The Melodrama of Cynthia Ozick's Imagination

Michèle Mendelssohn

ABSTRACT

Dualistic and duelling energies ripple throughout Ozick's writing. Her attraction to the agonistic and the operatic, the Zarathustrian and the Wagnerian, light and dark, good and evil is undeniable. This essay focuses on the literary dimensions of Ozick's nonfiction to shed light on her essays' mysterious powers. By eschewing the habitual liturgical framing of Ozick's works for a literary one, this essay anatomizes her methods to reveal the precursor form that subtends her essayistic style—melodrama. Ozick's melodrama intervenes in her nonfiction writing like a ghostly haunting from her fiction. It patterns her thought, like a figure in the carpet. This essay argues that melodrama is a central characteristic of Ozick's work. By positioning Ozick in relation to a longer history of melodrama and the novel in which Henry James is a key figure, the essay argues that her employment of melodramatic methods in her nonfiction can be understood as a plea for (i) the legitimization of imagination and (ii) the urgency of the literary arts and their methods.

KEYWORDS: Feminism, Norman Mailer, theater, novel, melodrama, Broadway, agon, Anne Frank, Henry James, Holocaust, morality, biography

April 30 1971, New York City Town Hall. Everyone who is someone is here. People have been chanting outside. There was a crush to get in. Now they're chanting in the hallways. Near the front of the auditorium, in the audience, you can see Susan Sontag and Elizabeth Hardwick. On stage, some of the most prominent forces of 1970s feminism sit arrayed and ready for battle: Germaine Greer, Jill Johnston, Diana Trilling, and Jacqueline Ceballos, the president of the New York chapter of the National Organization for Women. There's a crackle of tension among the panelists even before the event starts, an ambience of excitement, nervousness and mild unease. The atmosphere is gladiatorial and glamorous. It seems anything could happen.

About half a century earlier, the Town Hall's 1500 seats held suffragists fighting for women's freedom. Tonight its red velvet seats are almost all taken, but it seems the conversation hasn't moved on much (even though women got the vote in 1920). Tonight's

topic is “A Dialogue on Women’s Liberation.” It’s also a chance for the speakers to do battle with Norman Mailer and the violent masculine energies expressed in his recent book, *The Prisoner of Sex*, an attack on Kate Millett’s *Sexual Politics*. Mailer has written that he would have been primed to write about *Sexual Politics* “even if he had never seen the author’s face on *Time* or been aware of the publishing phenomenon of its appearance, for it was a book as unwittingly obsessed with the nature of men as a child born blind from birth might be absorbed in imagining what a landscape was like” (1971, 69). Mailer is on the Town Hall stage too. He will be the only man to take the podium tonight, and he gains a symbolic power through his solitariness there, as though he doesn’t only represent himself, but something greater and more iconic still—misogyny personified. True to the chauvinist type, Mailer introduces Diana Trilling as “our leading lady critic” (Pennebaker 1979) and, later, commands Jill Johnston to “be a lady!”

The debate that ensues is theatrical and confrontational. Germaine Greer argues for a “revolution which will exchange the rule of force for something else, for a more intricate and sophisticated social order.” “We are on the brink of a revolution,” Greer announces gravely, “and it’s that or death.” This is theater of ideas, intellectual debate as bullfight, a conversation with all the drama of a Wagner opera. The event elicits performances that dramatize the public sphere, turning political debate into a public spectacle with sharp emotional curves. The mood oscillates between tension and release, attack and retaliation, hilarity and deadly seriousness. The comments veer from apocalyptic to amusing. At one point, Mailer lashes out at the audience, like a dramatic character delivering an angry aside. “You’re all singularly without wit,” he spits. His swagger combines menace, mockery and comic flair.

This is not a forum for the weak of wit or the faint of heart. About an hour in, the floor is thrown open to questions. A serious, girlish-looking woman stands up in the audience and takes the microphone. She is wearing a barrette in her neatly parted dark brown hair, an

orange floral top and horn-rimmed glasses. She could pass for Anne Frank's sister. "The reason Mr. Mailer appears not to comprehend and appears to patronize, uh, I think I'm on to it," she says. She read *The Prisoner of Sex* on the subway coming over tonight and she has a theory about it. "He's not not comprehending and he's not patronizing. He's a *priest*. And and, uh, I'm not, um, indulging in mockery or clowning, which you warned us against, Mr. Mailer," she says piously. Her verbal hesitation makes her sound unsure of herself. You get the impression she's the kind of person who isn't going to kick up a fuss. You even may be inclined to think, at first, that she is on Mailer's side. But then, with the next breath, everything changes: she begins to deliver a dressing down unlike anything that has yet been heard. She skewers Mailer's machismo, his above-it-all air, his pompous writing style. Sentence by sentence, breath by breath, she tears him apart. She mocks his book and describes the zeitgeist he represents as a "return to the primal erotic basic religion" of the phallus. There is, she explains to the audience, on the one side, the force of the phallus, and, on the other, the force of civilization. One is evil and one is good. One is Mailer and one is not. Her theory, it turns out, is that there are two camps. There is no doubt which side she is on. Mailer listens quietly, but looks unnerved and annoyed. He bides his time like a caged animal eager to bring his ordeal to an end.

The woman has got Mailer in her sights now. "You see, the women here, and particularly Miss Sontag, have been talking in terms of, uh, *justice*, which is the basis of civilization," she says, "but a sacerdotal sexual transcendentalist priest like Mr. Mailer cannot be concerned with justice rooted in civilization because he has left Jacob's tent to become Esau," she says, comparing Mailer to the Biblical figure who sold his birthright for a mess of pottage. Her tone is no longer sweet, but impassioned and deadly earnest.

Her parting shot comes in the form of a question. "This is a fantasy, this is my moment," she says, and the audience laughs along encouragingly, rising to the occasion's

keyed-up feel. The woman looks up at Mailer on stage. His face is set hard like a rock. His fists are up by his chin like a boxer. The woman isn't fazed in the slightest. In *Advertisements for Myself*, Mailer has written that "a good novelist can do without anything except the remnant of his balls" (Combs 1980, 54). "I've been wondering Mr Mailer," the woman asks impishly, emboldened by the tittering audience, "when you dip your balls in ink what color ink is it?" It's the *coup de grace*. Raucous laughter ripples across the audience in the red velvet seats. The panelists fall about in amusement. That woman's got *chutzpah*! Only Mailer doesn't flinch, his face stony, his fists firm.

"Ozick," he says, looking directly at the girlish-looking woman, who is actually 43 years old, "I will cede the round to you. I don't pretend that I've never written an idiotic or stupid sentence in my life." She has drawn blood. The crowd goes wild.

Ozick: one. Mailer: zero.

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Cynthia Ozick's virtuoso turn was captured in the film *Town Bloody Hall*.[1] She may remind you of the passionately anti-patriarchal Hermia, the little woman in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, of whom it is said, "O, when she is angry, she is keen and shrewd./ She was a vixen when she went to school,/ And though she be but little, she is fierce" (Shakespeare 1996, 82). Or she may remind you of David facing up to Goliath. Either way, you sense that some primal combat is underway. The encounter's intensity comes, in part, from its agonistic context, which *Town Bloody Hall* captures well. Ozick's startling religious, mystical and Biblical allusions ratchet up the melodramatic tension with Mailer in this high-stakes debate about women's liberation and civil society. Yet Ozick's comments were not as off the cuff as they appeared. In fact, they were a tongue-in-the-cheek version of views she had articulated nearly a year earlier, in Rehovoth, Israel, in her Weizmann Institute lecture on Diaspora Jewish culture, where she had also compared Mailer to Esau, a Biblical parallel she deployed

to excoriate him and other countercultural Jewish-American artists for denying their birthright in pursuit of Gentile approbation. The lecture was published in the journal *Judaism* as “Toward a New Yiddish” in 1970 and was hailed in some circles as “visionary” (Ozick 1983, 151).

For Ozick and Mailer, the *Town Bloody Hall* encounter reenergized and amplified their personal and prior battles, raising them to even higher literary and cultural stakes. That year, Ozick published an essay in which she attacked Mailer’s “testicular theory” of literature (Ozick 1983, 266). But it’s unlikely many in the audience knew this. And so Ozick and Mailer’s prior history, their *Town Bloody Hall* agon, also operates on another level of awareness: as a form of secret knowledge unheard and unseen by the audience. There is a pattern that lies beneath what can be detected on the surface of the clash between Ozick and Mailer. Even without knowing this pattern, the Town Hall audience sensed and powerfully reacted to the clash of points of view between Mailer and Ozick. Through the audience’s audible amusement and rapturous applause, they signalled their support for the plucky heroine’s battle against the villain of the night. Framed by the evening’s war of the sexes, the skirmish gains symbolic significance and Ozick achieves greater moral recognition.

At the time of the Town Hall, Ozick had published relatively little but the caustic wit and fearless intelligence she demonstrated in that arena was amplified in the ensuing decades. The publication of more than 100 pugnacious and playful essays eventually established her as one of America’s foremost critics. Taken together, these incidents highlight the seriousness, intelligence and unrelenting vigor Ozick brings to her nonfiction interventions in person and in print, to the point that her prose can seem like a driving combustion engine working to a fierce internal music of moral and psychic energy. William Giraldi calls her a “sorceress” (2018, 122) who “responds to literature” as only a witch can, summoning forces of good and evil, light and dark “with a surging reciprocity, the consummate force and flooding of her

selfhood" (119) to cast her spell over readers. How can Ozick's attraction to the agonistic and the operatic, the Zarathustrian and the Wagnerian, the light and the dark, the good and the evil be explained? These dualistic and duelling energies ripple throughout her writing. Once you notice them, you begin to see that they pattern her prose like nothing else. How do we account for these energies?

One way of answering this question would be to turn to Jacob and Esau. The Ozick-Mailer fight — a fight between two Jewish cultural heavyweights — legitimates that approach, but only to a point. Indeed, scholars have given a liturgical framing to her dissent from some aspects of liberalism and her critiques of idolatry, morality, ahistoricism, aestheticism, assimilationism, coteries, and popularism.[2] There is no question that Ozick's Judaism informs her work, but this focus has often come at the expense of valuing and engaging critically with her works' *literary* elements. She began her writing career, let us recall, as a *poet*. The real interest of the Ozick-Mailer case seems to me to lie in what made Ozick a literary heavyweight and a stylish fighter in the first place – both on the page and in person. What is it about the agon that attracts her so?

This essay aims to bring into focus the literary dimensions of Ozick's nonfiction and to shed light on her essays' mysterious forcefulness and powers. It is my intention here to demystify and therefore to eschew the habitual liturgical framing of Ozick's works for a literary one, to anatomize her methods and to reveal the precursor form that subtends her essayistic style. Ozick's melodrama is hardly separable from her essays. It intervenes in her nonfiction writing like a ghostly haunting from her fiction. It patterns all her thought, like a figure in the carpet.

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You don't expect emotional shock tactics from literary criticism. Yet you're less surprised when you encounter them in fiction. They abound in Ozick's. For instance, "Usurpation", an

early short story, ends on the slur “kike”. “It is the story’s last word, and it is genuinely shocking,” Adam Kirsch notes, “because it turns Jewish alienation into a cosmic principle” (2015, 223). Kirsch is right that, for Ozick, “there really is a necessary friction between being Jewish and being an English writer” (221). But it’s not all about Jewishness, not least because Ozick’s Jewishness doesn’t entirely explain the operation of her cosmic shock-and-awe framework, a framework informed by important literary precursors. And so the question must be posed: what literary dynamics underlie and explain this “friction”? To answer that question, we must turn to literature and, more specifically, to melodrama.

No critic has done more to reveal the workings of melodrama than Peter Brooks. In *The Melodramatic Imagination*, he demonstrates, through close readings of nineteenth-century novels by Henry James and Honoré de Balzac, how melodrama trades in hyperbole, masks, disguises, secrets, mysteries. Melodrama searches out the breathless, the shocking, the devastating. Melodrama revels in exposure, casting aside conventions and taste in its urgent “desire to express all” (Brooks 1976, 4). You know it by how it looks, sounds and feels: melodrama is marked by plangent emotion, ethical dualisms, drastic situations, light and dark, good and bad (11-12). Melodrama’s polarized distinctions and dualistic worldview serves to reveal the “moral occult, the locus of intense ethical forces from which man feels himself cut off, yet which he feels to have a real existence somewhere behind or beyond the facade of reality” (202).

According to Brooks’s account, melodrama’s origin story begins with the French Revolution,

> the moment that symbolically, and really, marks the final liquidation of the traditional Sacred and its representative institutions (Church and Monarch), the shattering of the myth of Christendom, the dissolution of an organic and hierarchically cohesive society, and the invalidation of the literary forms – tragedy, comedy of manners – that depended on such a society. […] It comes into being in a world where the traditional imperatives of truth and ethics have been violently thrown into question, yet where the promulgation of truth and ethics, their inspiration as a way of life, is of immediate, daily, political concern. (15)

It is not difficult to see how, for Ozick, the Holocaust constitutes an equivalent moral scene to the one Brooks describes. The Holocaust informs her fiction and nonfiction.[3] It might be tempting, therefore, to leap to the conclusion that her works' melodramatic structures are mobilized by a Jewish post-Holocaust worldview. And yet to leap to that conclusion, we'd have to ignore two significant facts. First, the fact that Ozick's affinity with melodrama is as evident in her nonfiction as it is in her fiction. To illustrate this point, I will turn to her essay on Anne Frank. Second, the fact that the melodramatic paradigm obtains even in Ozick's works that do not, prima facie, deal with Jewish or Holocaust themes. To illustrate this point, I will turn to her essays on Henry James.

What does the melodramatic paradigm unlock within her works and, particularly, her essays? This essay argues that melodrama is a central characteristic of Ozick's literary worldview. It is surprising that Ozick's melodramatic vision dominates her essays since, by her own admission, the essay is a form that "knows that make-believe is frivolity" (Ozick 1983, ix). Elsewhere, she has asserted that "the essayist's contract is exactly contrary to the novelist's – a promise to deliver ideas […] Novelists invent, deceive, exaggerate" (Ozick 1996, 320). By positioning Ozick in relation to a longer history of melodrama and the novel in which Henry James is a key figure, I will argue that her employment of melodramatic methods in her nonfiction can be understood as a plea for (i) the legitimization of imagination and (ii) the urgency of the literary arts and their methods.

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Though melodrama is common in fiction, one of the distinctive features of Ozick's nonfiction is that she brings the genre's theatricality to bear on the essay, coupling its intellectual calisthenics with a dramatization of moral consciousness. This is evident in "Who Owns

Anne Frank?". The essay announces Ozick's preoccupation in the title. Immediately she rejects sentimental answers. Anne Frank doesn't belong to "the children of the world", nor ought they to identify with her. In fact, what she wants is the opposite: to make Frank's tragedy less friendly, less sentimental, and more real.

"She was born to be a writer," Ozick writes, framing Frank as a child prodigy (2000, 74). "At thirteen, she felt her power; at fifteen, she was in command of it. It is easy to imagine—had she been allowed to live—a long row of novels and essays spilling from her fluent and ripening pen." The essay evokes what could have been – the wunderkind maturing into the woman of letters "that we would number … among the famous of this century" – only to cast out the thought. Such an approach, Ozick warns, is "an unholy speculation" (75). She condemns her own fantasy about Frank's future life because "it tampers with history, with reality." We can see in this a clue to how her essays operate: in her nonfiction, she introduces fictional possibilities with one hand and slaps them away with the other. This is the familiar "masochism of melodrama, with its incessant acts of inner violation, its mechanisms of frustration and overcompensation" (Elsaesser 2012, 457). It's also the key to her critical approach: when others overlook or neglect an issue she values, she responds by hyperbolic inflation.

From the very beginning, for Ozick, Anne Frank already seems to be two people. There is the history of the astonishingly gifted girl Frank actually was and, within her, there is the elder Frank, a sage, a spiritual giant, a literary master who, Ozick claims, "intuited what greatness in literature might mean, and she clearly sensed the force of what lay under her hand in the pages of her diary" (2000, 74). Even in an essay, Ozick tends to think narratively and to project her subjects temporally into situations that lie beyond what the facts can tell (i.e. who was Frank and what would she have become?).

The gist of "Who Owns Anne Frank?" is that Frank's legacy has been betrayed. Ozick lays the blame on the individuals who adapted the text, as well as on the audiences who swallow their saccharine version popularized by literary vandals. "'The Diary of a Young Girl' […] has been bowdlerized, distorted, transmuted, traduced, reduced; it has been infantilized, Americanized, homogenized, sentimentalized; falsified, kitschified" (77) she writes, racking up an extensive catalogue of the literary offences perpetrated against Frank. The perpetrators also belong predominantly to the literary realm, in Ozick's telling. These "falsifiers" are dramatists, directors, translators, "and even—or especially—the public, both readers and theatregoers, all over the world." Their crime? Turning "a deeply truth-telling work" into a falsehood. The essay states the accusation in polarized and melodramatic ways, and points to the moral of the story in terms that delineate the larger ethical realm that lies beyond this reality. The "falsifiers'" actions have far-reaching consequences that transcend Frank's individual story; their actions gesture to issues of still greater historical, spiritual and moral significance that Ozick presents in starkly Manichean language:

> The pure has been made impure—sometimes in the name of the reverse. Almost every hand that has approached the diary with the well-meaning intention of publicizing it has contributed to the subversion of history. (78)

The essay reveals this moral occult and drops into an abyss of iniquity. From Frank's "optimistical view on life" (85), we plunge headlong into Ozick's reading of the diary's "vision of darkness."[4] The rest of the essay, based on two academic studies, *The Stolen Legacy of Anne Frank* by Ralph Melnick and *An Obsession with Anne Frank* by Lawrence Graver, analyses the manglings in successive iterations of Frank's story. Ozick dwells on the revisions and additions. She reveals how racial and universalising themes were introduced and nuances lost. Through careful organization and presentation of these materials, the essay exerts a sustained pressure. It builds throughout the piece, ultimately piercing through historical realities and bursting apart the essay's dense tissue of textual history to expose the

ethical vacuum lurking beneath the theatricalized version of Frank's life that opened on Broadway in 1955.

Ozick rejects twentieth century popular theater's methods by writing an essay that resorts to strategies derived from a mode of nineteenth century popular theatre – melodrama. As the "sins" (Ozick's word) pile up, the reader falls helplessly into the depths of a moral sinkhole. The distortions of Frank's legacy are breathtaking, the manipulations scurrilous. Yet Ozick's essay achieves far more than a mere accounting ever could. Through Ozick's melodramatic literary effects, the reader is made to *feel* the evil.

The essay's acute emotional charge distinguishes Ozick's contribution from others that have commented on Frank's cultural afterlife. Hannah Arendt thought the Frank play "cheap sentimentality at the expense of a great catastrophe" (qtd. in Ozick 2000, 98). Bruno Bettelheim called it a falsification of history. Theodor Adorno condemns it as "propaganda" (1998, 101) and relays an anecdote about the play's immoral effects: an anti-Semitic person goes to the show and, following a chilling logic of individuated exceptionalism that obliterates the totality of Jewish lives lost in the Holocaust, emerges from the theatre saying, "*That* girl at least should have been allowed to live." The implication, of course, is that no other Jew should have been spared. Ozick's interrogation of memory culture aligns with that of French historian Pierre Nora, who writes, in *Les lieux de mémoire*, that "the memorial model has triumphed over the historical model and ushered in a new, unpredictable, and capricious use of the past – a past that has lost its peremptory and constraining organic character" (qtd. in Hayes 2022, 227). Though Ozick points to similar problems as Arendt, Bettelheim, Adorno and Nora, her essay's literary nous and operatic rhetoric give it a distinctive urgency.

There is a paradox at work in Ozick's version of the Frank story, however. Even as the essay points to the perils of sentimentalism by drawing the reader through intricate close

readings of its operation in the repackaging of Frank's diary into a play, the essay redeploys melodrama's formal methods in its own construction. She rejects twentieth-century popular theatre through recourse to strategies derived from a nineteenth-century mode of popular theatre. The essay uses the melodramatic form in service of an attack on the melodramatic form. It decries melodrama while deploying it. It's circular, yes, but also clever and quite perverse.

As "Who Owns Anne Frank?" hurtles towards its shocking conclusion, it hurls a succession of six increasingly furious questions at the reader. "Who, after all, in the half century since Miep Gies retrieved the scattered pages of the diary, really owns Anne Frank? Who can speak for her?" (Ozick 2000, 99) the sequence begins. One after another, each query insists, applies pressure, demands attention. The rat-a-tat-tat builds to a kind of cosmic climax by insisting on each successive sin and then naming each sinner in turn. As a syntactical device, the questions punctuate the essay with staccato rhythms that heighten the sense of jeopardy. The interrogation incrementally builds and takes on world-historical dimensions, demanding a serious and responsible engagement with remembrance. This would not be worthy of our attention were repetition not a rhetorical device Ozick's essays frequently deploy. She brings the *melos* to their *dramas*: questions drum home the crisis, repetition prods at the wounds. For instance, a short paragraph in the same essay lavishly uses anaphora to devastating effect, insisting three times on the noun "evisceration" and thirteen times on evidentiary instances beginning with the conjunction "by":

> Evisceration, an elegy for the murdered. Evisceration by blurb and stage, by shrewdness and naiveté, by cowardice and spirituality, by forgiveness and indifference, by success and money, by vanity and rage, by principle and passion, by surrogacy and affinity. Evisceration by fame, by shame, by blame. By uplift and transcendence. By usurpation. (101-2)

Such insistent, songlike repetition might be said to be Ozick's "signature music" in moments of melodramatic tension. Here, for instance, the repetitive diction hammers home Frank's

tragedy. It's a specifically literary tragedy as well as a human one, according to Ozick's account. Repetition, a formal choice frequent in Ozick's writing, has a coercive effect: it demands and commands moral attention, clamouring like a Greek chorus standing in judgement over a tragedy.

Taken together, Ozick's formal and literary choices raise the essay's stakes ever higher, until it reaches a dramatic crescendo that makes us – and even its author – shudder. "It may be shocking to think this (I am shocked as I think it)" (102), Ozick writes, but the best way of saving Frank's diary from evisceration would have been to burn it. Ozick's chosen method hints at both the conventional way manuscripts are destroyed – Henry James burned his correspondence and literary archive – as well as gesturing to the Holocaust's ovens. Burning Frank's diary would have spared it from "floating lightly over the heavier truth of named and inhabited evil." It's scandalous. It's gutting. Maybe you sensed the essay building to some brutal finale, but this lands like a sucker punch.

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Peter Brooks's study of melodrama makes Henry James one of the mode's most significant modern practitioners. Melodrama offered James "a complete set of attitudes, phrases, gestures clearly conceived towards dramatization of essential spiritual conflict" (1976, 20). Even though James had no significant religious beliefs, he turned to melodrama to represent the "moral occult" (5), the invisible spiritual forces that structure secular reality and make an individual's ethical and psychic drama the most important aspect of their life. James made melodrama characteristic of the modern sensibility and wove it into a literary art "backed by no theology and no universally accepted social code" (21).

Ozick's nonfiction writings follow suit: often, they turn on the dramatization of an essential spiritual conflict that plays out within the arts, particularly the literary arts. In the

essay on Anne Frank discussed above, the conflict revolves around the ethical import of sentimentalism and sensation, as literary methods that cheapen and efface their subject and, by extension, life itself. Likewise, in an essay about Dostoyevsky, she writes that the terrorist Ted Kaczynski, better known as the Unabomber, was transformed by the "melodramatic publication of his manifesto in major newspapers" (Ozick 2000, 4), because his writings fixed him as an American Raskolnikov figure, a "philosophical criminal of exceptional intelligence and humanitarian purpose [who] was driven to commit murder out of an uncompromising idealism." These essays' fierce mood announces them as a belles-lettres battle royale. Art matters to some. Art *seriously* matters to her.

Nowhere is Ozick's debate with literature and life so plangent and personal than in her essays on James. One of the earliest, a 1982 piece titled "The Lesson of the Master", reflects on her misguided youth spent in thrall to James. It's the story of Ozick's youthful misreading of James, an anecdote that becomes the occasion for a revelation of greater and more generalised existential significance. Life, she discovers belatedly, isn't all about the art of fiction, it's also about the art of living. Written from the perspective of a mature author, the drama in "The Lesson of the Master" hinges on the interplay between young and old, desire and its denial, ambition and thwarted dreams. "I had been betrayed by Henry James," she announces and repeats like a sinister chant (Ozick 1983, 291). "I felt myself betrayed by a Jamesian trickery… And this cost me my youth" (293). Does that narrative arc from blithe naiveté to mature wisdom seem familiar? Surely you've seen it before. This essay, like so many of Ozick's, draws on melodramatic methods Hollywood movies have made mainstream. It recalls films where emotionally saturated scenes climax with a dramatic reversal that, as film historian Thomas Elsaesser observes, implicitly enacts a critique of

> the streak of incurably naive moral and emotional idealism in the American psyche, first by showing it to be often indistinguishable from the grossest kind of illusion and self-delusion and then by forcing a confrontation when it is most wounding and contradictory. The emotional extremes are played off in such a way that they reveal

> an inherent dialectic, and the undeniable psychic energy contained in this seemingly vulnerable sentimentality is utilized to furnish its own antidote, to bring home the discontinuities in the structures of emotional experience. (2012, 454)

Once more, the narrative arc spans from innocent longing to knowing insight.

"My scary confession," Ozick writes, is that, aged 22, "I became Henry James" (1983, 294). The solemnity of art became her religion. "I carried the Jamesian idea, I was of his cult, I was a worshiper of literature, literature was my single altar; I was, like the elderly bald-headed James, a priest at that altar; and that altar was all of my life." The practice of art is tremendously exacting. It demands total commitment from of its devotees, and makes no guarantees in return. Ozick, its youthful high priestess, offered herself up on its altar, ready to immolate herself for the cause. She was, at 22, a willing martyr, but by the time she reached New York City's Town Hall, aged 43, she no longer romanticized self-sacrifice.

There is perhaps no greater critic of art's sanctity than a priest or priestess who has pierced its mysteries and stepped away from the altar. Seen from this vantage point, the significance of Ozick's Town Hall attack on Mailer, the "sacerdotal sexual transcendentalist priest," comes into sharper focus. One priest was addressing another. Ozick's intervention, like the prior lecture that underpinned it, was not merely about Mailer's Jewish birthright but also, and equally importantly, about his aesthetic birthright. *The Prisoner of Sex* was a mess of pottage unworthy of art's altar, a point her essay makes crystal clear when she writes that, "having failed through inadequate self-persuasion to write the novels of Esau, Mailer now swings round to interpretive journalism, a minor liturgical art" (Ozick 1983, 169). Ozick castigates Mailer's Jewish and artistic demerits equally, calling them out as desecrations of the temple of art.

You will not hear Ozick make this point in *Town Bloody Hall*, where she appears in the role of the outsider truth-teller, not as a high art priestess. Indeed, watch the film and you are likely to walk away with the impression that Ozick is playing David to Mailer's Goliath,

that she is minor to his major. But read “Toward a New Yiddish”, the essay that subtends Ozick’s oral performance (and which was first delivered as a lecture at the Weizmann Institute in Jerusalem), and it becomes evident how wrong that apprehension of scale is (and what a difference sharp camera angles and good film editing can make). In that essay, Ozick addresses Mailer as a fellow priest, who, like her, is at risk of going off the rails. She prefaces her critique by offering her own case as a cautionary tale. “No committed writer seriously aims to be minor or obscure. I offer a tragic American exemplar of wasted powers and large-scale denial,” she writes, predicting that what has happened to her will, in due course, also happen to him: one day, he will not be read. “One day [Mailer] will become a small Gentile footnote” (Ozick 1983, 170). Years later she was still harping on the point, emphasizing the artistic, “*belles-lettres* sense” of the literary culture she advocated and Mailer disavowed (152).

What can we learn from the framing of Ozick’s oral and written interventions? On one hand, oral remarks like the ones she makes in *Town Bloody Hall* and in the Weizmann Institute lecture appear to be a form of public art worship. On the other hand, an essay like “The Lesson of the Master” exposes its truth in a melodramatic manner familiar from James’s writings (about which more to follow). They are unified in that, whether in person or in print, the public nature of these occasions prompts her most dramatic and theatrical performances. To describe Ozick as one of James’s “cult” will shock no one. Yet the rude awakening she details in “The Lesson of the Master” makes the persistent vigour with which she defends James’s vision surprising. Here she is, for instance, in a review essay on “Cinematic James,” observing that “*The Portrait of a Lady*, James’s earliest full-scale masterpiece, is at its core an effective melodrama” (Ozick 2000, 150), redeemed by “James’s searching idea of a large and susceptible imagination roiling with world-hunger” (152). Ozick pans Jane Campion’s adaptation of the novel for failing to live up to James’s ethical dilemma, for failing to deliver

a film that “enacts the defeat of freedom” (154). The keenness with which Ozick attends to and defends James’s melodramatic methods against their cinematic diminution reveals their outsize importance to her worldview.

In Jamesian melodrama, Ozick finds ethical and artistic profundity. This pattern is woven through “What Henry James Knew,” a 1993 essay published first in the *New Criterion* and later as the preface to the Knopf Everyman edition of Henry James’s novel, *The Awkward Age*. Peter Brooks’s account of James’s integration of melodrama highlights the novel. It is “one of the many versions of the Jamesian obsession with sophisticated versions of innocence and corruption,” Brooks notes (1976, 165). It is also one of his most perfect. “Nanda Brookenham's story is again exemplary here, for it is both [in] her superiority and her worldly tragedy that she encompasses knowledge of evil within her virtue” (170). Ozick, too, dwells on the novel’s perilous theatrics at length in “What Henry James Knew”. As with “The Lesson of the Master”, the subject is once again a reversal of epic, existential proportions. But this time it’s not about the foolishness of the young, but the imprudence of their elders. And it’s not about Ozick, but about her alter ego (remember her confession: “I became Henry James”).

“What Henry James Knew” turns on the dramatic reversal of fortunes endured by James who, according to Ozick, achieved “mastery in youth” (2017, 7) as a novelist and essayist only to watch it all melt away in an instant when he tried, and failed, to conquer the stage with *Guy Domville*, a heavy-handed play that was declared dead on arrival on the opening night. James’s defeated theatrical ambitions might have been relegated to the realm of literary anecdote, but these disappointments become, in “What Henry James Knew”, the occasion for melodramatic redemption. Ozick divides the essay into three parts – setup, confrontation and resolution – a three-act structure familiar in fiction and in theater, but not often found in nonfiction. For Ozick, form follows function. The shape of the writing (no

matter whether it is fiction or nonfiction) directly relates to its intended purpose. By grafting a fictional narrative model onto the essay, she effectively rewrites the form's blueprint, building into it a structure within which imagination plays more freely than is usual. Here's how. In part one, titled "The Horrible Hours", the essay tells the story of a hero tested by a "sacred terror" (Ozick 2017, 11), a phrase derived from James's novel *The Awkward Age,* but here taken to signify a failure so great that it threatens to destroy him personally and professionally, jeopardizing the very art that has been his life's work. Ozick ratchets up the stakes and the pain quotient: James, the hero of the essay's tragic narrative has to contend with his father's dreadful mental state, his friend's suicide, his sister's breakdown, his queer loneliness. All of this, the essay suggests, stands weighted against James, the terrorized hero, as though the balance couldn't possibly tip in his favour. In part two, "The Sacred Terror", the hero loses it all. "Everything he had thought himself to be – a personage of majestic achievement – disintegrated in an instant," Ozick writes (15). She poses questions to cue the introduction of a glimmer of light into the essay's bleakly dark scenario. "What was James up to? What system of psychological opposition had he fallen into?" (9), she asks, hinting at an unseen pattern of the kind melodrama specializes in revealing. How will the essay's hero respond to "the most horrible hours" of his life?

In part three, "*The Awkward Age*," the essay grants the hero a blessed resolution. "In those 'most horrible hours of my life' after his inward collapse on the stage of the St. James [Theatre], the curtain was being raised for *The Awkward Age*," Ozick writes (15-16). She frames James's redemption theatrically, as though his personal and artistic drama was playing out beneath a proscenium arch. In this passage, the idiomatic expression "raising the curtain" is a clue that hints that the theatrical ideas with which the essay is explicitly and implicitly in touch. This is no mere stylistic flourish, but one of countless examples of the imbrication of melodrama within Ozick's essays.

The Awkward Age's presentation is of a piece with this. The novel, Ozick says, replays James's personal battles until "the sacred terror is at last flung straight in the face of the tale" (23). Ozick, in turn, flings the melodramatic form straight into the essay, framing James's novel as a Manichaean battle for "truth" (25) that plummets headlong into depravity. True, James's characters go very low: there is incest, adultery, bribes, pedophilia. True, *The Awkward Age* plays out in an atmosphere of exceptional wickedness and corruption. James's novel offers no redemptive closure, no saving sentiment, only a vivid tragedy of modern girlhood compromised.[5] In contrast, in Ozick's essay, driven as it is by the logic of redemption that melodrama demands, all of this suffering must lead to some cosmic revelation. Where there is suffering, there must be solace. There must be a payoff big enough to merit such conspicuous corruption.

Like a *deus ex machina* dropping down onto the stage in the third act's last gasp, redemption arrives right on cue at the end of Ozick's essay, delivering the cosmic closure its literary-historical melodrama demands. The breakdown built James up into one of "the imperial moderns," Ozick concludes (4). It made him "one of the great avatars of modernism" (3).

James, it turns out, is heir to the glimmering world of the modernist novel. Against all odds, his disaster catalysed him to integrate drama into the novel in a new way, the essay argues, and in doing so he charted a path toward his final and most experimental phase. All that pain led to an artistic breakthrough. My point is not a counterfactual quibble: the essay's facts are sound (they are, in the main, indebted to Leon Edel's biography about which Ozick has written in reverential terms). My point here is a different but no less important one, one about the ostentatiously melodramatic framing the essay gives these facts, about the all-or-nothing absoluteness of the diction, about the histrionic tenor and mood of high-dudgeon in which these facts are conveyed, about the overarching loser-to-winner structural framework

in which they are ensconced. My point is that, in Ozick's essay, Henry James goes from zero to hero, a dramatic arc conventionally associated with overtly sentimental fictional forms.

In Ozick's telling, the "sacred terror" — James's personal pain and his characters' — converts into resplendent triumph, transforms the hero, and makes art new. Lo and behold, the "moral occult" previously invisible is made visible, its inscrutable spiritual forces revealed. In Ozick's essay, an unseen figure in the carpet comes into focus. The melodramatic framing that governs her essay is made all the more conspicuous because of the all's-well-that-ends-well conclusion that spells out the moral and reaffirms the sacredness of James's art. "After the cataclysmic turning of *Guy Domville*, hidden knowings are everywhere in James – notably in *What Maisie Knew* (1897) and "The Turn of the Screw," and culminating in the last great pair of conspiratorial works, *The Wings of the Dove* (1902) and *The Golden Bowl* (1904). […] all these pitchforked James out of the Victorian and into the modern novel," Ozick writes (2017, 24). It was worth it, after all.

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Why put melodrama into an essay? Why does Ozick do it? What does this practice owe to Ozick's fiction, to her work as a practising novelist? The answers may surprise you. This is not about technique. Nor is it about personality. Rather, the most cogent reason for Ozick's insistent interlacing of theatrical methods into her nonfiction may well be for literary-historical reasons, and for reasons that pertain to writing's relationship to her *Weltanschauung*. One clue comes from the novel's traditional attention to "private feelings and interiorized (puritan, pietist) codes of morality and conscience" (Elsaesser 2012, 435). Another clue comes from Ozick's sustained attention to exaggerated reports about the death of the novel, a form in which she was personally invested and to which she aspired from youth. "The nineteenth-century novel has been pronounced dead," Ozick wrote in 1970,

specifying that “what is regarded as exhausted in nineteenth-century fiction is not simply the worked-out vein of characterisation and storytelling, but something beyond mere devices: call it History, call it Idea” (Ozick 1983, 164).

Perhaps, though the novel was dead, or at least, diminished something might rise from its ashes? That phoenix, as it turns out, may well have been the essay. At the same time that Ozick was puzzling about fiction, in the late 1970s, she started puzzling over the place of imagination in nonfiction. Soon the rigid separation between the two forms began to crumble. Finally, in “She: Portrait of the Essay as a Warm Body,” she declared, “an essay is a thing of the imagination” (Ozick 2000, 178) whose power resides in its ability to “coerce assent” (181). It’s a manifesto for the modern essay and a cri de coeur. It’s a revelation, too. “At the end of the day, the essay turns out to be a force for agreement. It co-opts agreement; it courts agreement; it seduces agreement. For the brief hour we give to it, we are sure to fall into surrender and conviction” (182). She concedes, at the end of the essay, that she does not believe in distinguishing between “the marrow of the essay from the marrow of fiction.” It is entirely possible “to speak of the essay as if it – or she – were a character in a novel or play” (186).

Perhaps, in the end, nothing is lost, but everything gets transformed. It's worth bearing in mind Brooks’ argument that the melodramatic imagination found a home in the nineteenth century novel, and found one of its premier exponents in James. In the hands of a novelist like Ozick, the essay becomes a home for the melodramatic imagination. Ozick’s essays plead for the value and virtue of imagination. They insist readers attend to literature’s methods more carefully. They sometimes do so in ways that eschew mere civility in favour of urgency and hyperbole. By importing melodramatic features, Ozick is abiding by different protocols of argument than, say, a philosopher or logician.[6] But while such “literary thinking” may have its limits, it also enables the essay to breathe new life into the topics under scrutiny.

If the novel is dying, then long live the essay. For Ozick, the essay is a cosmic force that attempts to bend the reader's mind to its own logic. Like the melodrama, her essays contain a moral occult embedded within them. Like her novels, her essays emerge "from the writer's connection of social or cosmic principle" (Ozick 1983, 241). The essay's powers are God-like, its workings mysterious to her, she says. "After all, an essayist must be an artist, and every artist, whatever the means, arrives at a sound and singular imaginative frame – or call it, on a minor scale, a cosmogony" (184). Her melodramatic imagination makes her essays a literary world unto themselves.

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[1] Ozick speaks at the 1:02 mark.
[2] See, for instance, Most 166 and Strandberg 19-32.
[3] Amos Goldberg notes the usefulness of melodrama's "discourse of excess" in discussions about Holocaust witnessing (2015, 267).
[4] Frank writes, "I see the world being slowly transformed into a wilderness, I hear the approaching thunder that, one day, will destroy us too, feel the suffering of millions. . . . In the meantime, I must hold on to my ideals. Perhaps the day will come when I'll be able to realize them!" (qtd. in Ozick 2000, 85).
[5] Michèle Mendelssohn, "'I'm not a bit expensive': Henry James and the Sexualization of the Victorian Girl," in *Small Change: Nineteenth-Century Childhood and the Rise of Consumer Culture.*, ed. Dennis Denisoff (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008).
[6] I am tremendously grateful to my co-editor, Charlie Tyson, for his thoughtful editing and stylish suggestions, and to Joe Moshenska for his comments on an early draft of this essay.