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DEATHFUGUE AND THE MAIDENS:  
THE INTERTEXTUAL BONDS BETWEEN  
PAUL CELAN'S "TODESFUGE"  
AND CYNTHIA OZICK'S *THE SHAWL* RE-CONSIDERED

ABSTRACT

The article examines diverse relations between Cynthia Ozick's *The Shawl* and the final distich of Paul Celan's "Deathfuge," which the American writer chose as an epigraph to her Holocaust prose. An intertextual analysis of both texts (which relate to each other in a midrash-like manner) demonstrates the existence of numerous parallels in the language and imagery used by both authors, as well as their identifiable references to the motif of "Death and the Maiden," which can be found in German paintings (Grien, Deutsch) and music (Bach, Schubert, Wagner).

KEYWORDS: Holocaust fiction, Holocaust poetry, Holocaust testimony, intertextuality, non-orthodox midrash, motif of "Death and the Maiden"

STRESZCZENIE

Niniejszy artykuł rozważa wielowymiarowe związki pomiędzy tekstem „The Shawl” Cynthii Ozick a finałowym dystychem z „Fugi śmierci” Paula Celana, który amerykańska pisarka wybrała jako motto swojej holocaustowej prozy. Intertekstualna analiza obu tekstów – tworzących wspólnie jeden literacki „midrasz” – ujawnia nie tylko identyfikowalne paralele na poziomie języka i obrazowania, lecz również mniej wyraźne, lecz wciąż interpretacyjnie znaczące odniesienia Ozick i Celana do motywu „śmierci i dziewczyny” obecnego w szesnastowiecznym malarstwie niemieckim (Grien, Deutsch) i niemieckiej muzyce (Bach, Schubert, Wagner).

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: Holocaust w prozie fabularnej, Holocaust w poezji, świadectwo, intertekstualność, midrasz, „śmierć i dziewczyna” jako motyw w sztuce

As it seems, the choice of the famous concluding distich from Paul Celan's "Todesfuge," "dein goldenes Haar Margarete/ dein aschenes Haar Sulamith,"<sup>1</sup> as an epigraph to Cynthia Ozick's 1989 book edition of *The Shawl* (itself being

<sup>1</sup> This is how the final lines of the poem appear in Ozick's book, and also how they are rendered by John Felstiner in his *Selected Poems and Prose of Paul Celan* (31–33). Felstiner's deliberate non-translation has its rationale, which is clarified in his major study of the German poet's life: it is the poem's well-known "resistance to translation, its rude integrity" (*Paul Celan...* 32) as well as the

a diptych that comprises two related stories, “The Shawl” and “Rosa”) was more than a run-of-the-mill gesture by the author of Holocaust fiction, who may have wanted to adorn her narrative with a rather overused quote from one of the most recognizable and revered postwar German poems, and thus boosted the intended seriousness and depth of her own text. Upon closer reading, as I demonstrate below, the introduction of Celan’s lines triggers some intertextual dynamics, illuminating and enriching as it does the original fabric of *The Shawl*. And in this respect, the epigraph can be seen as performing the function of, say, a non-orthodox midrash.<sup>2</sup> Or, paradoxically, it is perhaps the other way around, and the distinction between what here is a primary text and what a commentary to it ceases to be obvious. Also, trying to see the intertwining of the verse and the story in a broader perspective of cultural tradition of the West, I read them as variations of the old motif of “Death and the Maiden,” highlighting their links with music and the visual arts. Finally, the intertextual net of mutual connections between “Todesfuge” and *The Shawl* becomes instrumental in formulating a question of how “addressability” (Celan’s term) of the Holocaust is conveyed in testimony and in literature – an issue that still, in my view, awaits further critical consideration.

“Todesfuge” and *The Shawl*, each text treated these days as canonical in the national literature it represents, do not avoid the controversy of having trespassed the boundary of *decorum* in Holocaust representation (once verbalized by Theodor Adorno, and later sustained and consistently defended by Lawrence L. Langer) either by the excessive use of figural language (the former) or by the employment of fictional mode, often embellished with quasi-poetic elements (the latter). However, irrespective of the fact that neither Celan nor Ozick experienced the universe of concentration camps personally,<sup>3</sup> we know that the poem and the narrative were inspired by real events and authentic testimonies. When “Todesfuge” was published for the first time, the text of the poem was preceded by a short explanatory note: “The poem whose translation we are publishing is built upon the evocation of a real fact. In Lublin, as in many ‘Nazi death camps,’ one group of the condemned were forced to sing nostalgic songs while others dug graves” (qtd in Felstiner 28). As for *The Shawl*, its first section is an extended literary modification of the laconic information that Ozick came across while reading William L. Shirer’s *The Rise and the Fall of the Third Reich. A History of Nazi Germany*, which brings the story of

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translator’s desire in the final address to Margareta and Shulamith to show that his “voice moves into unison with the poet’s, *recouping a little* of what has been lost in translation” (40, emphasis added).

<sup>2</sup> The “midrashic mode” of Ozick’s Holocaust prose is explored by Marianne M. Friedrich (93–96), who traces several phases of the compositional process that eventually led to the publication of *The Shawl* as a book. The addition of an epigraph from Celan’s poetry is perceived by her as the final element of this process.

<sup>3</sup> Granted, Paul Celan was a Holocaust survivor, but since the texts that are subject of the present analysis relate to the experience of death camps, it needs to be reminded that he was not a death camp prisoner, and wrote his poem inspired by testimonies available to him at the time of composition. Cynthia Ozick was born in and has always lived in the US.

a young Jewish woman, a concentration camp prisoner, forced to witness the death of her child being thrown against the electrified fence by a guard.<sup>4</sup>

The motif of “Death and the Maiden,” which, as I argue below, both Celan and Ozick obliquely relate to and develop in their works, is to a large extent associated with the German tradition in painting and music. This fact and the contextual framework it necessitates if we venture on a critical, intertextual analysis are of particular importance when it comes to Celan’s oeuvre as such – primarily, when we consider his stubborn, life-long insistence on writing poetry in the language of his tormentors, but even more so in the context of his and Ozick’s shared endeavors to grasp *some* truth of Holocaust experience. For reasons that are more than obvious, “Todesfuge” enters into a dialogue with masterpieces of nineteenth-century German music in which death and mourning are main concerns, e.g. Franz Schubert’s 1817 *Der Tod und das Mädchen*, with Matthias Claudius’s lyrics built upon the Maiden’s protestations (“Pass me by”) and Death’s tempting reassurances (“I am a friend, and come not to punish”) (*Art Song*); Richard Wagner’s 1859 finale to *Tristan und Isolde* “Liebestod,” the very title of which is a cluster of the words “death” and “love”; or Johannes Brahms’s 1868 monumental *Ein deutsches Requiem*, opening with a quote from Matthew 5:4: “Blessed are they who bear suffering.” All these (and the list, of course, can be expanded) Celan implicitly glosses, and the bitterness and irony permeating his verse add extra value to the whole tradition.<sup>5</sup> Still, above all else, his poem is a “fugue,” i.e. it grafts a typically musical structure onto a literary field, finding equivalents for contrapuntal compositional technique in a precise reshuffling of phrases and sentences that grow out of the main theme. And it is perhaps not irrelevant for the sake of the present analysis to remember that one of the unquestionable masters of the fugue, J. S. Bach, allegedly died while giving a final touch to his *Art of Fugue*, BWV 1080, and that his handwritten notation at the point where the last unfinished countersubject ends abruptly forms the letters (notes) “B,” “A,” “C,” and “H.” Irrespective of the fact whether this has been convincingly substantiated by historians (i.e. whether the manuscript *does* record the actual moment of the composer’s death), the history of German culture cherishes the legend of the art of the fugue being intertwined with death (Wolff 431–441). As for “Todesfuge,” since the time Celan composed it, the fugue and death have been wedded forever.

Bearing no immediate traces of musical elements in its structure, *The Shawl* can be best located and reconsidered within the tradition of German paintings

<sup>4</sup> “There was a line in there, just one line in a very, very fat book, that spoke about babies being thrown against electrified fences, and I guess that image stayed with me” (qtd in Strandberg 204).

<sup>5</sup> John Felstiner (32) is more radical in his assessment of the poet’s intention, and has no doubt whatsoever that “Celan’s poem blights this tradition.” It can be argued, however, that “blighting” *any* tradition is not that easy, as by attacking its main tenets or distinct thematic preoccupations, the attacker often, in one way or another, ends up as a polemical *continuator* of the tradition he/she has come to grips with.

depicting the motif of “Death and the Maiden.” Again, as was the case with Celan, the number of possible examples calls for a reasonable limitation – and, arguably, two early sixteenth-century visual realizations do the job. Hans Baldung Grien’s variant, *Der Tod und das Weib*<sup>6</sup> (1518–1520), loaded with sexual overtones, features Death as a nagging suitor, whose advances are a source of both attraction and repulsion – the young woman (das Weib), whether consciously or not, is taking off her attire, boldly exposing her nakedness, the whole act of yielding to the suitor being at odds with the expression of disgust on her face. Niklaus Manuel Deutsch’s 1517 *Der Tod und das Mädchen* goes even further, bewildering the viewer with the scene in which a decomposing corpse is kissing a girl and reaching under her dress to grope her crotch. These two Renaissance iconographic figurations of Thanatos and Eros derive from the Medieval motif of “Dance of Death,” and tentatively foreshadow what much later came to find its full discursive expression in psychoanalysis. In further parts of my article, I argue that all major elements of the aforementioned paintings: the vulnerability of the young, abjection inescapably coupled with desire, and a tormentor being also a lover, resurface in the short prose of Ozick, but they do so in an (understandably) altered constellation, and with a radically different tenor.

There can be distinguished three levels at which Celan’s poem reveals its musicality, two of these highlighting the bonds of the text with the theme of death. First, the debut of “Todesfuge” on the literary scene, in the magazine *Contemporanul*, in May 1947, was not in the German original version but in a Romanian translation of Petre Solomon, under a different albeit still musical and death-infected title, “Tangoul Mortii” (Tango of Death). In the late 1940s, tango was no longer a craze in Europe, but it was still fashionable, notably in the major cultural centers: Paris, London, or Berlin, and it was perhaps in France, where he took premedical courses just before the outbreak of WWII, that Celan noted the spell of its charm. Interestingly, both a distinct kind of entertaining music and a strictly codified formula for a dance, the tango has its darker, more sinister historical aspect – it evolved from clandestine musical gatherings of slaves in Argentina in late eighteenth-century (*The Hidden History...*). The adequacy of the German title for the poem (which has remained its official title ever since) stems from its intricate structure that verbally emulates the fugue by the carefully controlled introduction of recurrent motifs or counterpoints, further strengthened by alliterations and alterations within corresponding, *nearly* identical lines. The example of such a meaningful repetition with a difference is the famous opening: “Black milk of daybreak we drink *it* at *evening*,” which in the subsequent stanza transforms itself into “Black milk of daybreak we drink *you* at *night*” (31, emphasis added). Besides, the structural plane of the verse’s musicality features telling, alliterative links to the word “play,” which are invisible in the English translation: “Ein Mann wohnt im Haus der *spielt* mit den *Schlangen*

<sup>6</sup> The German word “Weib” is rather offensive, or at least vulgar as compared with “Mädchen.”

der *schreibt*” (30, emphasis added) (“A man lives in the house he *plays* with his *vipers* he *writes*,” 31, emphasis added). The second level of musicality manifests itself directly in the voices of the people who refer to dancing, singing, fiddling, and even whistling. The embedded shouting of a tormentor, for instance, assumes two variants of the same order:

he whistles his Jews into rows has them shovel a grave in the ground  
 he commands us play up for the dance  
 ...  
 He shouts dig this earth deeper you lot there you others sing up and play  
 he grabs for the rod in his belt he swings it his eyes are so blue  
 stick your spades deeper you lot there you others play on for the dancing (31)

Which gets us to the third level of references, the most important ones, namely those pertaining to the historical veracity of the above lines. As confirmed by numerous testimonies, music was a perverse fact of the life beyond the barbed wires. To take an instance that may have been known to Celan as early as during the war, in the forced labor camp on Janowska Street, Lvov, established in 1941, torture and executions were accompanied by music performed by an orchestra comprising inmates themselves. The repertoire was strictly controlled by the Nazis and included a commissioned piece entitled the “Death Tango,” composed by musicians imprisoned there (*The Black Book* 308–309). This is how the camp routine is recalled by one of the witnesses:

Outside the gate music starts to play. Yes, we have an orchestra made up of sixty men, all inmates. This orchestra, which has some known personalities in the music world in it, always plays when we are going to and from work, or when the Germans take a group out to be shot. We know that for many, if not all, of us the music will someday play the “Death Tango,” as we call it on such occasions. (Weliczker Wells 135)

In Auschwitz, frivolous tunes adapted from Parisian or Viennese operas and operettas, such as Offenbach’s *Le contes d’Hoffmann*, or Lehár’s *Die lustige Witwe* were performed by an ensemble of elegantly dressed, good-looking maidens while the Nazis were carrying out the selection of newly transported Jews for the gas chambers (Shirer 970). Szymon Laks, a member of and – at a certain point – conductor of a different orchestra, in Auschwitz II, gave unique testimony to “this strange chapter in the history of music” (6) in *Music of Another World*, a book tellingly divided into three sections, “Overture,” “Music of Another World,” and “Coda,” and which – in its own, exceptional way – aspires to taking part in the debate regarding contradictions inherent in the problem of Holocaust representation:

Is not one of them [i.e. the contradictions] the very fact that music – that most sublime expression of the human spirit – also became entangled in the hellish enterprise of the extermination of millions of people and even took an active part in this extermination? (5)

The mention of Margareta and Shulamith in “Todesfuge” opens up a yet another, wide range of associations and hidden or open references, this time to German and Jewish literary and religious traditions.<sup>7</sup> Margareta is, on the one hand, the addressee of a letter being written by the camp commandant, but at the same time a namesake of the character from Goethe’s *Faust* (a fact recognizable even to someone who is fair-to-middlingly versed in German literature), an unsophisticated, vulnerable maiden, who falls victim to Faust’s seductive tricks, gives birth to a bastard, and who in the in the final scene of the second part of the epic comes to embody the patriarchal myth of “das Ewig-Weibliche,” the eternal feminine, the immutable essence of womanhood. All this composite semantic load informs Celan’s single line: “he writes when it grows dark to Deutschland your golden hair Margareta” (31). Additionally, the “golden hair,” the only specified physical attribute of the maiden, plays out the Nordic (“Aryan”) archetypical ideal of beauty (including blue eyes and a physique mirroring Greco-Roman statues), but then it is immediately compromised by being an echo of Heinrich Heine’s very popular Romantic lyric on Lorelei, who has her “golden hair” combed by a siren. Heine – similarly to Baruch Spinoza before him and to Celan, in his self-chosen exile in Paris, later – is one of the paradigmatic figures of Jewish, chronically unbalanced, *betweenness* (i.e. he is an instance of a Jewish European artist torn between Hebraism and Hellenism): “Heine not only perceived himself as the absolute outsider but was socially isolated. Unable to assume a position within the dominant society, he removed himself from him” (Gilman 129). And this isolation had its posthumous continuation. As Felstiner (36) notes, because of the fact that during the Nazi era Heine’s poem was officially tagged as anonymous, Celan developed a strong elected affinity with his German predecessor.

In the very sounds audible in her name, Shulamith,<sup>8</sup> featuring in the Bible once only, in the Song of Songs, as a dark-haired beloved maiden, conveys a series of at least three interrelated associations: peace (*shalom*), Jerusalem (*Yerushalayim*) and a feminine equivalent of the name *Solomon*, which may make her a potential bride of Solomon, the king (biblegateway). Revered in the text of the Song as “dove” and “undefiled” (6:9, KJV), Shulamith finds her debased plight, literally in the air, as chimney-smoke remnant, in the twentieth-century new formula: “Your ashen

<sup>7</sup> There exists an overwhelming body of exegeses and commentaries to Celan’s poem, and the present exposition of some selected aspects of it is, inevitably, indebted to the works of other scholars. That said, the aim of the present paper is not to add anything significant to the research into Celan, but to explore the intertextual potential of its links to the prose of Ozick. While tracing this potential, I particularly draw on the seminal study of John Felstiner (22–41), as well as the one by Pierre Joris (3–35).

<sup>8</sup> The double spelling of the Jewish maiden’s name reflects the differences of the conventions used in the source texts: Celan consistently uses the form “Sulamith,” but Felstiner diversifies spelling: in the parts of the fugue that are fully translated, he follows the convention from King James Version, “Shulamith.” In the final distich, which for reasons clarified in Footnote 1 retains the original German text, the name appears as “Sulamith.”

hair Shulamith we shovel a grave in the air where you won't lie too cramped" (31). When Celan has both maidens braced in the final distich of "Todesfuge": "dein goldenes Haar Margarete/ dein aschenes Haar Sulamith," he creates a quasi-biblical syntactical parallelism that remains painfully antithetic. And severed from any imaginable closure by the symbolic lack of period.

In a succinct yet still profound way, the first part of Ozick's *The Shawl* illustrates the misery and precariousness of covert motherhood behind the barbed wires of an unspecified Nazi camp, where an emaciated young Jewish woman, Rosa Lublin, having managed to sneak in her toddler hidden under a shawl during the induction processing, is confronted with the double challenge of having to provide nourishment and making sure the child remains invisible for the guards. As the feeding proves impossible, the image of empty, dried breasts becomes an important, recurring element of the narrative: "Magda relinquished Rosa's teats ... both were cracked, not a sniff of milk. The duct-crevice extinct, a dead volcano, blind eye, chill hole" (4). By reversing the most obvious associations that as small children we have with the softness and warmth of female breasts, sources of the most elemental *first* food, Ozick comes close to an analogical (not identical) semantic operation that Celan resorted to when he coined his oxymoron "Schwarze Milch." Instead of drinking "black milk," Magda (un)naturally learns to soothe herself by sucking on the protective shawl. When the cloth, for a certain reason, is missing, she leaves the barrack, toddles onto the roll call area of the camp, and is grabbed by a German guard. It is precisely at this moment of the narrative that the breasts are again oddly recalled and endowed with deadly overtones. Observing the whole scene Rosa feels "[a] tide of commands hammered in ... [her] nipples" (8) and then suppresses a scream while her child is flung onto the electrified fence.

Although the trauma of witnessing the infanticide is given prominence in the story and as a major theme finds its development in a subsequent part of the diptych, "Rosa," it should not overshadow a different, equally sinister aspect of female experience of the Holocaust, which – signaled in the narrative merely in passing as understatement – is, nevertheless, its crucial component. Rosa's *ad hoc* remark that she "was forced by a German ... and more than once" (43), as well as the fact of her daughter having blue eyes like "*their* babies" (4) allude to sexual abuse that in all probability preceded the events described in the book. A detailed review of Holocaust testimonies and Holocaust fiction that focus on women and were written by women – which for obvious reasons is outside the scope of the present paper – would easily demonstrate that explicit sexuality and eroticism occupy a rather marginal position in such texts (but, significantly, are treated more fully by male authors).<sup>9</sup> Ozick is no exception here, and certainly her decision to forgo

<sup>9</sup> For a comprehensive study of the problem both in female testimonies and in fiction written by female authors see, for example, the ground-breaking study *Sexual Violence Against Jewish Women During the Holocaust*, edited by Sonja M. Hedgepeth and Rochelle G. Saidel.

overt representation of the rape scene does not in the least way diminish the value of her story. Violation of Nazi laws against so-called *Rassenschande* (sexual and marital relations between “Aryans” and “non-Aryans”) was, even despite notoriously aggressive anti-Semitism, a relatively common occurrence during WWII. And it is a distant echo of one instance of such a violation embedded in the narrative that enables us to consider *The Shawl* as part of *Der Tod und das Mädchen* tradition – the tradition encompassing the paintings of Hans Baldung Grien and Niklaus Manuel Deutsch. The apparent incongruity between these two instances of Renaissance visual art and one instance of twentieth-century war fiction vanishes the moment we spot their shared, concurrent imagery: the implication of the victim in a sexual liaison with the tormentor, and the mixture of revulsion and passionate feelings that comes out of it as a result.

The images and the precise contrapuntal structure of Celan’s fugue find their echoes in the way Ozick handles and configures the images of her story, notably color and spatiality. I have already signaled the near equivalent of the metaphoric “black milk” in the absence of nutrition, when Rosa’s breast is rendered as a “dead volcano,” but a net of subtle correspondences reaches far beyond that. One of the strongest connecting motifs is the emphasis given to Magda’s blue eyes and fair hair. In the fugue, the commandant’s appearance surfaces twice, each time synecdochically reduced to his most Aryan trait: “he grabs for the rod in his belt he swings it *his eyes are so blue*” (31, emphasis added) and “this Death is ein Meister aus Deutschland *his eye it is blue*” (33, emphasis added). The color of the oppressor’s eyes is as deadly captivating for the camp inmates whose chorus voices we hear in “Todesfuge” as it is for a raped Jewish maiden in Ozick’s story, who, staring at the face of her beloved child, cannot help recalling the eyes of the assaulter. As for the “fair hair,” it doubly connotes both racial superiority and victimhood (golden haired Margareta’s sexual abuse), and thus – especially, when Celan’s verse becomes an intertext to *The Shawl* – an absurdity is inscribed in the fate of Magda, the Jewish-German child in the Nazi camp, who is murdered by her father’s kinsman.

The pre-funeral rite wherein the inmates are ordered to “shovel a grave in the ground,” whereas they themselves feel they “shovel a grave in the air where you won’t lie too cramped” (31), and which subsequently is modified into a very concrete verbalization by the commandant of their accurately anticipated fate (“you’ll rise up as smoke to the sky/ you’ll then have a grave in the clouds,” 33) is the main pillar of the fugue’s vertical perspective. Such spatial orientation from *down* to *up* is also a distinct feature in *The Shawl*, where it assumes a few elaborate realizations. In the camp universe of starvation and forced labor, the body’s rapid decline is rendered by means of pointing to its gradual painful estrangement, on one hand, and its lightness, on the other. Depicted at the beginning of the story as they walk, Rosa and her niece Stella raise “one burden of a leg after another” (5); soon, however, “[t]he weight of Rosa” is “becoming less and less” until she feels as if she were “slowly turning into

the air” (6), and the malnutrition of her daughter manifests in a small, swollen belly “fat with air” (5). At this moment of the narrative, the language that Ozick applies to render the camp experience borders on what we may, for want of a better term, call poeticized, shortening at the same time the distance between the *down* and the *up*, between the notions of *hell* and *heaven*: “Rosa ... felt light ... [like] someone who is already a floating angel, alert and seeing everything, but in the air, not there, not touching the road” (3–4). The description of Magda’s death is informed by the same, poeticized (or perhaps over-poeticized) imagery and vertical orientation that in the end acquires Celanian overtones:

All at once Magda was swimming through the air. The whole of Magda traveled through loftiness. She looked like a butterfly touching a silver vine. [And soon] Magda’s feathered round head and her pencil legs and balloonish belly and zigzag arms splashed against the fence... (9–10)

The death occurs *up*, and in a moment, the body of the child is burnt on the electric wires – all this in surroundings where even the wind that blows, as it is mentioned earlier in the narrative, is “ash-stripped” (7).

But the intertextual relation between Celan’s verse and Ozick’s prose does not exhaust in what has been outlined above. In 1942, an *Umsiedlung* (relocation) of Jews from the ghetto in Czernowitz, Bukovina began, and Celan’s parents were deported east to Transnistria, i.e. across the Dniester River to Ukraine, then occupied by the German army. At the time, he himself was outside home, safe in a hideout, a fact that remained a wound on his conscience ever after. The tidings of his father’s almost immediate demise as a result of contracting typhus, and – particularly – the information, months later, that his mother was declared unfit to work and shot, occasioned a series of deeply personal lyrics (Felstiner 16–19). One of them, “Schwarze Flocken” (“Black Flakes”), which documents the day Paul received the letter from his mother informing him of his father’s death, has the form of an exchange between parent and child, is haunted by an anti-Semitic menace, and revolves around the image of a protective “shawl”:

[“] Oh for a cloth, child,  
 to wrap myself when it’s flashing with helmets,  
 when the rosy floe bursts, when snowdrift sifts your father’s  
 bones, hooves crushing  
 the Song of the Cedar...  
 A shawl, just a thin little shawl, so I keep  
 by my side, now you’re learning to weep, this anguish,  
 this world that will never turn green, my child, for your child!”

Autumn bled all away, Mother, snow burned me through:  
 I sought out my heart so it might weep, I found – oh the summer’s breath  
 it was like you.  
 Then came my tears. I wove the shawl. (15)

Even if the above lines are not referred to in the prose of Ozick, they nevertheless enrich the intertextual dynamics being considered in the present discussion. Early on in the narrative, the eponymous shawl Magda is wrapped in is wishfully believed by Rosa to possess the magic capacity to “nourish an infant for three days and three nights” (5). The piece of cloth, evoking the traditional *tallit* and thus recalling the protagonists’ Jewishness, gives merely an *ersatz* comfort – offers a temporary (eventually insufficient) invisibility and pacifies the child’s hunger. Having a piece of it inserted in her mouth, Magda sucks on it, or better: drinks the imagined milk, the image of which is yet another modification of the ghastly, compulsive activity mentioned in the opening lines of the fugue:

Black milk of daybreak we drink it at evening  
 we drink it at midday and morning we drink it at night  
 we drink and we drink (31)

The figure of drinking, as Felman (30) notes, is traditionally interpreted as a metaphor for yearning – be it an erotic or a purely aesthetic drive. In Celan’s fugal composition and in Ozick’s story, the figure is stripped of its cultural refinement, scaled down to its most rudimental, biological meaning, and made to connote the dose of pain and torture that is to be swallowed by a victim.

The (real) history of Celan’s poem’s reception and the (imagined) history of Rosa’s life as a survivor after the war are also two distinctly converging exemplifications of what Michael G. Levine terms “testimonial transmission” (9), the process of turning traumatic memories into “social acts, into narrative memories addressed to others” (7), which is of paramount importance in Holocaust studies. Upon receiving, in 1958, “The Literature Prize of the Free Hanseatic City of Bremen,” Celan gave a talk, in which he introduced the notions of “an addressable Thou,” and an “addressable reality,” as destinations for a(ny) poem. For the sake of the present discussion I treat the word “poem” as very close to the notion of testimonial literature itself. Celan said:

A poem, as a manifestation of language and thus essentially dialogue, can be a message in a bottle, sent out in the – not always greatly hopeful – belief that somewhere and sometime it could wash up on land, on heartland perhaps. Poems in this sense too are underway: they are making toward something.

Toward what? Toward something standing open, occupiable, perhaps toward an addressable Thou, toward an addressable reality.

Such realities, I think, are at stake in a poem. (396)

The addressability of his own literature proved to be a major challenge, if not – initially at least – an insurmountable obstacle. Celan’s attitude toward his best-known poem was soon marked by a strong emotional ambivalence, and this to such an extent that he withdrew his permission to have it anthologized and stopped including it on set lists in his public readings. The reason for the authorial

hostility toward his own text was both of a moral and political nature. As a man born into a family of Jewish-Bukovinian roots, but, from 1955, a naturalized French citizen, Celan for most of his life wrote in German, the language adored by his mother, and wanted to be part of the literature of his vicarious, *linguistic* homeland. Still, after the war, during his occasional visits there, he was most alarmed by the direction the political developments in this country were taking. As noted by his biographers (e.g. Joris 18–23), in the late 1940s/early 1950s Nazi criminals were officially held not liable to punishment, and the program aimed at removing them from the sphere of public life came to a halt, which in practice meant that army and police officers, judges, attorneys, school and academic teachers, etc., were granted the right to regain their posts; as a consequence, the memory of war crimes and the Holocaust was shrouded in silence and, for a postwar generation of young Germans, gradually became a skeleton in the closet. When in 1957, a German journal of pedagogy published a report on how “Todesfuge” engages high school students, it turned out that the poem was analyzed in purely formal terms, with the teacher’s emphasis placed on theme, counterpoint, repetitions, etc., and without any serious foray into the homicidal history that constitutes its core (Felstiner 118). Celan’s trips to Germany to meet local fledgling literary circles often proved to be alienating experiences, especially when “Todesfuge” and his other poems were either deemed “unpleasant,” or misread – deliberately or not – as, for example, “dreamy” and “surreal” by the former SS member and now critic and poet Hans Egon Holthusen (Joris 21).

In a sequel to the story of the infanticide in a concentration camp (titled “Rosa”), Ozick explores Rosa’s inability to narrativize her traumatic memories, demonstrating how the “message in a bottle,” washed up on the American shore (Miami) about thirty years after the war, remains corked, ignored and undeciphered, and at most very unlikely to be transmitted to “an addressable Thou.” Whereas in “Todesfuge” the act of writing is intertwined with a deadly play (e.g. through the alliteration: “spielt,” “Schlangen,” “schreibt”), the second part of Ozick’s diptych often assumes an epistolary form, within the framework of which Rosa is compulsively dedicated to producing an alternative account of her past life, in the form of letters sent to her long dead daughter, so as to *stifle* a surfacing noise of the past trauma; and also, in the meantime, she herself becomes a subject of the discourse of others – in each case, however, writing does not reach its intended purpose, i.e. it does not arrive at anything close to “testimonial transmission.” In one of the most striking, yet at the same time symptomatic, examples, Rosa conceives a new life for her long dead daughter in the way an author brings a character into being. The very act of writing (in Polish) literally *makes* a history:

What a curiosity it was to hold a pen – nothing but a small pointed stick, after all, oozing its hieroglyphic puddles: a pen that speaks, miraculously, Polish. A lock removed from the tongue. Otherwise the tongue is chained to the teeth and the palate. An immersion into the

living language: all at once this cleanliness, this capacity, this power to make a history, to tell, to explain. To retrieve, to reprove!  
 To lie. (44)

The last verb in what may easily pass for a fragment of an interior monologue tellingly strikes a discordant note, pointing to the solipsistic character of the communication Rosa engages in.

As I have attempted to demonstrate in the brief discussion above, the bond between *The Shawl* and the epigraph from Celan's "Todesfuge" that Ozick chose for it manifests itself in the intricate intertextual dynamic that results in both texts mutually illuminating themselves. Given the Jewish origins of both authors and their dedication to Judaic tradition, this "midrashic" aspect should not be overlooked in the interpretation of their works. Yet, the closeness of the two lines of verse and the short story is even better seen if we recognize their – so far critically neglected – affiliation with a profound tradition of works employing the motif of "Death and the Maiden," both in the visual arts and in music. This is particularly important in view of the subject matter Celan and Ozick focus on, i.e. the Holocaust, because here we are confronted with yet another instance of how difficult it has always been for the writers preoccupied with this particular event to propose a writing formula, the uniqueness of which would correspond to the uniqueness of the experience it tries to represent. Finally, my article draws attention to the question that the combined Celanian-Ozickian discourse brings with it, albeit well-hidden between the lines: how is one to communicate and address something that can hardly be contained as an object of narration? This problem, however, deserves separate consideration.

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