

FRAMING QUESTIONS: CYNTHIA OZICK'S 'SHOTS'

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Abstract

The philosophical (and stern) divide between the Hellenic and Hebraic, especially in relation to aesthetics and ethics, is what critics of Cynthia Ozick's fiction so often focus on. Yet I will argue that in her short story, 'Shots', Cynthia Ozick's passion for the Judaic collective memory and moral consciousness has created a character whose principal life's work, the production of visual images, rejects such a facile exiling of beauty and visual aesthetics to the realm of the pagan. For this protagonist, a photographer, sees herself as a creator who is not only not a mere maker of idols, a trafficker in vanity, but is rather a seeker, a critical eye, a woman attempting to understand the world both ethically and aesthetically through the interpretation of what she finds in her viewfinder.

I

IN THE Second Commandment of the ten received by Moses, God warns Israel: do not make or worship graven images resembling anything in heaven or the natural world. This prohibition is a familiar one. It is the reason synagogues are devoid of stained glass scenes of Adam and Eve. It is why there are few frescoes of Abraham and his family. It explains the absence of triptychs documenting the exodus from Egypt, of 'Jewish' sculptures honoring the great kings, David and Solomon. All these potentially dramatic images are rendered exclusively in words. The Second Commandment raises the question of what constitutes a Jewish visual aesthetics: does it exist; can it, given these restrictive prohibitions, and if so, what is its programme, its parameters; what actually constitutes transgression?

Cynthia Ozick's work, as a whole, is not only concerned with aesthetics, but is specifically engaged in the struggle to define the relationship between aesthetics and ethics. How does an artist, some of her narratives ask, manage to create objects of beauty, inclusive of literature, in the shadow of the Second Commandment? How does one counter the numbing, or dehumanising, effect, she claims, idol worship inspires in adherents, 'crush[ing] the capacity for pity'?¹ In her short story, 'Shots', Ozick has created a character who, by dint of being a photographer, has animated these questions and captured in

her lens what can be construed as a Jewish interpretation on the creation of 'graven images'. This portrait of the artist counters the putative dangers of idolatry.

Though it would seem apparent that the continued view of the creation of beauty and art as a pagan, and decidedly non-Hebraic, concern is false, this is precisely the critical lens through which many critics view Ozick's fiction.² Ozick herself, in an essay addressed to Harold Bloom, protests his 'implicit claim that paganism—i.e. anti-Judaism—is the ultimate ground for the making of poetry'.³ A more thoughtful reading of her work reveals that the binary opposition of Pagan versus Judaic is too simplistic a governor for this complex engagement of ideas and civilisations. This is especially so in a world whose borders, it must be acknowledged, have always been osmotic and where cultural borrowing, or usurpation⁴ to employ a term Ozick uses frequently, is inevitable.

The very Biblical portion in which Moses descends from Mt. Sinai, tablets of law in hand, is called *Yitro*, the name of Moses' Midianite father-in-law. It was Yitro who suggested that his son-in-law institute a system of judges who could meet the people and give counsel. Moses would then be free to attend to the business of leading the nation. This decentralisation of power, the reliance on judges, who in later centuries would become rabbis, to run the day-to-day legal and ethical affairs of the nation, is fundamental to an understanding of Judaism. Privileging interpretation in this way, shifting power from a central figure to a group of individuals granted the authority to disseminate and apply the law, is equally fundamental to understanding and outlining aspects of a Jewish aesthetic.

'Liberation is no guarantee of liberty',⁵ Michael Walzer observed and for this reason Yitro's non-hegemonic revolutionary structure, which was introduced at a pivotal moment in the Exodus, is seen as a serious contribution to the destiny of a people evolving from a state of slavery to freedom. The 'suggestive influence of the unexpressed, [...] multiplicity of meanings and the need for interpretation',⁶ which is how Erich Auerbach defined a Jewish aesthetic, applies equally to the way in which the law, handed down at Sinai, was henceforth approached.

But for all the resistance surrounding the making of idols, the notion that all representational art is forbidden in the Jewish tradition is simply untrue. The Second Commandment is more widely interpreted than is commonly known. Lionel Kochan explains how 'the image-ban is secondary, merely a by-product, as it were, of the over-riding need to vanquish those other gods, it follows that where an image is not expressive of any "theology", it is wholly legitimate'.⁷ It is not necessary to look deeply into Jewish sources to see the evidence for that. The cherubim, three dimensional carved figures which hovered above the Ark of the Tabernacle, are the most familiar example. Similarly, the lengthy

instructions given to Bezalel for the building of the *Mishkan*, the mobile tabernacle which serviced Israel's communal religious needs while they wandered through the desert for forty years, are an indication of the importance placed on this construction, both formally and symbolically. If this mobile tabernacle were a mere capitulation to the human need for form, then Bezalel could have been told to hammer some wood beams together and tie down a tarp overhead. Instead Exodus 25:9 through 29 is a text-based construction document, specifying materials, sizes, proportions, functions, and even building methodology.

Bezalel, an archetype for the Jewish artist, is given a name which in Hebrew means 'in God's shadow'. This 'could signify the artist's subordinate relationship to the *Torah*',⁸ a reminder to the human creator not to even attempt to usurp the role of the Creator. But the etymology of his name might also indicate that the artist is respectful of the power—the Light—of the omnipotent and creates a positive product from a negative imprint, just as the narrator of 'Shots' does when she develops her photos in the darkroom. Mel Alexenberg explains that:

the job of the artist in Judaism is not to imitate creation—that leads to idolatry, which is making the dynamic world static and then worshipping it—but rather to create new worlds [...] It is not to imitate creation, but to imitate the Creator in the process of making the world.⁹

There are additional examples over the centuries of Jews within the tradition producing Haggadot (Passover books), Ketubot (marriage contracts), even synagogue art representing people and other creatures of nature without censorship. This has enabled Jewish artists to grapple with the question of a Jewish aesthetics, to comfortably situate themselves in the less dogmatic position of recognising that there has always been a place for the creation and appreciation of visual beauty despite hesitations and prejudices. Certainly there is an overt prohibition against creating and worshipping idols, but simultaneously there is a need to accept, use, celebrate, and express impressions of the proliferation of images of earth's beauty, as Adam did in the Garden of Eden when he named the world around him.

The widening of the sphere of the permissible has enabled Jewish artists to explore their relationship to beauty and to images, and to become passionately engaged in painting and in photography as a means to protect 'the singular separate self from the impersonal totality'.¹⁰ For Ozick, 'art and memory suggest that "truth" lies somewhere between our sense [...] of predestination and our fear of the absolute'.¹¹ Art is thus seen by Ozick, and by her heroine in 'Shots' as an active agent of interpretation which acts as a bulwark against totalitarianism. Yitro's revision took absolute power away from Moses and

provided his counsellors with the manoeuvrability to interpret and to challenge authority.

While she acknowledges this right, desire, even inevitability of expression among human beings, Ozick is quite sensitive to the need to temper aesthetics with ethics. Otherwise, she claims, this infatuation can easily become the pitiless handmaiden to idolatry. As an example of the worship of beauty devoid of morality she claims that the 'German Final Solution was an aesthetic solution: it was a job of editing, it was the artist's finger removing a smudge.'¹²

While the Second Commandment is not only a strong reaction to the (literal) human sacrifice which often accompanied idol worship, it also recognises, in the words of Baudrillard, 'the murderous capacity of images'.¹³ In language not so far from that of the rabbis who were likewise concerned with the effects of representative images, illusion, and confusion of the real, Baudrillard writes that '[s]imulation is infinitely more dangerous [than the real object ...] since it always suggests, over and above its object, that *law and order themselves might really be nothing more than a simulation*'.¹⁴ Ozick herself has written on the dangers inherent in simulacra, citing the concentration camps where millions perished but 'thanks to Zyklon B, not a drop of blood was made to flow; Auschwitz with its toy showerheads, out of which no drop fell'.¹⁵

II

The unnamed narrator in 'Shots'¹⁶ claims that the Photograph is the 'Successor to the Painting' (39), that it is the artistic medium of our century (especially if one includes cinema). According to Walter Benjamin, photography has changed the way tradition is related to, since 'making many reproductions [...] substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence'.¹⁷ This deprivileging of authenticity is liberating but it is also intimidating. A potential flattening of meaning, a levelling of all objects, a radical dismantling of the hierarchy, hovers on the horizon, threatening to undermine all boundaries and certainties.

Jewish law, which is concerned that the authenticity of God not be confused with any construed object, might consider photographs 'safe', since they are clearly reproductions and not so easily confused with the real thing, insofar as the Second Commandment is rigidly interpreted. Baudrillard points out though that images, and he is referring above all to the medium of replicated images, remain 'sites of the *disappearance* of meaning and representation [...] sites of a fatal strategy of denegation of the real and of the reality principle'.¹⁸ So while the distinction between authenticity and falsehood is maintained, the creation of meaning remains potentially underminable. John Berger wrote that 'the camera [...] demonstrated that there was no centre'.¹⁹ Even so, the making of photographs cannot be seen as an invitation to the kind of cruelty, bloodshedding, and moral relativism often associated with idol worship in the ancient world and Fascism in the modern.

Be that as it may, to make a reductive counterpoint between a pagan appreciation of physical beauty and a Jewish stance against it is not supported in Ozick's work. She does not foreground the production of beautiful images; rather she emphasises the meaning invested in them.

And while the unnamed narrator of 'Shots' seems to echo these sentiments of relativism in the opening line of her story when she explains: 'I came to photography as I came to infatuation—with no special talent for it, and with no point of view' (39), she contradicts this when immediately afterwards she lists all that she does not know about photography: its history and technical intricacies. She defines her photos as having 'nothing to do with art and less to do with reality' (39).

This self-conscious declaration reveals her ambivalence. While she is invested in her art productions, she wishes to wear her mastery lightly. This attitude may stem from her initial introduction to photography which occurred at the age of eleven when she found a collection of sepia photographs of a woman she named Brown Girl, now presumably dead, in a pile of brown autumn leaves. 'Call it necrophilia' (39) she comments, describing how she fell in love with dead faces and the photographs that keep them alive.²⁰

The existential question she struggles with is not whether to be or not, but whether to create or not. Her chorus of 'don't know much abouts' is undone by the list whose very contents indicates how much she actually does know. She then proceeds to narrate a tale of unrequited love—both of the dead, and Sam, the object of her erotic desire—which is really an exploration of the making of art, the translations of reality, the tension between simultaneity and history, the relationship of time and space. She reveals that she may have the talent to not only disclose truths but to become the sort of photographer who not only 'records the past but the one who invents it'.²¹

This seems to be a case of the lady (narrator) protesting too much. She tries to throw the reader, and Sam, off track by flaunting this salt-of-the-earth, anti-intellectual, anti-aesthete position. The interesting question is, of course, why? A common interpretation among critics of Ozick's work is that it reveals her ambivalence towards the production of images, literary and literal, because of their potential deification. Another interpretation, a kind of subset of the previous one, is that this defensiveness is a result of the narrator's chronic passivity: she has chosen to reflect on life, is busy translating it, and has therefore forfeited living it. This is, in some way, just a more refined criticism of the artist.

Certainly the photographer suffers, but is it a result of her vocation? The putative passivity and helplessness she expresses at the beginning of the story might support this. Moreover, her lack-of-involvement in the production of 'real' life (meaning, the reproduction of humans) is a stark counterpoint to Judaism's belief in action. And from this point of view she is certainly wanting.

An alternative interpretation of this story, one which can be applied as well to other Ozick narratives, is that the ambivalence reflected in the narrator's disingenuous caveat in the story's opening paragraph, is not concerned exclusively with the Hellenic–Hebraic schism—Beauty versus Law—Heart versus Will. Nor is the angst expressed here solely about the observer being pitted against the participant, the outsider gazing in on the insider. What I suspect she is experiencing is not mere ambivalence, but the vertigo of oscillation.

This narrator is not trying to choose between territories. She is actually caught in between, drawn to the past, looking to carry time forward into the future, she cannot rest easy in the present. She struggles to synthesise her devotion to aesthetics, history, and ethics, in order to ease some deep personal suffering only hinted at in the story. As much as she is drawn to death, she may suffer from consciousness of her own. Death's inevitability, that 'all green corrupts to brown' (54), provokes her. She may be haunted by loneliness: she is without a mate and mourns her childlessness. There is the possibility that she feels both an abandonment to and abandoned by time; she may be reacting with unconscious fear to unidentified greater forces which seem to shake and mould her.

The story she tells though belies her protestation. For it soon becomes clear that her photographs are quotations of history, to borrow Benjamin's term. They reflect inconsistencies, doublings, multifracted perspectives, fragmentation, fabricated narratives, the inescapable subjectivity of a point of view. There is no totalising system; it just is. 'Photography is *literal*,' she tells Sam, 'It gets what's *there*' (52). But this too is a lie, for she has just told the reader that were she to tell Sam the truth, she would expose herself too much. The negation of a point of view, the insistence that her photos have nothing to do with art, is a veil whose purpose is to shroud her true intentions. And she needs to act out this charade, at least at the start of the tale, because of this very oscillation. The lack of full disclosure is her way of maintaining balance. But there is a shift in the protagonist's point of view, at least in regards to her creativity. Though it may remain unconscious to her, by the story's end, a point of view, what might be construed as a Jewish spin on the primacy of the art of interpretation, does come into focus.

Any conflict she may experience vis-à-vis the production of visual images is caused, one is tempted to argue, by a misguided view of the artist, influenced too much and for too long by the strictest and even least logical interpretation of the Second Commandment. The shift the narrator/protagonist experiences reflects what Ozick has also come to recognise: the primacy of the creative imagination. Without one, Abraham would have never been able to look into nature and 'envision [...] that which there is no evidence for whatever'.²² Geoffrey Hartman has pointed out that 'the ambivalence surrounding

imagination [in the Jewish world] centered on [...] a contrast between its low position in the hierarchy of faculties and its sublime function in prophecy'.²³ As if to realign this traditional view, Mel Alexenberg has written:

the word *oman*, 'artist' in Hebrew is the same as *amen*, which means *emet*, 'truth'. Its feminine form is *emunah*, 'faith,' and as a verb its 'to educate, to nurture'—*l'amen*. So Jewish artistry is about truth, faith, and education.²⁴

The narrator of 'Shots' takes a photo of a simultaneous translator at the very instant that an assassin's bullet ploughs into his neck. Right before this convergence of shots, she reflects on why she has chosen to focus her lens on him at all, considering he is performing a service and is not an important person at the symposium she has been hired to document. He 'kept his microphone oddly close to his lips,' she observes, 'like a kiss, sweat sliding and gleaming along his neck—it seemed he was tormented by his bifurcated concentration. His suffering attracted me' (43). Once dead, being taken out to the ambulance, she notes that 'he was alone on a stretcher; his duality was done, his job as surrogate consummated' (44). She is drawn to his bifurcated perspective, his life lived as a mouthpiece for another, as a double. This point of view parallels her own as a creator of photographs which champion 'the co-existence of [...] two ideals—assault on reality and submission to reality'.²⁵ This kind of doubling, seen in other Ozick fictions, reflects the character's involvement with dialectics, simultaneity, multiplicity and shifting interpretations of events which come to be called history. It also reflects, as Paul Coates observes, an author who is 'suspended between languages and cultures'.²⁶

The photographer lives uncomfortably, yet there she is, with fluid borders; not with strict prohibitions of image making, but with the intention to reveal connections between events, people, defying time, collapsing space, 'what happened then was here now' (42). Though she is reluctant to face her power, nevertheless, the narrator creates history through the images stalked and captured, found and determined, by her camera. This is art with a desire for truth, for faith, and if not education then at the very least, elucidation. She tries though to diminish the importance of this desire and is genuinely offended when the police confiscate her film. Certainly she recognises that it is now evidence in a criminal investigation. But for her, the film is, more importantly, a way to bridge the gap between herself and another, a co-translator, each interpreting the world simultaneously, spontaneously, both imprinting history.

The narrator's life's passion for photography is inspired by the Brown Girl. She always carries a photo of her around in a pocket as if to remind herself that she can slice through time, defy mortality, assault the past's fixity with her shutter's speed. Only in the end, when Sam's wife dresses her in a nun's brown habit and proclaims: 'Period Piece!' (56), does she accept, in spite of

her insistence that it is she who controls the photos and not them her, that she has become the Brown Girl and that her demise is inevitable. She is not above the fray. Her life too is open to another's interpretation.

III

Photography is an interesting creative medium in which to examine Jewish aesthetics because, as many photographers claim, it is all about light and therefore finds affinity with the importance of this element in Jewish texts.²⁷ Freema Gottlieb in *The Lamp of God* describes light as a metaphor which entails 'the capacity for ascendance from lower to higher forms of life'.²⁸ There is an inherent movement in it as a medium of production. She continues: 'Light was the first "thing of beauty" ever created by an artist, the first Word, and the first image.'²⁹

Roland Barthes equates the 'discovery that silver halogens were sensitive to light'³⁰ to that of an alchemist's. The transformation of one form of matter into another. The preeminent American architect Louis Kahn saw light as 'the giver of all Presences: by will; by law [...] the maker of a material'.³¹ For him the awesome task of working with light was the architect's mandate. Form shapes light, light speaks to form. In photography, framed images are emanations of light, light bleeds into form.

This is the subtext that the narrator of 'Shots' tries to repress, at least in the story's beginning. Egged on by Sam asking her why she does not use a Polaroid camera more often, she forgets the anti-intellectualism of her introduction and replies: 'the farther you are from having what you think you want, the more likely you are to get it. It's just that you have to wait. You really have to *wait*. What's important is the waiting' (52). The Polaroid is pure mimesis. It is representational art with a weak point of view. Being instantaneous, there is no time or space for reflection, for the creation of meaning. It is too much surface.

After this revelation, she unwittingly reveals to the reader how close to a Judaic view of aesthetics she actually is; how the 'influence of the unexpressed [...] and the need for interpretation'³² is her *modus operandi*. She proceeds to explain to Sam, the historian: 'If you have a change of heart between shooting your picture and taking it out of the developer, the picture changes too' (52). He does not understand how, since for him photography is a chemical, and decidedly not an alchemical, process. But the narrator is displeased. She is not a mechanic, nor even a scientist, but, like him, an interpreter. She protects herself from greater exposure, in this instance graver misunderstanding, by switching from exterior dissemination to internal monologue: 'I wanted to explain to him,' she speaks to herself and the reader, 'how between the exposure and the solution, history comes into being, but telling that would make me bleed, like a bullet in the neck' (52). For her interpretation creates the

images which in turn forge or more importantly reveal disparate links in the chain of humanity. And despite her fears and hesitations, she is the simultaneous translation between the image and history.

When she realises that she and Sam will never consummate their *ersatz*-love affair, she asks him to let her take his picture. He agrees though he does not really understand her request. The narrator claims at first that ‘virtue ravishes me. I want to keep its portrait’ (53). This ironic comment on poor Sam’s paralysis—miserable in his marriage and ostensibly unable to act on his attraction to the photographer—is a screen for the need she has to mark their time together. This is not a desire born of nostalgia; rather, photographing him is her way of carrying the emotional experience forward, of telling the story of her time with Sam to herself.

She at once recognises that Sam’s attraction to terrorism, factionalism, and revolution south of the border, is an expression of his rebellion against the engulfing domesticity his over-competent wife has surrounded him with. In contrast, she, unmarried and childless, thirty-six but ‘tomorrow [she] will be forty-eight’ (56), is straining towards connection. For her, the stakes feel much higher, the losses much closer, the double strategies she must consistently employ riskier.

When she stands with Sam beneath the wet-with-rain linden tree, covered by its heart-shaped leaves and their ‘traditional erotic overtones’,³³ her desire, her vulnerability, ‘stings her in the neck’ (55) like an assassin’s bullet. So while she withholds her words from him, she cannot restrain her emotion.

The bullet in the neck is a *leitmotif* which ‘leads’ (the definition of *leit* in German) the photographer to expect annihilation in the face of an exposed emotional vulnerability. But *leit* is also synonymous with the light she forms through the aperture of her camera. Emblematic of the narrator’s desire to both manipulate and be captured by time, the bullet in the neck is the simultaneous translation of an oppressive and contrived totality into a paradoxically fragmented web of connection. The unrequited infatuation to which she came to she tells us ‘with no special talent’ (39), spurs her on to creation. Through the production of images in which the protagonist expresses her point of view, she seeks understanding, companionship; she seeks solace.

Barthes, at the end of *Camera Lucida*, writes beautifully that ‘in the love stirred by Photography, another music is heard, its name is oddly old-fashioned: Pity’.³⁴ Not pity just for the outcast, but a pity, maybe better called by the Hebrew word, *rachamim*³⁵ which alludes to the measure of sympathy God created the world with. In Lurianic Kabbalism, the sixth sphere of existence is known as both *Tifereth* or *Rachamim*, beauty or compassion, respectively. Here is the landscape of a Jewish aesthetics: a dimension in which beauty and compassion inform one another, become one another, indeed serve one another. These parameters stand in stark opposition to the lack of pity and

inhumanity Ozick accuses idol worship of fostering: a 'system sufficient in itself [...] lead[ing] back only to itself'.³⁶ Here is pity not just for Walker Evan's impoverished folk and Diane Arbus' freaks, but for all of humanity, bound by form, informed by light.

At the moment of taking Sam's picture though, the photographer realises that it is not his face that 'stings her in the neck' (55) but the tree and the 'transitoriness of these thin vulnerable leaves, with their piteous veins turned toward a faintness of liverish light' (55). It is the inevitability of death and the desire for insight, for inspiration, which most moves her and makes her feel subjectivity itself as a kind of vulnerability.³⁷ Sam assumes greater meaning to her shot under the dripping linden tree and not in the myriad of photographs she has taken of him at the various symposia. By exposing him to the elements—tree, rain, light—by finding him in her viewfinder, she locates herself as well, frightened, wanting, awed.

Walter Benjamin said that 'earliest works of art originated in the service of ritual—first the magical, then the religious kind'.³⁸ For Ozick's protagonist, photography is a ritual, if not exactly religious in any overt sense, then certainly of the kind linked to a search for meaning quite common to our century and throughout (Jewish) time. 'The aboriginal Jewish aesthetic,' Steven Schwarzschild writes, is 'in eternal pursuit of the ideal, divine, or at least messianic world.'³⁹ For the photographer, this translates into forging connection and empathy, through ritualised portraiture, and of course, through interpretation.

The *Shulchan Aruch*, the sixteenth century codification of Jewish law compiled by Rabbi Joseph Karo, has a chapter concerning the 'Laws about Images and Forms'. In it there is an interpretation of the Second Commandment stating that distortions and fragments of images are not forbidden. Schwarzschild writes that this point of view dovetails with 'two of the chief principles of twentieth-century modern art—abstraction and distortion'.⁴⁰ This fragmentation, distortion, or what he calls 'the theology of the slashed nose'⁴¹ is not 'a reduction but an expansion of the human form'.⁴² Like Benjamin who states that the snapshot 'reveals entirely new structural formations of the subject',⁴³ these distortions of form, deliberate misrepresentations of images, are as much a part of an aboriginal Jewish aesthetic as is the intention to search for meaning in the replication of the very act of creation.

Do photographs distort in this manner? Certainly not in the obvious way that an Impressionist, Cubist or Abstract Expressionist painting does. Even the photographer here claims that her photos simply tell it like it is and what's more, that their creator has no point of view. But of course she does, for a picture cannot be framed without a point of view. And this forces an interpretation which by default is both revelation and a distortion of the

image-rich world. The distinction lies, as Benjamin observes in ‘The Task of the Translator’, in the intention.⁴⁴

The last image in ‘Shots’ is of Sam and his wife, Verity. The photographer narrates that they are ‘caught side by side in their daughter’s mirror. I shoot into their heads [...] Now they are exposed. Now they will stick forever’ (57). It is as if she is holding up a mirror to their mirror, and this double reflection reflects their progeny, their daughter(s), their mutual creation, the glue and strength of their bond, both back to them and as a correction to the narrator.

Though Verity has dressed the photographer up literally and dressed her down figuratively in a dead nun’s habit, reminding her who between them is fecund and connected to a husband, to children, and who between them is chastely married to a ‘higher’ calling, the photographer’s parting shot is to expose them in their miserable union. They are stuck together. They are not free to pursue emotions or passionate experiences outside the narrow province of their marriage. Caught together, they are doomed unto eternity, ‘forever’ posed before this domestic bliss [sic], for the photograph makes it so.

The *mis-en-abyme* of the story’s end, when she has become the Brown Girl while still carrying the photograph of her Brown Girl in her front pocket, forces the photographer to come to terms with her power; she can now ‘assault’ and ‘submit’ to history, albeit uncomfortably. She has trapped Sam and Verity’s reflection, moving from a posture of longing and envy to one of subjective identification with their constrictions. She both abuses and exalts them with this photograph in a ‘metonymic montage’, a term Barthes used to describe the themes raised in the Biblical account of Jacob struggling with the angel. Narrative elements are ‘combined, not “developed”’ and so remain distinct while bound.⁴⁵

IV

Stephen Schwarzchild, referring to Hermann Cohen, says that ‘art depicts the Messiah; that is, art is man’s anticipatory construction of the world as it ought to be, as God wants it to be’.⁴⁶ This definition of art is predicated on two principles; one, that art is potentially redemptive, and two, that humanity has within its grasp the capability of transforming the world, instigating what in Lurianic Kabbalah is called *tikkun olam*, a mending of the world. Gershom Scholem explains how ‘the *tikkun* is not so much a restoration of Creation—which though planned was never fully carried out—as its first complete fulfillment’.⁴⁷ In the Lurianic construct, when God created the world, the light which was sent forth, metaphorically, was so great that the ‘vessels’ which were to contain it, shattered. This led to a loss of distinction between the forces of good and evil, which henceforth, intermingled in the world. ‘Thus to separate them once more is one of the central aims of all striving for the *tikkun*.’⁴⁸ And the power to do this lies, according to Luria, within each and every individual

Jew on Earth—the power to release the trapped sacred sparks of light inherent in every living form and to enable them to be restored to a holistic untainted aura enveloping and comprising the world.

Visual artists then, whose preoccupation is as much with light as it is with form and color, work with the raw material of creation. Photographers most blatantly manipulate light as they frame and fix their images on treated film and then further mould them in darkrooms where negatives are transformed into positives, where chemical baths, silver paper, and time conspire to express the artist's vision. Reflecting upon the Brown Girl's sepia portraits, the narrator of 'Shots' comments on the photographer's lack of technical skill and/or compassion:

the first rule of the box camera was always being violated: not to put the sun behind your subject. A vast blurred drowning orb of sun flooded massively, habitually down from the upper right corner of her picture. Whoever photographed her, over years and years and years, meant to obliterate her. (41)

She then recognises that it is not just the sun which has partially erased the figure, but also consciousness of time. 'The face faded out because death was coming: death, the changer [...] the bleacher' (41). The photographer of the Brown Girl did her subject a double injustice. Since the ravages of time were bound to catch up with her, the potential was there for the photograph to reveal something about the subject which transcended time—to reveal something about her essential humanness which would be based on a sympathetic subjective exposure, and not a hostile shrouding. Ozick says that she herself is:

drawn to the eeriness of photography, the way it represents both mortality and immortality. It both stands for death and stands against death because it's statuary [...] It's a mystery of a verisimilitude surrounded by [...] a penumbra of all kinds of unknown things.⁴⁹

Manipulating images which reveal this penumbra, prying out 'an allusion to the conceivable which cannot be presented',⁵⁰ visual artists potentially release a multitude of sparks. Those who work with light, photographers, painters, and architects, are not violating the Second Commandment when they conjure up their forms and images. They can, as a number of the visual artists in Ozick's fiction do, resist beauty as a fountain of knowledge devoid of ethics.

Like Bezalel, the archetypal Jewish artist and artisan, and the *Mishkan*, the prototypical structure designed to be 'the maker of the light',⁵¹ productions of art can potentially become a bridge spanning the fracture of body and spirit, beauty and morality, idolatry and creation, a static present and the flow of history. Questions, like the fringes on prayer shawls, spiral out from Ozick's

tales, not making unequivocal final determinations, but not leaving the strident issues of history, morality and aesthetics in the domain of a diluted and so ineffective ethical relativism.

Ozick sees her work as a direct product of 'Judaism in its ontological and moral aspects as a civilisation'.⁵² By creating a protagonist whose principal life's work is the production of visual images, Ozick continues the stream of consciousness within Judaism which recognises art and pictorial language as yet another route to establishing greater insight and sympathy in the world, for humanity, for the complex schisms which both separate and haunt nations.

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- ² See V. Strandberg, S. Pinsker, L.S. Friedman, E. New, V. Emuna Kielsky, J. Handler Burstein, *et al.*
- ³ 'Literature as Idol', p. 181.
- ⁴ Not only has Ozick addressed this issue squarely in her story, 'Usurpation (Other People's Stories)', she has returned in many other fictions to the idea of cross-cultural, intra-cultural, cross-generational, and cross-gendered borrowings, or as some of her characters have put it, thefts: plagiarisms in a word. (See in addition, 'Virility', 'Envy; or, Yiddish in America', 'An Education', 'The Pagan Rabbi', *The Cannibal Galaxy* and *The Messiah of Stockholm*.)
- ⁵ M. Walzer, *Exodus and Revolution* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), p. 5.
- ⁶ E. Auerbach, *Mimesis*, tr. W.R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1953), p. 23.
- ⁷ L. Kochan, *Beyond the Graven Image: A Jewish View* (London: Macmillan, 1997), p. 93.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 99.
- ⁹ M. Alexenberg, 'Aesthetics in Judaism', *Wellsprings* (April/May 1986), p. 18.
- ¹⁰ S. Handelman, *Fragments of Redemption: Jewish Thought and Literary Theory in Benjamin, Scholem, and Levinas* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1991), p. 185.
- ¹¹ C. Rainwater and W. Scheick, "'Some Godlike Grammar": An Introduction to the Writings of Hazzard, Ozick, Redmon', 25 *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 2 (1983), p. 197.
- ¹² C. Ozick, 'Towards a New Yiddish', *Art and Ardor* (New York: Knopf, 1983), p. 165.
- ¹³ J. Baudrillard, 'The Evil Demon of Images and the Precession of Simulacra', *Simulations* (New York: Semiotext(e), 1983), p. 196.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 197.
- ¹⁵ C. Ozick, 'Preface', *Bloodshed and Three Novellas* (New York: Knopf, 1976), p. 7.
- ¹⁶ All subsequent parenthetical citations of the story refer to its publication in *Levitation: Five Fictions* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1982).
- ¹⁷ W. Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' in H. Arendt (ed.), tr. H. Zohn, *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken, 1969), p. 221.
- ¹⁸ 'Evil Demon', p. 194.
- ¹⁹ J. Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: BBC and Penguin, 1972), p. 18.
- ²⁰ Benjamin wrote: 'It is no accident that the portrait was the focal point of early photography. The cult of remembrance

- of loved ones, absent or dead, offers a last refuge for the cult value of the picture' ('The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', p. 226).
- ²¹ S. Sontag, *On Photography* (1973. New York: Farrar, Strauss, Giroux, 1978), p. 67.
- ²² E. Kauver, 'An Interview with Cynthia Ozick', 26 *Contemporary Literature* 4 (1985), p. 395.
- ²³ G.H. Hartman, 'Imagination' in A.A. Cohen and P. Mendes-Flohr (eds), *Contemporary Jewish Religious Thought: Original Essays on Critical Concepts, Movements, and Beliefs* (New York: Free Press, 1987), p. 452.
- ²⁴ 'Aesthetics', p. 18.
- ²⁵ *On Photography*, p. 123.
- ²⁶ P. Coates, *The Double and the Other: Identity as Ideology in Post-Romantic Fiction* (London: Macmillan, 1988), p. 2.
- ²⁷ M. Alexenberg points out in his exhibition notes, "'On the Creation of Lights OROT" that "light represents the major foci of Judaism: God is my Light" (Psalms 27:1), "Torah is light" (Psalms 6:23), and Israel is "a light unto the nations"' (Isaiah 42:6) (49). He also mentions that the titles of the Kabbalistic books, *Sepher Bahir* and the *Zohar*, *Book of Light* and *Radiance* respectively, indicate a consistent involvement with light as a conduit of wisdom.
- ²⁸ F. Gottlieb, *The Lamp of God* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1989), p. xiv.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. xvii.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 80.
- ³¹ L.I. Khan, 'Space and Inspirations', *Writings, Lectures, Interviews* (New York: Rizzoli, 1991), p. 6.
- ³² *Mimesis*, p. 23.
- ³³ E. Kauver, *Cynthia Ozick's Fiction: Tradition and Invention* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1993), p. 120.
- ³⁴ *Camera Lucida*, p. 116.
- ³⁵ This word, whose root is *rechem* (womb), implies sustenance and nurturing.
- ³⁶ 'Literature and Idol', p. 189.
- ³⁷ Susan Handelman writes extensively on this in her book, *Fragments of Redemption*.
- ³⁸ 'Work of Art', p. 223.
- ³⁹ S.S. Schwarzschild, 'Aesthetics' in A.A. Cohen and P. Mendes-Flohr (eds), *Contemporary Jewish Religious Thought: Original Essays on Critical Concepts, Movements, and Beliefs* (New York: Free Press, 1987), p. 6.
- ⁴⁰ S.S. Schwarzschild, 'The Legal Foundations of Jewish Aesthetics', 9 *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 1 (January 1975), p. 33.
- ⁴¹ 'Aesthetics', p. 3.
- ⁴² 'Legal', p. 35.
- ⁴³ *Illuminations*, p. 236.
- ⁴⁴ Benjamin's idea was not so different from what his good friend Gershom Scholem was busy writing about in his studies of Jewish mysticism: 'In Lurianic thought, these elements [magic of inwardness], under the name of *Kawwanah*, or mystical *intention* [italics mine], occupy a highly important position' (tr. G.G. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1955), p. 275).
- ⁴⁵ R. Barthes, 'The Struggle with the Angel', *Image-Music-Text*, tr. S. Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), p. 140.
- ⁴⁶ 'Aesthetics', p. 5.
- ⁴⁷ G.G. Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and its Symbolism*, tr. R. Mannheim (1960. New York: Schocken, 1965), p. 117.
- ⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 114.
- ⁴⁹ 'Interview', p. 396.
- ⁵⁰ J.F. Lyotard, 'Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?', *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, tr. G. Bennington and B. Massumi (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1991), p. 46.
- ⁵¹ 'Space and Inspirations', p. 227.
- ⁵² 'Interview', p. 379.