raped women were often killed immediately after the assault, and those who survived often found themselves either unable to talk about the experience or stigmatized by family members. As a consequence, until the late 1990s Holocaust historiography and literature was marked by a predominantly male perspective, and sex crimes committed against Jewish women were often left out of the "standard" repertoire of victimization: mass murder in death camps, enforced labor and physical abuse in concentration camps, starvation in ghettos (Sinnreich 3-4). In the early 1980s, by deciding to focalize her narrative by a female Holocaust

survivor, Ozick contributed to the then-modest genre of women's Holocaust fiction, of which the most important and representative instances were Norma Rosen's *Touching Evil* (1969) and Susan Schaeffer's *Anya* (1974).

The Shawl unfolds in the settings of four different locations on both sides of the Atlantic—in Warsaw, in an unidentified Nazi concentration camp, in New York City, and in Miami, and assumes at least three time perspectives: the 1930s, the 1940s and the 1970s. And the choice of this narrative geography tellingly, succinctly and symbolically encapsulates the fate and predicament of the Jewry in the twentieth century. The doubleness of the protagonist, i.e. her (apparently) dual identity, is commensurate with the structure of the narrative, which ostensibly draws on number *two* as its fundamental building unit, doubling and pairing as it does places situations, images and emotions. The settings are meant to be as representative as possible—one of the old centers of Yiddish culture (Warsaw), two major cores of the Jewish population living outside Israel (Miami and New York), and a place synecdochically standing for the disappearance of millions (the Nazi camp). The meaningful Jewish geography is also inscribed into the surname of the protagonist, "Lublin," a Polish town with a long tradition of Jewish presence (over 60% of the population in the middle of the nineteenth century), often called "the Jewish Oxford," as its once-famous yeshiva center attracted students from all over Europe, but also the site of *Wohngebiet der Juden*, the infamous ghetto, from which in 1942 30,000 people were deported to the Belzec extermination camp.

Rosa Lublin comes from a fully assimilated Jewish family, and the high social status of her parents, who consider themselves Poles "by right," is consistently and strongly emphasized in the narrative—her father is the General Director of the Bank of Warsaw, and her mother is a poetry lover, "almost Japanese in her… refinement" (66). They are the owners of a four-floor house, the rooms of which are virtually crammed with thousands of books in various languages. "Cultivation, old civilization, beauty, history!" (66) permeate the place. Years after the war, the depiction of pre-war Poland that emerges from Rosa's nostalgic letters written in America in the 1970s makes it clear that she perceives her present life as a fiasco, a poor shadow of the one that had been "stolen" by the Nazis. The picture of Warsaw, for instance, is invariably saturated with a quasi-Edenic ambience, and seen through the lenses of nostalgia assumes, especially in the eyes of the Polish reader, the quality of an unreal city fused with an idyllic countryside: "Surprising turnings of the streets, shapes of venerable cottages, lovely aged eaves, unexpected and gossamer turrets, steeples, the gloss, the antiquity! Whoever speaks of Paris has never seen Warsaw" (21).

This devoted veneration of Polish culture is accompanied by a virtual cult of the Polish language—the only one Rosa feels at home in, both before the war and during her disgraceful (as she herself sees it) stay in America. Accordingly, switching into Polish is always the moment of being subject to a curative treatment in times of utmost despair, "An immersion into the living language: all at once this cleanliness, this capacity, this power to make a history, to tell, to explain. To retrieve,

to reprieve! To lie" (44). It is, however, interesting to note that while this fragment is evidently part of the protagonist's interior monologue, the narrative status of the last verb is not certain. We are not sure who adds the last problematic and contradictory verb ("to lie"), whether it is Rosa, or, perhaps, the omniscient narrator. Undoubtedly, however, the use of the Polish language seems to temporarily liberate Rosa from the oppressive context of her American exile, removing a "lock… from the tongue" (44) and triggering the working of nostalgia that, so is the implication, pushes the woman's thoughts into the regions of fabrication and mendacity.

In Ozick's narrative, the apparently marginal, almost accidental and insignificant mention of Julian Tuwim as an exemplary Polish man of letters and the embodiment of stylistic refinement in the Polish language—although absolutely agreeable in terms of the proposed valuation—produces a subtle overtone and ironically undercuts Rosa's nostalgic euphoria. The woman identifies herself as an able, fluent and competent user of Polish—indeed, the model reader of the admired poet's words: "In school she read Tuwim: such delicacy, such loftiness, such *Polishness*" (20). But the ironic seasoning that tinges this sentence hides in the fact that Tuwim, the allegedly quintessentially Polish writer, was an assimilated Jew with Polish citizenship. In the interwar period, he—an ardent supporter of Jewish assimilation—had to cope with anti-Semitic attacks, and as a dual individual who struggled with his problematic identity, was doomed to remain in the sphere of cultural "betweeness." Still, as a leading figure of "Skamander," a group of experimental poets, he managed to make it to the top, becoming a celebrity, and all his poems, songs, librettos and sketches were written in flawless, highly innovative Polish. (Admittedly, writers of Jewish origin significantly contributed to the radical modernization of the Polish literary idiom in the first decades of the twentieth century, e.g. Bolesław Leśmian's and Bruno Schulz's verbal dexterities have remained virtually unrivalled to date.) Similarly to the fictional Rosa, Tuwim experienced exile and became incurably nostalgic. In 1939, soon after the German invasion, he left Poland to live in Rio de Janeiro and New York City, where he composed his *Kwiaty polskie* (*Polish Flowers*), a long poem with a strong iambic rhythm (quite a feat in the poet's adopted mother tongue), which brims over with yearnings for the native land of long-gone childhood. Thus, Rosa's exalted yearnings for quintessential "Polishness" and her admiration of Tuwim keep her still—whether she is conscious of it or not—in the orbit of (hidden but still accompanying) Jewishness. The devotion to Polish is sharply contrasted with a manifest contempt toward Yiddish, which she soaks up in her childhood: "[h]er father, like her mother, mocked at Yiddish" (21). Accordingly, one of the streets of pre-war Warsaw emerges from her memories as a place of off-putting otherness: "bitter ancient alley, dense with stalls, cheap clothes strung on outdoor racks, signs in jargoned Yiddish" (20). That certainly is *not* the Warsaw of those who, like the family of Lublin, strive for "aristocratic sensibility" (21). Rosa and her parents manifest their fears of marginalization, probably shared by other assimilated Jews of pre-war Poland, and of being considered outsiders among the "rightful" inheritors of Polish culture.

What is conspicuous by its absence in *The Shawl*, particularly from the point of view of the Polish reader, is the fact that there is no mention of the waves of anti-Semitic feelings and attitudes that swept through Poland in the interwar period. The whole complexity of Polish-Jewish relations within the borders of one shared state is locked in the irony of the laconic conviction that "[i]n Poland there used to be justice" (43). Yet, as is commonly known, the "Jewish question" was an important and galvanizing issue at the time Poland regained its political independence. The citizens of Jewish origin "were still the main Other… but this otherness was no longer primarily religious or caste-based or even cultural. Instead, it had become political and ideological" (Hoffman 169). The 1921 national census recorded almost 3 million Jews, which was approximately10.5% of the whole population (Zamojski 85). But although they were, like all other non-Polish minority groups, officially guaranteed protection by the "Little Treaty of Versailles," the law was not efficient and later, after the death of Piłsudski, became purely superficial. Various forms of discrimination included those related to language matters:

> A 1927 law requiring artisans to pass a formal examination of technical competence laid down that their proficiency in the Polish language be tested as well. The law confronted them with an obstacle that relatively few among them were in a position to overcome and did nothing in practice to accelerate the spread of the Polish language in the Jewish population, a natural process that needed no formal machinery to promote it. (Vital 769)

An overtly anti-Semitic agenda was espoused by the right-wing National Democracy, according to whom Jewishness was not merely foreign but intrinsically inimical to the so-called Polish spirit, and the separation of Jews in the domain of Polish culture was further strengthened by the policy of *numerous clausus*, by means of which the number of Jewish students at Polish universities was kept at the desired, i.e. low level.

Shown in the book as an unlikable character, Rosa is a self-hating Jew and an anti-Zionist, whose obsessive dedication to becoming an integral part of Polish society is brutally thwarted by the Nazi occupation, confinement in the ghetto and, later, in a concentration camp. In October 1940, all the Jews in Warsaw and its suburbs are ordered to relocate into a walled area. Soon, the Warsaw Ghetto, initially covering 3.5 square km, has to accommodate about 400,000 inhabitants. For the Lublin family that is the end of their long-cherished social and class status they were so proud of. The necessity of wearing brassards with the yellow Star of David, a visible sign—a brand—of belonging to the despised ethnic group, and life in a shared squalid room lead to outrage and disgust:

> [I]magine confining *us* with teeming Mockowiczes and Rabinowiczes and Perskys and Finkelsteins, with all their bed-smelling grandfathers and their hordes of feeble children!…. We thought they didn't know how to organize themselves in adversity, and besides that, we were furious:

> because the same sort of adversity was happening to *us*… we were furious because we had to be billeted with such a class, with all these Jew peasants worn out from their rituals and superstitions, phylacteries on their foreheads sticking up so stupidly, like unicorn horns, every morning. And in the most repulsive slum, deep in slops and vermin and a toilet not fit for the lowest criminal. (66-67)

However, even within the confines of the walls there regularly appears a visible reminder of their former life—a streetcar meant for Poles commuting through the ghetto. The exceptional character of this transit line lies in the fact that it trespasses the forbidden area within which a special permit is required. A means of public transport arrives from *beyond*, from the other world, highlights the situation of "separateness," and underlines an important spatial context for the story: "The most astounding thing was that the most ordinary streetcar, bumping along on the most ordinary trolley tracks, and carrying the ordinary citizens going from one section to another, ran straight into the place of our misery. Every day, and several times a day, we had these witnesses" (68). The repetition of "ordinary" is obsessive. Rosa, a by-stander, a hopeless observer, a vicarious Pole, is cut off from the sphere of the "ordinary" by the force of the Nazi decree. Significantly, one figure behind the window fliting by catches her attention for a while: it is a woman holding a shopping bag with a head of lettuce sticking out of the top. For a brief moment, Rosa becomes "the woman with the lettuce" (69). The sentiment is fueled not only by—understandable in such a situation—physical hunger, but also by a painful nostalgia for her stolen identity. It can be argued, as Gilman (1) does, that considered historically, Jewish self-hatred, i.e. reluctance to openly manifest one's Jewishness, was an effect of anti-Semitism—the most flabbergasting and extreme reaction of some of the members of Jewish diasporic communities to the hostility surrounding them. This paradoxical phenomenon can be explained in psychological and social terms as occurring between any minority (outsiders) living within a dominating group (insiders). "Self-hatred results from outsiders' acceptance of the mirage of themselves generated by their reference group—that group in society which they see as defining them—as reality" (Gilman 2). In a situation of sanctioned persecution, members of the downtrodden community can develop a somewhat *schizophrenic* strategy that consists in recognizing exclusionary practices and offensive labels as justified, but only if applied to a certain group *within* the oppressed. This, in turn, establishes the degrees of being stigmatized; there were, for instance, different kinds of Jews in pre-war Poland: more or less orthodox, more or less assimilated, and more or less alienated from Polish culture. Apparently, in Ozick's prose, the stigmatization of Polish Jews leads to Rosa's re-writing of the family history by hiding all possible Semitic traces in the customs and tastes of the family members, and by the cultivated habit of frowning upon everything that is associated with Jewishness. At the same time, however, the Lublin family's hatred of Jews (or, in fact, their self-hatred) is not fully explored in the novella, and it remains unclear whether the sentiment is a psychological defense mechanism developed in a hostile surrounding, or whether

it results from the family having naturally merged into the fabric of Polish society, culture and language.

Before deportation to a concentration camp, Rosa is raped (apparently in a brothel for Nazi officers) and conceives a child, Magda. Wrapped in the eponymous "shawl," the baby accompanies her mother behind the barbed wire, where as a substitute for nourishment, desperately trying to placate the baby's hunger, Rosa gives her the linen shawl to chew on. In what Lawrence L. Langer refers to as the "Ur-moment" of the narrative (142), a concentration camp guard kills Magda by forcefully hitting her against the electrified fence. The witnessing of the killing is rendered against a backdrop of silence: "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" (10). The mother's reaction is reduced to silence, which from now on is inextricably woven into Rosa's trauma. Thus, trauma and silence begin to dominate the woman's ability to articulate anguish. What remains is the shawl, which is kept for years to come, sacrilegiously worshipped like a relic, and functioning in the second part of the story like the Proustian madeleine that summons up the past. Significantly, while the fact of the rape is never subject to a *total* conscious suppression ("I was forced by a German, it's true, and more than once, but I was too sick to conceive"; 43), the identity of the supposed father is consistently altered. (Years later, in a letter written to her dead child, whom she obsessively imagines to be still alive, Rosa claims that the man's name was Andrzej.) The eponymous object in Ozick's narrative generates an additional (presumably intended) set of significances in the context of the protagonist's ethnicity. Providing warmth and faking a mother's teat do not exhaust the scope of its functions. Neither is it a mere physical reminder of the lost child. Beyond practicality there lurks a strong cultural value. The book is, after all, also a reflection on the confused Jewish identity. Apart from being a visible sign that the person wearing it enters the sphere of a ritual, the tallit, a shawl traditionally worn while attending Jewish morning or evening prayer, connotes the fact of belonging to a particular ethnic and religious tradition (irrespective of the fact that tallits are worn by men). The piece of material that envelopes Magda is in all probability not a tallit, but if considered in purely figurative terms, and if the association between these two is assumed as meaningful in the context of the narrative (as it may be by an interpreter), the shawl—which as the title word controls and unifies all the elements of the narrative—can also be seen as a metaphor of the suppressed (i.e. as a tallit desacralized, with the tradition *truncated* from it).

Putting aside Svetlana Boym's detailed taxonomy of nostalgia (notably, her fundamental distinction between so-called "restorative" and "reflective" nostalgia) as reaching far beyond the confines of my consideration of Ozick's narrative, I reference more general parameters of the key concept, which point to the sentiments of "loss and displacement," "a romance with one's own fantasy" as well as the "cinematic image of nostalgia" as a "superimposition of two images—of home and abroad, of

past and present, of dream and everyday life" (Boym 7). Yet this morphological mapping of nostalgia transferred and applied to the analysis of *The Shawl*, I argue, is incomplete when considered separately from the deliberate or semi-conscious confusion concerning one's identity (notably self-hatred) and trauma seen as the trigger that keeps "reloading" the triple engine of "nostalgic" nightmares, lies and fantasies that the story of the Holocaust survivor exemplifies. Much as Boym's notion of nostalgia, perceived by her as the symptom of the twentieth century, is correlated with a "new understanding of time" (8), *The Shawl*'s protagonist's nostalgia is, at least to a certain extent, the outcome of the suppression of her ethnic roots and a manifestation of her rebellion against the workings of irreversible history. The sentiment develops alongside trauma, is kept alive, and feeds on "the relationship between individual biography and the biography of groups or nations, between personal and collective memory" (Boym 9). Still, its unique character grows mainly on Rosa's inability to come to terms with her ethnic origin.

Strangely, Rosa's nostalgia for pre-war Poland and her life as a fully assimilated Jew in Polish society is often interpreted by American critics as misdirected. Victor Strandberg, for instance, has no doubts whatsoever that the woman "has no cultural strength to draw upon in the face of her two Holocaust-caused obsessions: her death consciousness and her propensity to live in fantasy rather in reality" (149). The assertion takes it for granted that the experience of the concentration camp can be overcome. In *The Shawl* nostalgia is a defense mechanism against the working of trauma; its target, however, remains beyond control. And this is done in order to demonstrate that a consciously controlled variation of this disposition does not exist. Somehow paradoxically, Ozick's story of re-locations and dis-locations, of enforced and self-imposed labels, of being "unconnected" (47), seems to defy its rigid and common classification as *merely* Holocaust fiction. While it is justified to claim, as Strandberg does, that the book's central preoccupation is "the annihilation of… [the] protagonist's Jewishness under the pressures of… urgent claims of identity" (139), the fact that before the war she consciously chose to define herself as a Pole cannot be neglected, or, as some American critics tend to do, deemphasized. The story may apparently be read as a statement of disapproval of the idea of assimilation (which, nevertheless, *was* the fact of life among some of the Polish Jews), even to the point of implying that Rosa's *real* tragedy took place before the Holocaust, namely when she turned her back on her ethnic origins. Nevertheless, as Ozick has her protagonist stubbornly assert, "you can be a Jew if you like, or a Gentile, it's up to you. You have a legacy of choice, and they say choice is the only true freedom" (43). Therefore, any strong suggestion that only a return to one's Jewish roots brings health appears somewhat risky and unconvincing.

For reasons that are understandable (and obvious), it is tempting to locate Rosa's case in the "conventional therapeutic paradigm of illness and recovery" (Langer 142). The experience of the death camp and the murder of her daughter, Magda, cage the survivor mother in a forever haunting, traumatic memory; what the second part of the diptych unfolds may, theoretically, be read as a painful process

of her coming to terms with the fact that the past loss is irredeemable. Such a trivial recognition, however, does not, in any satisfactory way, render the subtlety of Ozick's narrative. In his critical evaluation of *The Shawl* (in a manner typical of him), Langer points to the insufficiency of the fiction mode to adequately render Holocaust experience, reminding us that "[w]hen ardor of art trespasses on the misery of mere experience, it prods consciousness to enter the richer domain of imagination" (143). This is certainly a relevant and obvious point when it comes to a story which has an almost fairy-tale-like quality in the language and atrocious imagery it features (especially in its first part, "The Shawl"). And, therefore, instead of pursuing the all-too-well recognized dilemmas of representation of Holocaust experience, Langer proposes to read Ozick's prose as a very informative investigation into an intricate set of language traps, which all the main characters of *The Shawl* are implicated in. It can, therefore, be argued that at its most rudimentary level, Ozick's two-part novella illustrates different processes of narrativizing trauma, in which language constantly oscillates between the "myth" of experience (understood as a mental and discursive strategy that makes it possible for us to bear the unbearable, or to understand the incomprehensible) and the "truth" of experience (treated as an ideal notion—hardly attainable, but discursively useful). One of the instances of the "outside" narrative at its most severe is the very beginning of the second part of the book ("Rosa"), which emulates the language of tabloids, with their characteristically strong, arbitrary vocabulary: "Rosa Lublin, a madwoman and scavenger, gave up her store—she smashed it up herself—and moved to Miami" (13). Further on, the tragedy of the protagonist is synecdochically, and literally, reduced to a newspaper headline: "WOMAN AXES HER OWN BIZ" (18). Besides, and even more importantly, Rosa is constantly subject to analogical "outside" narrativization in her intimate relations. This can be best exemplified by her exchange with Persky, a Polish Jew who was not affected by the Holocaust as he managed to make it to America before the war even started:

> 'For everything there's a bad way of describing, also a good way. You pick the good way, you get along better.'
> 'I don't like to give myself lies,' Rosa said.
> 'Life is short, we all got to lie[.]' (56)

The attempt to reach a level of empathy that would enable at least *some* understanding of the scale of the survivor's tragedy consists here in juggling catchy clichés, which certainly sustains a difficult dialogue but misses the core of Rosa's problem. The language of cheap consolation, even when used with good intentions, is demonstrated by Ozick as a mere overlay, which does not contribute to the healing of a still-fresh psychological wound. But the irony of the whole situation is further complicated by the simultaneous workings of what can be referred to as "inside" narrativization, whereby a compulsive liar—whether fully consciously or not—tries to pass as a person hating lies.

Rosenberg's two theoretical proposals (or theses, as he calls them), the "accommodationist" and the "compartmentalist" (x, xi), which I recall at the beginning of my discussion, seem insufficient to define either American Jewish or Polish Jewish identity in the twentieth century. They do not give appropriate weight to the significance of the occasional ebbs and flows of American and Polish anti-Semitism; do not recognize the importance of Holocaust experience in the process of identity formation; and finally, do not take into serious consideration the phenomenon of Jewish self-hatred. Having said this, I do not intend to place an equals sign between the manifestations of Jewish diasporic identity on both sides of the Atlantic—to claim so would be a gross simplification. Nevertheless, the two identities can be investigated with the use of the same (or analogical) variables. Ozick's *The Shawl*—the literary text analyzed here as an apt illustration of the problem—brings together all the above-mentioned factors, thus providing an interesting, albeit unobvious, perspective. In general, the identity of Jews both in America and in pre-war Poland is unavoidably related to their identification, but the two terms do not overlap. While the latter conveys the act of naming, labeling, and pigeonholing others so as to dispel the mist of their strangeness (referring to appearances and arising from the way one is perceived by others, which assumes the form of "outsider" narrativization), identity is an inner experience of self, more elusive, opaque and therefore not easily definable/describable in unequivocal terms.

As it seems, apart from being both a canonical literary reflection on Holocaust trauma and an example of the relatively poorly represented female perspective on Holocaust experience, *The Shawl* strengthens Hana Wirth-Nesher's strong conviction about "the impossibility of arriving at a universally acceptable definition of who is a Jew" (3) in the context of diaspora. In Ozick's narrative it is history, not one's sense of true belonging, that arbitrary (re)classifies one's ethnicity and identification. Understood paradigmatically, the case of Rosa demonstrates how in the twentieth century Jewishness (or perhaps it would be better to coin the term "post-Jewishness") was formed in specific cultural and historical circumstances, comprising various (often conflicting) allegiances and ambivalences, and thus making the very notion far from stable or coherent.

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