
"Myself, I'm a specialist," declares Percy Nightingale in the short story "At Fumicaro." A columnist for the *All-Parish Taper*, a religious publication circulated in Brooklyn and Staten Island, Nightingale specializes "in Wops and Presbyterians. Ad hoc and a la carte. We all have to make a living."

Cynthia Ozick is a specialist, too. Of sorts. Born in 1928, and raised in the Pelham Bay section of the Bronx, Ozick learned Yiddish from her grandmother and Rabbi Meskin, "who taught girls as zealously as he taught boys." Educated at New York University and Ohio State, she fell in love with "the old masters," writing a thesis on "Parable in the Later Novels of Henry James." Like James, she has said, she chose art over life. After abandoning one unreadable novel, *Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love*, and publishing another, *Trust* (1966), Ozick found her voice, with the help of Leo Baeck's essay "Romantic Religion," and Henry Graetz's *History of the Jews*. With the appearance of her story, "Envy, or Yiddish in America" in *Commentary* magazine in 1969, Ozick became "a Jewish-American writer." In more than a dozen highly acclaimed works of fiction and non-fiction, one critic has quipped, she's been "a rabbi without seminary portfolio."

Ozick doesn't reject the label "Jewish writer." The Jewish traditions of memory, irony, learning, and laughter clearly inform her outlook. But, she maintains, "the world is bigger and wider and more complex than our subjective selves." The four stories in *Dictation* reveals that Ozick is adept—and at times virtuosic—in "imposing meaning on being" in a wide array of imagined experiences, including those of the preeminent Protestant private secretaries to Henry James and Joseph Conrad; Catholic journalists at a conference on public relations in Mussolini's
Italy; the melodramatists in "King Lear on the Lower East Side:" and the manic and militant inventor of a new language named GNU.

Although they are not always perfectly plotted, Ozick's stories are seriously funny. Living "along the skin of the world," her characters want more. Dreaming and scheming, they're susceptible to self-deception and deceit. In "Dictation," the only heretofore unpublished story in the collection, the formidable Theodora Bosanquet thinks of herself as a conduit to genius, privy, as no one else is, to Henry James' silences and sighs, his doubts, reversals, and excitements. But she aches to have her fingerprint "eternally engraven, as material and manifest as peak and crater."

And so, she enlists her querulous counterpart, Lilian Hallowes, amanuensis to Joseph Conrad, then working on "The Secret Sharer," in a plot to leave behind "an everlasting sign that they felt, they acted!" Bosanquet's seduction of Hallowes, whose mother has told her that children are the only posterity "any normal person ought to care about," is a tour de force deconstruction of Victorian sexual repression. In love with Conrad, "mutely, for six whole years," Miss Hallowes allows Miss Bosanquet to call her Lilian, but never Lily. Reaching across the sugar bowl, Theodora fondled a hand that was "wide and soft "and unprepared for womanly affection." "Let us meet again very soon,' she said."

In "Actors," Ozick savagely—and sympathetically—satirizes the stage, which, like "real life," lies even as it mercilessly and mechanically tells the truth. Matt Sorley, an aging, "secretly melancholy," often out-of-work actor, whose adopted name "had a vaguely Irish sound," but whose origins, as Mose Sadacca, were Sephardic, takes the lead role in Marlene Miller-Weinstock's adaptation of King Lear. A self-styled minimalist, "whose gods were ellipsis and inference," Matt resists when director Ted Silkowitz, a kid wearing "sweatshirt and jeans,
pendant dangling from the neck, a silver ring on his thumb," insists on using the play to restore
the lost art of melodrama, "with its largeness, big feelings, big cries." In spite of himself, Matt
learns that fury is truth, and begins to listen to "the steady blows of some interior cannon"—his
own heartbeat. Until ninety-six year old Eli Miller, Marlene's Lear, whose gods were Jacob
Adler and the Yiddish Theater, escapes the Home for the Elderly Children of Israel to explain, in
breaths that "smelled of farina," why "this is not the way!"

Hungry for public acclaim, Ozick's characters yearn to join "the great protoplasmic heave
of human continuity." But they don't know how. In "At Fumicaro," Frank Castle, like Mose
Sadacca, is "a parochial man who kept himself inside a frame," capable every now and then of a
jolt of self-recognition. A Catholic journalist and radio commentator, he has "few Protestant and
no Jewish friends." He's come to fascist Italy, where "The Last Supper" is peeling, without
admitting, to himself or others, how much his faith has frayed. Four days after he arrives, he
marries his chambermaid, Viviana Teresa Accenno. She's "the instrument of his carnality," the
object of his rescue—and maybe more. Deftly and devilishly, Ozick organizes the story around
Viviana's pregnant phrase, in fractured English, "No belief."

The same needs, born of quiet or clamorous desperation, animate "What Happened to the
Baby?" A child—and the secrets buried with her—we learn, account for the sorrows of Simon
and Essie Greenfield and the struggle between GNUs and Esperantists. Ozick has her narrator
wonder whether "everything Essie had confided was a fickle fable, myself (like those flies to her
sugar bowl) lured into it, a partner to Simon's delusions." It's a postmodern prompt, perhaps, for
Essie's claim that lie, illusion, deception may well be "the goddamn universal language."

At eighty, it's clear, Cynthia Ozick is still going strong, with stories that are sly,
searching, and subversive. Taking dictation from her remains a perilously pleasurable pastime.
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