

## *Mishkan: The Ungraven Image*

See, I have called by name Bezalel the son of Uri,  
the son of Hur, of the tribe of Yehuda: and I have filled him with the  
spirit of God, in wisdom, and  
in understanding, and in knowledge, and in all manner of workmanship,  
to contrive works of art.

—Exodus 31: 1–4

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 no frescoes of Abraham and his family. It accounts for the near absence of triptychs documenting Moses and the exodus from Egypt, of ‘Jewish’ sculptures honoring the great kings, David and Solomon. All these potentially dramatic images have been rendered almost 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 agenda, 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 effort 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 dehumanizing effect art can embody when and if it is worshipped for its own sake? Ozick has argued that when art contains no intrinsic historical or moral import, then, like idols and their worship, the capacity for pity is crushed.<sup>1</sup> This is evidenced most explicitly in the cult of human sacrifice prevalent in the ancient pagan world and in the technologically driven mass murder of the modern. Both idolatry and ideology can lead to killing and Ozick merges the two by claiming that the Second Commandment’s intention is

to help humanity resist the temptation to murder for the sake of ideology and in the name of beliefs.<sup>2</sup>

In her short stories, “Shots,”<sup>3</sup> and “The Suitcase,”<sup>4</sup> and in the novels, *The Puttermesser Papers* and *The Cannibal Galaxy*, Ozick has created characters that, by dint of being painters and photographers, have animated these questions of art’s relationship to idolatry and ethics. Through them she has focused her sights on what I maintain can be broadly construed as a potently Jewish interpretation on the creation of ‘graven images.’ These portraits of the artist counter the putative dangers of idolatry.

It seems quite evident to me that the continued view of the creation of beauty and art as a pagan and decidedly non-Hebraic concern is not entirely or necessarily true. Yet this is precisely the critical lens through which many of Ozick’s finest critics view those narratives whose protagonists are artists struggling with notions of creation, power, and the parameters of meaning.<sup>5</sup> Ozick herself protests this “implicit claim that paganism—that is, anti-Judaism—is the ultimate ground for the making of poetry.”<sup>6</sup> The God of Israel may be exacting but he [sic] is not a muted minimalist. Aesthetic manipulation has always been an integral aspect of the creative energy of the world beginning with light, “the first ‘thing of beauty’ ever created by [God the . . .] artist, the first Word, and the first image.”<sup>7</sup> Blessings expressing an appreciation of nature’s splendor, the idiosyncratic attention given to the details of ritual objects, the exquisite complexity of biblical Hebrew are but a few examples from the Judaic tradition that provide a clear counterpoint to a stark reductive rendering of the aesthetically permissible.

A more thoughtful reading of Ozick’s work reveals that the binary opposition of pagan versus Judaic is just too simplistic a governor for the complex engagement of character, ideas, and civilizations in her narratives dealing with artistic productions. This is so because her fiction depicts a world whose borders, both within the frames of her fiction and without, have always been osmotic and where cultural borrowing or usurpation is inevitable.<sup>8</sup>

The biblical portion in which Moses descends from Mount Sinai, tablets of law in hand, is called *Yitro*, the name of Moses’ Midianite father-in-law. Yitro 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 exclusively to the business of leadership. This decentralization 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. The privileging of interpretation, 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,”<sup>9</sup> Walzer observed and for this reason Yitro’s nonhegemonic revolutionary structure, 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, [. . . a] multiplicity of meanings and the need for interpretation,”<sup>10</sup> which is how Auerbach defined a Jewish aesthetic, applies equally to the way in which the law, handed down at Sinai, was henceforth approached. This parallel applicability, between the law and aesthetic production, exposes an essential link and compatibility.

Ozick is concerned with the philosophical context for the act that is born out of this need for interpretation. She claims that

The future of a Jewish literature [and I would add all genres of art] was to derive insight into what a Jew is—not partially, locally, sociologically, ‘ethnically,’ but in principle. . . . To be a Jew is to be a member of a distinct civilization expressed through an oceanic culture in possession of a group of essential concepts and a multitude of texts and attitudes elucidating those concepts.<sup>11</sup>

Sometimes her characters are consciously aware that they are acting out their lives as visual artists in this oceanic context of Judaism. Sometimes they are not. Still, the ways in which creativity, the power of interpretation, and a sense of manifold perspectives are presented in Ozick’s narratives help provide a sense of boundaries, albeit shifting ones, to the conception of a Jewish aesthetic.



For all the resistance surrounding the making of idols, the notion that all representational art is forbidden in the Jewish tradition is simply not true. The Second Commandment is more widely interpreted than is commonly known. 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.”<sup>12</sup> It is not necessary to look deeply into Jewish sources to see evidence of that. The cherubim—angel-like gold figures with human faces whose wings spread over the cover of the Ark of the Tabernacle—are quite impressive examples. Similarly, the lengthy instructions given to Bezalel for the building of the *Mishkan*, the sanctuary that 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 a tarp overhead. Instead Exodus 25:9–29 is a text-based construction document, specifying materials, sizes, proportions,

functions, and even building methodology. This is not mere filler, a break in the narrative between the Golden Calf carnival at Sinai and the meticulous outlining of the law coming up in Leviticus. The instructions take up ten times more space in the Bible than the description of the creation of the universe. The *Mishkan* was an elaborate, solicitous, and pleasing structure meant to help focus worshippers' attention on the majesty and awesomeness of their formless Creator and Redeemer. Inside the thoughtful composition, the intention was not for Israel to pledge allegiance to the vast quantities of gold and jewels and fragrant woods, but to recognize in such beauty the power of the one god.

Bezalel, an archetype for the Jewish artist, is given a name that in Hebrew means "in God's shadow." This "could signify the artist's subordinate relationship to the *Torah*,"<sup>13</sup> a prophylactic obstacle to hubris; a reminder to the human creator that it is not his or her place to attempt to match the authority of the Creator. But the etymology of Bezalel's name might also indicate that he, as artist, is respectful of and not in competition with the power—the light—of the omnipotent. Being in the shadow of god allows him to create a positive product from a negative imprint, as the narrator of "Shots" does when she develops photographs in the darkroom. Bezalel is in the lord's penumbra because he works so closely with this light. It becomes his inspiration and guide. In his hands, materiality is charged with the search for greater meaning. God himself says about Bezalel: "I have filled him with the spirit of God, with Wisdom, with Understanding, and with Knowledge" (Exodus 31:3). Mel Alexenberg's description of the artist illuminates Bezalel's charge:

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 worshiping 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.<sup>14</sup>

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.<sup>15</sup> A widening of the sphere of the permissible, a return, as it were, to an earlier more flexible definition and understanding of the commandments, has enabled artists to grapple openly with the question of a Jewish aesthetics. Under this rubric, personal and communal explorations of beauty, meaning, and images have taken place.

Jewish artists, especially in the twentieth century, have become passionately engaged in painting and in photography. With this comes the recogni-

tion 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 worshipping idols, but simultaneously there is a need to accept, use, celebrate, and interpret impressions of the proliferation of images representing the earth's fecundity and splendor, much as Adam did in the Garden of Eden when he named the world around him.

"Appreciation of physical beauty, both in nature and man . . . provides occasion to recall the work of the creator. Those who behold a particular seat of natural wonder are called on to utter a special blessing: 'blessed are you, O Lord our God, king of the universe who has made the creation.'"<sup>16</sup> Landsberger cites the Talmud's interpretation of the biblical words, "This is my God and I will adorn him,"<sup>17</sup> as a source for the justification of the creation of beautiful objects and space with which to worship God.<sup>18</sup>

While acknowledging this right, desire, even inevitability of artistic expression, Ozick is sensitive to the need to temper aesthetics with ethics. Otherwise, she claims, this infatuation can easily become, as was stated earlier, 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."<sup>19</sup>

The Second Commandment is not only a strong reaction to the (literal) human sacrifices that often accompanied idol worship, but also recognizes, in the words of Baudrillard, "the murderous capacity of images."<sup>20</sup> In language that closely resembles that of rabbis concerned with the power of representational images, 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.*"<sup>21</sup> Ozick has also 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."<sup>22</sup> Be that as it may, the reductive counterpoint between a pagan appreciation of physical beauty and a Jewish stance against it is simply not supported in Ozick's work. She does not foreground the production of beautiful images in order to expose their vapidness; rather she emphasizes the meaning invested in them.

The *Shulchan Aruch*, the sixteenth-century codification of Jewish law compiled by Rabbi Joseph Caro, 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."<sup>23</sup> This fragmentation, distortion, or what he calls "the theology

of the slashed nose,"<sup>24</sup> is not "a reduction but an expansion of the human form."<sup>25</sup> Like Benjamin, who states that the photographic snapshot "reveals entirely new structural formations of the subject,"<sup>26</sup> 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 original act of creation. Ozick's artist characters work with images to bring together their visions of the world informed by the Western tradition of aesthetics and by the Judaic search for meaning in forms that cite formlessness and powers beyond the obvious lines of containment.



The unnamed narrator in "Shots" 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). Benjamin says photography has changed the way tradition is related to since "making many reproductions . . . substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence."<sup>27</sup> This deprivileging of authenticity is liberating but it is also intimidating. Berger writes how the camera "demonstrated that there was no centre."<sup>28</sup> Here is a potential flattening of meaning raised from a leveling of all objects. A radical dismantling of hierarchy hovers on the horizon threatening to undermine all boundaries and certainties.

Jewish law, which is concerned that the authenticity and authority of God not be confused with any construed object, might consider photographs 'safe,' since they are clearly miniature reproductions of the world and cannot easily be confused with reality, 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."<sup>29</sup> So while the distinction between authenticity and falsehood is sustained, the creation of meaning remains potentially undermined. Every scene can be framed without reaching for higher intention; every point of view is legitimate. Even so, the making of photographs cannot simply 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.

The unnamed narrator of "Shots" echoes the sentiments concerning photography's relativism in the opening line of the story: "I came to photography as I came to infatuation—with no special talent for it, and with no point of view" (39). She thinks this relieves her of responsibility for the artifacts she produces. Yet she contradicts this position immediately when she lists all that she claims not to know about photography: its history,

technical challenges, and intricacies. She defines her photographs as having “nothing to do with art and less to do with reality” (39). Yet no photograph is framed without a point of view, however nonchalant and unintentional. This physical fact forces an interpretation that by default is both a revelation and a distortion of the world. The distinction between authenticity and imitation lies, as Benjamin observes, in the intention.<sup>30</sup>

The protagonist’s self-conscious declaration reveals 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 that occurred at the age of eleven when she found a collection of sepia photographs of a woman she named Brown Girl in a pile of brown autumn leaves. “Call it necrophilia” (39) she comments, describing this watershed moment of her life when she fell in love with dead faces and the photographs that keep them alive.<sup>31</sup>

The existential question she grapples with is not whether to be or not, but whether to create or not. After her ‘don’t know much about’ declaration she reveals unwittingly that she has the talent to disclose truths and that she wants, in addition, to be the brand of photographer who not only “records the past but . . . who invents it.”<sup>32</sup> This seems to be a case of the lady (narrator) protesting too much. She tries to throw the reader, and Sam, the object of her erotic desire, 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 this posture reveals her ambivalence toward the production of images, literary and literal, because of their potential deification. Another interpretation is that this apologetic defensiveness is a result of the narrator’s chronic passivity: she has chosen to reflect on life, is busy translating it, and has forfeited living it. This is, in some way, just a more refined criticism of the artist.

An alternative interpretation, one that can be applied to other Ozick narratives as well, is that the uncertainty 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 her suffering solely about the observer being pitted against the participant, the outsider gazing at the insider with longing. What I suspect she is experiencing is not simply ambivalence, but the vertigo of oscillation.

This narrator is not trying to choose between territories. She is actually caught in between them. Drawn to the past, looking to carry time forward into the future, she cannot rest easy in the present. By focusing her lens on the simultaneous translator, rather than on the academic lecturers she has been hired to photograph, she exhibits an idiosyncratic struggle to synthesize her devotion to aesthetics, history, and ethics in order to ease some personal suffering only hinted at in the story.

One of the hints is revealed in her relationship to Brown Girl. She is infatuated with her history and the portraits that have defied time. Yet she is also concerned with the photographer's intention and the message of the photographs themselves:

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 recognizes that it is not just the sun that 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 photograph could have revealed something about the subject that transcended a fixed moment in history. Something of her essential humanness founded on sympathy could have been brought forth. Instead she is shrouded in hostility.

The photographer's lack of technical skill and/or compassion seems to the protagonist an apt and tragic conclusion to the life history of a woman incarcerated in a lunatic asylum. Like Bear Boy who is the model for his father's illustrations in *Heir to the Glimmering World*, Brown Girl is trapped in sepia photographs. Brown Girl is anonymous and Bear Boy so universally acclaimed that his visage becomes a mask, its own form of invisibility. This girl and that boy are frozen in time, juvenile forever in these predatory works of art. Brown Girl goes crazy. Bear Boy commits suicide. The connection between the fixity of a visual frame and death intrigue the photographer. She is attracted to death—Brown Girl's, the translator's, and suffers consciousness of her own. Like Ozick, this protagonist 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."<sup>33</sup> Death's inevitability, that "all green corrupts to brown" (54), provokes her. Brown Girl, Bear Boy. Both brown. She is haunted by loneliness and not by the clash of civilizations. She is without a mate, mourns her childlessness, and fears death.

The story she tells belies her early 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, and the inescapable subjectivity of a point of view. This is no totalizing 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 between the aesthetic and the ethical, between portraits that reveal meaning and those that annihilate their subjects. Partial disclosure is her way of maintaining balance.

Yet a shift occurs over the course of the story in the protagonist's point of view regarding 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 position on the primacy of the art of interpretation, does come into focus. Ozick has said that without the capacity to imagine, Abram of Ur would never have been able to look into nature and "envision . . . that which there is no evidence for whatever."<sup>34</sup> Geoffrey Hartman has pointed out that "the ambivalence surrounding imagination [in the Jewish world] centered on this contrast between its low position in the hierarchy of faculties and its sublime function in prophecy."<sup>35</sup> 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 it is 'to educate, to nurture'—*l'amen*. So Jewish artistry is about truth, faith, and education."<sup>36</sup>

The narrator of "Shots" takes photographs of a simultaneous translator at the very instant that an assassin's bullet plows into his neck. Right before this convergence of *shots*, she reflects on why she has chosen to focus her lens on the translator, considering that he is performing a service and is not among the important persons 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). After he has been assassinated and is 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 mouth-piece for another, a double. This identity parallels her own as a creator of photographs who champions Sontag's view of a photography that embraces "the co-existence of . . . two ideals—assault on reality and submission to reality."<sup>37</sup> This kind of doubling, seen in "The Pagan Rabbi," "Bloodshed," *The Puttermesser Papers*, *The Messiah of Stockholm*, "Levitation," "Usurpation (Other People's Stories),"<sup>38</sup> among many other Ozick fictions, reflects the character's involvement with dialectics, simultaneity, multiplicity, and the shifting interpretations of events that come to be called history. It also reflects, as Coates observes, a protagonist "suspended between languages and cultures."<sup>39</sup>

The photographer lives uncomfortably, yet there she is, with fluid borders. Strict prohibitions of image making are not part of her consciousness. Her intention is to reveal connections between events, people, to defy time, to collapse space, to literally show how “what happened then was here now” (42). And still a persistent vertigo follows her throughout the story. While she is reluctant to face her power, nevertheless she creates history through the images stalked and captured 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 unconvincingly to diminish the importance of this desire and is genuinely offended when the police confiscate her film after the simultaneous translator’s assassination. Certainly on a practical level she must recognize that the footage is now evidence in a criminal investigation. But for her the film is, more important, a way to bridge the gap between herself and another cotranslator, each interpreting the world simultaneously, spontaneously, both imprinting history.

The narrator’s life’s passion for photography is inspired by 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. At the end of the story, Sam’s wife dresses her in a nun’s brown habit and proclaims: “Period Piece!” (56). Then the photographer accepts, in spite of her insistence that it is she who controls the photos and not them her, that she has become Brown Girl; that her own demise is inevitable. She is not above the fray. Her life is also open to another’s interpretation.

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.<sup>40</sup> Freema Gottlieb describes light as a metaphor that entails “the capacity for ascendance from lower to higher forms of life.”<sup>41</sup> Roland Barthes in *Camera Lucida* writes that photography is chiefly “an emanation of the referent.”<sup>42</sup> He equates the “discovery that silver halogens were sensitive to light”<sup>43</sup> to that of an alchemist’s: the transformation of one form of matter into another. This is not so different from the way many architects approach the phenomenon of light. The preeminent American architect Louis Kahn had a near mystical interpretation of light as “the giver of all Presences: by will; by law . . . the maker of a material.”<sup>44</sup> 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 beginning. Egged on by Sam’s challenging her resistance to Polaroid

cameras, 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 waiting and silence and the creation of meaning. It is too much surface. Hester Lilt criticizes Joseph Brill in *The Cannibal Galaxy* for having “stopped too soon” (63), for not waiting. She understands how jumping to facile and quick conclusions disables one from reaching higher meaning. She lauds the ability to interpret future potentialities without obvious or gross hints. And her daughter Beulah, who blossomed from silence into expressiveness, who began as a follower in Brill’s school to become a leader in her own school of young painters, is her best example of the rightness of this philosophical point of view.

The intimate thoughts of the photographer’s process of creation unintentionally reveal to Sam a perspective quite close to a Jewish view of aesthetics. Here process and interpretation are foregrounded. She explains: “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 this occurs since, for him, photography is a chemical, and decidedly not an alchemical, process.

The narrator is displeased by him. She is not a mechanic, or even a scientist, but, like him, an interpreter. But where he is able to see openings in which to insert himself into analyses of history and the politics of Latin America, he is not able to see beyond a static present of images that, in his mind, photography is an extension of.

She seems to agree, at least on the surface when she explains to him that the photographer gets what is *there*, as if a photograph were a catalogue of facts. Whereas in truth she is consciously and actively shaping the story that she finds in her viewfinder. She protects herself from greater exposure though, in this instance hearing Sam’s grave misunderstanding of her life’s work, 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 that in turn forge or reveal disparate links in the chain of humanity. And despite her fears and hesitations, she is a part of the simultaneous translation between the image and history. But expressing this to Sam, the academic historian, would make her vulnerable to his reproach. She fears annihilation. She fears being captured in his biased viewfinder. She fears he will make her into Brown Girl, as his wife eventually does. This degree of visibility is comparable to assassination.

When she realizes 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 sexual desire for 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, of interpreting the possibilities and limitations of reality.

She recognizes that Sam’s attraction to terrorism, factionalism, and revolution south of the North American border is an expression of his rebellion against the engulfing domesticity his overcompetent wife has surrounded him with. In contrast, the photographer, unmarried and childless, thirty-six but “tomorrow [she] will be forty-eight” (56), is straining toward 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,”<sup>45</sup> her desire, her vulnerability, “stings her in the neck” (55) like an assassin’s bullet. She withholds her words from him, but cannot restrain her emotion.

The bullet in the neck is a leitmotif that ‘leads’ the photographer to expect annihilation in the face of exposed emotional vulnerability. But *leit*, which means “to lead” in German, is also a homonym with the light she molds in 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 contrived totality in a paradoxically fragmented web of connection. The unrequited infatuation of both photography and Sam to which she came to “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.

At the moment of taking Sam’s picture the photographer realizes 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, that most moves her and helps her understand subjectivity itself as a kind of vulnerability.<sup>46</sup> Sam assumes greater meaning to her shot under the dripping linden tree than in the myriad photographs she has taken of him at various symposia. By exposing him to the natural elements—tree, rain, light—by finding him in her viewfinder, she locates herself as well, frightened, wanting, and awed.

Benjamin said that “earliest works of art originated in the service of ritual—first the magical, then the religious kind.”<sup>47</sup> For Ozick’s protagonist, photographing is a ritual as well. Not religious in any overt sense, but linked to a search for meaning quite common to our century and throughout (Jewish) time. “The aboriginal Jewish aesthetic,” Schwarzschild writes, is “in eternal pursuit of the ideal, divine, or at least messianic world.”<sup>48</sup> For the photographer, this translates into forging connection and empathy through ritualized portraiture and, of course, through interpretation.

The last shot 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 reveals 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, connected to a man and children, and who is chastely married to a ‘higher’ calling, the photographer’s parting shot is to expose them in their miserable union. They are not free to pursue passion outside the narrow province of their marriage. Stuck 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 the photographer wearing a nun’s brown habit has become Brown Girl whose photograph is in her front pocket, forces the photographer to come to terms with her power. She can control and ‘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 here are “combined, not ‘developed’” and so remain distinct while bound.<sup>49</sup> Sam and Verity coexist. They are shot at and survive. Not for them the fatal assassin’s bullet. But in the light of the mirror, in the shadows captured on film, their reflections remain static adjacencies.

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.”<sup>50</sup> Not pity just for the outcast, but a pity, maybe better called by the Hebrew word *rachamim*,<sup>51</sup> that 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 artistic 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.”<sup>52</sup> Here is pity not just for Walker Evans’s impoverished folk and Diane Arbus’s freaks, but for all of humanity, bound by form, informed by light.



In the “Puttermesser Paired” chapter of *The Puttermesser Papers*,<sup>53</sup> Ozick has coupled her serial heroine, Ruth Puttermesser, now in her fifties, with a visual artist. Rupert Rabeeno<sup>54</sup> is a painter whose highly original work lies not in the degree of distortion or fragmentation he achieves, or in his use of a modern medium, but rather in the old-fashioned act of applying oil paint to canvas to achieve as close a likeness as he can to the famous works of the old masters.

Watching him work in the French neoclassical room at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, Puttermesser is at first impressed with his technical skill. During her opening gambit when she queries him about his copying, he explains that he does nothing of the sort: “I reenact” (125–26), he insists. At this point it becomes clear that Ozick is not simply dressing up a character in the garb of a visual artist. Once again she is intent on examining concerns underlying aesthetics in order to understand the ways in which history, interpretation, ethics, and the production of visual representation intersect.

As in “Shots,” the act of creating images is embedded in a love story. Unfortunately for another Ozick heroine, it is unrequited. For Ruth Puttermesser it is not because her beloved, Rabeeno, like Sam, is married, but because he is truly temperamentally unsuited to sustaining an emotional commitment (though he proves himself an attentive suitor). Rabeeno is so consumed with his reenactments of the masters and of history that he is not able to actually forge new ground for himself; he cannot conjure up a present without precedent.

Taking Puttermesser’s lead and plunging into the life of George Eliot and George Lewes, they read the novels, the biographies, and the journals of these nineteenth-century lovers. Intrigued by Lewes’s nephew, Johnny Cross who married Eliot after Lewes’s death, Rabeeno makes an argument and ultimately persuades Puttermesser that Cross did not marry Eliot out of love. Rather, Rabeeno, the “polychromatic, jack-in-the-box, ambushing the public” (131), claims that Cross was like himself, a reenactor: “[h]e was going to be Lewes for [Eliot]. A reasonable facsimile” (144). Rabeeno closely

examines the Eliot, Lewes, and Cross biographies and letters and proves to Puttermesser how couple number two literally followed in the footsteps of couple number one. Cross, Rabeeno insists, was enthralled by Lewes and by the opportunity to become him. Rabeeno sees himself in Cross as the photographer in "Shots" saw herself in the simultaneous translator.

The tension Benjamin articulated as early as 1936 between an authentic original and replication is hyperbolically exhibited in this chapter. Puttermesser exclaims excitedly to herself: "She understood that she had happened upon an original. A mimic with a philosophy! A philosophy that denied mimicry! And he wasn't mistaken, he wasn't a lunatic" (127). What Rabeeno enables Puttermesser to recognize is that during those long lonely nights when she read Eliot over and over and pined for a Lewes of her own, that she too was engaging in a "resurrection of sorts. . . . Wasn't her dream of having George Lewes again—a simulacrum of George Lewes. . . . Wasn't she, all on her own, a mistress of reenactment?" (132). Wasn't she exactly the same as Rabeeno, wanting to make moments in history happen again, the ultimate *déjà vu*?

Baudrillard writes that "[w]hereas representation tries to absorb simulation by interpreting it as false representation, simulation envelops the whole edifice of representation itself as a simulacrum."<sup>55</sup> Rabeeno, an enormously skilled painter, enlivens Baudrillard's concept and chooses to copy the masters that are then photographed and reduced and sold as greeting cards in book and gift shops throughout the country. He recognizes "the paradox that these images describe the equal impossibility of the real and the imaginary"<sup>56</sup> and so has taken up the mantle of the means. He privileges the process of creation while depreciating the finished canvases.

"Whatever I do is original," he defends himself against Puttermesser's accusation that he does not "make anything up." And he retorts that "[u]ntil I've done them my things don't exist" (126). It is this emphasis on replicating the act of creating, and not on the deification of the created, that seems to me to be most allied with a certain nuance in the attempt to define a Jewish aesthetic. This is an aesthetic that takes its power from the simultaneity of multiple interpretations, from the decentering analyzed and celebrated by Berger, Barthes, Derrida, and de Man, and most significantly from the imitation of the creator making meaning in the world.<sup>57</sup>

Marcuse concludes that "great art is never the simple negation of the reality principle but its transcending preservation in which past and present cast their shadow on fulfillment. The authentic utopia is grounded in recollection."<sup>58</sup> Puttermesser with her obsession with Eliot and Lewes, Rabeeno with his transformation of painting into performance art, are not content with recalling the past. The art of reenactment foregrounded here is precisely about the diminution of the actual images that are prone to stasis and open

to worship. The act of existence is elevated; the individual in the act of painting, of reading, of recollecting and its attendant drama are privileged. Rabeeno is not consciously creating a net of ethics in his reenactments and diminution of European paintings. Nonetheless, he is, by the very act of repetition, conjuring up a sense of “continuity, and continuity [is for him] not far from eternity” (131). Continuity, as the resilient thread of history is, for Judaism, the context for morality.

That Puttermesser, under Rabeeno’s lead, is willing to play George Eliot to his Johnny Cross, to the point where she marries him despite all rational sense (the twenty odd years between them, the haste, the foretold conclusion to their short drama), indicates the strength of her desire to turn the tide and show her mother that at this late hour in her life she has finally recognized for herself that “it was possible for brains to break the heart” (106). Now it was time for the heart to put the mind in its place. Now it was time to settle down with a man.

Living much of her emotional life through literature, the reserved Puttermesser, after a short foray into artistry when she created her golem/daughter Xanthippe, finally marries in the fifth decade of her life. Unlike the anonymous, every-woman-artist in “Shots” and the academic naïf in “An Education,” Puttermesser seizes the day and makes the transition from the life of the observer to that of actant. One late winter afternoon in a rabbi’s study Puttermesser is made holy via betrothal, she becomes *mekoodeshet* to Rupert Rabeeno, the self-made reenactor, with his capes, dramatic moustache, and enormously facile hand.

Rupert Rabeeno first crushes a glass underfoot as is customary in traditional Jewish wedding ceremonies, and then he crushes Puttermesser with his predictable desertion. (Not through the window like Cross into the polluted water of Venice’s Grand Canal to get away from Eliot’s first overt sexual gesture on their honeymoon. Rupert has the good sense to walk out the front door, taking his paints and easel with him.) Puttermesser narrates, disingenuously: “A fabricator of doubles, but he had no duplicity. . . . It wasn’t a manner of mannerisms he took from his prototypes. It was—could it be true—their power?” (136). She will not accept that he has maliciously played with her heart. Indeed, their affair, like all his reenactments, was an authentic expression of the creation of a re-creation.

Puttermesser should have known better. Still, part of the intrigue in this little plot, at least for Puttermesser, is the desire to become another and through experience create connections or continuity that reach beyond the fixed frames of time, place, and identity. Is Rabeeno being judged harshly? Is he cruel? Are his actions features of the kind of truth-hedging that accompanies complex moral situations, the type encountered in the Bible: Abraham telling Pharaoh that Sarah is his sister when she is his wife, Jacob deceiving



Isaac to receive the blessing intended for Esau, Laban switching daughters on Jacob's wedding night? These situations when deceit is deliberately employed have been commented on voluminously. The general consensus is that while the falsehoods reveal flaws in the principal characters, they simultaneously help move history in the direction that has enabled the Jewish people to become the nation, for better or for worse, they were 'destined' to become. 'Extenuating circumstances,' presumably God's will acting through and upon these principal characters, make these unethical acts acceptable.

Rabeeno's duplicity also moves the narrative forward in what seems to be an intended and not unpredictable fashion. Puttermesser remains alone, forewarned by her first encounter with him that this was how it would end. For when she first saw Rabeeno 'reenacting' Jacques-Louis David's 1787 painting, *The Death of Socrates*, she should have remembered her last creative adventure with Xanthippe. Disappointment, deceit, and a broken heart were what remained then. But like the patriarch Jacob who finds the wrong woman in his marriage bed, Puttermesser is caught in the unenviable predicament of allowing her hitherto aloof, bookish mind to follow her heart into the snare of love. There it is broken once again.

For Rabeeno, the desire to connect to eternity while enlivening the present is safe as long as the connection remains a cold abstraction. Face-to-face with a warm blooded woman, he can only engage as long as he is reenacting. He may want to break out of the cycle of replication, he may even believe that in the very act of replication lies the only authenticity available to contemporary lives, but still, he lacks compassion when faced with a beating broken heart, with a woman's desire. His facility with the world of images has not made him into an empathic identifier and he cannot take responsibility for the woman facing him. It has confused him. He has not "convert[ed] the imagination into the necessary moral instrument of a serious ontological enterprise" thereby quieting the "roiling question of art."<sup>59</sup> He has not invented himself, as in "Shots," as an interpreter of the world, valuing the ability to provide signposts in the chaos.

Just as Rabeeno the 'reenactor' framed his paintings, so too he framed his relationship with Puttermesser. It may not have been very kind of him to abandon her on their wedding night. But, then again, he provided her with George Lewes. For those weeks that she able to live as George Eliot, she was happy as the writer herself who spoke of the unspeakable joy she and Lewes found in one another. That Rabeeno "cast out George Lewes . . . and hauled in Johnny Cross" did not stop Puttermesser from being "aroused" and "kindled" (156).

Ozick has made Rabeeno a painter who specializes in reenactment to emphasize the point that visual aesthetics, or simulation, is "a strategy of the real, neo-real, and hyperreal whose universal double is a strategy of

deterrence.”<sup>60</sup> It is the intention and the meaning invested in the aesthetic creations that determine the effect of this deterrence. The truth, or *emet* in what Alexenberg sees as the link of art and faith, confronts the world of appearances in Rabeeno’s work. He holds up his mirror to the multiple mirrors parading as authentic arbiters of reality. He dares to challenge them, he dares to tell history that it too is a series of interpretive gestures, easily imitable, and so made anew and open to alteration: “Rabeeno copied the masters. Harvey Morgenbluth photographed Rupert’s doubles, in full color, and reduced them; then the photos were sent off to the printer and after that to a jobber for distribution” (135). He deviates from incorporating morality into his aesthetic vision in his lack of empathy, a flagrant lack of responsibility for the Other. But in his intention of “decoding the world for humanity”<sup>61</sup> he also shows that he is not only interested in serving himself.

Rabeeno exploits society’s love affair with pictorial representation. His is an assertive in-your-face posture, exposing both the power and the potential vacuousness of visual language. This power, like physical might, intellectual strength, and spiritual insight, can be used to serve the good or it can destroy. When charged with ‘the good’ and with a sense of ethics, visual aesthetics can inspire and reveal that which is best in humanity, the connective tissue between people, the commonality of creation. Melnikoff, a British artist, recounts how he once asked Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook about the permissibility of creating art. The rabbi, Melnikoff said, began reading through volumes of Talmud and concluded that it was not forbidden to create imperfect objects. And then in the affirmative he continued:

We are told that when God created light, it was so strong and pellucid, that one could see from one end of the world to the other, but God was afraid that the wicked might abuse it. What did He do? He reserved that light for the righteous when the Messiah should come. But now and then there are some great men who are blessed and privileged to see and I think Rembrandt was one of them, and the light in his pictures is the very light that was originally created by God Almighty.<sup>62</sup>

These thoughts came to Rabbi Kook during a short exile in London.<sup>63</sup> There he frequented the National Gallery and discovered Rembrandt’s paintings. He learned to see in the great painter’s portraits not abominations but expressions of sacred light. Rabeeno is not reaching so high. It would be too bold a gesture in the postwar world of disillusionment to attempt to capture God’s light and, were he to try, his efforts would most probably be misinterpreted as sentimental. Still, Rabeeno is concerned with transcending,

via replication and an emphasis on the act of creation, what he concludes are artificial divisions of time and ethical parochialisms.



None could argue that Rabbi Kook was being seduced by images, as Joseph Brill's mother accuses her son of being in *The Cannibal Galaxy* when she learns he has been visiting the Musée Carnavalet near their home in Paris. Hers is the traditional unidimensional 'Jewish' reaction to the world of visual representation: "she knew what a museum signified. A pagan hall had enticed him, an image had ensnared him. . . . 'Save yourself from shame,' she warned Joseph; 'keep away from such a sty'" (9). When the young Joseph protests that he was most impressed with a sculpture of Rachel the matriarch, she rejoins, "'an image is an image'" (9). Ironically, he has unwittingly confused the portrait of a nineteenth-century actress with the biblical figure, betraying, even as a child, "a private wish for a unified sensibility, for the peaceful coexistence of art and Judaism."<sup>64</sup>

He realizes this desire later in life when he establishes a school dedicated to what he calls the Dual Curriculum in the United States. And yet this pathbreaking experiment in bringing together the Western pagan tradition with the Judaic is eventually undermined by art. Beulah Lilt, a former student whom he wrote off as mediocre, becomes famous and in a television interview about her childhood negates Brill and his school entirely. She claims to remember nothing special about that period in her life. With one stroke in her fifteen minutes of fame she is able to wipe him and his putative achievement out of existence. At least this is Brill's experience witnessing the interview from the safety of his living room in the American Midwest. Compounding the cloak of invisibility he feels descending upon him and his life's work is the art Beulah creates, also on display on the television screen. It is an art he is not familiar with. He misunderstands and feels threatened by the images. Beulah's painting "lies, for him, on the margin of intelligibility."<sup>65</sup>

Joseph, whose very name is a quotation of the biblical Joseph's, a gifted interpreter of image-rich dreams, is drawn to the world of aesthetics, though he is also confused by it. Unlike his biblical namesake, he cannot interpret images and is doomed not to achieve prominence in the Egypt of his day. "[H]e is a kind of reverse Pygmalion, seeing only dullness where imagination waits to be kindled and refusing to recognize profound potential, including his own."<sup>66</sup> When he makes conscious efforts as a child to avoid the museum he has been forbidden to enter, he fails. "But the roundabout way was an ambush: it took him [there] without his intending it" (9). Later in life he experiences his confrontation with the philosopher, Hester Lilt, Beulah's mother, in much

the same way. He uses the same verb—to ambush—to describe the impact Hester's views on morality and art, ambition and predictability, have on his life. She "had, in fact, waylaid him, plundered and robbed him. In hindsight he knew he had been ambushed by Hester Lilt" (162).

Hester takes him to places almost against his will. Her destination, her concern, is not the physical enclosure of a museum, a secular "cathedral of space."<sup>67</sup> Rather Hester focuses her considerable intellectual prowess on what Heschel calls the "architecture of time."<sup>68</sup> She privileges the simultaneous synthesis of hindsight, the present, and foresight. She honors unpredictability and incorporates it in her construct of an intellectual and moral universe.<sup>69</sup> She counsels and then critiques Brill for stopping too soon (63), in his life's philosophy, in the diminishment of his ambitions, and in his assessment of the young lives in his charge. Rather than reaching *Ad Astra*, the school's motto, the curriculum, reflecting its headmaster's decline, contents itself with the mediocre, a "truncated brilliance."<sup>70</sup>

The Edmond Fleg<sup>71</sup> School's most famous graduate, Beulah Lilt, barely cast a light while she studied there and denies all memory of these formative years. Ozick herself has commented that Beulah "repudiated the Jewish cultural side of her education. She said she forgot it, and she escaped and ascended into the nimbus. . . . She left a sense of moral civilization. She became an aesthete."<sup>72</sup>

Yet a careful reading of the descriptions of Beulah's paintings connects it positively to what Ozick in other writings has called the corona, the "interpretation, implicitness, the nimbus of *meaning* that envelopes story."<sup>73</sup> For, after all, what difference is there between Beulah's work, which takes the form of "phantasmagorical windows enclosed in narrow silver frames" (147), whose interiors are actually "enameled forms out of which a flaming nimbus sometimes spread" (162) and the corona? Are not a corona and nimbus sometimes the same thing? And does not Ozick herself use the words synonymously? Is not the attention to the light that spreads from the object the telltale sign of meaning and morality?<sup>74</sup>

In spite of her reservations, Ozick has created a painter, who like her mother, is not boxed in to a stationary structure. Beulah inhabits the architecture of time. She has managed to immerse herself in the silent language of the visual while simultaneously (like Rembrandt in Rabbi Kook's estimation, like the light of ascendance Gottlieb writes of) sending out sparks that speak to the moral dimension of life. Kauvar points out that "the 'corona, the luminous envelope' of meaning, so vital to what Ozick believes to be the 'pulse and purpose of literature,' is captured in Beulah's resplendent example."<sup>75</sup>

Ironically, Brill's point of view dominates the novel and if one reads Beulah's paintings as an accomplishment, his is a failed vision. Brill, whose