

**THE CANNIBAL GALAXY:
AN INITIATIVE JOURNEY INTO
HOW TO WORK THROUGH HOLOCAUST TRAUMA**

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The Holocaust represented a direct attack both against self-identity and communal identity. This worked to plunge the Jewish community into a deep collective crisis, which in some cases led to a loss of faith in God (blamed for having been absent and silent while such a catastrophe was going on). In other cases, however, the event served to create awareness about the need of strengthening ties to Judaism. Cynthia Ozick –though not a survivor to the events– has reflected extensively on the necessity of keeping true to Judaism as a means to affirm the Jews’ damaged identity. In fact, she sees religion as having the potential to restore victims to life and hence to draw them out of the abyss of trauma. This is what she has us believe in *The Cannibal Galaxy*, where she presents us with two possible scenarios: commitment to Mosaic Law versus rejection of tradition. In relation to this, the paper seeks to show how Ozick intends the reader to interpret Hester’s healthy survivorship as a result of her belief in Judaism, an outcome which is to be confronted to Joseph’s disregard for Jewishness and resulting life of apathy (unhealthy survivorship).

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In spite of not being herself a Holocaust survivor, Cynthia Ozick has proved –in no few essays and literary works– that she is fully empathic with the abiding anguishes of a memory that resists being put to rest. In fact, there is a sense in which it might be argued that Ozick is traumatised by the Nazi genocide: like a recurrent dream, in book after book the topic emerges, the event comes “unbidden, unsummoned” (in Kremer 1989: 219). Only once did she dare to address it directly. It was in *The Shawl*, where she brings readers to the nightmarish world of lice, disease and death that inhabit *l’univers concentrationnaire*. Although she later admitted that it might have been a mistake to undertake to imagine a reality which she knows only from the books (by extensive reading of factual documents and memoirs), it is something which, as a Jew, she cannot avoid doing. In an interview for *Paris Review* conducted by Tom Teicholz, she put it this way: “I don’t want to tamper or invent or imagine. And yet I have done it. I can’t not [*sic*] do it. It comes, it invades” (1987: 31). What is more, it is something which she is required to do. Allegiance to the principles of Judaism imposes on her a moral duty, as pointed out by Rabbi Jill Jacobs: “The Torah elevates memory to the level of a commandment, instructing us at various times to remember Shabbat, to remember that we were slaves in Egypt, and to remember that the tribe of Amalek attacked the Jewish people on their way out of Egypt” (n. d.: 1). It is a matter of pure logics to conclude that

if Jews are enjoined to remember these traumatic events they are all the more enjoined to remember an event that is responsible for the existence of various generations of traumatised Jews (survivors, children of survivors and grandchildren of survivors). Ozick, therefore, simply complied with her obligations and responsibilities as a Jew.

Be that as it may, the truth is that she has never again addressed the subject in its full dimension, preferring instead to mourn the Holocaust through other means –notably by presenting readers with Jewish characters who have had some kind of encounter with the Holocaust. This she uses as an excuse to explore the range of possible reactions which such an encounter can trigger. Her sights, as observed by S. Lillian Kremer, are singularly set on determining whether this has served to strengthen their bonds to Judaism and Jewry (which leads to survivors' healthy survivorship) or rather it has resulted in distancing them from their cultural heritage (which leads to survivors' unhealthy survivorship, meaning that they are plunged into the abyss of trauma) (2001: 167). This is precisely the theory at work in *The Cannibal Galaxy*, where she sets the main character, Joseph Brill, into an initiative journey, the aim of which is to teach him that maintaining intact the values of Judaism is a crucial step in the process of working through the trauma of the Holocaust.

Trapped in the whirlwind of Holocaust trauma

Throughout history the Jewish community has been repeatedly oppressed –a treatment inflicted by methods which have ranged from persecution to outright genocide. As early as 586/7 BC, Jews were forced out of their homeland in Judaea and, according to Josephus, between 66 and 73 AD, the Roman army –in its attempt to crush a Jewish rebellion– killed about 1,100,000 Jews and took some 97,000 as slaves.¹ These two events represent the beginning of a long history of blood-litels, expulsions, forced conversions and massacres which reached its most destructive form in the more than 2,000 anti-Jewish measures put into effect by Nazi Germany between 1933 and 1945. Using Jews as a scapegoat for economic and social problems, Hitler implemented anti-Jewish decrees which gradually eliminated the rights of Jewish citizens. At first, policies were introduced slowly, so that the civilian population would not realise the extent of the National Socialist Party's anti-Semitism. The first major law to curtail the rights of Jewish citizens was the "Law for the Restoration of the Professional Civil Service", which was issued in April 1933 and excluded from state service both Jewish and "politically unreliable" civil servants and employees. New laws continued to be promulgated in an attempt by German authorities to step up legislative persecution of Jews. These measures paved the way for the Holocaust: the systematic annihilation of six million Jews orchestrated by the Nazis during World War II.

The Holocaust was atrocious not only (and this simple fact would have been enough to place it among one of the bleakest episodes in history) because it brought about death in mass scale but also because it caused harm in another likewise dramatic way: it seriously damaged the feelings of identity and identification of its victims. Those who survived plunged into "death in life". Subjected to a homogenising process (one that required them to dress equally, to give up their religion, customs and traditions and to lose their names), prisoners ceased to be the bearers of a distinct identity. More specifically, they were deprived of their social identities, understood in the terms conceived of by Henri Tajfel; that is, as "that *part* of an individual's self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership in a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership" (author's

emphasis) (1981: 255). Insofar as they were rendered identity-less (the self no longer emerged as a distinct object), they were without an individuality and hence left adrift.

In the case of the Jewish community, it represented a direct attack against the series of identitarian traits by which Jews have historically maintained allegiance to Judaism: they were denied the possibility to observe laws concerning dress, food and religious holidays and they were forced to go through a process (inscription of the tattoo on their skin) whereby they gave their name in favour of a number. This represented not only a violation of self-identity but also of Mosaic Law, which explicitly forbids tattoos because they are a form of idol worship: "Ye shall not make any cuttings in your flesh for the dead, nor imprint any marks on you: I am HaShem" (Larry n. d.: 19:28). A Jew himself, Primo Levi has commented extensively on the kind of attack which this operation entailed for Holocaust prisoners:

The operation was not very painful and lasted no more than a minute, but it was traumatic. Its symbolic meaning was clear to everyone: this is an indelible mark, you will never leave here; this is the mark with which slaves are branded and cattle sent to the slaughter, and that is what you have become. You no longer have a name; this is your new name. The violence of the tattoo was gratuitous, an end in itself, pure offense (1989: 119).

All this worked to distance Jews from their community, to the extent that on returning from their descent into hell they were no longer able to identify neither with their prior selves (which were so far away removed from what they had been forced to become that they were unable to recognise them as their own) nor, for that same reason, with their communities. Cut off from their Jewish brethren, survivors were left with a meaningless life. As a result, many of them retreated into the memories of a past that they could not leave behind, one which re-emerged in all its vividness in the form of nightmares, hallucinatory episodes and recurrent dreams. Trapped in this whirlwind of commemoration, they found it all but impossible to attach any meaning whatsoever to survival. For some, contact with hell proved to be so distressing that they lost all faith in a God whom they blamed for having been absent and silent while such a catastrophe was going on. Others, however, found in Judaism a means of working their way out of this hellish world.

Being herself a deeply committed Jew, Ozick seems to have come to believe that Judaism is a good antidote against the traumatic memory of an event that was intended to strip Jews of any religious allegiance whatsoever through their removal from the face of the earth. That is to say, she seems to believe that by remaining true to their beliefs, Jews will resist Hitler's annihilating endeavours (for this will be a powerful sign that Civilisation vanquished Unreason). At least this is what she has us believe in those stories and novels where she features a Holocaust survivor as the protagonist of her narrative. Common to all of them is the fact that characters that opt for strengthening their ties to Judaism and Jewry undergo a rather healthy survivorship whereas characters that distance themselves from their religious allegiances plunge into an everlasting trauma. In this sense, S. Lillian Kremer notices that "the Holocaust crucible accounts for [Enoch's] refugee psyche and his metamorphosis from political to religious activism, from pre-Holocaust Communist too post-Holocaust observant Jew" and, most significantly, for this character's spiritual growth by the end of *Trust* (1989: 221). In sharp contrast, Rosa Lublin, because she shows contempt for her Jewish heritage, is incapable of working through her daughter's murder in *The Shawl*.

Escaping Holocaust trauma by strengthening bonds to Judaism

Although fiction does not necessarily account for reality, if we are to be true to Cynthia Ozick's *The Cannibal Galaxy* there is a way by means of which survivors can work through Holocaust trauma –one which even if totally ineffective in terms of effacing the event's outrageous reality it might serve at least to lessen its psychological burdens. Briefly stated, this consists in developing a mechanism through which the diminished Jewish civilization is affirmed rather than denied. And this, as she sees it, demands strengthening ties with Judaism, which is the sustaining belief of the Jewish community; otherwise there is peril of withdrawing into an abiding lethargy. *The Cannibal Galaxy*, the novel under consideration in this paper, is singularly interesting because it presents us with these two scenarios, represented through the characters of Hester Lilt and Joseph Brill respectively.

Being a firsthand witness to the barbarities committed in the name of National Socialism, Joseph Brill, a survivor of Nazi-occupied France, has developed an understandably negative view of humanity, one "predicated ... on the bestial uniformity of the species" (Bloom 1986: 128). More specifically, he has emerged from his hiding with nuns in a convent's cellar and later in a farmer's hayloft as someone incapable of engaging in any course of action which is of a long-term nature. Although his ambition to reach far in life has not been curtailed (actually, at the beginning of the novel he aspires to transcend the Holocaust by metaphorically reaching for the moon, to make good of his motto *ad astra*), it seems as if what he underwent had deprived him of the capacity to go too far. This accounts for his decision to redirect his career from astronomy to education. Yet what so diminishes Brill, whose name, by the way, suggests truncated brilliance, is neither the fact that after living through his family's and friends' destruction he is a man with wrenching disappointments nor the fact that he has retreated into a world of slumber, apathy and mediocrity, or to put it with the words of the novel, into a world of middleness. Revealingly enough, we meet him in late middle age, living in the American Midwest and working as the headmaster of a primary school which "was of the middle and in the middle. Its three buildings were middling-high, flat-roofed, moderately modern" (1983: 3-4). All this accords with the pains that psychiatric theory associates to traumatised psyches, a view of life which, again, seems natural enough for a person who has lived through the hellish world of ghettos and concentration camps that Hitler set up in Nazi Europe. Rather what so diminishes Brill (and will eventually account for the failure of his educational theory) is his spiritual vacuum. In his attempt to bring together Jewish and Western European cultural heritage in his "Dual Curriculum", Brill has come up with a dilution rather than a fusion of the two traditions; that is to say, with ideas of sameness, of assimilation. This, observes Lawrence S. Friedman, "implicates Brill in the destruction of the very Jewish culture which the dual curriculum was designed to preserve. ... Inevitably the Jewish half of the Dual Curriculum [will] vanish into the maw of Western culture". And he goes on to explain the source of Brill's real diminishment: "By unwittingly laying the pedagogical groundwork for the cannibalization of Jewish culture, Brill has aligned himself not with Judaism's preservers but with its destroyers" (1991: 148).

By contrast, the novel's heroine, Hester Lilt –who is also a survivor of the Holocaust, though maintains silence about her ordeal– takes a diametrical stance: she is an authentic self-defining Jew who commits herself to the preservation of Judaism, ensuring thereby the continuation (survival) of her community's progeny. Concerned

with the transmission of Jewish ideas, Hester gives Brill a probing lesson on Education Theory, the groundwork for which she takes from traditional Judaic lore and which is intended to awaken Brill from his intellectual torpor. Put to the basics, her speech is aimed at chastising her counterpoint character for stopping too soon; that is to say, for settling for second rate (in the sense of bland middleness, sameness, assimilation) and, accordingly, of succeeding only in achieving the ordinary. No wonder, therefore, that Brill gives up his obsession with Hester, whose intellectual brilliance had gripped him, and decides to marry a perfectly ordinary, dull-witted school secretary, Iris. This points precisely to the reason why his educational theory fails. Because he champions cultural homogenisation, his students emerge as ideal products of this pedagogic experiment: ordinary, only middling. Beulah Lilt, Hester's daughter, is the clearest example of this. Brill had admitted her into the Edmond Fleg School believing that, like her mother, she would prove to be talented, brilliant, but her progress shows otherwise. She seems to be as unremarkable, commonplace and ordinary as the rest of the children in the school. As things turn out, it is revealed that Brill has again stopped too soon. After moving with her mother to Europe, the child becomes an artist of genius renowned worldwide. In a twist of irony, when questioned in a television programme about her school years in America, she remembers nothing of the Dual Curriculum, a final blow for Brill, whose insignificant life becomes all the more meaningless upon learning that his cherished Dual Curriculum has proved to be sterile.

Conclusions

In conclusion, Ozick's novel brings to the forefront one of the topics that pervades her narrative ethos: the dangers of assimilation, a subject which, in turn, gives her a good pretext to reflect on the proper uses of Holocaust memory. Convinced that the Holocaust was fatal not only because of the number of deaths it brought about but also because it worked in the way of causing a cultural death, she considers that the moral duty of Jews is to seek restoration for their community. Through their commitment to Judaism, they will attain a triple purpose: first, they will contribute to reversing Hitler's annihilating plan (for this implies a celebration of the culture that Nazis intended to erase); second, they will struggle against the kind of amnesia that resulted in Jewish suffering during the Holocaust; and, third, those who, because of the painful experiences suffered during Nazi incarceration, had lost interest in life shall find a source of fruitful meaning, one which, she suggests, shall be crucial in the process of trauma healing. In short, in *The Cannibal Galaxy*, Ozick seems to be encouraging fellow Jews to undertake a journey into the depths of Judaism as a means to work through the trauma of an experience that threatens with plunging its victims into a meaningless existence.

Notes

1. Titus Flavius Josephus was a first-century Jewish historian and apologist of priestly and royal ancestry who survived and recorded the First Jewish-Roman War. His works, *Jewish War* (c. 75) and *Antiquities of the Jews* (c. 94), provide a valuable insight into the Jewish history of this period.

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