Victor Strandberg

The Art of Cynthia Ozick

Cynthia Ozick is a Jewish American writer who discovered an affinity for the classical view of life during her formative years and who has written extensively about the Gentile mainstream of Western literature. Those three matrices of culture—Hebrew, Hellenic, Christian—have furnished the major materials and obsessions of her artistic career, which now features a novel and three books of short stories. (Forthcoming are a new novel and a collection of essays.) Contrary to the usual pattern—that of Joyce, Hemingway, or Hawthorne, for example—Ozick launched her career with the novel, an immense and densely written work entitled *Trust* (1966), and then went on to the shorter volumes: *The Pagan Rabbi and Other Stories* (1971), *Bloodshed and Three Novellas* (1976), and *Levitation: Five Fictions* (1982).

Critical reaction to these works has been highly favorable but scanty. Apart from the early reviews, *Trust* in particular has suffered almost total neglect, doubtless because its length imposes formidable demands upon a prospective reader's time. Indeed, in this respect the title may have come at the reader of 1966 as an imperative verb, with few readers inclined to invest that much trust in an unknown young writer unanointed by the best seller lists. Yet the reviewers have encouraged some such investment on a rising scale of enthusiasm with the appearance of each new volume.\(^1\) For all that, very few analytical comments of any substance have to my knowledge been published.\(^2\)

My ensuing discussion will attempt to remedy this situation with a critical analysis of each separate volume taken up in their order of publication. This chronological approach means that we shall begin with a grand climax, a cosmic Big Bang of creativity that continued through the six and a half years of the novel's making. (Ozick finished *Trust* on the day President Kennedy was murdered.) About that phase of her career Ozick recently wrote: "I do know in my deepest sinew that I will never again write so well, that I will never again have that kind of high ambition or
monastic patience or metaphysical nerve and fortitude. That be-
longs, I suppose, to the ambition, strength, and above all ar-
rogance of youth.” Our major enterprise here, therefore, will be
to undertake an intensive analysis of this most important and
most neglected of her works—her masterpiece—following which
there will be a briefer study of the three short story collections.

Before we approach the fiction, however, a look at some of
Ozick’s incidental writings—her essays and reviews—will help
establish our intellectual bearings for that larger enterprise.

We may reasonably begin with her piece in “The Making of a
Writer” column of The New York Times Book Review, which
describes her childhood in the Pelham Bay neighborhood of the
Bronx during the Depression. Here the ambiguity of her life as a
Jewish American first impinged upon her awareness, as witnessed
in her mental growth (avidly reading the English and American
classics while writing letters in Yiddish to a grandmother in Mos-
cow) and in the enclosures imposed by the majority culture: “In
P.S. 71 I am publicly shamed in Assembly because I am caught
not singing Christmas carols; in P.S. 71 I am repeatedly accused
of deicide.” Inevitably, these childhood abrasions prefigure a
master theme of the adult artist: what, in this time and place, it
means to be a Jew.

Perhaps this writer’s answer to that question may be inferred
most clearly from her other incidental prose, beginning with her
reviews of several WASP contemporaries who broach the subject.
John Updike, the least offensive of these, offends (in Ozick’s opin-
ion) because in Bech: A Book he fashioned his Jewish persona
from random scraps of authorial prejudice that were synthesized
in ignorance. Updike’s attempt at “putting Bech together out of
Mailer, Bellow, Singer, Malamud, Fuchs, Salinger, [and] the two
Roths” cannot work, Ozick explains, because his sources include
too many “indifferent disaffected deJudaized Jewish novelists of
his generation.” In them, as in Updike himself, the telltale sign
of inauthenticity is indifference to—or ignorance of—Jewish his-
tory, particularly its record of ubiquitous and unrelenting per-
secution:

Emancipated Jewish writers like Bech (I know one myself)
have gone through Russia without once suspecting the land-
scape of old pogroms, without once smelling another Jew. . . .
[But Bech’s] phrase “peasant Jews” among the Slavs is an
imbecelic contradiction—peasants work the land, Jews were
kept from working it. . . . If there had been “peasant Jews”
there might have been no Zionism, no State of Israel . . . ah
Bech! ... despite your Jewish nose and hair, you are—as Jew—an imbecile to the core.\(^6\)

Updike’s peasant Jews may be a pardonable imbecility, the figment of an imagination that strayed too far from its WASP Pennsylvania point of origin. (Cynthia Ozick’s people came from the area of Minsk in Russia.) In contrast, William Styron’s imbecility, Ozick’s subject in “A Liberal’s Auschwitz,” is not pardonable because it engenders a refusal to acknowledge the central meaning of Auschwitz, that towering presence in modern Jewish history that figures so largely throughout Ozick’s fiction:

The two and a half million Jews murdered at Auschwitz were murdered, Mr. Styron recalls for us, in the company of a million Christian Slavs. This is an important reminder. . . . [But] the enterprise at Auschwitz was organized, clearly and absolutely, to wipe out the Jews of Europe. The Jews were not an instance of Nazi slaughter; they were the purpose and whole reason for it.\(^7\)

Notwithstanding his Jewish wife and half-Jewish children, Styron thus repeats Shakespeare’s vile error of allowing the Jews eyes and ears but not cultural integrity:

... if the Jew is ground into the metaphorical dust of “humanity,” or of “victim,” . . . if he is viewed only as an archetype of the eternal oppressed, if he is not seen as covenanted to an on-going principle, if he is not seen as the transmitter of a blazingly distinctive culture, . . . or if he is symbolically turned into “mankind”—but here I stop, having stumbled on Shylock’s plea again.\(^8\)

By lacking the sense of history that makes Jewish culture “blazingly distinctive,” William Styron nicely illustrates the central thesis of another book reviewed by Ozick, Mark Harris’s The Goy. Here a Gentile’s attempt to reverse the usual pattern of acculturation occasions Ozick’s culminating statement concerning the bond between identity and history: “How then shall Westrum become like a Jew? What is the Jewish ‘secret’? . . . What makes a Jew is the conscious implication in millennia. To be a Jew is to be every moment in history, to keep history for breath and daily bread.”\(^9\) Jewish history in turn makes the goy’s case hopeless: how can goy become Jew, she asks, when history has made “fear of the goy” a primary feature of Jewish identity? From this point
of view, the honored phrase "Judeo-Christian tradition" takes on meanings that are not accessible to a man like William Styron, as she reminds him in "A Liberal's Auschwitz": "Christianity does not stand responsible all alone in the world; nevertheless it stands responsible. The Inquisition was the known fruit of concrete Christian power. That thirteenth-century Pope (his name was Innocent) who ordered Jews to wear the yellow badge was not innocent of its Nazi reissue seven hundred years later."10

Pervasive as it is, persecution is the circumference rather than the center of Jewish history, the center being that singular event which marks off God's Chosen People. Though I have yet to find the phrase "chosen people" in Ozick's essays (does she think it veils a goyish sneer?), her loyalty to the concept evinces an unyielding, bedrock solidity, as witness her reproach of John Updike that strikes not only at him but at his de-Judaized Jewish models:

Being a Jew is something more than being an alienated marginal sensibility with kinky hair. Simply: to be a Jew is to be covenanted; . . . or, at the very minimum, to be aware of the Covenant itself. . . . If to be a Jew is to become covenanted, then to write of Jews without taking this into account is to miss the deepest point of all. Obviously this is not only Updike's flaw, but essentially the flaw of the Jewish writers he is sporting with.11

In contrast to these latter Jews, Harold Bloom affirms the true measure of Jewish identity in a passage Ozick cites admiringly: "There is no recovery of the Covenant, of the Law, without confronting again, in all deep tribulation, the God of the Fathers, Who is beyond image as He is beyond personality, and Who can be met only by somehow again walking His Way."12

This, then, is the final ground of the writer's Jewish identity, she theologizes. It is a trait she can admire in other artists, including Gentiles like Updike and Tolstoy, but her theology contrasts sharply with theirs. Although a Judeo-Christian continuity must be credited—"All the varieties of Christianity and Islam are inconceivable without the God of the Jews," she says13—it is the contrast that matters, a contrast that Ozick remarked after reading Rabbi Leo Baeck's essay entitled "Romantic Religion." From this essay, which she says "in some way broke open the conceptual egg of my life,"14 we may infer not only the difference between Christian and Jew but also that rootlike thrust of art into real life which is the essence of Ozick's literary credo. As
opposed to the Jewish "classical" religious sensibility, Romantic Religion makes an ideal of flight from the world, as Baeck defines it: "it seeks its goals in the now mythical, now mystical visions of the imagination. Its world is the realm . . . which lies beyond all reality"; "The desire to yield to illusion . . . here characterizes the entire relation to the world"; "Romantic religion is completely opposed to the whole sphere of existence with which the social conscience is concerned. Every romanticism depreciates the life devoted to work and culture"; "Romanticism therefore lacks any strong ethical impulse, any will to conquer life ethically.'15

Insofar as Hellenism contributed a Neoplatonic otherworldliness to this "Romantic" theology, it stood contrary to the Jewish sense of a worldly mission and so held no allure from a Hebraic point of view. For Ozick, however, an older tradition of Hellenism, that which produced the pagan gods, has posed so magnetic an attraction as to nearly tear her loose from her Jewish moorings, as she attests in books like Trust and The Pagan Rabbi. Beginning in her college years, when she read Matthew Arnold on Hellenism and Hebraism, studied "E. M. Forster's Greeky heroes" ("I used to read Forster's The Longest Journey every year"), and "went mad with Gibbon-joy," she gradually came to regard "the issue of Hellenism-versus-Hebraism as the central quarrel of the West."16

It is an issue that has been keenly appreciated by other contemporary writers, including Updike in The Centaur and Faulkner in his faun-haunted early works like The Marble Faun and Soldiers' Pay. But the issue has exceptional interest for Ozick as a Jewish writer. "Judaism & Harold Bloom," while brilliantly showing the centrality of Bloom's Judaism to his literary criticism, also shows how the Hebraic/Hellenic dichotomy impinges upon Ozick's own thinking. "Over the last several years," she writes, "it has come to me that the phrase 'Jewish writer' may be what rhetoricians call an 'oxymoron'—a pointed contradiction, in which one arm of the phrase clashes so profoundly with the other as to annihilate it."17 What makes the concept of a Jewish writer untenable is a theological contradiction. On one side, being a Jew means to live under the sovereign prohibition of the Second Commandment: "The single most serviceable . . . description of a Jew—as defined 'theologically'—can best be rendered negatively: a Jew is someone who shuns idols." On the other side of the contradiction, Bloom cites Vico to show how "paganism—i.e. anti-Judaism—is the ultimate ground for the making of poetry. Bloom writes: 'Vico understood . . . the link between poetry and pagan theology. . . . Vico says that the true God founded the Jewish religion on the prohibi-
tion of the divination on which all the Gentile nations arose.’” To be an artist, then, is to serve pagan gods—“the spontaneous gods of nature” is Ozick’s term in an essay on E. M. Forster—and to translate those gods into their new births. “Reinvigorating the idea of the idol in a new vessel, as Astarte begets Venus,” is Ozick’s phrase for this process; looking back, we can picture “Venus opening her eyes in a dawning Rome to learn that she is Astarte reborn. Astarte will always be reinvented.” So to be a writer is to gravitate toward what the Jew must shun: “When art is put in competition, like a god, with the Creator, it too is turned into an idol. . . . The strivings of divination—i.e. of God-competition—lead away from the Second Commandment, [and] ultimately contradict it.”

It is significant that Ozick picks out Venus/Astarte as her example of a pagan god who will always be reinvented. As the climactic scene in Trust unforgettably attests, sexuality is the issue which most crucially illustrates the Hellenism-versus-Hebraism conflict in Ozick’s writing. In her vividly lyrical, liberating dramatization of the sexual life-force, Ozick directly flouts the deeply rooted taboo that Leo Baeck defines in This People Israel. Jewish sexual discipline, Baeck says, is the very thing that most tellingly distinguishes God’s People from the “unclean” Canaanites: “Purity, in this people [Israel], primarily means that of the sexual life. . . . The battle which this people’s soul, in its covenant with God, waged against the people of Canaan and the peoples nearby was above all a battle for this purity. It continued for centuries.”18 To judge from Ozick’s fiction, Baeck’s time frame ought rather to have been millennia rather than centuries in this instance.

Having touched upon the crucial issue of Jewish identity and the seductiveness of Hellenism, we have one further feature of Cynthia Ozick’s art to consider in this preliminary discussion. This would be her sense of the relationship between fiction and reality. Here, as in her definition of Jewish identity, we may infer her view of the subject from what she says about other writers. In general, the most damaging thing she can say about any fiction is that it manifests, like Romantic Religion, the flight reflex, choosing to fantasize rather than cope with reality. In her review of The Wapshot Chronicle, she considers John Cheever’s praiseworthy talent to be irredeemably defeated by this moral weakness. And when Cheever portrays the decay of his Yankee heritage in terms of ethnic snobbery—his novel’s Dr. Cameron is ashamed to be exposed as née Bracciani—no amount of nostalgic rhapsodizing can make amends: “Oh, it is hard to be a Yankee—if only the
Wapshots were, if not Braccianis, then Wapsteins—how they might then truly suffer. And we might truly feel."

Another telling example of evading reality that Ozick chooses to discuss is perpetrated by E. M. Forster—otherwise a great favorite of hers—in Maurice, his only overtly homosexual novel. Forster’s irresponsibility lay in putting a wish at the heart of his work, rather than the will which brings a character up against life’s genuine contingencies: “I was determined [she quotes Forster as saying] that . . . two men should fall in love and remain in it for the ever and ever that fiction allows.” Ozick’s allegiance to reality condemns this concept: “The essence of a fairy tale is that wishing does make it so. . . . In real life wishing, divorced from willing, is sterile. . . . Consequently Maurice is . . . an infantile book, because, while pretending to be about societal injustice, it is really about make-believe, it is about wishing; so it fails even as a tract.”

We may infer, then, that Ozick has chosen a middle ground for her work, rooting it in the hard contingencies of factual life on the one hand (unlike the fantasists Forster and Cheever), while imbuing it all with religious meaning on the other (unlike sociological novelists like Philip Roth or the Updike of Bech). This classic standard concerning the purpose of literature is further illuminated in two brief commentaries. In a Round Table discussion on “Culture and the Present Moment,” Ozick rejected the Susan Sonntag school of high camp with the claim that “artists themselves must stand up against ‘Against Interpretation.’ . . . There’s not enough judgment—and by ‘judgment’ I mean not simply opinion, but bringing to bear on a work history, character, and other speculation.” Her adversary on the highbrow side is the playfully self-reflexive novel, a pure art object, against which she holds up the model of Thomas Hardy: “Hardy writes about—well, life . . . life observed and understood, as well as felt. A society . . . is set before us: in short, knowledge; knowledge of something real, something there.” Hardy’s high seriousness in turn imparts a permanent efficacy to his work: “Though Hardy was writing one hundred years ago, . . . Hardy speaks to me now and I learn from him. He educates my heart, which is what great novels always do.” Although we cannot “turn back to the pre-Joycean ‘fundamentalist novel,’” she goes on to say, contemporary writing has “led away from from mastery . . . and from seriousness”—from, to cite two chief mentors, Henry James’s Art of Fiction and Matthew Arnold’s Criticism of Life. With such a view.
that sort of suspense which constitutes the novel's appeal to the intellect: "Suspense occurs when the reader is about to learn something, not simply about the relationship of fictional characters, but about the writer's relationship to a set of ideas, or to the universe." Or, as she put it in her Preface to Bloodshed, "a story must not merely be, but mean. . . . I believe that stories ought to judge and interpret the world." Having now looked at this writer's "relationship to a set of ideas," we should be better prepared to see how her stories "judge and interpret the world."

**Trust**

American literature has featured a number of major novels in which the search for a father forms the essential plot line. Faulkner's Charles Bon comes to mind, in *Absalom, Absalom!*, as does Jack Burden in Robert Penn Warren's *All the King's Men*, and for that matter the actual gist of the Horatio Alger stories (as opposed to their rags-to-riches surface theme). Perhaps it was Thomas Wolfe who stated the idea of father-hunger most compellingly: "The deepest search in life, it seemed to me, the thing that in one way or another was central to all living was man's search to find a father, not merely the father of his flesh, not merely the lost father of his youth, but the image of a strength and wisdom external to his need and superior to his hunger, to which the belief and power of his own life could be united." Particularly as related to the concluding part of this statement, there have been many novels, written by men, about fathers and sons; rather few, written by women, about fathers and daughters. *Trust* is just such a book, the quite remarkable climax of which fixes upon the way a young woman's "belief and power" is united with a long-sought father image.

For its originality and evocative power, the climactic scene of *Trust* is a piece of great literature, something to justify the preceding five hundred pages where Ozick pursued her plan "to write a novel about Everything, about politics, love, finance, etc. etc." The ground theme which unifies these disparate motifs, including the father-hunger, is the venerable theme of self-discovery. Through most of her twenty-one years, the book's narrator had not known her own name. Because "her [mother's] aim was to re-father me," she has borne the name of her mother's first husband while living under the roof of the second, only to be informed in the year of her majority that she is "illegitimate issue" in that her mother and her biological father had never married. That natural father is
the mystery man whose identity the narrator must uncover before she can know herself. Until then, she remains a nameless narrator, like Ellison's Invisible Man.

The four sections of *Trust* are titled after the place-names most relevant to her self-knowledge. "Part One: America" describes her present sojourn with mother in the New York area, where, while planning postgraduation travel in Europe, she receives word that her Prodigal Father has demanded her presence at Duneacres, the abandoned "marine museum" her maternal grandfather had established. "Part Two: Europe" recalls the girl's first encounter with her father at age ten, when he visited her mother in Paris to extort money from her. "Part Three: Brighton" describes the mother's vagabond youth, with major focus on the seaside village in England where the narrator was born. "Part Four: Duneacres" picks up the narrative thread suspended since Part One and describes the last fateful encounter of father and daughter over a two-day period.

Together, the three father figures in *Trust* represent the three cultural matrices cited earlier: William, her mother's first husband, appears to be a model of WASP order and rectitude (it is he who informs her she is "illegitimate issue"); Enoch, the second husband, is a Jew whose keenly original intellect appeals strongly to the narrator; and Gustave Nicholas Tilbeck is the illicit lover who fathered the narrator, thereby dissolving her mother's first marriage, and who by conventional judgment appears utterly disreputable—an irresponsible hedonist, runaway father, vagabond, ne'er-do-well, sponge, and blackmailer. But in the end Tilbeck becomes the role model his daughter has longed for and the unlikely repository of her "Trust": a man of spontaneous passion, of faunlike immersion in the moment, of Greek/pagan heresies, suggesting the "spontaneous gods of nature" that Ozick has associated with E. M. Forster.

The heresy which Tilbeck lives by and which in the end engages his daughter's allegiance is the subject of an essay written by her stepfather, Enoch Vand: "It's called Pan versus Moses. It's about Moses making the Children of Israel destroy all the grotto shrines and greenwood places. . . . It's about how Moses hates Nature" (p. 557). What produces the turn toward Pan, or more precisely the return to Pan, is the crisis in culture that Ozick portrays in exceptional breadth and detail. Like Henry James, she juxtaposes Europe and America, but with a view of the subject that James was spared because of his death in 1916. James was incredulous and heartbroken to have to witness, after a lifetime of treating the "international theme," the outbreak of World War I; but his
agony must seem positively enviable compared to Ozick's view of the scene following the Holocaust. In *Trust* the two characters who represent the before and after of that unspeakable fragment of history are the narrator's mother and stepfather, Allegra and Enoch Vand. The year the war ends, Allegra brings her young daughter to Europe in a Jamesian hunger to ingest its superior culture while Enoch Vand is pursuing his job, as a minor functionary for the State Department, of listing the names of death camp victims: "She had brought me to see the spires . . . and minarets like overturned goblets, and . . . she promised from this fountain of the world (she called it life, she called it Europe) all spectacle, dominion, energy, and honor. And all the while she never smelled death there. . . . But it was death camp gas . . . that plagued his head and . . . swarmed from his nostrils to touch those unshrouded tattooed carcasses of his, moving in freight cars over the gassed and blighted continent" (p. 78). Even though too young, at age ten, to understand the Holocaust, the narrator leans toward her stepfather's rather than her mother's view of Europe. On approaching the German border, she vomits on a German tank and makes a map of Europe with her vomit (p. 63), and later she repeats the motif with another map of Europe traced in the stale urine and blood left on her hotel mattress (p. 116).

An admirer of Europe, Allegra Vand is a compendium of American errors and follies representing the bankruptcy of her native culture. In politics, art, religion, and family life, her immense wealth as heiress to a trust fund (one of the title ironies) has turned her life into a series of pathetic gestures. In her youth a binge with a radical political organization led her to write a bad novel, *Marianna Harlow*, which has become a best seller in the Soviet Union. As an older person, she has been contriving to get her husband appointed ambassador to a country with an aristocratic tradition. In the eyes of her daughter, Allegra's two sexless/childless marriages are the worst thing of all, proving the failure of love.

The root of corruption is of course her money, which in Jamesian fashion has stirred predatory instincts among her acquaintances. As a would-be artist, Allegra is patroness to a poetry magazine called *Bushelbasket* and its poet-parasite editor who boasts: "I am an instance of private enterprise. The Edward McGovers of the world are luxuries which only the very rich can afford" (p. 41). And her two husbands—to say nothing of her blackmailing ex-lover—are deeply conscious of her financial well-being. Even after the divorce, her first husband, William, is willing to stay on as Allegra's trustee and lawyer: "They were all bought, after all,
as Ed McGovern had not been afraid to express it . . . even the incorruptible William, who had put her away as his wife, . . . was bought and paid for” (p. 41). So surrounded, the narrator, wearing a silver and gold graduation dress specially ordained by her mother, feels rank with vicarious corruption: “There was the sick breath of money upon all of us; it rushed out dirtily, as from a beggar’s foul mouth . . . full of waste . . . trivial and tedious” (p. 36).

As this sickness metaphor indicates, the failures of the parents infect the next generation. The narrator herself is altogether adrift through most of the text, her keen intelligence mainly devoted to skepticism, distrust, and revulsion concerning every aspect of her cultural nurture. Her sole instance of passion is an ephemeral flaring up of love toward William’s son, but this seems occasioned by fellow-feeling in that he too abjures his parents and their bankrupt way of life. His fiancée, Stefanie, is a brainless chatterbox whose interest in William’s son appears motivated by his prospective moneyed future, so that in the younger generation the cycle of mercenary marriage looks likely to repeat itself.

Ultimately, the crisis of culture pervading Trust is a religious one, caused by the contemporary inability of parents or society to provide beliefs to live by. Trust is trellised throughout with allusions to religious figures—Christ, Buddha, Moses, Poseidon, Pan, even Allah—and to religious myth and imagery. These motifs, pointing up the novel’s “quest for consequence” (p. 519), lead to Gustave Nicholas Tilbeck’s concluding apotheosis. In virtually every respect, Tilbeck is a contrapuntal opposite to the book’s perverted ideologies. Named after Swedish and Russian royalty such as Allegra Vand pines after, he chooses to flaunt his descent from a common Swedish sailor who “died frozen drunk in the streets of Seattle” (p. 457)—a world-wandering grandfather as free spirited as Tilbeck himself. His disdain for social status is matched by his Thoreausque disinterest in having money or its symbols. The narrator’s earliest memory of Tilbeck, when as a girl she eavesdropped on a conversation in the adjoining hotel room (she never saw his face), focuses on the ancient bicycle, leaning splashed with mud and rain, that marked his arrival. (Contrapuntally, that same weekend Allegra had wrecked her limousine during a stint of illegal and dangerous driving.)

Tilbeck’s blackmailing of Allegra, it turns out, is a matter of amusement and curiosity for him and of contemptuous protest, rather than a serious extortion scheme: he wants to measure just how much her spurious respectability means in her life. The hush
money she sends he always throws away on prostitutes or other frivolities, and when the opportunity arises for real extortion—he could ruin the prospective ambassador’s appointment by disclosing his fathering of the love-child—it is clear that for this score of years the whole process has been a bluff she could have called at any time without retribution. It is noteworthy that Tilbeck was her faithful companion during the only period of poverty in Allegra’s life, while she was waiting in England for her child to be born and for her trust fund to begin yielding its opulence. When, after the child’s (our narrator’s) birth, he wandered off toward the Mediterranean, he seemed to be testing whether she would give up all she had and follow him. Instead, despite her passionate yearning for him, she took her child and dowry back to the shelter of married respectability, with her first husband staying on as her trustee and her second one opening up superior access to “Europe.”

Concerning this theme, too—of “Europe”—Tilbeck plays a role of contrapuntal reversal. Whereas Enoch Vand (though born in Chicago) comes out of the Europe of unspeakable horror, which Allegra never sees, Tilbeck as a Swede represents a Europe untainted by the Holocaust; and as a neopagan he embodies the freely expressed life force of the Europe of classical times, before either Christ or Moses imposed their Puritan denials. Moreover, while Allegra hearkens toward the Old World of palaces and pageantry, Tilbeck reverses this motif of Jamesian pilgrimage by flying an American flag on his bicycle in Paris, a reminder of the energy and adventurousness of that Europe whose denizens journeyed abroad to create America. Tilbeck, in sum, is a singular example of Europe at its best, made all the more attractive by the book’s otherwise ruinous expanse of cultural negations.

In Trust those negations cover the most fundamental issues of any culture: money (as we have seen), sex, and God. Sex—including marriage and the family—is the first of these issues to appear overtly. In chapter 1, as the rites of graduation are concluding, a little girl tells the narrator, “My sister’s getting married tomorrow,” thereby evoking that greater rite of passage that normally is indispensable to any young woman’s sense of identity: “There was a shimmer of mass marriages. . . . Envy . . . ought not be accounted sinful, for sinning is what we do by intent, and envy . . . desires us against our will” (p. 3). But in this novel of the Eisenhower-Kennedy years, marriage is virtually moribund. Most of the husband figures—Purse, Enoch, William, William’s son—are either literally or emotionally cuckolded (by Tilbeck, in each in-
stance), and even apart from this prevalence of sexual mistrust, marriage is an institution of social-economic convenience rather than a form for the containment of passion.

The ultimate negations are those pertaining to religion. For the narrator, a Gentile, Christianity has become utterly meaningless if not actually harmful, mainly because it is for her a "Romantic Religion" as Leo Baeck described it. Its otherworldliness turns Christian doctrine into gibberish, as seen in the narrator's response to the Trinity. "I had once actually confused the Holy Ghost with a new kind of candy bar," she says (p. 59); the Son for her is "the bitter and loveless Christ" of "redemption, that suspect convenant" (p. 38); and the Father actually delivered a piece of excrement rather than a Savior with regard to perhaps the most celebrated of all New Testament verses (John 3:16): "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten dung" (p. 279). For the narrator this world cannot be so wishfully dealt with: "the irretrievable can never be returned to us; and there is no alternative but to go on with the facts exactly as they are" (p. 38).

Enoch Vand, a Jew, theologizes this view of Christianity as a version of the flight reflex. After altering Jesus' promise of paradise—"The house of death hath many mansions" (p. 80)—he states the main Jewish objection to it: "Christ was one of Enoch's great villains . . . not merely for his cruelty in inventing and enforcing a policy of damnation, but more significantly for his removal of the Kingdom of Heaven to heaven, where, according to Enoch, it had no business being allowed to remain . . . and ought instead to be brought down again as rapidly as possible by the concerted aspiration and fraternal sweat of the immediate generation" (p. 375). To complete the negation of Christianity, there remains only the travesty of Christian charity expressed by William's new wife, who speaks of "Christian mercy" and contempt for non-WASPS (the Irish) in almost the same breath (pp. 360-61). And William himself finally reveals beneath his Presbyterian facade nothing more than old-time Calvinist confusion between God and Mammon, "his preoccupation with ownership being a further example of his Calvinist probity" (p. 59).

In the person of Enoch Vand, the Jewish faith is as bankrupt as Christianity is, but at a much higher level of intellectual integrity. What has ruined modern Judaism is its recent encounter with "Lady Moloch," with "her diadem of human teeth and ankle-ring of human hair," who has substituted for the Torah Enoch's Book of the Dead, "the black canvas of that ledger held on that priestly spot [Enoch's heart] like a tablet of the Law" (p. 102). So Enoch,
and apparently the narrator with him, leans toward atheism: "Kein Gott ist" (p. 136). To him even the Holocaust is just a prototype of "the magnificent Criminal plan" for the whole species: "Who can revere a universe which will take that lovely marvel, man (... aeons of fish straining toward the dry, gill into lung, paw into the violinist's and dentist's hand), and turn him into a carbon speck?" (p. 373). For a time he had held to the Jewish belief "that whatever you come upon that seems unredeemed exists for the sake of permitting you the sacred opportunity to redeem it"; but now he has learned that "God [is] the God of an unredeemed monstrosity," and "the world isn't merely unredeemed: worse worse worse, it's unredeemable" (pp. 397, 398). So Enoch is not so far removed from the Christian flight reflex after all, as the narrator reminds him: "'You're waiting for the Messiah then,' was all I ventured. He strangely did not deny it" (p. 191). Until that inconceivable supernatural intervention, there is for Enoch only a deepening revulsion against the world's monstrous uncleanness: "'The trouble is the brooms don't work. Nothing works,' he said.... 'There's no possibility of cleaning up.... It's the whole world that's been dipped in muck.... You can't clean murder away'" (p. 191).

For the narrator the question which Enoch's attitude defines is how, or whether, one's life can be sustained in a world "not only unredeemed but unredeemable." It is a question which other Jewish writers, most notably Saul Bellow, have spent a lifetime raising and answering. For Ozick, unlike the others, the answer comes from pagan antiquity. For the modern religious sensibility, she suggests, recovery of the L'Chaim ("To Life!") principle must come by a Hellenic rather than Hebraic access, for it was the old Greeks who most deeply immersed their religious imagination in the natural world, seeing a divine essence in sun and sea, tree and mountain, and—above all—in the immense creative force of sexuality.

In *Trust*, the theme of sexuality is crucial, evoking celibate Christ and taboo-promulgating Moses—both serving a God who created life without sex—in radical contrast to the pagan worship of Venus/Astarte. In treating this theme with a power and seriousness which are rare—perhaps unique—among Jewish writers, Ozick contributes to a major tradition in American literature. One thinks of John Updike pitting the last Christian, George Caldwell, against the horde of neopagan hedonists in *The Centaur* (they celebrate their total victory in *Couples*); of Faulkner running his doomed worshipers of Aphrodite to their defeat by a "Christian" society in *The Wild Palms*; of Henry Adams musing over the
Virgin's unaccountable victory over Venus in *The Education*; of Ralph Waldo Emerson owning the supreme power of Love ("Men and gods have not outlearned it") in his poem, "Eros." Ultimately, they all hearken back to actual pagan literature in antiquity, of which a chorus in Sophocles' *Antigone* is an excellent example. "Where is the equal of Love?" they chant:

In the farthest corners of the earth, in the midst of the sea,
He is there; he is here

And the grip of his madness
Spare not god or man...  

At the side of the great gods
Aphrodite immortal
Works her will upon all.  

Tilbeck's role as avatar of a pagan fertility god enables him to lift his daughter from the mire of Christian/Mosaic "uncleanness" that would otherwise enclose her identity as "bastard" or "illegitimate issue." Her path to enlightenment is thus the path from the (Mosaic) "clean" to the (Bacchic) "dirty"; her gain in wisdom is measured by juxtaposing the girl in white dress of chapter 1, fearing to get her shoes muddy, against the same girl ecstatic amid the filth, rust, and decay of Town Island, where the liberating god himself is last seen, after his death by water, smeared with his own green vomit. It is dirt, in the end, that fosters life and nourishes it—as the nine Purses so engagingly illustrate—leaving the "clean" people like William and Enoch marooned in their sterile and deathsome sanctity.

The importance of this transformation of the religious sensibility—the most momentous thing in the book—is borne out by the elaborate web of allusions and images that threads through the text. Scattered across that web we find fragments suggesting those that T. S. Eliot shored against his ruins: Yahweh, Buddha, Norse and Greek deities, and scenes from *The Golden Bough* fade in and out like the bass line of a melody. Initially, in her "clean" period, the narrator correlates sexuality with Evil, as Semitic myth teaches: "presumably those rivalrous siblings [Cain and Abel] were not yet born while their parents were innocent; that indeed is the point of the story. The connection between Evil and the birth of the next generation is intimate" (p. 446). From this standpoint, she regards her father, with shame, as resembling a primitive sea god, reptilian (with "the patient lids of a lizard"), crudely sexual
(lying "among shells with their open cups waiting"), and cruelly rapacious for his blackmail: "like a terrible Nile-god Gustave Nicholas Tilbeck invaded, vanished, and reappeared. Nothing could assure his eclipse but propitiation ... and my mother, as enraged as any pagan by a vindictive devil, had to succumb. . . . Money came to him at last where he lay, and he blinked his torpid jaundiced lids and was content" (pp. 11-12). Even so, the god's allure also breaks through from the beginning, investing her gold and silver graduation gown, originally a symbol of her mother's crass opulence, with her father's nature imagery: "the dress she had bought for me singed my skin with a blaze of gold and silver, the hot gold of my father's beach and the burning silver of his sea" (p. 23).

No motif in Trust is more significant than the imagery of the sea. For Allegra, the sea's murk and slime harbor not a sea god but a sea monster who comes, rapacious and unclean, to invade her shelter—"that Tilbeck who rose from the murk like a half-forgotten creature of the strait to claim his tribute (I was educated enough in myth to know that in every tale of this sort it is a daughter who is taken to feed the slime)" (p. 186). Allegra's father, however—the superrich founder of her trust fund—had been a compulsive mariner who bequeathed his seaside estate to establish a marine museum. He meant this place, Duneacres on Town Island, to illuminate the religious/scientific truths which conjoin myth and biology: "I'll give the place to the sea. Every room to be a mansion for Neptune—sea-nymphs everywhere. . . . Let it be a History of the Origin of Life" (p. 296); and again: "People are wrong, you know, when they talk of Mother Earth. It's Father Neptune who takes us in our last days. . . . Blood is salt water, like the sea, which never left us though we left it. . . . All of mankind's wrung with drunkard's thirst for the sea. In my view that's the explanation for religion" (p. 295).

Apart from so honoring the prime matrix of life and myth, the marine museum becomes a master metaphor for the crisis of culture that undergirds this novel. Disdained and ignored by Allegra and Enoch (the modern and secular), closed up and left to decay by William (a Presbyterian Calvinist), Duneacres while serving as Tilbeck's habitation gradually gathers its force of psychic retaliation, foretelling a return of the repressed in the offing: Tilbeck's Dionysian backlash against the contemporary Apollonian. Beneath the surface realism of style, a current of allegory thus becomes manifest: "Surely my father, constituting present evidence of a buried time, was a sort of museum," the narrator muses; "he housed matters which had to be dug after, collected bit by bit,
and reconstructed” (p. 56). This imagery, which adumbrates precisely the central theme and plot line of the whole narrative, leads to further allegorical meanings whereby, apropos of Duneacres being reduced to “fossil museum” status, Tilbeck reveals that his real motive for blackmail is not money but recognition:

“I see it does you good,” the visitor said softly, “to think of me as a fossil.”
“I never think of you at all.”
“Never?”
“You’re not there. You don’t exist,” she repeated.
“I’m perfectly willing not to exist . . . for someone else . . . as long as I can manage to exist for you . . . . Well, put it that one wants a little acknowledgement . . . . Of who one is; of what one is.” (condensed from pp. 120-22)

Who and what Tilbeck is—a question as central as who and what Gatsby or Kurtz or Moby Dick is—is as gradually clarified as in those books by means of allusions and imagery from pagan antiquity. For his daughter the earliest hint of her father’s true character lay in the book which dropped from his rain-soaked bicycle during the encounter in Paris. Immediately before this—one page earlier—the scene had been set by the young girl’s religious speculation: “‘I was wondering if there’s a God. . . . If there is a God, is it the same God for everywhere? I mean, the same in America as here? . . . I wish there were a different one for America’” (p. 150). With an American flag flying from his bicycle —“a sort of glorious and healthful omen of America,” his daughter thinks (p. 165)—the avatar of a different god drops his “ENCHIRIDION: OF WOODLAND FLOWERS” for his daughter’s perusal, in which one flower in particular rivets her attention: “‘Jewelweed; Wild Touch-Me-Not,’ said the caption. . . . ‘The name Touch-Me-Not almost certainly derives from the quick, spasmodic action of its ripe seed-pods which instantly erupt at a touch and spurt their seeds in every direction’” (pp. 151-52). Seed-sputtering flowers are not the only clue to Tilbeck’s identity. “Ah, you’re clammy. You don’t feel clean,” her mother says (p. 164); in lifting Tilbeck’s book from the mud, the girl makes her first step in the long trek from the clean to the dirty. Meanwhile, in the background of this encounter with her father, a quartet of honeymooners engage in open sexual play (they may have been bride-swapping) with a zest which offends Allegra and the landlady but evokes for the narrator the old amphorae (“They raced across the dewy grass like Greek Runners” [p. 163]).
The Art of Cynthia Ozick • 283

The conflict between Pan and Moses concerning sex reaches maximum intensity in the scene where William’s painful euphemisms for the narrator’s illegitimacy (“the circumstances of my birth—how indecently priggish and Dickensian that sounds” [p. 274]) place Tilbeck’s role invitingly in focus, “as though, while standing solemnly in court, about to be sentenced, I had caught sight of the god Pan at the window, clutching a bunch of wild flowers . . . and laughing a long and careless jingle of a laugh, like bicycle bells” (p. 274). In this context the fall of Pan measures well the failure of the Western religious imagination. Worshiped in antiquity as the god of spontaneous life—of wine, sex, the dance—Pan was appropriated by the Christian fathers and so transformed that his faun-shape became that of the Christians’ devil. Tilbeck’s role is to reverse that epoch-making error.

To Allegra, of course, Tilbeck retains the conventional devil’s penumbra, leaving “an unmistakable cloven hoof eloquently delineated in slime” (p. 153); and his nickname—Nick—reminds us of one of the devil’s common appellations. But Tilbeck says the name Nicholas represents his “part Greek” ancestry, which combines with the Norse to open multiple possibilities: “‘Nick?’ he said. ‘Why not Thor? Why not Loki? Why not Apollo? . . . Well, in my time they didn’t call babies Zeus—’ ‘Or Pan’ [I offered]” (p. 474).

As the narrative advances toward its climax, a Dionysian procession of pagan figures appears to be gathering, leaving all manner of verbal traces: “the goat-hooves of Venus and Pan” (p. 334); “religious processions for Dionysus and Demeter” (p. 343); “the divine . . . Bacchus” (p. 519); “Poseidon . . . Cupid” (p. 536); “Circe and her pale herd” (p. 450); “Thor at the clavier” (p. 511); “a god of the Nile” (p. 511); “He [Tilbeck] has an island right off Greece” (p. 435); “He [Tilbeck] looked like a faun” (p. 473). Tilbeck’s domain at Duneacres, when finally approached, appears suitable for such an inhabitant. Ritualistically commanded to appear alone with no guide or escort, the narrator travels a “road as buried now as Caesar’s” (p. 424), then is rowed to the island by a Charon-like youth with “eye-glasses twinkling light like semaphores” (p. 426)—though we come to see that this is a reversal of the classical passage: the world she has left behind, that of Enoch’s Moloch and William’s Mammon, is the realm of the dead, while the island before her harbors, like an Eleusinian mystery, nature’s deeply immanent Life Force.

Bespeaking this Life Force, and radiant with its cabalistic power, is the tree guarding the way to Tilbeck’s island. Gathering vast affinities in its branches—to the Golden Fleece, the Burning Bush, the Tree of Life and Tree of Knowledge, the Buddha’s bo-
tree of Enlightenment—it signals the beginning of the narrator’s apprehension of Sacred Beauty, a term which her mother had defined during her initiation (with Tilbeck at Brighton) twenty-one years ago: “If you want to know what I mean by Sacred I mean anything that’s alive, and Beauty is anything that makes you want to be alive and alive forever, with a sort of shining feeling” (p. 337). (Allegra’s short-lived phase as “an ancient Greek” also centered upon a “holy looking” tree outside their cottage window: “Most trees are atheists, but not this one” [p. 337].) Which is to say, Sacred Beauty is what makes Enoch Vand’s “unredeemable world” not only redeemable but redeemed.

First described as bushlike, with a “comb of yellow leaf stained through by sunlight, . . . the whole blown head of it coruscating like a transparent great net of caught fishes”—an image linking the tree to Tilbeck’s sea realm—the tree soon becomes animate:

Lens upon lens burned in the leaves with a luminosity just short of glass and nearer to vapor; the veins were isinglass ducts swarming with light. . . . A radiance lifted itself from the shoulders of the tree and hung itself, by some unknown manner of passage, close against my face, so that, to see, I had to stare through a tissue of incandescence. . . . The tree was an eye. It observed me. The tree was a mind. It thought me. . . . It burned for me, it leaped all whiteness and all light into being, and for me. . . . I was its god, my gaze had forced its fires, the sanctity of my wonder had quickened its awe. . . . I appeared like a god or goddess . . . as once the Buddha sat and stared, and, seeing, showed himself divine; I was nymph, naiad, sprite, goddess; I had gifts, powers. (pp. 424–25)

Although the vision collapses—“Then it was snuffed. The light went out of it. The sun slid down and away” (p. 425)—her passage to Tilbeck’s island brings fresh epiphanies through the agency of some surprising companions. Her boatman, “a sort of Norse centaur, the top half human, the lower half presumably the parts of a boat” (pp. 426–27), is one of seven siblings in the Purse family, whom Tilbeck has invited to stay at Duneacres a few days while they wait for their plane flight to Pakistan. There, Purse senior will dig for “humanoid bones” on a Ford Foundation grant; in the interim Tilbeck’s “fossil museum” should satisfy both his professional interest and a serious need to save money.

The nine Purses contribute three elements to the novel’s climax:
they emanate a Dickens-cum-Marx brothers comic flair; they func-
tion as ancillaries to the initiation rites on Town Island; and they
step into the role of ambassadors from America that Enoch and
Allegra fail to fulfill. In a novel replete with Jamesian echoes—it
even quotes verbatim the opening sentence of The Portrait of a
Lady (p. 451)—this portrayal of America's real representatives
becomes in itself a moment of initiation for the narrator, who was
born in Europe and has known only Allegra's wealth-insulated
leisure-class America. Like Tilbeck, the Purses comprise a coun-
terpoint to the book's opening cultural negations.

As a compendium of both the strengths and petty vices of mid-
dle America, the Purse family (from New Rochelle, New York
—the author's home town) exhibits a checklist of representa-
tive American characteristics. Adventurous (the whole family is
moving to Pakistan), resourceful (they live mainly by their wits),
high-spirited (they are inveterate game players), mildly acquisi-
tive (as befits their name), and pragmatic (they profess no ideolo-
ony), the Purses realize the middle-class ideal of self-improvement
through the "diffusion of competence" that Eric Hoffer thought
the most distinctive characteristic of America. The mother, for
example, is a superb auto mechanic, and even the small children
are studying Urdu. Unlike Allegra and Enoch, they will make fine
ambassadors.

Amplifying their quintessence of Americanism are the names of
the Purse children, four of which refer to the great Transcenden-
talist writers—Manny, Sonny, Throw, and Al being Whitman,
Emerson, Thoreau, and Bronson Alcott, respectively. The only
daughter is Harriet Beecher Stowe Purse, and the other two boys
are named after exceptionally admirable religious leaders—Dee
and Foxy being Mohandas K. Gandhi and George Fox Purse. Of
these names, Emerson's appears most significant, partly because
it turns up elsewhere in the novel (e.g., p. 319), but mostly be-
cause it clarifies the religious meaning of this episode. In the end
the Purse family certifies what the narrator had envisioned as a
young girl, "a different God for America."

Nominally the Purses are Quakers, or Friends—which is to say,
members of a peaceable sect unstained by Christendom's history
of bloody violence and hypocrisy—but in practice they radiate a
pagan mentality, savoring each moment with passionate vitality.
Theirs is the stance Emerson calls for in his essay "Circles": "In
nature every moment is new; the past is always swallowed and
forgotten; the coming only is sacred. Nothing is secure but life,
transition, the energizing spirit." And their God is actually the
"spontaneous gods of nature" that Ozick associated with E. M.
Forster but which also evoke the Emerson of "Experience": "Nature, as we know her, is no saint. . . . She comes eating and drinking and sinning. . . . We must set up the strong present tense against all the rumors of wrath, past or to come." Even the Quaker Inner Light suggests Emersonian rather than orthodox theology: "Jesus Christ belonged to the true race of prophets," Emerson said in his notorious "Divinity School Address"; "He saw that God incarnates himself in man, and evermore goes forth anew to take possession of his World." Certainly the Purses are doing their best to emulate this model.

So the Purses become part of the Dionysian procession which moves into Tilbeck's magic island, with Mrs. Purse taking the role of Circe, and her youngest cherub—who is usually nude and hyperactive to an airborne degree—serving as a Cupid surrogate. Circe's fabled powers of transformation are in this instance limited to the junk littering the island (she gets castaway engines running); her nightly trysts with Tilbeck signify her larger importance as a sort of love goddess whose previous adventures might well have bred illegitimate issue: "Was he really Purse's son, the splendid savage child . . . ? Or had Circe coupled with a hero while Purse lay bound in the snores of an aging athlete?" (p. 481). At the same time she evokes other pastoral/sexual nuances, including "Eve in Paradise on the world's sixth day, surrounded by the forms of nature" (p. 441); Prospero, Miranda, and Caliban (p. 479); and those two famed Latin poets of love, "Ovum and Virgin" (p. 494). With the Purses on board, the scene is almost set for the grand rite toward which the whole narrative has been heading. There remains only one crucially missing actor, or actress, that being a young woman to enact and celebrate the mystery to which the narrator will become witness-initiate. That role is filled when the last two visitors arrive at the island, William's son and his fiancée Stefanie, who had expected to find a private retreat for prenuptial lovemaking.

Its cast now complete, this final epiphany scatters allusions like leaves from a Golden Bough. For one thing, this ground—this sacred grove, we may say—was consecrated to Love years ago when an Armenian youth killed himself here rather than give up his beloved; that was why it became a "fossil museum," closed to the public and given over to the wild growth of nature. Now the tomb of Allegra's parents has come to resemble a scene from ancient Attica, featuring "in the center of a sort of grove an astonishing stone ruin, broken like a Greek shrine" (p. 452). Here, as the narrator arrives, ritual games are in progress, exempt from conventional rules and standards: Tilbeck and Purse are playing
the Purse children would appoint Stefanie their "mistress of games."

Appropriately, the narrator recognizes which of the two men is her father through his Dionysian quality. Tilbeck's first words on behalf of his visitor are "Show her the wine cellar" (p. 452), which she correctly regards as a sort of password: "At once I knew him. Tilbeck was the one who needed wine" (p. 453). His first question of his daughter is priestly rather than fatherly—"You religious?" (p. 454). To this crucial question Ozick brings a wide range of possibilities significantly exclusive of the Judeo-Christian tradition. The chief reference to Christianity in these pages is a joke: Tilbeck's "Last Supper"—he calls it that because his presence makes thirteen at the table (p. 499)—is correctly designated; however, it prefigures not crucifixion but sexual consummation preceding his death by water. Further belittling the faith are the twelve chairs for his guests, each chair topped by the carved head of a reprobate Christian king. Those same countenances, recurring on the mansion walls, indicate why Tilbeck has cheerfully burned most of the furnishings: "The kings matched the kings on the chairs under the trees. Grotesque noses, awkward rough little snarls, wicked wicked foreheads leering with the minute grain of the crafty wood. . . . 'See?' he said . . . 'That whole row up there? . . . Those are the Six Philips of France. . . . On the other side . . . those are the Five Philips of Spain. Murderous, hah?' " (p. 455).

Buddhism, by contrast, appears to great advantage, as Tilbeck evokes the Buddha’s smile (p. 466), the Buddhist "Man without Ego" ideal (p. 468), and the Buddha’s teaching of desirelessness: "Not wanting anything is what makes me perfectly free. . . . There’s not a thing in the wide world I want. Or ever wanted" (p. 468). Allegra later confirms through her mockery this facet of Tilbeck’s role: "The Man of No Desires. I know the whole thing. . . . Just like the Buddha after nirvana. A holy man" (pp. 548-49). And the pagan ambience continues to thicken. When Nick/Zeus/Pan licks her blood from a cut finger, emanating "the floweriness of wine in his shoulder," she becomes half initiate, then yields to the flight reflex: "Strange and new, I breathed the minotaur. Then ran . . . to the panicked kings, to the table dense with civilization, ran, ran from the faun" (p. 474). But she already knows there is no going back to innocence: "Following slowly up out of the beach, a small laughter came from the beautiful man" (p. 475).

Philosophically, the ideology which undergirds all this appears to derive from the teachings of Gnosticism, that longstanding rival of Christianity which fostered the Catharian Court of Love in the twelfth century. Like Denis de Rougemont in *Love in the*
Western World (and like his disciple John Updike in Couples and Marry Me), Ozick postulates the idea of redeeming knowledge at the heart of this episode—a knowledge attainable only through sexual consummation. In this instance, the narrator’s undeveloped state—young, virginal, small-breasted—imposes the need for vicarious learning: she will be witness to the rite of love, not participant. Yet her knowledge is sure and transforming, as her affinity with the celebrants grows stronger: “I was initiate. I knew it. I knew the taste of complicity. Nick had put it on my tongue like a pellet—complicity, amazing first-hand knowledge of the private thing” (p. 520).

There follows the sense, hitherto unimaginable in her “hollow man” condition, of deep change pending: “knowledge is the only real event in the world, and something had happened. . . . In me the private thing turned: knowledge turned, love turned, what my mother knew I knew” (p. 521). Again, in Gnostic/Catharian fashion, the knowledge in question is ineffably sensual: “Taste; no word. Yet there was no memory of a physical flavor. . . . It is never sensuality that remains (I know now and glimpsed then), but the idea of sensuality. . . . Feeling cannot be stored. . . . The nerve gives only the now, and is improvident” (p. 520). Brought to this level of enlightenment, the narrator is fully prepared at last for transcendence, as the Purses are not; unspiritual, conventional-minded sluggards, they snore through the final epiphany. On the brink of transcendence, the narrator enters the lovers’ circle:

The lovers had touched. The lovers had touched at last. Their skins had touched; the friction had begun; the Purses were expunged: something had happened. Love. The private worm; the same. What my mother knew I knew.

—I loved my father.

And the union of the lovers was about to be. (p. 526)

The key phrase here is “I loved my father.” Her mother’s purpose from the beginning had been “to re-father me” (p. 58) to William or Enoch, and that purpose had struck away the girl’s identity, bringing on her Hamlet-like mood of world-weariness. Without roots, money, career, respectability, or even a family circle, Tilbeck seems eminently suitable for de-fathering. What redeems him as father is his life’s proof that all the above desiderata are obstacles to his daughter’s freedom and subversive to her search for self-knowledge.

Initially, the encounter between father and daughter appears to magnify her identity problem. As if being illegitimate issue were
not enough, her father’s youthful appearance engenders still deeper humiliation:

There was still something unrecounted about the stink of my first cell. Dejection seized me. Shame heated my legs. Not even William, sordid puritan, had had the courage of this sordidness. I viewed my father. He might have been a decade younger than my mother. . . . Then and there I had to swallow what I was: the merest whim. . . . It surpasses what is decently normal. A boy of seventeen had made me. (pp. 453–54)

The narrator’s movement from this depth of shame to unconditional love of father thus marks a transformation which in the end makes possible her own self-acceptance. Tilbeck’s Catharian practice of free sexuality, performed so she might know she “had witnessed the very style of my own creation” (p. 531), wipes away every trace of taboo and stigma.

Importantly it is free sexuality, not “free love,” that the narrator witnesses. Ozick underscores this distinction in the setting of the scene (the floor), the dialogue, and the action. Throughout their dalliance the lovers mock each other verbally—she calling him “Cockroach” and suggesting that he starch his soft member—and, most important, the narrator notes that “from the beginning they never kissed” (p. 531). Moreover, the very style of her creation, she observes, is doglike: at the last moment, “brutally, and before she can sprawl, he flips her over. And penetrates. A noise of pain creaks from her” (p. 530). Which is to say, the distinctly human tenderness of face to face sex has been abjured in favor of more primitive, more purely erotic conjunction: Zeus choosing the form of swan or bull for his fleshly encounter. (Zeus is also evoked here by the thunder and lightning of the background storm.)

From this nexus of nymph and demigod we may infer three crucial insights which have become hidden behind the veil of modern sentimentality: (1) that sexuality, the life-force, emanates with irrepressible power from the uncivilized, prehuman depths of the human psyche; (2) that in the male lover of any age the sexual being—the faun—is always a seventeen-year-old boy; and (3) that such sexual conjunction as is described here is not sordid or “dirty” but expressive of Sacred Beauty. The narrator’s perfect agreement with these principles, and her newly found contentment with her status as “illegitimate issue,” is shown in her subsequent taunting of William’s son, who is determined to marry
Stefanie, despite her infidelity, "so as not to embarrass the families" (p. 533). "'I,' I said, 'am issue of the floor. You,' I said, 'are issue of the nuptial couch'" (p. 534). Plainly, she flaunts the richer heritage.

Apropos the thematic concern of Trust there is the sine qua non of its style, in this book a momentous presence. "[In Trust] I wanted to include a large range of language: a kind of lyric breadth and breath," the author has stated; and in her Preface to Bloodshed she says that Trust "was conceived in a style both 'mandarin' and 'lapidary,' every paragraph a poem." In its cumulative effect, the "mandarin" and "lapidary" style of Trust points up a final meaning. Ozick, who wrote her M.A. thesis on "Parable in the Later Novels of Henry James," has in Trust framed her own parable; the novel is, among other things, a parable of the artist. Like Melville's "Bartleby the Scrivener" (a great favorite of Ozick's), Trust forms its analogies around the figure of an artist-rebel; unlike Bartleby, the narrator of Trust escapes her sick soul condition at last through her transfiguring experience of Sacred Beauty.

Tilbeck's final metamorphosis, after his death, greatly enhances the parable. "A male Muse he was. Nick" (p. 539), says the narrator, overriding the objection that "the Muse is a woman." What a Muse of either gender does is defined by Ozick in an essay. As against the "sentimentalists" who "believe in money, in position, in a marriage bell"—incidentally a good description of Allegra Vand—the Muse says "'Partake,' it says, 'live,'" reminding us "that the earth lies under all." Beyond this function, a male Muse can accomplish a further purpose, undoing the sexist mischief of the White Goddess theory of creativity: "If [woman] cannot hear the Muse, says Robert Graves, what does it matter? She is the Muse. Man Does, Woman Is is the title of Graves's most recent collection of poetry. But she too (if she was born talented) can find her own Muse in another person. What male Muse it was who inspired Emily Brontë's Heathcliffe, history continues to conjecture. The Muse—pace Robert Graves—has no settled sex or form, and can appear in the shape of a tree (Howard's End) or a city (the Paris of The Ambassadors) or even—think of Proust—a cookie."

In its deployment of this Künstlerroman ending, Trust resolves its deepest theme, the search for self-knowledge or identity that originated in the book's opening pages. Clearly the male Muse, though biologically unprogenitive (Stefanie was using contraceptives), has dropped germinous seeds into his daughter's soul,
thereby transforming her bridal hunger of chapter 1 into an easy jest in the novel’s closing paragraph: “What I was and what I did during that period I will not tell; I went to weddings.” Even Nick’s exposure as a “tawdry Muse,” with dyed hair and a laurel of vomit (“tender putrid greenish flowers” [p. 545]), only enhances the parable. “It is no light thing to have intercourse with the Muse,” the initiate says of her newly insatiate thirst for beauty; “The planet’s sweetmeats fail after a nibble at vatic bread” (p. 539). But the tawdry Muse teaches his offspring to spurn any celestial city; grubby, earthbound Town Island is the soil from which will spring art’s Sacred Beauty. From this standpoint the bridal hunger of chapter 1 may be seen, in hindsight, as the artist’s passion for the world’s body: “I looked out at them with envy in the marrow, because I was deprived of that seductive bridegroom, . . . of his shining hair and the luster of his promised mouth. . . . I did not wish to envy them, . . . but greed for the world had bitten me. I longed to believe, like these black-gowned brides, in pleasure, in splendor, in luck; in genius, in the future, most of all in some impermeable lacquer [i.e., art] to enamel an endless youth” (p. 3).

To help her realize these goals, the male Muse imparts one last gift to his neophyte, that being his own example of the virtue cited in the book’s title. “The title ‘Trust’ was of course ironic, and signified distrust in every cranny,” Ozick has said.31 This distrust notably extends to the novel’s fake artist figures: Edward McMahon, the poet-parasite; Eugenia Karp, the punster; Allegra Vand, authoress lionized in the Soviet Union. The novel’s epigraph, however, poses the choice between “a mammoth trust fund” and “a minuscule fund of trust”; and in leaving her mother’s domain for her father’s, the narrator has chosen the latter legacy. However minuscule the fund, self-trust is perhaps more necessary for the artist than for any other calling. “To believe in your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart is true for all men,—that is genius,” said Ralph Waldo Emerson (a presence in Trust) in “Self-Reliance”; and again, “In self-trust all the virtues are comprehended,” he declared in “The American Scholar.” To the narrator of Trust, these precepts bear significant correspondences. To think and feel independently, seeking Sacred Beauty; to follow new gods, pursuing Gnostic knowledge; to believe in her calling, emulating the male Muse’s “cult in himself. . . . The cult of art . . . the cult of experience” (p. 325)—these are the salient features, in the end, of Ozick’s portrait of the artist as a young woman.
Compared with the immense scope and baroque complexity of *Trust*, Ozick’s tales\(^\text{32}\) may seem an anticlimax, as the author herself implies in her recent statement, “I care more for *Trust* than for anything else I have written.”\(^\text{33}\) The tales, however, have been the basis of her reputation—doubtless in part because *Trust* has been out of print—and as the many admiring reviews indicate, they constitute an important achievement in their own right. In her stories Ozick makes a transition from being an “American novelist” to being one of our foremost Jewish American storytellers.

Obviously a collection of short stories cannot be expected to display the coherence or unified focus which we expect to find in a novel. In her three collections Ozick gathers a rather disparate group of writings, ranging from brief sketches to novella-length narratives, in which her literary modes vary from conventional realism to parable and fantasy. To a surprising degree, nonetheless, she imposes a web of coherence upon the stories through her continuous process of “reinvigorating” (a favorite word in her literary criticism) her central themes and obsessions. By imagining radically new sets of characters and dramatic situations and by employing fresh ways of approaching her material—especially in the comic/ironic mood—she extends and deepens her ground themes rather than merely repeats them from one book to another. In the ensuing discourse I hope to trace these thematic patterns through their various artistic mutations, touching lightly on those stories I consider fairly transparent or relatively less important while devoting stronger emphasis to the more substantial or difficult pieces.

The predominant themes in her three later books are familiar to readers of *Trust*, but their interaction now assumes an altogether different profile. The Pan-versus-Moses theme continues to sustain a *basso continuo* presence in the time frame that stretches from “The Pagan Rabbi” (1966) through the Puttermesser-Xanthippe stories of *Levitation* (1982), but this central theme of *Trust* gradually loses importance to two themes which were subordinate in the novel: problems of the artist, particularly the Jewish or female artist; and the exigencies of Jewish identity. This latter theme, relegated to Enoch in *Trust*, eventually emerges as the transcendent issue of the story collections, evoking the author’s deepest emotional and artistic power.

Illustrating the new balance among her triad of ground themes is a brief quantification: of the seven stories in *The Pagan Rabbi*,...
only two make the Pan/Moses dichotomy their central theme, while two others touch on the issue. By comparison, five of the tales focus upon the figure of the artist, and six of the seven amplify the theme of Jewish identity, leaving only "The Dock-Witch" to carry forward the Gentile cultural ambience of _Trust_.

Although the pantheistic element thus seems downgraded from its paramount status in _Trust_, it still rates enough importance to justify making "The Pagan Rabbi" the title story for the whole volume. In this tale the Pan/Moses conflict attains a new intensity, in part because the story is a more concentrated form than the novel, but equally because the adversary ideologies are more clearly drawn: not Tilbeck versus the general modern malaise, but Pan versus orthodox Judaism. Moreover, the conflict now occurs within a single individual, the learned rabbi whose suicide occasions the story.

As in _Trust_, a vital symbol in "The Pagan Rabbi" is the tree which functions as both totem (for Hellenic nature worship) and taboo (for Hebraic forbidden knowledge). Sex and death, the two modes of forbidden knowledge associated with the Semitic myth of The Fall, do in fact pertain to the rabbi's tree: sex, when he couples with the tree's dryad; and death, when he hangs himself from its branches. Yet it is Pan who prevails over Moses in this encounter. Death here becomes (as Walt Whitman called it) a promotion rather than a punishment in the light of the rabbi's pantheistic insight: "The molecules dance inside all forms, and within the molecules dance the atoms, and within the atoms dance still profounder sources of divine vitality. There is nothing that is Dead" (p. 20). From this Spinozan heresy—Spinoza is cited by name by the dryad (p. 32)—arise two intolerable consequences for traditional Judaism. First, the Second Commandment is nullified by the immersion of the Creator in his creation: "Holy life subsists even in the stone, even in the bones of dead dogs and dead men. Hence in God's fecundating Creation there is no possibility of Idolatry" (p. 21). And second, as a final outrage against the Hebraic ethos, the concept of holiness, of being separate from the unclean, becomes meaningless. Even more than Town Island in _Trust_, the setting of "The Pagan Rabbi" is thus befouled with corruption, so that the rabbi's ecstatic sexual union occurs in an environment of "wind-lifted farts" and "civic excrement" created by the city's sewage polluting the nearby seashore (pp. 33, 37). Even so, the vitality of Nature overrides the authority of the Torah. When the Law undertakes direct competition with the senses, claiming to sound "more beautiful than the crickets," to smell "more radiant than the moss," to taste better than clear
water (p. 36), the rabbi on the instant chooses to join his dryad lover, hanging himself from the tree with his prayer shawl. Because the narrator of "The Dock-Witch" is a Gentile, neither the Jewish horror of idolatry nor the ideal of holiness stands in opposition to his pantheistic enticement. So the protagonist, originally a midwestern churchgoer (p. 131), yields immediately and guiltlessly to the impulse which brings him to New York to live within sight of the East River. Here the pagan goddess of Nature is connected, like Tilbeck in Trust, with the sea and pagan Norsemen (her final metamorphosis puts her on the prow of a Viking ship) as well as with the original Canaanite seagoers, the Phoenicians whose tongue she speaks. Between seeing off a shipload of Greeks to their homeland and another vessel packed with orthodox Jews to theirs, the Dock-Witch so affects the narrator's view of nature that even a pair of penguin-sized rats on the dock appear "sacerdotal" to him, "like a pair of priests late for divine service" (p. 147). And as with Tilbeck and the Pagan Rabbi, the speaker's immersion in nature is consummated in a sexual union of insatiable magnitude—"she made me a galley slave, my oar was a log flung into the sea of her" (p. 156).

The hunger for the world's beauty that underlies these extraordinary sexual encounters relates the tales of Pan-worship; to both the theme of Jewish identity and that of the portrait of the artist. An engaging example of all three themes working in concert is "The Butterfly and the Traffic Light," which is not really a tale but a sketch of the artist toying creatively with his (her) material. Here the thematic triad begins to form when a character named Fishbein talks with a young woman about the "insistent sense of recognition" that can attach to so mundane a thing as a street in their small city: "Big Road was different by day and by night, weekday and weekend. Daylight, sunlight, and even rainlight gave everything its shadow, winter and summer, so that every person and every object had its Doppelganger, persistent and hopeless. There was a kind of doubleness that clung to the street, as though one remembered having seen this and this and this before" (p. 213). To see this doubleness is the beginning of metaphor, so that an unneeded traffic light over Big Road becomes, for the young woman, "some sort of religious icon with a red eye and a green eye" (p. 214), and this in turn becomes a new version of the Hellenism/Hebraism dichotomy:

"No, no," he objected, "... A traffic light could never be anything but a traffic light. —What kind of religion would it
be which had only one version of its deity—a whole row of identical icons in every city?"

She considered rapidly. "An advanced religion. I mean a monotheistic one."

"And what makes you certain that monotheism is 'advanced'? On the contrary, little dear! . . . The Greeks and Romans had a god for every personality, the way the Church has a saint for every mood. Savages, Hindus, and Roman Catholics understand all that. Its only the Jews and their imitators who insist on a rigid unitarian God. . . . A little breadth of vision, you see, a little imagination, a little flexibility, I mean—there ought to be room for Zeus and God under one roof. . . . That's why traffic lights won't do for icons! They haven't been conceived in a pluralistic spirit, they're all exactly alike. (p. 215)

Two other metaphors give this sketch a behind-the-scenes candor, the impression of the author's mind disclosing the way it works. One is the butterfly of the title (a metaphor of the finished art work), prettier but less significant than the caterpillar (art in the process of creation): "The caterpillar is uglier, but in him we can regard the better joy of becoming" (p. 217). The other metaphor is that of the immortal city—like Jerusalem, Baghdad, or Athens—mythologized by millennia beyond any sense of utility. America, in this sense, has no cities; and that, we may surmise, is why Town Island is the crucial setting in Trust: it had been hopefully christened Dorp Island a mere three hundred years ago, like Gatsby's Manhattan, by Dutch sailors.

Whereas "The Butterfly and the Traffic Light" creates a positive impression of artistic creativity, two other sketches of the artist render a feminist protest in one instance and a nightmare vision of failure in the other. The feminist satire is "Virility," an attack against male supremacy in art that correlates largely with Ozick's ridicule of "The Testicular Theory of Literature" in her essay, "Women and Creativity: The Demise of the Dancing Dog." So manly has the poet Edmund Gates become, after his meteoric rise to success in "Virility," that his very shape now resembles a "giant lingam" (p. 244) and his reviewers search for appropriate imagery to describe his verses: "The Masculine Principle personified," "Robust, lusty, male," "Seminal and hard." When it turns out that an elderly aunt had actually written the poems, the praises turn to abuse ("Thin feminine art," "A spinster's one-dimensional vision" [p. 266]), and Edmund Gates does penance
for his impersonation by spending his remaining half century going in drag.

If such artistic fraudulence is contemptible, there is one thing even worse: having talent without the strength of character to realize it. In "The Doctor's Wife," Doctor Silver's failure to realize his talent resembles that of Hemingway's persona in "The Snows of Kilimanjaro": "he thought how imperceptibly, how inexorably, temporary accommodation becomes permanence, and one by one he counted his omissions, his cowardices, each of which had fixed him like an invisible cement. . . . At twenty he had endured the stunned emotion of one who senses that he has been singled out for aspiration, for beauty, for awe, for some particularity not yet disclosed. . . . At forty he was still without a history" (pp. 187–88). Apart from Hemingway and the later Henry James, who feared a wasted life ("The Beast in the Jungle" is especially relevant here), one other favorite writer of Ozick's makes a curiously negative contribution to "The Doctor's Wife." The success of Anton Chekhov, another bachelor-doctor-artist like Doctor Silver, stands as a reproach to the latter's arrested development while at the same time it represents something like Harold Bloom's "Anxiety of Influence" thesis. In fact, the story is a perfectly Chekhovian paradigm of waste and futility, vividly illustrating the banality of marriage (a theme carried over from Trust), the illusiveness of happiness, and the human incapacity to achieve or even to formulate a meaningful purpose in life. The Chekhovian tone is especially strong concerning this last motif: "his life now was only a temporary accommodation, he was young, he was preparing for the future, he would beget progeny, he would discover a useful medical instrument, he would succor the oppressed, . . . he would be saved" (pp. 182–83).

In the end Doctor Silver preserves not a scrap of his life in art—in fact he has not lived—nor does he even manage to define what mode of art might suit his need. Bewildered by the chaos of it all, he leaves the capturing of his own time to his brother-in-law, a commercial photographer, while he finds his secret vision of beauty, ironically, in a photograph of the young Chekhov standing near a woman who becomes Silver's imaginary wife, in a final Chekhovian lapse into protective illusion.

The remaining two tales in The Pagan Rabbi also portray artistic failure, but their ultimate concern is Jewish identity. Both "The Suitcase" and "Envy; or, Yiddish in America" define the Jewish ethos by contriving a memorable confrontation between Jew and Gentile. In "The Suitcase," the adversaries at first seem
totally assimilated into the larger American society. The Gentile, formerly a pilot in the Kaiser’s air force, has lived in America so long that he “no longer thought of himself as German” (p. 103). Apart from naming his son Gottfried—he later wishes it were John—his only connection to his native land has been a sister whose eleven-year-old daughter died in the bombing of Cologne. The Jew is Genevieve, a brilliant woman who has become mentor and mistress to the German’s son, though both lovers are married to others. She too has become assimilated, preferring the art world of New York to her dull Jewish husband (a C.P.A.) and four daughters back in Indianapolis. For her Gentile lover, a painter, she has even culled through German literature, selecting comments from Beethoven, Mann, and Goethe for Gottfried’s exhibition program. (The program features a talk by one “Creighton MacDougal” of The Partisan Review, a pretentious fraud who gives Ozick occasion for some wicked satire concerning a certain prominent critic.)

When these two characters meet—the painter’s father and mistress—their layers of assimilation rapidly peel away, exposing the ethnic granite at the core of each personality. Her innate Jewishness rises to the mention of Carl Gustav Jung as “some famous Jewish psychiatrist” (p. 107), to which she replies “He isn’t a Jew. . . . That’s why he went on staying alive” (p. 108). The father’s ethnicity thereupon reacts in a surge of defensiveness: “He knew what she meant him to see: she scorned Germans, she thought him a Nazi sympathizer even now, an anti-Semite, an Eichmann. She was the sort who, twenty years after Hitler’s war, would not buy a Volkswagen. . . . Who could be blamed for History? It did not take a philosopher . . . to see that History was a Force-in-Itself, like Evolution” (p. 109).

Of course he is not a bad fellow. All he wants, as a German, is to forget history, which is exactly what she, as a Jew, cannot permit. Ostensibly he gets the best of her by breaking up the miscegenetic dalliance and sending Genevieve back to her Jewish family. But the final victory is hers. At the end of the tale, when Genevieve’s purse is reported stolen, he compulsively proves himself innocent by opening his suitcase and demanding that she search it. It is a paradigm of his much larger and unanswerable need for innocence, brought to exposure by his remark that tomorrow he sails abroad:

“To Germany?”
“Not Germany. Sweden. I admire Scandinavia. . . .”
"I bet you say Sweden to mislead. I bet you're going to Germany, why shouldn't you? I don't say there's anything wrong with it, why shouldn't you go to Germany?"

"Not Germany, Sweden. The Swedes were innocent in the war, they saved so many Jews. I swear it, not Germany. It was the truckmen [who stole your purse], I swear it."

(pp. 125, 126)

A similar confrontation of Jew versus Gentile concludes "Envy; or Yiddish in America," where the aging Yiddish poet Edelshtein gathers together the familiar thematic triad: problems of the artist, Jewish identity, and the pagan enticement. What defeats the artist in this story is not lack of will or talent but entrapment within a minority culture which is dying from worldwide loss of interest within modern Jewry. Edelshtein has found that even the nation of Israel has no use for "the language of the bad little interval between Canaan and now" (p. 48), and with Yiddish eradicated from Europe by the Holocaust, there remains only America as a site where the Yiddish culture might survive. Here, however, to his dismay, the younger generation of American Jews actually refers to its elders as "you Jews" while disdaining the Jewish obsession with history as "a waste" (p. 92). Meanwhile, America interprets Jewish culture through novelists who were "spawned in America, pogroms a rumor, . . . history a vacuum. . . . They were reviewed and praised, and were considered Jews, and knew nothing" (p. 41).

Yet Edelshtein himself exhibits telltale signs of cultural betrayal. Emanating from the same reflex which makes him envy "natural religion, stones, stars, body" (p. 86), his dream life hovers about Canaanite temptations, including homoerotic feelings for Alexei, a friend of his boyhood, and similar lads spotted in the subway: "The love of a man for a boy. Why not confess it? Is it against the nature of man to rejoice in beauty?" (p. 80). And his lapse into wishing "he had been born a Gentile" (p. 68) must mitigate the acculturation he finds blameworthy in others. Moreover, the Gentile/pagan preference for flesh over spirit—"Our books are holy, to them their bodies are holy," "The Pagan Rabbi" had said (p. 12) —gains new appeal when measured against the decrepitude of the Yiddish speakers. Between them, Edelshtein and Baumzweig constitute a catalog of decay featuring a dripping nose, a urine-stained fly "now and then seeping" (p. 9), "Mucus the sheen of the sea" (p. 58), "thighs . . . full of picked sores" (p. 76), and a recurrent "vomitous belch."

The status of Yiddish in America seems analogous to this de-
crepit condition, but in the end it is not Yiddish so much as Jewish history which Edelshtein struggles to preserve from oblivion. Like the face-off between Jew and German in "The Suitcase," Edelshtein's confrontation with the Christian evangelist focuses upon a vein of history that the Gentile prefers to dismiss. To Edelshtein's list of historic villains—"Pharoah, Queen Isabella [who expelled the Jews from Spain], Haman, that pogromchick King Louis that they call in history Saint, Hitler, Stalin"—the evangelist responds with the sort of fancy that Leo Baeck classified as Romantic Religion: "You're a Jew? . . . Accept Jesus as your Saviour and you shall have Jerusalem restored" (p. 99). As in "The Suitcase," the thrust and parry of dialogue quickly strikes ethnic bedrock, Edelshtein placing his adversary among his list of villains—"Amalekite! Titus! Nazi!"—when the majority culture bares its teeth in familiar fashion: "You people are cowards, you never even tried to defend yourselves. . . . When you were in Europe every nation despised you. When you moved to take over the Middle East the Arab Nation, spic faces like your own, your very own blood-kin, began to hate you. . . . You kike, you Yid" (pp. 99–100).

By way of transition to the next book, it should be noted that Edelshtein's closing outcry, "On account of you I have no translator!" obscures a fundamental precept stated earlier in the story: that Yiddish is untranslatable. Even without the indifference of young Jews and the contempt of Gentiles to contend with, Edelshtein's poetry would remain hopelessly incommunicative to a non-Yiddish readership:

The gait—the prance, the hobble—of Yiddish is not the same as the gait of English. . . . Mamaloshen doesn't produce Wastelands. No alienation, no nihilism, no dadaism. With all the suffering, no smashing! NO INCOHERENCE! . . . The same biblical figure, with exactly the same history, once he puts on a name from King James, COMES OUT A DIFFERENT PERSON! (pp. 81, 82)

In her preface to Bloodshed, Ozick amplifies this statement with an exposition of her own problems with the English language: "A language, like a people, has a history of ideas. . . . English is a Christian language. When I write English, I live in Christendom. But if my postulates are not Christian postulates, what then?" (p. 9). The specific story to which she relates this problem is the next one we shall consider, "Usurpation (Other People's Stories)" in Bloodshed. Having written this Preface, she says, solely from
frustration over a critic’s comment that this story is unintelligible, she explains why it may have seemed so: “There is no way to hear the oceanic amplitudes of the Jewish Idea in any English word or phrase. ‘Judaism’ is a Christian term. . . . English . . . cannot be expected to naturalize the life-giving grandeur of the Hebrew word—yet how much more than word it is!—‘Torah.’ . . . So it came to me what the difficulty was: I had written ‘Usurpa-tion’ in the language of a civilization that cannot imagine its thesis” (p. 10).

As these fragments of the Preface indicate, Bloodshed is the book in which Ozick most markedly stakes her claim to being a Jewish author—more profoundly Jewish, I should say, than the more celebrated names like Saul Bellow and Philip Roth. All four of the stories in Bloodshed take as their governing theme the betrayal of Jewish identity. Her thematic triad remains intact, however, in that the appeal of paganism and the portrayal of the artist maintain substantial importance as ancillary issues.

With its artist-persona and its renewal of the Pan-versus-Moses conflict, “Usurpation (Other People’s Stories)” is the entry in Bloodshed that best illustrates this continuing thematic interplay. Subserving this portrait of the artist mired in self-conflict are two issues the author discussed at length in her essay “Judaism & Harold Bloom”: Bloom’s “anxiety of influence” thesis, here taking the form of writer’s envy; and the conflict between Judaism—specifically the Second Commandment—and art. This latter question evokes the most forgivable and yet—to the author—the most worrisome instance of cultural subversion in the volume. As her Preface states: “the worry is this: whether Jews ought to be story-tellers! . . . There is one God, and the Muses are not Jewish but Greek. . . . Does the Commandment against idols warn us even against ink?”

In the light of this question, the narrator’s usurpation of other people’s stories—here referring to Bernard Malamud’s “The Silver Crown”—shortly becomes a minor issue. In this most openly confessional of Ozick’s stories, the essential usurpation encompasses a much larger prize: the appropriation of an alien culture, which alone can make storytelling permissible: “Magic—I admit it—is what I lust after. . . . I am drawn not to the symbol, but to the absolute magic act. I am drawn to what is forbidden” (p. 134). Because “the Jews have no magic,” she goes on, “I long to be one of the ordinary peoples . . . oh, why can we not have a magic God like other peoples?” (p. 135).

The answer to that question comes through another usurpation, borrowed from a would-be artist’s manuscript. In it the narrator
finds the concept of the writer as “self-idolator, . . . so audacious and yet so ingenious that you will fool God and live” (p. 141). The writer who has done this is Tchernikhovsky, a Jew who has lapsed into “pantheism and earth-worship . . . pursuit of the old gods of Canaan” (p. 144). Despite this apostasy, which culminates in his “most famous poem, the one to the god Apollo” (p. 143), he ascends after death into the Jewish paradise, where the narrator glimpses Tchernikhovsky wickedly at ease in Zion, hobnobbing with his pagan gods, savoring his faunlike pleasures, and ignoring with impunity his Jewish obligations of worship: “Tchernikhovsky eats nude at the table of the nude gods, clean-shaven now, his limbs radiant, his youth restored, his sex splendidly erect . . . ; he eats without self-restraint from the celestial menu, and when the Sabbath comes . . . as usual he avoids the congregation of the faithful before the Footstool and the Throne” (p. 178). The story’s last sentence, however, makes it clear that though he could fool the Jewish God, neither he nor any other Jew can ever fool the gods of that alien culture in praise of which he had written his poetry. They will always know he is not one of theirs: “Then the taciturn little Canaanite idols call him, in the language of the spheres, kike.”

If “Usurpation” portrays the least blameworthy betrayal of the Jewish heritage, “An Education” treats the most blameworthy, which may explain why it emanates the most sardonic tone of these four stories and is the most immediately comprehensible. Written about the time Trust was completed, it extends several of the novel’s themes, as is evident in the heroine’s (Una’s) initial interest in the classics (she earns two graduate degrees) and her ultimate disinterest in marriage (she refuses to marry her lover). In the opening scene, a Latin class, Una is called to explain the genitive case—a term that becomes a key to the story, both as a description of marriage and as a foreshadowing of Una’s total possession by a singularly irresponsible married couple.

That married couple, in turn, illustrates the central theme of the story, the cultural vacuum which ensues when they try to integrate themselves within the Gentile majority. Having changed their name from Chaims (“But isn’t that Jewish?”) to Chimes (“Like what a bell does”), they further de-Judaize themselves by eating ham, naming their daughter “Christina,” and making a joke of a Holy Ghost/Holocaust pun (p. 80). The retaliation for this betrayal of their heritage comes when Clement Chimes, a would-be artist, is unable to progress beyond the title page of his masterwork, “Social Cancer/A Diagnosis in Verse/And Anger.” Leaving aside his lack of talent, we may read this story as the
obverse of "Yiddish; or, Envy in America." Contrary to Edelshtein, who fails because his art is rooted in a dying minority culture, Chimes fails because, having renounced his Jewish birthright, he faces the dilemma of trying to write literature without any cultural roots whatever.

Whereas "An Education" presents an essentially comic view of Jewish deracination, "A Mercenary" projects a tragic instance of this governing theme—tragic in the old sense of portraying grievous waste. Beginning rather shockingly with an epigraph from Joseph Goebbels ("Today we are all expressionists—men who want to make the world outside themselves take the form of their lives within themselves"), this tale applies Goebbels's remark to three characters representing the civilizations of three different continents. The two main characters have in some sense exchanged birthrights: Lushinski, a native of Poland, by becoming the United Nations representative of a small black African country; Morris, his assistant, by submerging his African past under a European veneer acquired at the University of Oxford. A third character, Louisa, Lushinski's mistress in New York, is American and hence too innocent either to require or to comprehend a multiple identity; but she, like the others, follows Goebbels's expressionist standard insofar as she prefers her innocent inner picture of the world to the reality defined by actual history.

Lushinski is the "Mercenary" of the title, an eloquent "Paid Mouthpiece" for his African dictator both at the U.N. and in television talk shows featuring "false 'hosts' contriving false conversation" (p. 20). In his latter role he makes a televised confession of murder, but he never tells anyone who his victim was—not even Morris or Louisa. Instead he tells his audience of other violence: how the Germans took Warsaw on his sixth birthday, causing his wealthy parents to buy him a place with a peasant family, after which the parents, though Aryan in looks and manners, were identified as Jews and shot. It is not very entertaining material, commercially speaking, and after a commercial break, the mercenary in the man rises to meet the mercenary medium; he makes his tale out to be a jest, a fabrication to entertain his listeners: "All this was comedy: Marx Brothers, . . . the audience is elated by its own disbelief. . . . Lushinski is only a story-teller" (p. 29).

In thus making a travesty of his tragic past, Lushinski is not solely interested in commercial advantage; he mainly wants to exorcise the self he was, the child who "had survived the peasants who baited and blistered and beat and hunted him. One of them had hanged him from the rafter of a shed by the wrists. He was four sticks hanging" (p. 37). Telling Louisa he is "the century's
one free man," he explains: "every survivor is free. . . . The future can invent nothing worse" (p. 37). Having chosen to use his freedom to establish a new identity, he has largely succeeded. Though "born to a flag-stoned Warsaw garden," he now feels himself "native to these mammalian perfumes" of African flowers, in token of which he long ago immersed his being in this culture's pagan hedonism ("these round brown mounds of the girls he pressed down under the trees" [p. 16]). To underscore further his freedom from that Jewish child in his past, he has taken a crypto-German mistress in America: "They spoke of her as a German countess—her last name was preceded by a 'von' . . . though her accent had a fake melody either Irish or Swedish" (p. 21). At the same time he has done all in his power to offend Jews everywhere: "Always he was cold to Jews. . . . In the Assembly he turned his back on the ambassador from Israel. . . . All New York Jews in the gallery" (p. 41).

Yet the Jewish child is not wholly expungeable. For all his sophistication, words like "peasant" and "Jew" evoke visible fear in Lushinski; and most important, he reveals that telltale sign of Jewish identity, a passion for Jewish history. The history in question—Raoul Hilberg's monumental work, *The Destruction of the European Jews*—opens a breach between Lushinski and his mistress, who sees no purpose in this masochistic morbidity:


. . . He crashed down beside her an enormous volume: it was called *The Destruction*. She opened it and saw tables and figures and asterisks; she saw train-schedules. It was all dry, dry. 

(p. 38)

Paradoxically, his affinity for Jewish history has only strengthened his need for exorcism, as his Gentile mistress correctly infers: "You hate being part of the Jews. You hate that. . . . Practically nobody knows you're a Jew. . . . I never think of it" (p. 40).

In the remainder of the tale, Lushinski accelerates his flight from his Jewish past by becoming "a dervish of travel" as he speaks about Africa on the television and lecture circuit and by cementing his ties to his African "homeland." Morris, the real African, meanwhile moves in a direction exactly opposite to that of Lushinski, gradually shedding his European veneer so as to recover his tribal birthright: "the dear land itself, the customs, the rites, the cousins, the sense of family" (p. 33). Pushed in this direction by his revulsion against the Tarzan movies—"Was he
[Morris] no better than that lout Tarzan, investing himself with a chatter not his own? How long could the ingested, the invented, the foreignness endure" (p. 46)—Morris tries to push Lushinski likewise. From New York, "a city of Jews" (p. 49), he sends a letter to the seacoast villa in Africa where Lushinski is enjoying his employer's gratitude. The letter describes a Japanese terrorist, jailed for slaughtering Jews in an air terminal, who in his prison has converted to Judaism. Lushinski reads the message as an unmasking: "It meant a severing. Morris saw him as an impersonator. . . . Morris had called him Jew" (p. 51).

Thus a familiar pattern recurs: a Jew who tries mightily to be assimilated is in the end forced back into his native Jewishness. Like Tchernikhovsky in "Usurpation," whom the Canaanite gods called kike though he had fooled the God of the Jews, Lushinski will finally be pronounced Jew no matter how far he might flee into the hinterland. As the tale ends, the word Jew—abetted by the memory-evoking colors of his surroundings—thrusts him away from the pleasures of his new country and toward the land of his birth; and thence to a closing revelation: the name, in the last two lines, of the man Lushinski had killed and buried in Warsaw:

And in Africa, in a white villa on the blue coast, the Prime Minister's gaudy pet, on a blue sofa . . . smoking and smoking, under the breath of the scented trees, under the shadow of the bluish snow, under the blue-black pillars of the Polish woods, . . . under the rafters, under the stone-white hanging stars of Poland—Lushinski.

Against the stones and under the snow. (pp. 51-52)

Up to this point the stories in Bloodshed have portrayed the deracination of Jewish identity in terms of art ("Usurpation"), sociology ("An Education"), and politics ("A Mercenary"). In her title story, "Bloodshed"—and doubtless this is why it is the title story—Ozick brings forward her most momentous mode of deracination: the theological. In this instance the theology does not involve a conflict between Judaism and some alien system (e.g., Pan versus Moses); rather, its focus lies wholly within a Jewish matrix. Cleared thus of goys and pagans, the narrative measures a New Yorker named Bleilip, a middling sort of Jewish American, against "the town of the hasidim," an Orthodox village within range of Bleilip's neighborhood that is inhabited almost entirely by survivors or children of survivors of the death camps. Ostensibly, he has come hither to visit his cousin, but in reality he is in flight from a despair so deep that he has been toying with the
idea of suicide—toying, literally, in that he carries in one pocket a toy gun ("to get used to it. The feel of the thing" [p. 70]) and in another pocket a real pistol. Thus possessed by the Sickness unto Death, Bleilip has undertaken this sojourn among the faithful as a last feeble grasp for beliefs by which to live.

Fundamentally, the issue in "Bloodshed" is the most crucial dichotomy within the Judaic ethos: the contradiction between sustaining unbearable suffering, as predicated by Jewish history, and the "L'Chaim" or "To Life!" principle, which holds that life is always worthful. The cause of Bleilip's despair is his enclosure within the far side of this contradiction, so that his religious belief fails in the face of recent Jewish history—the bloodshed of the story's title. Regarding the Holocaust, even the Orthodox rebbe, a survivor of Buchenwald, apparently shares Bleilip's sick-soul condition. At worship he describes the appalling transference wrought by that monstrous event upon the ancient idea of the scapegoat: "For animals we in our day substitute men. . . . [W]e have the red cord around our throats, we were in villages, they drove us into camps, we were in trains, they drove us into showers of poison. . . . [E]veryone on earth became a goat or a bullock, . . . all our prayers are bleats and neighs on the way to a forsaken altar. . . . Little fathers! How is it possible to live?" (pp. 65, 66-67). Now when it most seems that the rebbe is Bleilip's alter ego, he turns on Bleilip: "Who are you?" (p. 67). To Bleilip's answer—"A Jew. Like yourselves. One of you"—the rebbe retorts: "Presumption! Atheist, devourer! For us there is the Most High, joy, life. . . . But you! A moment ago I spoke your own heart for you, emes [true]? . . . You believe the world is in vain, emes?" (p. 67). This exchange leads to the rebbe's final divination: "Empty your pockets!" Even before the guns come to view, the rebbe—a death camp survivor speaking to a New York intellectual—says the key sentence: "Despair must be earned" (p. 69).

Other Jewish writers have threaded forth a similar response to the Suffering/L'Chaim dichotomy—Saul Bellow's Herzog is a masterly example—but Ozick remains distinctive for her theological rather than philosophical orientation. In "Bloodshed" her confrontation of Jewish opposites concludes in a kind of theological dialectic. Bleilip, the hater of bloodshed, admits that "it is characteristic of believers sometimes not to believe" (p. 72). What they hold in common, as Jews, at last takes precedence: first, a belief, if only "now and then," in "the Holy One. . . . Even you [Bleilip] now and then apprehend the Most High?"; and second, the blood-kinship, including the most dreadful meanings of
the term, that the Most High has seen fit to impose upon His people. The rebbe’s last words, “Then you are as bloody as any-
one,” become Bleilip’s final badge of Jewish identity in this most severely Jewish of the book’s four tales. They also make a con-
venient bridge from this title story of Bloodshed to the title story of Levitation, where Jewish history again transforms bloodshed into a singular mark of Jewish identity.

Levitation: Five Fictions is a collection which ventures into fantasy, fable, and allegory. Beneath these novel tactics, however, Ozick’s earlier triad of ground themes continues to inform the new book. Behind her fresh slate of characters facing new dramat-
ic situations in widely different settings, the essential issues re-
main the familiar concerns with Jewish identity (“Levitation”),
the pagan enticement (“Freud’s Room,” the Puttermesser-Xan-
thippe stories), and the struggles of the artist (“Shots”).

In her title story, Ozick tries a new tactic: adopting the point of
view of a Christian minister’s daughter. Ozick’s task is eased,
however, by the woman’s desire to marry “Out of [her] tradi-
tion,” which makes her eligible for marriage to Feingold, a Jew
who “had always known he did not want a Jewish wife” (p. 3). A
Psalm her father recites from the pulpit leads her to settle the
issue: she will become “an Ancient Hebrew.”

After her conversion, the marriage seems unusually companion-
able; they are both novelists, as well as “Hebrews,” and they love
their professional intimacy: “Sometimes . . . it seemed to them
that they were literary friends and lovers, like George Eliot and
George Henry Lewes” (p. 4). As writers, they share a view of
literature that makes them feel “lucky in each other. . . . Lucy
said, ‘At least we have the same premises’ ” (p. 6). The central
point of “Levitation,” however, is that they do not have the same
premises—as Hebrews. Whereas her concept of “Ancient Hebrew”
leads inevitably to Jesus as her stopping point, his concept of
“Hebrew” begins in the Middle Ages and ends in World War II: which is to say, Feingold is a Jew, not a Hebrew. As such, he
is obsessed with Jewish, not biblical, history: “Feingold’s novel
—the one he was writing now—was about [the] survivor of a mas-
sacre of Jews in the town of Estella in Spain in 1328. From morn-
ing to midnight he hid under a pile of corpses, until a ‘compas-
sionate knight’ (this was the language of the history Feingold re-
lied on) plucked him out and took him home to tend his wounds”
(pp. 4–5).

When they throw a party to advance their professional interests,
this dichotomy between “Jew” and “Hebrew” widens to Grand
Canyon proportions. To Lucy’s dismay, her husband insists upon
pouring out his obsessions upon the company: "Feingold wanted to talk about . . . the crime of the French nobleman Draconet, a proud Crusader, who in the . . . year 1247 arrested all the Jews of the province of Vienne, castrated the men, and tore off the breasts of the women" (p. 11). Eventually, she is driven to cut him off: "There he was, telling about . . . how in London, in 1279, Jews were torn to pieces by horses. . . . How in 1285, in Munich, a mob burned down a synagogue. . . . Lucy stuck a square of chocolate cake in his mouth to shut him up" (pp. 12-13).

There is one guest, however, who does not want Feingold to shut up: a man who updates Jewish history. A Holocaust survivor, he describes in a whisper the slaughter at (apparently) Babi Yar, gripping the other listening Jews with hypnotic power but leaving Lucy alone and bewildered: "Horror; sadism; corpses. As if . . . hundreds of Crucifixions were all happening at once . . . bulldozers shoveling those same sticks of skeletons" (p. 14). As the whisper rasped on, the "room began to lift. It ascended . . . levitating on the little grains of the refugee's whisper. . . . They were being kidnapped, these Jews, by a messenger from the land of the dead" (p. 15). Eventually, they levitate beyond her range of hearing, rapt in their necrotic visions; and she is free at last to define her revulsion: "A morbid cud-chewing. Death and death and death. . . . 'Holocaust,' someone caws dimly from above; she knows it must be Feingold. . . . Lucy decides it is possible to become jaded by atrocity. She is bored by the shootings and the gas and the camps. . . . They are tiresome as prayer" (p. 19).

As the Jews soar up and away, she comes to a realization. Essentially she is not Jewish nor Ancient Hebrew nor Christian: she is a pagan, a believer in the Dionysian gods of the earth. What evokes this insight is her recollection of Italian peasants dancing, shouting "Old Hellenic syllables," and ringing bells like those "the priests used to beat in the temple of Minerva" (p. 17). In this scene "she sees what is eternal: before there was the Madonna there was Venus, Aphrodite . . . Astarte. . . . [T]he dances are seething. . . . Nature is their pulse. . . . Lucy sees how she has abandoned nature, how she lost the true religion on account of the God of the Jews" (p. 18).

Of the three recurring themes in "Levitation," two—paganism and Jewish identity—are treated seriously, and one—the Feingolds as artists—is handled with levity. (An additional pun underscores the priestly tribe of Levi in old Israel.) In "Shots," the portrayal of the artist is the central theme, calling up Ozick's most serious intentions. The art form in "Shots" is photography—a subject she has touched upon with great sensitivity elsewhere (see her "Edith
Wharton" essay, e.g.)—but it shortly becomes an analogue for her own calling, a fable of the writer. The fable ranges into allegory along the way, but with the saving virtue of being meaningful both on a symbolic plane and on the level of immediate realism. The allegory begins with the motif of infatuation, initially with the art form itself. What the camera (or literature) offers its devotee is the power to raise the dead ("Call it necrophilia. . . . Dead faces draw me" [p. 39]), to preserve youth ("time as stasis . . . the time . . . of Keats's Grecian Urn"), to touch eternity. For the cam erawoman/narrator of "Shots," these powers are summed up in two images. One, from her childhood, is an ancient photo of "the Brown Girl," showing the face in youth of a patient at the nearby Home for the Elderly III—which face has since become one with the institution's "brainless ancients, rattling their china teeth and . . . rolling . . . their mad old eyes inside nearly visible crania" (p. 140). The other image is her own handiwork, a happenstantial filming of an assassination that blinks from life to death: "I calculated my aim, . . . shot once, shot again, and was amazed to see blood spring out of a hole in his neck" (p. 43).

But the infatuation grows beyond her embrace of a magic box. While on assignment to cover a public symposium, she becomes enthralled by one of its speakers, a professor of South American history. If Ozick's mode in this story were realism, doubtless the subject would be Jewish history; for her portrayal of the artist, it does not matter. What does matter is the photographer's compulsive immersion in the professor's subject, which brings her into open rivalry with his wife, Verity. Though she is a perfect wife, a paradigm of multiple abilities, "He didn't like her. . . . His whole life was wrong. He was a dead man . . . ten times deader than [the assassin's victim]" (p. 47).

Here the symbolism becomes complicated. If Verity (Conventional Realism) is unable to bring her husband out of a condition similar to rigor mortis, she nonetheless has little to fear from her photographer-rival, who has her own handicaps. Though she gets deeply into Sam's sphere (as Verity cannot), and though she does revitalize him, hers must at best be a partial claim on his favor: she (Art, Imagination) may be History's off-hours paramour; Verity is his lawful and permanent companion. For all their affinities, the ways of Art and History are not finally compatible. "You really have to wait," she tells him; "What's important is the waiting" (p. 52). But her mode of perception is untranslatable: "I wanted to explain to him, how, between the exposure and the solution, history comes into being, but telling that would make me bleed,
like a bullet in the neck” (the assassin’s victim had been a “simultaneous translator” [p. 53]).

Like so many other Ozick tales, “Shots” ends in a flare of combat. Verity and her historian-husband, for their part, overcome the narrator by dressing her in archaic brown clothes, making her a “Period piece” (in Verity’s phrasing). The period piece cannot resist this inevitability; eventually even the artist must submit to time and history. “I am already thirty-six years old, and tomorrow I will be forty-eight,” she says (p. 56), and thereby completes a circle: “I’m the Brown Girl in the pocket of my blouse. I reek of history” (p. 56). But still she registers a final dominance of art over history. With all the intensity of the sex drive, she captures the image of her adversary for eternity: “I catch up my camera . . . my ambassador of desire, my secret house with its single shutter, my chaste aperture. . . . I shoot into their heads, the white harp behind. Now they are exposed. Now they will stick forever” (p. 57).

Apart from “Freud’s Room,” a speculation about the “hundreds of those strange little gods” that Freud collected, the remainder of _Levitation_ is mostly fantasy in the comic/satiric mode. Over half the book traces the adventures of an urbanite named Ruth Puttermann—fortyish, single, possessing “one of those Jewish faces with a vaguely Oriental cast” (p. 23), devoutly loyal to New York, victim of job discrimination, and so hungrily intellectual that her dream of Eden is an eternal reading binge: “She reads anthropology, zoology, physical chemistry, philosophy, . . . about quarks, about primate sign language, . . . what Stonehenge meant. Puttermesser . . . will read at last . . . all of Balzac, all of Dickens, all of Turgeniev and Dostoevski, . . . and the whole _Faerie Queene_ and every line of _The Ring and the Book_ . . . at last, at last!” (p. 33).

Clearly Puttermesser is in some ways an alter ego of her maker, a role she expands upon in the dozen sections making up the “Puttermesser and Xanthippe” narrative. This sustained excursion into fantasy describes Puttermesser’s creation of her own alter ego, the golem Xanthippe. This delightful creature, made of earth and breathed into life through the speaking of the Name, has to be dissolved into the earth again in the end because of her uncontrollable sexual hunger. Wearing a toga (p. 136), or a “sari brilliant with woven flowers” (p. 141), Xanthippe the Jewish golem elides into a Greek sex goddess risen from earth; as such, she gives a new twist to Ozick’s old Hellenism/Hebraism dichotomy. Here our female Pan and Moses work in harmony, as it were, with Put-
termesser using the golem's magic to effect a Mosaic transformation of New York City. Elected mayor, she rids the city of its crime, ugliness, and debt: "Everyone is at work. Lovers apply to the City Clerk for marriage licenses. The Bureau of Venereal Disease Control has closed down. The ex-pimps are learning computer skills... The City is at peace" (p. 135). But predictably, the harmony of Jewish and Greek gods is short-lived. Succumbing to the unruliest of gods ("Eros had entered Gracie Mansion" [p. 138]), Xanthippe becomes Puttermesser's adversary, consuming the mayor's entire slate of city officers in her sexual fire; and when the golem returns to the earth, her magic goes with her, leaving the city in its normal ruined condition. With Puttermesser's closing outcry—"O lost New York!... O lost Xanthippe!" (p. 158)—the book as a whole attains a circular structure: it began with a levitation and ends with a collapse back to ordinary reality.

Postscript: An Appreciation

In concluding this essay, my chief regret is that even in so generous an allotment of pages as I have had here, it has not been possible to render any proper appreciation to the continuous execution of Ozick's art—the line by line, scene by scene, page by page vivacity of imagination and vigor of style. If we postulate that the "scene" in fiction corresponds to the image in poetry, we may say that Ozick's interplay of fictional devices consistently develops scenes answering to Ezra Pound's Imagist Manifesto of 1913: they "transmit an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time." The pagan motifs converging into the night of Tilbeck's apotheosis; the Pagan Rabbi's breathtaking consummation of love with the dryad; Puttermesser chanting her beloved golem back to a pile of mud; Tchernikhovsky insolently at ease in Zion; Lushinski in Africa contemplating his buried self in Warsaw; the many dramatic verbal battles rendered with a perfect ear for speech patterns: Edelshtein versus the evangelist, Bleilip versus the rebbe, German versus Jew in "The Suitcase"—such scenes bespeak a gift of the first order of talent. Even if not outstandingly abundant in the fashion of Joyce Carol Oates or Saul Bellow, Ozick's stream of creativity has been outstandingly pure.

Although her ensconement within a minority subculture may initially seem to limit her appeal to a larger audience, I (though not Jewish) have found that the obstacles to understanding her work are little to do with her Jewish materials. They result, rather, from her willful adherence to basic aesthetic principles. A holdover from the Modern Period—the Age of Eliot, Faulkner,
Joyce—she is no more inclined to simplify her complex art, so as to ease her reader's task, than she is to falsify her view of reality, so as to thrive in the marketplace. Her Jewish heritage, for the most part, is not more constractive than Hawthorne's or Faulkner's regionalism.

What matters in the end is the imaginative power to elevate local materials toward universal and timeless significance. By that standard, I judge Ozick's work to be memorably successful. Her variety and consistent mastery of styles; her lengthening caravan of original and unforgettably individualized characters; her eloquent dramatization through these characters of significant themes and issues; her absorbing command of dialogue and narrative structure; her penetrating and independent intellect undergirding all she writes—these characteristics of her art perform a unique service for her subject matter, extracting from her Jewish heritage a vital significance unlike that transmitted by any other writer. In the American tradition, Cynthia Ozick significantly enhances our national literature by so rendering her Jewish culture.

Duke University
Durham, North Carolina

Notes


6. Ibid.


8. Ibid., p. 151.


16. Ozick to Strandberg, Letter, 14 January 1982. See also “Judaism and Harold Bloom,” p. 44.
17. “Judaism and Harold Bloom,” p. 44. My ensuing quotations in this paragraph are from this same essay, pp. 47, 44, 49, 51, and 48.
29. This “mandarin” and “lapidary” style takes hold in the book’s first sentence, in which we recognize—on second reading—a thick cluster of later themes and motifs: a rite of passage (graduation), “waiting parents” (anticipating Tilbeck’s role), the clean versus the dirty (white shoes held aloft from the mud), the narrator’s alienated condition (the “single, lost, unconnected” call of the bugle), her Hamlet-like revulsion against nature (the sky’s “sickened blue maw”), and her buried sexual instinct (the sun’s heat penetrating her gown).
34. “Women and Creativity.”