

Cynthia Ozick

The  
Pagan  
Rabbi

and  
Other  
Stories



PENGUIN BOOKS

POEMS

Calypso by Derek Mahon

Homert was wrong, she never "ceased to please",  
Once he'd escaped from Circe's magic castle,  
the toxic bowl, shape-shifting witcheries;  
from the underworld, from Aeolus' watery roar,  
the high-pitched Sirens' penetrating whistle,  
cliff monsters, divine anger, broken boats,  
on soft, tinkling shingle he crept ashore  
through juniper and parsley, cows and goats,  
and found the hot path to her open door,  
a cart parked in the lane, a smoking fire.  
Gaily disratching him from his chief design  
she welcomed him with open arms and thighs,  
teaching alternatives to war and power.  
A wild girl rushing to the head like wine,  
she held him fiercely with her braided coils,  
her swift insistence, aromatic oils,  
her mild, beguiling glance, tuning his days  
to a slow sea-rhythm; and through a salty haze  
he watched her moving as in a golden shower  
or swimming with her nymphs from the sea-shore.  
It was, "home", not far now as the kite flew,  
he shifted those evenings when a sea-wind blew  
but lingered in her cool cave behind the dunes,  
enchanted by those hazel and sea-grey eyes,  
the star-flow of the hair, the skilful tones,

and quivering foam, long leisure, lip and gland  
in the early-morning light, the sun ablaze  
through leaves and linen, through her open hand,  
bramble and currant, so the years unround  
in a whisper of spring water and kitchen noise.  
He spent his days there in a perpetual summer.  
Snack in a rock-cleft like a beachcomber  
washed up, high and dry amid luminous spray,  
intent on pond life, wildflower and wind-play,  
the immense significance of a skittering ant,  
a dolphin-leap or a plunging cormorant,  
he learned to live at peace with violent nature,  
calm under the skies' grumbling cloud-furniture  
and bored by practical tacks, iron and grease -  
an ex-king and the first philosopher in Greece.  
Bemused with his straw hat and driftwood stick,  
unmoved by the new wars and the new ships,  
he died there, fame and vigor in eclipse,  
listening to voices echo, decks and crates  
creak in the harbour like tectonic plates -  
or was he sharp still in his blithe disgrace,  
deliberate pilot of his own cloudy shipwreck?  
Homert was wrong, he never made it back; or,  
if he did, spent many a curious night hour  
still questioning that strange, oracular face.

*Rabbi Jacob said: "He who is walking along and studying, but then breaks off to remark, 'How lovely is that tree!' or 'How beautiful is that fallow field!'—Scripture regards such a one as having hurt his own being."*

*—From THE ETHICS OF THE FATHERS*

WHEN I HEARD that Isaac Kornfeld, a man of piety and brains, had hanged himself in the public park, I put a token in the subway stile and journeyed out to see the tree.

We had been classmates in the rabbinical seminary. Our fathers were both rabbis. They were also friends, but only in a loose way of speaking: in actuality our fathers were enemies. They vied with one another in demonstrations of charitableness, in the capitious glitter of their scholia, in the number of their adherents. Of the two, Isaac's father was the milder. I was afraid of my father; he had a certain disease of the larynx, and if he even uttered something so trivial as "Bring the tea" to my mother, it came out splintered, clamorous, and vindictive.

Neither man was philosophical in the slightest. It was the one thing they agreed on. "Philosophy is an abomination," Isaac's father used to say. "The Greeks were philosophers, but they remained children playing with their dolls. Even Socrates, a monotheist, nevertheless sent money down to the temple to pay for incense to their doll."

"Idolatry is the abomination," Isaac argued, "not philosophy."

"The latter is the corridor to the former," his father said. My own father claimed that if not for philosophy I would never have been brought to the atheism which finally led me to withdraw, in my second year, from the seminary.

The trouble was not philosophy—I had none of Isaac's talent: his teachers later said of him that his imagination was so remarkable he could concoct holiness out of the fine line of a serif. On the day of his funeral the president of his college was criticized for having commented that although a suicide could not be buried in consecrated earth, whatever earth enclosed Isaac Kornfeld was ipso facto consecrated. It should be noted that Isaac hanged himself several weeks short of his thirty-sixth birthday; he was then at the peak of his renown; and the president, of course, did not know the whole story. He judged by Isaac's reputation, which was at no time more impressive than just before his death.

I judged by the same, and marveled that all that holy genius and intellectual surprise should in the end be raised no higher than the next-to-lowest limb of a delicate young oak, with burly roots like the toes of a gryphon exposed in the wet ground.

The tree was almost alone in a long rough meadow, which sloped down to a bay filled with sickly clams and a bad smell. The place was called Trilham's Inlet, and I knew what the smell meant: that cold brown water covered half the city's turds.

On the day I came to see the tree the air was bleary with fog. The weather was well into autumn and, though it was Sunday, the walks were empty. There was something historical about the park just then, with its rusting grasses and deserted monuments. In front of a soldiers' cenotaph a plastic wreath left behind months before by some civic parade stood propped against a stone frieze of identical marchers in the costume of an old war. A banner across the wreath's belly explained that the purpose of war is peace. At the margins of the park they were building a gigantic highway. I felt I was making my way across a battlefield silenced by the victory of the peace machines. The bulldozers had bitten far into the park, and the rolled carcasses of the sacrificed trees were already cut up into logs. There were dozens of felled maples, elms, and oaks. Their moist inner wheels breathed out a fragrance of barns, countryside, decay.

In the bottommost meadow fringing the water I recognized the tree which had caused Isaac to sin against his own life. It looked curiously like a photograph—not only like that newspaper photograph I carried warmly in my pocket, which showed the field and its markers—the drinking-fountain a few yards off, the ruined brick wall of an old estate behind. The caption-writer had particularly remarked on the "rope." But the rope was no longer there; the widow had claimed it. It was his own prayer shawl that Isaac, a short man, had thrown over the comely neck of the next-to-lowest limb. A Jew is buried in his prayer shawl; the police had handed it over to Sheindel. I observed that the bark was rubbed at that spot. The tree lay back against the sky like a licked postage stamp. Rain began to beat it flatter yet. A stench of sewage came up like a veil in the nostril. It seemed to me I was a man in a photograph standing next to a gray blur of tree. I would stand through eternity beside Isaac's guilt if I did not run, so I ran that night to Sheindel herself.

I loved her at once. I am speaking now of the first time I saw her, though I don't exclude the last. The last—the last together with Isaac—was soon after my divorce; at one stroke I left my wife and my cousin's fur business to the small upstate city in which both had repined. Suddenly Isaac and Sheindel and two babies appeared in the lobby of my hotel—they were passing through. Isaac had a lecture engagement in Canada. We sat under scarlet neon and Isaac told how my father could now not speak at all.

"He keeps his vow," I said.

"No, no, he's a sick man," Isaac said. "An obstruction in the throat."

"I'm the obstruction. You know what he said when I left the seminary. He meant it, never mind how many years it is. He's never addressed a word to me since."

"We were reading together. He blamed the reading, who can blame him? Fathers like ours don't know how to love. They live too much indoors."

It was an odd remark, though I was too much preoccupied with my own resentments to notice. "It wasn't what we read," I objected. "Torah tells that an illustrious man doesn't have an illustrious son. Otherwise he wouldn't be humble like other people. This much scholarly stuffing I retain. Well, so my father always believed he was more illustrious than anybody, especially more than your father. *Therefore*," I delivered in Talmudic cadence, "what chance did I have? A nincompoop and no *sitzfleisch*. Now you, you could answer questions that weren't even invented yet. Then you invented them."

"Torah isn't a spade," Isaac said. "A man should have a livelihood. You had yours."

"The pelt of a dead animal isn't a living either, it's an indecency."

All the while Sheindel was sitting perfectly still; the babies, female infants in long stockings, were asleep in her arms. She wore a dark thick woolen hat—it was July—that covered every part of her hair. But I had once seen it in all its streaming black shine.

"And Jane?" Isaac asked finally.

"Speaking of dead animals. Tell my father—he won't answer a letter, he won't come to the telephone—that in the matter of the marriage he was right, but for the wrong reason. If you share a bed with a Puritan you'll come into it cold and you'll go out of it cold. Listen, Isaac, my father calls me an atheist, but between the conjugal sheets every Jew is a believer in miracles, even the lapsed."

He said nothing then. He knew I envied him his Sheindel and his luck. Unlike our fathers, Isaac had never condemned me for my marriage, which his father regarded as his private triumph over my father, and which my father, in his public defeat, took as an occasion for declaring me as one dead. He rent his clothing and sat on a stool for eight days, while Isaac's father came to watch him mourn, secretly satisfied, though aloud he grieved for all apostates. Isaac did not like my wife.

He called her a tall yellow straw. After we were married he never said a word against her, but he kept away.

I went with my wife to his wedding. We took the early train down especially, but when we arrived the feast was well under way, and the guests far into the dancing.

"Look, look, they don't dance together," Jane said.

"Who?"

"The men and the women. The bride and the groom."

"Count the babies," I advised. "The Jews are also Puritans, but only in public."

The bride was enclosed all by herself on a straight chair in the center of a spinning ring of young men. The floor heaved under their whirl. They stamped, the chandeliers shuddered, the guests cried out, the young men with linked arms spiraled and their skullcaps came flying off like centrifugal balloons. Isaac, a mist of black suit, a stamping foot, was lost in the planet's wake of black suits and emphatic feet. The dancing young men shouted bridal songs, the floor leaned like a plate, the whole room teetered.

Isaac had told me something of Sheindel. Before now I had never seen her. Her birth was in a concentration camp, and they were about to throw her against the electrified fence when an army mobbed the gate; the current vanished from the terrible wires, and she had nothing to show for it afterward but a mark on her cheek like an asterisk, cut by a barb. The asterisk pointed to certain dry footnotes: she had no mother to show, she had no father to show, but she had, extraordinarily, God to show—she was known to be, for her age and sex, astonishingly learned. She was only seventeen.

"What pretty hair she has," Jane said.

Now Sheindel was dancing with Isaac's mother. All the ladies made a fence, and the bride, twirling with her mother-in-law, lost a shoe and fell against the long laughing row. The ladies lifted their glistening breasts in their lacy dresses and laughed; the young men, stamping two by two, went on shout-

ing their wedding songs. Sheindel danced without her shoe, and the black river of her hair followed her.

"After today she'll have to hide it all," I explained. Jane asked why.

"So as not to be a temptation to men," I told her, and covertly looked for my father. There he was, in a shadow, apart. My eyes discovered his eyes. He turned his back and gripped his throat.

"It's a very anthropological experience," Jane said.

"A wedding is a wedding," I answered her, "among us even more so."

"Is that your father over there, that little scowly man?" To Jane all Jews were little. "My father the man of the cloth. Yes."

"A wedding is not a wedding," said Jane: we had had only a license and a judge with bad breath.

"Everybody marries for the same reason."

"No," said my wife. "Some for love and some for spite."

"And everybody for bed."

"Some for spite," she insisted.

"I was never cut out for a man of the cloth," I said. "My poor father doesn't see that."

"He doesn't speak to you."

"A technicality. He's losing his voice."

"Well, he's not like you. He doesn't do it for spite," Jane said.

"You don't know him," I said.

He lost it altogether the very week Isaac published his first remarkable collection of responsa. Isaac's father crowded like a passionate rooster, and packed his wife and himself off to the Holy Land to boast on the holy soil. Isaac was a little relieved, he had just been made Professor of Mishnaic History, and his father's whims and pretenses and foolish rivalries were an embarrassment. It is easy to honor a father from afar, but bitter to honor one who is dead. A surgeon cut out my father's voice, and he died without a word.

Isaac and I no longer met. Our ways were too disparate. Isaac was famous, if not in the world, certainly in the kingdom of jurists and scholars. By this time I had acquired a partnership in a small book store in a basement. My partner sold me his share, and I put up a new sign: "The Book Cellar"; for reasons more obscure than filial (all the same I wished my father could have seen it) I established a department devoted especially to not-quite-rare theological works, chiefly in Hebrew and Aramaic, though I carried some Latin and Greek. When Isaac's second volume reached my shelves (I had now expanded to street level), I wrote him to congratulate him, and after that we corresponded, not with any regularity. He took to ordering all his books from me, and we exchanged awkward little jokes. "I'm still in the jacket business," I told him, "but now I feel I'm where I belong. Last time I went too fur." "Sheindel is well, and Naomi and Esther have a sister," he wrote. And later: "Naomi, Esther, and Miriam have a sister." And still later: "Naomi, Esther, Miriam, and Ophra have a sister." It went on until there were seven girls. "There's nothing in Torah that prevents an illustrious man from having illustrious daughters," I wrote him when he said he had given up hope of another rabbi in the family. "But where do you find seven illustrious husbands?" he asked. Every order brought another quip, and we bantered back and forth in this way for some years.

I noticed that he read everything. Long ago he had inflamed my taste, but I could never keep up. No sooner did I catch his joy in Saadia Gaon than he had already sprung ahead to Yehudah Halevi. One day he was weeping with Dostoyevski and the next leaping in the air over Thomas Mann. He introduced me to Hegel and Nietzsche while our fathers waited. His mature reading was no more peaceable than those frenzies of his youth, when I would come upon him in an abandoned classroom at dusk, his stocking feet on the windowsill, the light already washed from the lowest

city clouds, wearing the look of a man half-sorted with print.

But when the widow asked me—covering a certain excess of alertness or irritation—whether to my knowledge Isaac had lately been ordering any books on horticulture, I was astonished.

"He bought so much," I demurred.

"Yes, yes, yes," she said. "How could you remember?"

She poured the tea and then, with a discreetness of gesture, lifted my dripping raincoat from the chair where I had thrown it and took it out of the room. It was a crowded apartment, not very neat, far from slovenly, cluttered with dolls and tiny dishes and an array of tricycles. The dining table was as large as a desert. An old-fashioned crocheted lace runner divided it into two nations, and on the end of this, in the neutral zone, so to speak, Sheindel had placed my cup. There was no physical relic of Isaac: not even a book. She returned. "My girls are all asleep, we can talk. What an ordeal for you, weather like this and going out so far to that place."

It was impossible to tell whether she was angry or not. I had rushed in on her like the rainfall itself, scattering drops, my shoes stuck all over with leaves.

"I comprehend exactly why you went out there. The impulse of a detective," she said. Her voice contained an irony that surprised me. It was brilliantly and unmistakably accented, and because of this jaggedly precise. It was as if every word emitted a quick white thread of great purity, like hard silk, which she was then obliged to bite cleanly off. "You went to find something? An atmosphere? The sadness itself?"

"There was nothing to see," I said, and thought I was lunatic to have put myself in her way.

"Did you dig in the ground? He might have buried a note for someone."

"Was there a note?" I asked, startled.

"He left nothing behind for ordinary humanity like yourself."

I saw she was playing with me. "Rebberzin Kornfeld," I said, standing up, "forgive me. My coat, please, and I'll go."

"Sit," she commanded. "Isaac read less lately, did you notice that?"

I gave her a civil smile. "All the same he was buying more and more."

"Think," she said. "I depend on you. You're just the one who might know. I had forgotten this. God sent you perhaps."

"Rebberzin Kornfeld, I'm only a bookseller."

"God in his judgment sent me a bookseller. For such a long time Isaac never read at home. Think! Agronomy?"

"I don't remember anything like that. What would a Professor of Mishnaic History want with agronomy?"

"If he had a new book under his arm he would take it straight to the seminary and hide it in his office."

"I mailed to his office. If you like I can look up some of the titles—"

"You were in the park and you saw nothing?"

"Nothing." Then I was ashamed. "I saw the tree."

"And what is that? A tree is nothing."

"Rebberzin Kornfeld," I pleaded, "it's a stupidity that I came here. I don't know myself why I came, I beg your pardon, I had no idea—"

"You came to learn why Isaac took his life. Botany? Or even, please listen, even mycology? He never asked you to send something on mushrooms? Or having to do with herbs? Manure? Flowers? A certain kind of agricultural poetry? A book about gardening? Forestry? Vegetables? Cereal growing?"

"Nothing, nothing like that," I said excitedly. "Rebberzin Kornfeld, your husband was a rabbi!"

"I know what my husband was. Something to do with

vines? Arbors? Rice? Think, think, think! Anything to do with land—meadows—goats—a farm, hay—anything at all, anything rustic or lunar—”

“Lunar! My God! Was he a teacher or a nurseryman? Goats! Was he a furrier? Sheindel, are you crazy? I was the furrier! What do you want from the dead?”

Without a word she replenished my cup, though it was more than half full, and sat down opposite me, on the other side of the lace boundary line. She leaned her face into her palms, but I saw her eyes. She kept them wide.

“Rebberzin Kornfeld,” I said, collecting myself, “with a tragedy like this—”

“You imagine I blame the books. I don’t blame the books, whatever they were. If he had been faithful to his books he would have lived.”

“He lived,” I cried, “in books, what else?”

“No,” said the widow.

“A scholar. A rabbi. A remarkable Jew!”

At this she spilled a furious laugh. “Tell me, I have always been very interested and shy to inquire. Tell me about your wife.”

I intervented: “I haven’t had a wife in years.”

“What are they like, those people?”

“They’re exactly like us, if you can think what we would be if we were like them.”

“We are not like them. Their bodies are more to them than ours are to us. Our books are holy, to them their bodies are holy.”

“Jane’s was so holy she hardly ever let me get near it,” I muttered to myself.

“Isaac used to run in the park, but he lost his breath too quickly. Instead he read in a book about runners with hats made of leaves.”

“Sheindel, Sheindel, what did you expect of him? He was a student, he sat and he thought, he was a Jew.”

She thrust her hands flat. “He was not.”

I could not reply. I looked at her merely. She was thinner now than in her early young-womanhood, and her face had an in-between cast, poignant still at the mouth and jaw, beginning to grow coarse on either side of the nose.

“I think he was never a Jew,” she said.

I wondered whether Isaac’s suicide had unbalanced her. “I’ll tell you a story,” she resumed. “A story about Esther: about mice that danced and children who laughed. When Miriam came he invented a speaking cloud. With Ophra it was a turtle that married a blade of withered grass. By Leah’s time the stones had tears for their leglessness. Rebecca cried because of a tree that turned into a girl and could never grow colors again in autumn. Shiprah, the lightest, believes that a pig has a soul.”

“My own father used to drill me every night in sacred recitation. It was a terrible childhood.”

“He insisted on picnics. Each time we went farther and farther into the country. It was a madness. Isaac never troubled to learn to drive a car, and there was always a clumsiness of baskets to carry and a clutter of buses and trains and seven exhausted wild girls. And he would look for special places—we couldn’t settle just here or there, there had to be a brook or such-and-such a slope or else a little grove. And then, though he said it was all for the children’s pleasure, he would leave them and go off alone and never come back until sunset, when everything was spilled and the air freezing and the babies crying.”

“I was a grown man before I had the chance to go on a picnic,” I admitted.

“I’m speaking of the beginning,” said the widow. “Like you, wasn’t I fooled? I was fooled, I was charmed. Going home with our baskets of berries and flowers we were a romantic huddle. Isaac’s stories on those nights were full of



dark invention. May God preserve me, I even begged him to write them down. Then suddenly he joined a club, and Sunday mornings he was up and away before dawn."

"A club? So early? What library opens at that hour?" I said, stunned that a man like Isaac should ally himself with anything so doubtful.

"Ah, you don't follow, you don't follow. It was a hiking club, they met under the moon. I thought it was a pity, the whole week Isaac was so inward, he needed air for the mind. He used to come home too fatigued to stand. He said he went for the landscape. I was like you, I took what I heard, I heard it all and never followed. He resigned from the hikers finally, and I believed all that strangeness was finished. He told me it was absurd to walk at such a pace, he was a teacher and not an athlete. Then he began to write."

"But he always wrote," I objected.

"Not this way. What he wrote was only fairy tales. He kept at it and for a while he neglected everything else. It was the strangeness in another form. The stories surprised me, they were so poor and dull. They were a little like the ideas he used to scare the girls with, but choked all over with notes, appendices, prefaces. It struck me then he didn't seem to understand he was only doing fairy tales. Yet they were really very ordinary—full of sprites, nymphs, gods, everything ordinary and old."

"Will you let me see them?"

"Burned, all burned."

"Isaac burned them?"

"You don't think I did! I see what you think."

It was true that I was marveling at her hatred. I supposed she was one of those born to dread imagination. I was overtaken by a coldness for her, though the sight of her small hands with their tremulous staves of fingers turning and turning in front of her face like a gate on a hinge reminded me of where she was born and who she was. She was an orphan and had been saved by magic and had a terror of it. The coldness

fed. "Why should you be bothered by little stories?" I inquired. "It wasn't the stories that killed him." *a notebook*

"No, no, not the stories," she said. "Stupid corrupt things. I was glad when he gave them up. He piled them in the bathtub and lit them with a match. Then he put a notebook in his coat pocket and said he would walk in the park. Week after week he tried all the parks in the city. I didn't dream what he could be after. One day he took the subway and rode to the end of the line, and this was the right park at last. He went every day after class. An hour going, an hour back. Two, three in the morning he came home. 'Is it exercise?' I said. I thought he might be running again. He used to shiver with the chill of night and the dew. 'No, I sit quite still,' he said. 'Is it more stories you do out there?' 'No, I only jot down what I think.' 'A man should meditate in his own house, not by night near bad water,' I said. Six, seven in the morning he came home. I asked him if he meant to find his grave in that place."

She broke off with a cough, half artifice and half resignation, so loud that it made her crane toward the bedrooms to see if she had awakened a child. "I don't sleep any more," she told me. "Look around you. Look, look everywhere, look on the windowsills. Do you see any plants, any common house plants? I went down one evening and gave them to the garbage collector. I couldn't sleep in the same space with plants. They are like little trees. Am I deranged? Take Isaac's notebook and bring it back when you can."

I obeyed. In my own room, a sparse place, with no ornaments but a few pretty stalks in pots, I did not delay and seized the notebook. It was a tiny affair, three inches by five, with ruled pages that opened on a coiled wire. I read searchingly, hoping for something not easily evident. Shendel by her melancholy innuendo had made me believe that in these few sheets Isaac had revealed the reason for his suicide. But it was all a disappointment. There was not a word of any importance. After a while I concluded that, whatever her



motives, Sheindel was playing with me again. She meant to punish me for asking the unaskable. My inquisitiveness offended her; she had given me Isaac's notebook not to enlighten but to rebuke. The handwriting was recognizable yet oddly formed, shaky and even senile, like that of a man outdoors and deskless who scribbles in his palm or on his lifted knee or leaning on a bit of bark; and there was no doubt that the wrinkled leaves, with their ragged corners, had been in and out of someone's pocket. So I did not mistrust Sheindel's mad anecdote; this much was true: a park, Isaac, a notebook, all at once, but signifying no more than that a professor with a literary turn of mind had gone for a walk. There was even a green stain straight across one of the quotations, as if the pad had slipped grassward and been trod on. I have forgotten to mention that the notebook, though scantily filled, was in three languages. The Greek I could not read at all, but it had the shape of verse. The Hebrew was simply a miscellany, drawn mostly from Leviticus and Deuteronomy. Among these I found the following extracts, transcribed not quite verbatim:

Ye shall utterly destroy all the places of the gods, upon the high mountains, and upon the hills, and under every green tree.

And the soul that turneth after familiar spirits to go a-whoring after them, I will cut him off from among his people.

These, of course, were ordinary unadorned notes, such as any classroom lecturer might commonly make to remind himself of the text, with a phrase cut out here and there for the sake of speeding his hand. Or I thought it possible that Isaac might at that time have been preparing a paper on the Talmudic commentaries for these passages. Whatever the case, the remaining quotations, chiefly from English poetry, interested me only slightly more. They were the elegiac favorites of a closeted Romantic. I was repelled by Isaac's Nature:

it wore a capital letter, and smelled like my own Book Cellar. It was plain to me that he had lately grown painfully academic: he could not see a weed's tassel without finding a classical reference for it. He had put down a snatch of Byron, a smudge of Keats (like his Scriptural copyings, these too were quick and fragmented), a pair of truncated lines from Tennyson, and this unmarked and clumsy quatrain:

*And yet all is not taken. Still one Dryad  
Flits through the wood, one Oread skins the hill;  
White in the whispering stream still gleams a Naiad;  
The beauty of the earth is haunted still.*

All of this was so cloying and mooning and ridiculous, and so pedantic besides, that I felt ashamed for him. And yet there was almost nothing else, nothing to redeem him and nothing personal, only a sentence or two in his rigid self-controlled scholar's style, not unlike the starched little jokes of our correspondence. "I am writing at dusk sitting on a stone in Trilliam's Inlet Park, within sight of Trilliam's Inlet, a bay to the north of the city, and within two yards of a slender tree, *Quercus velutina*, the age of which, should one desire to measure it, can be ascertained by (God forbid) cutting the bole and counting the rings. The man writing is thirty-five years old and aging too rapidly, which may be ascertained by counting the rings under his poor myopic eyes." Below this, deliberate and readily more legible than the rest, appeared three curious words:

Great Pan lives.

That was all. In a day or so I returned the notebook to Sheindel. I told myself that she had seven orphans to worry over, and repressed my anger at having been cheated.

She was waiting for me. "I am so sorry, there was a letter in the notebook, it had fallen out. I found it on the carpet after you left."

"Thank you, no," I said. "I've read enough out of Isaac's pockets."

"Then why did you come to see me to begin with?"

"I came," I said, "just to see you."

"You came for Isaac." But she was more mocking than distraught. "I gave you everything you needed to see what happened and still you don't follow. Here." She held out a large law-sized paper. "Read the letter."

"I've read his notebook. If everything I need to fathom Isaac is in the notebook I don't need the letter."

"It's a letter he wrote to explain himself," she persisted.

"You told me Isaac left you no notes."

"It was not written to me."

I sat down on one of the dining room chairs and Sheindel put the page before me on the table. It lay face up on the lace divider. I did not look at it.

"It's a love letter," Sheindel whispered. "When they cut him down they found the notebook in one pocket and the letter in the other."

I did not know what to say.

"The police gave me everything," Sheindel said. "Everything to keep."

"A love letter?" I repeated.

"And the police—they gave it to you, and that was the first you realized what"—I floundered after the inconceivable—"what could be occupying him?"

"What could be occupying him," she mimicked. "Yes. Not until they took the letter and the notebook out of his pocket."

"My God. His habit of life, his mind . . . I can't imagine it. You never guessed?"

"No."

"These trips to the park—"

"He had become aberrant in many ways. I have described them to you."

"But the park! Going off like that, alone—you didn't think he might be meeting a woman?"

"It was not a woman."

Disgust like a powder clotted my nose. "Sheindel, you're crazy."

"I'm crazy, is that it? Read his confession! Read it! How long can I be the only one to know this thing? Do you want my brain to melt? Be my confidant," she entreated so unexpectedly that I held my breath.

"You've said nothing to anyone?"

"Would they have recited such eulogies if I had? Read the letter!"

"I have no interest in the abnormal," I said coldly.

She raised her eyes and watched me for the smallest space. Without any change in the posture of her suppliant head her laughter began; I have never since heard sounds like those—almost mouselike in density for fear of waking her sleeping daughters, but so rational in intent that it was like listening to astonished sanity rendered into a cackling fugue. She kept it up for a minute and then calmed herself. "Please sit where you are. Please pay attention. I will read the letter to you myself."

She plucked the page from the table with an orderly gesture. I saw that this letter had been scrupulously prepared; it was closely written. Her tone was cleansed by scorn.

"My ancestors were led out of Egypt by the hand of God," she read.

"Is this how a love letter starts out?"

She moved on resolutely. "We were guilty of so-called abominations well-described elsewhere. Other peoples have been nourished on their mythologies. For aeons we have been weaned from all traces of the same."

I felt myself becoming impatient. The fact was I had returned with a single idea: I meant to marry Isaac's widow when enough time had passed to make it seemly. It was my intention to court her with great subtlety at first, so that

I would not appear to be presuming on her sorrow. But she was possessed. "Sheindel, why do you want to inflict this treatise on me? Give it to the seminary, contribute it to a symposium of professors."

"I would sooner die."

At this I began to attend in earnest.

"I will leave aside the wholly plausible position of so-called animism within the concept of the One God. I will omit a historical illumination of its continuous but covert expression even within the Fence of the Law. Creature, I leave these aside—"

"What?" I yelped.

"'Creature,'" she repeated, spreading her nostrils. "What is human history? What is our philosophy? What is our religion? None of these teaches us poor human ones that we are alone in the universe, and even without them we would know that we are not. At a very young age I understood that a foolish man would not believe in a fish had he not had one enter his experience. Innumerable forms exist and have come to our eyes, and to the still deeper eye of the lens of our instruments; from this minute perception of what already is, it is easy to conclude that further forms are possible, that all forms are probable. God created the world not for Himself alone, or I would not now possess this consciousness with which I am enabled to address thee, Loveliness."

"Thee," I echoed, and swallowed a sad bewilderment.

"You must let me go on," Sheindel said, and grimly went on. "It is false history, false philosophy, and false religion which declare to us human ones that we live among Things. The arts of physics and chemistry begin to teach us differently, but their way of compassion is new, and finds few to carry fidelity to its logical and beautiful end. The molecules dance inside all forms, and within the molecules dance the atoms, and within the atoms dance still profounder sources of divine vitality. There is nothing that is Dead. There is no

Non-life. Holy life subsists even in the stone, even in the bones of dead dogs and dead men. Hence in God's fecundating Creation there is no possibility of Idolatry, and therefore no possibility of committing this so-called abomination."

"My God, my God," I wailed. "Enough, Sheindel, it's more than enough, no more—"

"There is more," she said.

"I don't want to hear it."

"He stains his character for you? A spot, do you think?"

"You will hear." She took up in a voice which all at once reminded me of my father's: it was unforgetting. "'Creature,

I rehearse these matters though all our language is as breath to thee; as bables for the juggler. Where we struggle to understand from day to day, and contemplate the grave for its riddle, the other breeds are born fulfilled in wisdom. Animal races conduct themselves without self-investigations; instinct is a higher and not a lower thing. Alas that we human ones—but for certain pitifully primitive approximations in those few reflexes and involuntary actions left to our bodies—are born bare of instinct! All that we unfortunates must resort to through science, art, philosophy, religion, all our imaginings and tormented strivings, all our meditations and vain questionings, all—are expressed naturally and rightly in the beasts, the plants, the rivers, the stones. The reason is simple, it is our tragedy: our soul is included in us, it inhabits us, we contain it, when we seek our soul we must seek in ourselves. To see the soul, to confront it—that is divine wisdom. Yet how can we see into our dark selves? With the other races of being it is differently ordered. The soul of the plant does not reside in the chlorophyll, it may roam if it wishes, it may choose whatever form or shape it pleases. Hence the other breeds, being largely free of their soul and able to witness it, can live in peace. To see one's soul is to know all, to know all is to own the peace our philosophes futilely envisage. Earth displays two categories of soul: the free and the indwelling. We human ones are cursed with the indwelling—"

"Stop!" I cried.

"I will not," said the widow.

"Please, you told me he burned his fairy tales."

"Did I lie to you? Will you say I lied?"

"Then for Isaac's sake why didn't you? If this isn't a fairy tale what do you want me to think it could be?"

"Think what you like."

"Sheindel," I said, "I beg you, don't destroy a dead man's honor. Don't look at this thing again, tear it to pieces, don't continue with it."

"I don't destroy his honor. He had none."

"Please! Listen to yourself! My God, who was the man? Rabbi Isaac Kornfeld! Talk of honor! Wasn't he a teacher? Wasn't he a scholar?"

"He was a pagan."

Her eyes returned without hesitation to their task. She commenced: "All these truths I learned only gradually, against my will and desire. Our teacher Moses did not speak of them; much may be said under this head. It was not out of ignorance that Moses failed to teach about those souls that are free. If I have learned what Moses knew, is this not because we are both men? He was a man, but God addressed him; it was God's will that our ancestors should no longer be slaves. Yet our ancestors, being stiff-necked, would not have abandoned their slavery in Egypt had they been taught of the free souls. They would have said: "Let us stay, our bodies will remain enslaved in Egypt, but our souls will wander at their pleasure in Zion. If the cactus-plant stays rooted while its soul roams, why not also a man?" And if Moses had replied that only the world of Nature has the gift of the free soul, while man is chained to his, and that a man, to free his soul, must also free the body that is its vessel, they would have scoffed. "How is it that men, and men alone, are different from the world of Nature? If this is so, then the condition of men is evil and unjust, and if this condition of ours is evil and unjust in general, what does it

matter whether we are slaves in Egypt or citizens in Zion?" And they would not have done God's will and abandoned their slavery. Therefore Moses never spoke to them of the free souls, lest the people not do God's will and go out from Egypt."

In an instant a sensation broke in me—it was entirely obscure, there was nothing I could compare it with, and yet I was certain I recognized it. And then I did. It hurtled me into childhood—it was the crisis of insight one experiences when one has just read out, for the first time, that conglomeration of figurines which makes a word. In that moment I penetrated beyond Isaac's alphabet into his language. I saw that he was on the side of possibility: he was both sane and inspired. His intention was not to accumulate mystery but to dispel it.

"All that part is brilliant," I burst out.

Sheindel meanwhile had gone to the sideboard to take a sip of cold tea that was standing there. "In a minute," she said, and pursued her thirst. "I have heard of drawings surpassing Rembrandt daubed by madmen who when released from the fit couldn't hold the chalk. What follows is beautiful, I warn you."

"The man was a genius."

"Yes."

"Go on," I urged.

She produced for me her clownish jeering smile. She read: "Sometimes in the desert journey on the way they would come to a watering place, and some quick spy boy would happen to glimpse the soul of the spring (which the wild Greeks afterward called *naiad*), but not knowing of the existence of the free souls he would suppose only that the moon had cast a momentary beam across the water. Loveliness, with the same innocence of accident I discovered thee. Loveliness, Loveliness."

She stopped.

"Is that all?"

"There is more."

"Read it."

"The rest is the love letter."

"Is it hard for you?" But I asked with more eagerness than pity.

"I was that man's wife, he scaled the Fence of the Law. For this God preserved me from the electric fence. Read it for yourself."

Incontinently I snatched the crowded page.

"Loveliness, in thee the joy, substantiation, and supernal succor of my theorem. How many hours through how many years I walked over the cilia-forests of our enormous aspirating vegetable-star, this light rootless seed that crawls in its single furrow, this shaggy mazy unimplanted cabbage-head of our earth!—never, all that time, all those days of unfulfillment, a white space like a desert-~~fast~~, never, never to grasp. I thought myself abandoned to the intrigue of my folly. At dawn, on a hillock, what seemed the very shape and seizing of the mound's nature—what was it? Only the haze of the sun-ball growing great through hoarfrost. The oread slipped from me, leaving her illusion; or was never there at all; or was there but for an instant, and ran away. What sly ones the free souls are! They have a comedy we human ones cannot dream: the laughing drunkard feels in himself the shadow of the shadow of the shadow of their wit, and only because he has made himself a vessel, as the two banks and the bed of a rivulet are the naiad's vessel. A naiad I may indeed have viewed whole: all seven of my daughters were once wading in a stream in a compact but beautiful park, of which I had much hope. The youngest being not yet two, and fretful, the older ones were told to keep her always by the hand, but they did not obey. I, having passed some way into the woods behind, all at once heard a scream and noise of splashes, and caught sight of a tiny body flying down into the water. Running back through the trees I could see the others bunched together, afraid, as the baby dived helplessly, all these little girls

frozen in a garland—when suddenly one of them (it was too quick a movement for me to recognize which) darted to the struggler, who was now underwater, and pulled her up, and put an arm around her to soothe her. The arm was blue—blue. As blue as a lake. And fiercely, from my spot on the bank, panting, I began to count the little girls. I counted eight, thought myself not mad but delivered, again counted, counted seven, knew I had counted well before, knew I counted well even now. A blue-armed girl had come to wade among them. Which is to say the shape of a girl. I questioned my daughters: each in her fright believed one of the others had gone to pluck up the tiresome baby. None wore a dress with blue sleeves."

"Proofs," said the widow. "Isaac was meticulous, he used to account for all his proofs always."

"How?" My hand in tremor rustled Isaac's letter; the paper bleated as though whipped.

"By eventually finding a principle to cover them," she finished maliciously. "Well, don't rest even for me, you don't oblige me. You have a long story to go, long enough to make a fever."

"Tea," I said hoarsely.

She brought me her own cup from the sideboard, and I believed as I drank that I swallowed some of her mockery and gall.

"Sheindel, for a woman so pious you're a great skeptic."

And now the tremor had command of my throat. "An atheist's statement," she rejoined. "The more pious, the more skepticism. A religious man comprehends this. Superfluity, excess of custom, and superstition would climb like a choking vine on the Fence of the Law if skepticism did not continually hack them away to make freedom for purity."

I then thought her fully worthy of Isaac. Whether I was worthy of her I evaded putting to myself; instead I gargled some tea and returned to the letter.

"It pains me to confess," I read, "how after that I

moved from clarity to doubt and back again. I had no trust in my conclusions because all my experiences were evanescent. Everything certain I attributed to some other cause less certain. Every voice out of the moss I blamed on rabbits and squirrels. Every motion among leaves I called a bird, though there positively was no bird. My first sight of the Little People struck me as no more than a shudder of literary delusion, and I determined they could only be an instantaneous crop of mushrooms. But one night, a little after ten o'clock at the crux of summer—the sky still showed strings of light—I was wandering in this place, this place where they will find my corpse—”

“Not for my sake,” said Sheindel when I hesitated.

“It’s terrible,” I croaked, “terrible.”

“Withered like a shell,” she said, as though speaking of the cosmos; and I understood from her manner that she had a fanatic’s acquaintance with this letter, and knew it nearly by heart. She appeared to be thinking the words faster than I could bring them out, and for some reason I was constrained to hurry the pace of my reading.

“—where they will find my corpse withered like the shell of an insect.” I rushed on. “The smell of putrefaction lifted clearly from the bay. I began to speculate about my own body after I was dead—whether the soul would be set free immediately after the departure of life; or whether only gradually, as decomposition proceeded and more and more of the indwelling soul was released to freedom. But when I considered how a man’s body is no better than a clay pot, a fact which none of our sages has ever contradicted, it seemed to me then that an indwelling soul by its own nature would be obliged to cling to its bit of pottery until the last crumb and grain had vanished into earth. I walked through the ditches of that black meadow grieving and swollen with self-pity. It came to me that while my poor bones went on decaying at their ease, my soul would have to linger inside them, waiting, despairing, longing to join the free ones. I cursed it for its

gravity-despoiled, slow, interminably languishing purse of flesh; better to be encased in vapor, in wind, in a hair of a conut! Who knows how long it takes the body of a man to shrink into gravel, and the gravel into sand, and the sand into vitamin? A hundred years? Two hundred, three hundred? A thousand perhaps! Is it not true that bones nearly intact are constantly being dug up by the paleontologists two million years after burial?—Sheindel,” I interrupted, “this is death, not love. Where’s the love letter to be afraid of here? I don’t find it.”

“Continue,” she ordered. And then: “You see I’m not afraid.”

“Not of love?”

“No. But you recite much too slowly. Your mouth is shaking. Are you afraid of death?”

I did not reply.

“Continue,” she said again. “Go rapidly. The next sentence begins with an extraordinary thought.”

“An extraordinary thought emerged in me. It was luminous, profound, and practical. More than that, it had innumerable precedents; the mythologies had documented it a dozen dozen times over. I recalled all those mortals reputed to have coupled with gods (a collective word, showing much common sense, signifying what our philosophies more abstrusely call Shekhina), and all that poignant miscegenation represented by centaurs, satyrs, mermaids, fauns, and so forth, not to speak of that even more famous mingling in Genesis, whereby the sons of God took the daughters of men for brides, producing giants and possibly also those abortions, leviathan and behemoth, of which we read in Job, along with unicorns and other chimeras and monsters abundant in Scripture, hence far from fanciful. There existed also the example of the succubus Lilith, who was often known to couple in the mediaeval ghetto even with pre-pubescent boys. By all these evidences I was emboldened in my confidence that I was surely not the first man to conceive such a desire in the his-



tory of our earth. Creature, the thought that took hold of me was this: if only I could couple with one of the free souls, the strength of the connection would likely wrest my own soul from my body—seize it, as if by a tong, draw it out, so to say, to its own freedom. The intensity and force of my desire to capture one of these beings now became prodigious. I avoided my wife—”

Here the widow heard me falter.

“Please,” she commanded, and I saw creeping in her face the completed turn of a sneer.

“—lest I be depleted of potency at that moment (which might occur in any interval, even, I assumed, in my own bedroom) when I should encounter one of the free souls. I was borne back again and again to the fetid viscosities of the Inlet, borne there as if on the rising stink of my own enduring and tedious putrefaction, the idea of which I could no longer shake off—I envisaged my soul as trapped in my last granule, and that last granule itself perhaps petrified, never to dissolve, and my soul condemned to minister to it throughout eternity! It seemed to me my soul must be released at once or be lost to sweet air forever. In a gleamless dark, struggling with this singular panic, I stumbled from ditch to ditch, strained like a blind dog for the support of solid verticality; and smacked my palm against bark. I looked up and in the black could not fathom the size of the tree—my head lolled forward, my brow met the trunk with all its gravings. I busied my fingers in the interstices of the bark’s cuneiform. Then with forehead flat on the tree, I embraced it with both arms to measure it. My hands united on the other side. It was a young narrow weed, I did not know of what family. I reached to the lowest branch and plucked a leaf and made my tongue travel meditatively along its periphery to assess its shape: oak. The taste was sticky and exaltingly bitter. A jubilation lightly carpeted my groin. I then placed one hand (the other I kept around the tree’s waist, as it were) in the bifurcation (disgustingly termed crotch) of that lowest limb and the elegant and de-

voutly firm torso, and caressed that miraculous juncture with a certain languor, which gradually changed to vigor. I was all at once savagely alert and deeply daring: I chose that single tree together with the ground near it for an enemy which in two senses would not yield: it would neither give nor give in. “Come, come,” I called aloud to Nature. A wind blew out a braid of excremental malodor into the heated air. “Come,” I called, “couple with me, as thou didst with Cadmus, Rhoeceus, Tithonus, Endymion, and that king Numa Pompilius to whom thou didst give secrets. As Lilith comes without a sign, so come thou. As the sons of God came to copulate with women, so now let a daughter of Shekhina the Emanation reveal herself to me. Nymph, come now, come now.”

“Without warning I was flung to the ground. My face smashed into earth, and a flaky clump of dirt lodged in my open mouth. For the rest, I was on my knees, pressing down on my hands, with the fingernails clutching dirt. A superb ache lined my haunch. I began to weep because I was certain I had been ravished by some sinewy animal. I vomited the earth I had swallowed and believed I was defiled, as it is written: “Neither shalt thou lie with any beast.” I lay sunk in the grass, afraid to lift my head to see if the animal still lurked. Through some curious means I had been fully positioned and aroused and exquisitely sated, all in half a second, in a fashion impossible to explain, in which, though I performed as with my own wife, I felt as if a preternatural rapine had been committed upon me. I continued prone, listening for the animal’s breathing. Meanwhile, though every tissue of my flesh was gratified in its inmost awareness, a marvelous voluptuousness did not leave my body; sensual exultations of a wholly supreme and paradisaal order, unlike anything our poets have ever defined, both flared and were intensely satisfied in the same moment. This salubrious and delightful perceptiveness excited my being for some time: a conjuring not dissimilar (in metaphor only; in actuality it cannot be described) from the magical contradiction of the tree and its



issuance-of-branch at the point of bifurcation. In me were linked, *in the same instant*, appetite and fulfillment, delicacy and power, mastery and submissiveness, and other paradoxes of entirely remarkable emotional import.

"Then I heard what I took to be the animal treading through the grass quite near my head, all cunningly; it withheld its breathing, then snored it out in a cautious and wisplike whirr that resembled a light wind through rushes. With a huge energy (my muscular force seemed to have increased) I leaped up in fear of my life: I had nothing to use for a weapon but—oh, laughable!—the pen I had been writing with in a little notebook I always carried about with me in those days (and still keep on my person as a self-shaming souvenir of my insipidness, my bookishness, my pitiable conjecture and wishfulness in a time when, not yet knowing thee, I knew nothing). What I saw was not an animal but a girl no older than my oldest daughter, who was then fourteen. Her skin was as perfect as an eggplant's and nearly of that color. In height she was half as tall as I was. The second and third fingers of her hands—this I noticed at once—were peculiarly fused, one slotted into the other, like the ligula of a leaf. She was entirely bald and had no ears but rather a type of gill or envelope, one only, on the left side. Her toes displayed the same oddity I had observed in her fingers. She was neither naked nor clothed—that is to say, even though a part of her body, from hip to just below the breasts (each of which appeared to be a kind of velvety colorless pear, suspended from a very short, almost invisible stem), was luxuriantly covered with a flossy or spore-like material, this was a natural efflorescence in the manner of, with us, hair. All her sexual portion was wholly visible, as in any field flower. Aside from these express deviations, she was commandingly human in aspect, if unmistakably flowerlike. She was, in fact, the reverse of our hackneyed euphuism, as when we say a young girl blooms like a flower—she, on the contrary, seemed a flower transformed into the shape of the most stupendously lovely child I

had ever seen. Under the smallest push of wind she bent at her superlative waist; this, I recognized, and not the exhalations of some lecherous beast, was the breathlike sound that had alarmed me at her approach: these motions of hers made the blades of grass collide. (She herself, having no lungs, did not "breathe.") She stood bobbing joyfully before me, with a face as tender as a morning-glory, strangely phosphorescent: she shed her own light, in effect, and I had no difficulty in confronting her beauty.

"Moreover, by experiment I soon learned that she was not only capable of language, but that she delighted in playing with it. This she literally could do—if I had distinguished her hands before anything else, it was because she had held them out to catch my first cry of awe. She either caught my words like balls or let them roll, or caught them and then darted off to throw them into the Inlet. I discovered that whenever I spoke I more or less pelted her; but she liked this, and told me ordinary human speech only tickled and amused, whereas laughter, being highly plosive, was something of an assault. I then took care to pretend much solemnity, though I was lightheaded with rapture. Her own "voice" I apprehended rather than heard—which she, unable to imagine how we human ones are imprisoned in sensory perception, found hard to conceive. Her sentences came to me not as a series of differentiated frequencies but (impossible to develop this idea in language) as a diffused cloud of field fragrances; yet to say that I assimilated her thought through the olfactory nerve would be a pedestrian distortion. All the same it was clear that whatever she said reached me in a shimmer of pellucid perfumes, and I understood her meaning with an immediacy of glee and with none of the ambiguities and suspiciousness of motive that surround our human communication.

"Through this medium she explained that she was a dryad and that her name was *Tripomnoñeà* (as nearly as I can render it in our narrowly limited orthography, and in this dunce's alphabet of ours which is notoriously impervious to odorifer-

ous categories). She told me what I had already seized: that she had given me her love in response to my call.

“With thou come to any man who calls?” I asked.

“All men call, whether realizing it or not. I and my sisters sometimes come to those who do not realize. Almost never, unless for sport, do we come to that man who calls knowingly—he wishes only to inhabit us out of perversity or boastfulness or to indulge a dreamed-of disgust.”

“Scripture does not forbid sodomy with the plants,” I exclaimed, but she did not comprehend any of this and lowered her hands so that my words would fly past her uncaught. “I too called thee knowingly, not for perversity but for love of Nature.”

“I have caught men’s words before as they talked of Nature, you are not the first. It is not Nature they love so much as Death they fear. So Corylyb my cousin received it in a season not long ago coupling in a harbor with one of your kind, one called Spinoza, one that had catarrh of the lung. I am of Nature and immortal and so I cannot pity your deaths. But return tomorrow and say Iripomoñóéà.” Then she chased my last word to where she had kicked it, behind the tree. She did not come back. I ran to the tree and circled it diligently but she was lost for that night.

“Loveliness, all the foregoing, telling of my life and meditations until now, I have never before recounted to thee or any other. The rest is beyond mean telling: those rejoicings from midnight to dawn, when the greater phosphorescence of the whole shouting sky frightened thee home! How in a trance of happiness we coupled in the ditches, in the long grasses, behind a fountain, under a broken wall, once recklessly on the very pavement, with a bench for roof and trellis! How I was taught by natural arts to influence certain chemistries engendering explicit marvels, blisses, and transports no man has slaked himself with since Father Adam pressed out the forbidden chlorophyll of Eden! Loveliness, Loveliness, no one like thee. No brow so sleek, no elbow-crook so fine, no

eye so green, no waist so pliant, no limbs so pleasant and acute. None like immortal Iripomoñóéà.

“Creature, the moon filled and starved twice, and there was still no end to the glorious archaic newness of Iripomoñóéà.

“Then last night. Last night! I will record all with simplicity.

“We entered a shallow ditch. In a sweet-smelling voice of extraordinary redolence—so intense in its sweetness that even the barbaric stinks and wind-lifted farts of the Inlet were overpowered by it—Iripomoñóéà inquired of me how I felt without my soul. I replied that I did not know this was my condition. “Oh yes, your body is now an empty packet, that is why it is so light. Spring.” I sprang in air and rose effortlessly. “You have spoiled yourself, spoiled yourself with confusions,” she complained, “now by morning your body will be crumpled and withered and ugly, like a leaf in its sere hour, and never again after tonight will this place see you.” “Nymph!” I roared, amazed by levitation. “Oh, oh, that damaged,” she cried, “you hit my eye with that noise,” and she wafted a deeper aroma, a leeklike mist, one that stung the mucous membranes. A white bruise disfigured her petally lid. I was repentant and sighed terribly for her injury. “Beauty marred is for our kind what physical hurt is for yours,” she reproved me. “Where you have pain, we have ugliness. Where you profane yourselves by immorality, we are profaned by ugliness. Your soul has taken leave of you and spoils our pretty game.” “Nymph!” I whispered, “heart, treasure, if my soul is separated how is it I am unaware?”

“Poor man,” she answered, “you have only to look and you will see the thing.” Her speech had now turned as acid as an herb, and all that place reeked bitterly. “You know I am a spirit. You know I must flash and dart. All my sisters flash and dart. Of all races we are the quickest. Our very religion is all-of-a-sudden. No one can hinder us, no one may delay us. But yesterday you undertook to detain me in

your embrace, you stretched your kisses into years, you called me your treasure and your heart endlessly, your soul in its slow greed kept me close and captive, all the while knowing well how a spirit cannot stay and will not be fixed. I made to leap from you, but your obstinate soul held on until it was snatched straight from your frame and escaped with me. I saw it hurled out onto the pavement, the blue beginning of day was already seeping down, so I ran away and could say nothing until this moment."

"My soul is free? Free entirely? And can be seen?"

"Free. If I could pity any living thing under the sky I would pity you for the sight of your soul. I do not like it, it conjures against me."

"My soul loves thee," I urged in all my triumph, "it is freed from the thousand-year grave!" I jumped out of the ditch like a frog, my legs had no weight; but the dryad sulked in the ground, stroking her ugly violated eye. "Tripomonoëia, my soul will follow thee with thankfulness into eternity."

"I would sooner be followed by the dirty fog. I do not like that soul of yours. It conjures against me. It denies me, it denies every spirit and all my sisters and every nereid of the harbor, it denies all our multiplicity, and all gods diversiform, it spites even Lord Pan, it is an enemy, and you, poor man, do not know your own soul. Go, look at it, there it is on the road."

"I scudded back and forth under the moon.

"Nothing, only a dusty old man trudging up there."

"A quite ugly old man?"

"Yes, that is all. My soul is not there."

"With a matted beard and great fierce eyebrows?"

"Yes, yes, one like that is walking on the road. He is half bent over under the burden of a dusty old bag. The bag is stuffed with books—I can see their raveled bindings sticking out."

"And he reads as he goes?"

"Yes, he reads as he goes."

"What is it he reads?"

"Some huge and terrifying volume, heavy as a stone." I peered forward in the moonlight. "A Tractate. A Tractate of the Mishnah. Its leaves are so worn they break as he turns them, but he does not turn them often because there is much matter on a single page. He is so sad! Such antique weariness broods in his face! His throat is striped from the whip. His checks are folded like ancient flags, he reads the Law and breathes the dust."

"And are there flowers on either side of the road?"

"Incredible flowers! Of every color! And noble shrubs like mounds of green moss! And the cricket crackling in the field. He passes indifferent through the beauty of the field. His nostrils sniff his book as if flowers lay on the clotted page, but the flowers lick his feet. His feet are bandaged, his notched toenails gore the path. His prayer shawl droops on his studious back. He reads the Law and breathes the dust and doesn't see the flowers and won't heed the cricket spitting in the field."

"That," said the dryad, "is your soul." And was gone with all her odors.

"My body sailed up to the road in a single hop. I alighted near the shape of the old man and demanded whether he were indeed the soul of Rabbi Isaac Kornfeld. He trembled but confessed. I asked if he intended to go with his books through the whole future without change, always with his Tractate in his hand, and he answered that he could do nothing else.

"Nothing else! You, who I thought yearned for the earth! You, an immortal, free, and caring only to be bound to the Law!"

"He held a dry arm fearfully before his face, and with the other arm hitched up his merciless bag on his shoulder. "Sir," he said, still quivering, "didn't you wish to see me with your own eyes?"

"I know your figure!" I shrieked. "Haven't I seen that

figure a hundred times before? On a hundred roads? It is not mine! I will not have it be mine!"

"If you had not contrived to be rid of me, I would have stayed with you till the end. The dryad, who does not exist, lies. It was not I who clung to her but you, my body. Sir, all that has no real existence lies. In your grave beside you I would have sung you David's songs, I would have moaned Solomon's voice to your last grain of bone. But you expelled me, your ribs exile me from their fare, and I will walk here alone always, in my garden"—he scratched on his page—"with my precious birds"—he scratched at the letters—"and my darling trees"—he scratched at the tall side-column of commentary.

"He was so impudent in his bravery—for I was all flesh-ness and he all floppy wrath—that I seized him by the collar and shook him up and down, while the books on his back made a vast rubbing one on the other, and bits of shredding leather flew out like a rain.

"The sound of the Law," he said, "is more beautiful than the crickets. The smell of the Law is more radiant than the moss. The taste of the Law exceeds clear water."

"At this nervy provocation—he more than any other knew my despair—I grabbed his prayer shawl by its tassels and whirled around him once or twice until I had unwrapped it from him altogether, and wound it on my own neck and in one bound came to the tree.

"Nymph!" I called to it. "Spirit and saint! Iripomothoëia, come! None like thee, no brow so sleek, no elbow-crook so fine, no eye so green, no waist so pliant, no limbs so pleasant and acute. For pity of me, come, come."

"But she does not come.

"Loveliest, come."

"She does not come.

"Creature, see how I am coiled in the snail of this shawl as if in a leaf. I crouch to write my words. Let soul call thee lie, but body . . .

" . . . body . . .

" . . . fingers twist, knuckles dark as wood, tongue dries like grass, deeper now into silk . . .

" . . . silk of pod of shawl, knees wilt, knuckles wither, neck . . . "

Here the letter suddenly ended.

"You see? A pagan!" said Sheindel, and kept her spiteful smile. It was thick with audacity.

"You don't pity him," I said, watching the contempt that glittered in her teeth.

"Even now you don't see? You can't follow?"

"Pity him," I said.

"He who takes his own life does an abomination."

For a long moment I considered her. "You don't pity him? You don't pity him at all?"

"Let the world pity me."

"Goodbye," I said to the widow.

"You won't come back?"

I gave what amounted to a little bow of regret.

"I told you you came just for Isaac! But Isaac"—I was in terror of her cough, which was unmistakably laughter—"Isaac disappoints. A scholar. A rabbi. A remarkable Jew!"

Ha! He disappoints you?"

"He was always an astonishing man."

"But not what you thought," she insisted. "An illusion." "Only the pitiless are illusory. Go back to that park, Rebbetzin," I advised her.

"And what would you like me to do there? Dance around a tree and call Greek names to the weeds?"

"Your husband's soul is in that park. Consult it." But her low derisive cough accompanied me home: whereupon I remembered her earlier words and dropped three green house plants down the toilet; after a journey of some miles through conduits they straightway entered Tillham's Inlet, where they decayed amid the civic excrement.

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# A TRAGEDY FULL OF JOY:

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From Malamud, Ozick and Heller  
to I.B. Singer and Celia Dropkin

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DANIEL WALDEN,  
Editor

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Christina Dokou and Daniel Walden  
Penn State University

## THE PAGAN CONDEMNATION AND ORTHODOX REDEMPTION OF RABBI ISAAC KORNFELD

Cynthia Ozick's "The Pagan Rabbi" has been hailed as a characteristic example of her literary idiosyncrasy, combining an unusual genre format (a partly-epistolary, part-detective short story) with her high-ubiquitous theme of the Jewish consciousness clashing against a pagan/Christian environment. But for someone of self-professed "revulsion against the Greek and Pagan modes, whether in the Christian or post-Christian vessels, or whether in their vessels of *Kulturgeschichtliche*" (Art & Ardor 157) Ozick here creates a story in which, as critic Victor Strandberg concludes, although "the adversarial ideologies are more clearly drawn . . . Pan versus orthodox Judaism," remarkably "it is Pan who prevails over Moses . . . Death here becomes (as Walt Whitman called it) a promotion rather than a punishment in the light of the rabbi's pantheistic insight" (Greek Mind 82-83). Ozick presents us with a strong, sympathetic advocate of pagan values in the protagonist's figure, the intellectual rabbi Isaac Kornfeld, against whom, in contrast, the rage of his wife Sheindel, and the baffled horror of his friend (the narrator) are completely impotent.

However, through a lot of critical effort has gone—understandably—into the analysis of the Jewish elements of Ozick's art, the examination of the pagan, and specifically the classical Greek side of the dichotomy has proceeded little beyond the recognition of the general Pan-Moses conflict, and is yet to be mined to adequately yielding depths. We shall argue that this taking of Greek mythological elements at face value in the story of "The Pagan Rabbi" allows the multiplicity of nuances embedded in these myths to escape unnoticed and unraveled in the final judgment rendered to and through this story, and that their examination will provide the story not only with further meaning, but will reveal an added tragic dimension to each of its three main characters.

The story takes its main plot premise from the classical tradition of myths relating to nymphs, whose varied species and general traits Ozick renders accurately, except for the unique fact that the Hamadryads (like the one Isaac falls in love with) are completely identified with the particular oaks ("dryads" in Greek, from where "dryad" comes) they inhabit in myth, and die when that oak dies (this identification is rendered artfully here through the use of feminine epithets in the description of the oak as "young narrow weed," of "elegant and devoutly firm torso," with an analogy of parts to the female body—28-29). However, this deviation can be explained here since the crucial tension between the immortal Iripomonoëa and her mortal lover/devotee would be meaningless otherwise. The rendering of favors by the nymphs, be it sexual (as an Iripomonoëa's case) or the saving of lives (as in the episode where a naiad saves Isaac's baby daughter from drowning), is consistent with Greek lore, where encounters of that kind are inscribed in the adventures of many a lucky mortal.

The names of the two nymphs mentioned here, although made-up, contain some etymological veracity: Corymblyb is identified by the first compo-

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nent of her name ("cory-" denoting peak, top) as an oread, a nymph of the mountains—and if so, her "coupling in a harbor" with a sick Spinoza only intensifies the deviation, the wrongness of the deed for both nymph and a philosopher whose animistic credo marks him as an apostate vis-à-vis his Jewish heritage (32). Iripomonoëa, which appears to be a combination of "Iris" (the messenger of the Gods and rainbow personification) and "omonoëa" ("harmony of mind"), encapsulates both the dryad's enticing, luminous character, but also a reciprocity established between the human and the supernatural mind. Yet this "harmony" at no point in the story escapes suspicion: the rabbi calls, the gods answer—but is this a reality, or a consequence of a well-known Romantic topos (and Isaac is a priori identified by his notebook as a Romantic at heart—17) of the human wish desperately projecting itself upon nature? It is remarkable that at no point in the story, neither the narrator nor the widow think to pronounce Isaac simply crazy, delusional, or schizophrenic, as the twentieth-century tendency perhaps would be. Sheindel mentions the example of brilliant madmen (23), but for her insanity lies primarily in scaling "the Fence of the Law," not in actually seeing a hamadryad. Is this a wry suggestion on the part of the author that such creatures might actually exist, and should be taken seriously, or is it an admission that the encroachment of one conceptual universe upon another is an unavoidable fact of existence, a critical melding so subtle and harmonious that it goes undetected even when openly combated? The wrestling of Ozick herself as an artist with the same question finds its expression in this classical/Romantic ambiguity here, as Strandberg notes:

Perhaps the most subversive enemy of all was the goddess of Sex, variously named Astarte in Canaan, Aphrodite in Greece, and Venus in Rome. For Cynthia Ozick this primeval root of Hellenism, that which produced the pagan gods, has posed so magnetic an attraction as to nearly tear her loose from her Jewish moorings, as she attests in books like *Trust* and *The Pagan Rabbi* (24)

Sexuality in all its aspects plays an important part in Greek thought. According to Michel Foucault, "In Greece, truth and sex were linked, in the form of pedagogy, by the transmission of a precious knowledge from one body to another; sex served as a medium for initiations into learning" (1:61). It is significant that here the sexual encounter between the dryad and the hyper intellectual Isaac occurs under an overreaching imperative to know: "To see the soul, to confront it—that is divine wisdom" (21). Isaac becomes a neophyte follower of the Great Pan, whose cult of worship of natural force and fecundity had flourished in antiquity, through his sexual violation by the goat-like god himself. The protagonist here obviously repeats the mode and rationale of the Original Sin: to eat of the Tree of Knowledge, to pierce the barrier of the last quark of matter, to become as wise as God; his "blasphemous" ambition, however, coincides perfectly with the Platonic conception of the known universe as only an imperfect projection of the ideal world, where the soul resides.

The sexual drive is connected to the idea of death, the human consciousness of its inevitability (as Iripomonoëa points out, "I have caught men's words before as they talked of Nature, you are not the first. It is not Nature they love so much as Death they fear"—32), and the ensuing mythopoeisis in an attempt to ward it off. This is where the story makes use of the motif of the "dying-rising divinity," in the image of Isaac's ambiguous demise. The rabbi's hanging from the very tree that granted him what he thought was



immortal Lawless freedom recalls the multitude of significant divinities that were killed in the winter and then resurrected in spring to mark the natural cycle of decay and growth: from the Sumerian Dumuzi, who later becomes the Greek Adonis (Grimal 13-14), to the Egyptian Osiris; and especially from the African Cogan—who is hanged from a tree by enemies and then resurrected by his father Cagn—to the Norse supreme sky-god Odin, who annually hangs himself from the branches of the sacred World Ash-Tree only to be resurrected in replenished strength and wisdom. The story sets up the motif early on, with references to Isaac's "corpse withered like the shell of an insect" (26); the image of his body "which will be crumpled and withered and ugly, like a leaf in its seve hour" (33) in view of the animistic credo that permeates the book and reassures one of renewed existence; and with the final description of the determined pagan sliding "deeper now into silk....silk of pod of shawl" like a chrysalis closing itself inside its cocoon, from which it knows it will emerge as butterfly (37). This telling image, ambiguous though it may be, is, according to Amy Gottfried, of great significance in Ozick scholarship: speaking of another of the author's texts, *The Shawl*, Gottfried remarks that "metamorphosis at death reverberates throughout Ozick's textual framework, offering a scheme of ever-shifting meanings as a guide to surviving a destruction" (40). In further accordance to the motif, the particular oak that becomes the axis mundi of this story as a meeting-point between two universes, also stands on the threshold between death, symbolized by the putrid waters of the bay, and the birth signaled by the vegetation in the park: "In the bottommost meadow fringing the water, I recognized the tree which had caused Isaac to sin against his own life" (5). It is therefore appropriate that Isaac selects this specific tree at "the end of the line" (15) as the terminus between the rabbinical, scholarly life he is about to depart, and the new pagan life he wishes to enter.

The image of the dying-rising self here however becomes only a natural extension of the animistic manifesto that is the basis and thesis of Isaac's endeavor, and which links him to both Spinoza and the Pan cult. The imaginative creation of multitudes of deities, of nymphs and creatures of earth, sea, and sky that populate classical myths and folklore—personified and animated manifestations of what are today abstract scientific principles—converges in the idea of Pan, "Everything," the god-force of living energy that permeates all. The same concept is mirrored in the pagan rabbi's pronouncement that infers—very unscientifically, but in the true mythic spirit that leads him to make love to a tree (29)—life and soul where there is motion and energy.

It is a false history, false philosophy, and false religion which declare to us human ones that we live among Things. The arts of physics and chemistry begin to teach us differently; but their way of compassion is new, and finds few to carry fidelity to its logical and beautiful end. The molecules dance inside all forms, and within the molecules dance the atoms, and within the atoms dance still profounder sources of divine vitality. There is nothing that is Dead. There is no Non-life. Holy life subsists even in the stone, even in the bones of dead dogs and dead men. Hence in God's fecundating Creation there is no possibility of Idolatry, and therefore no possibility of committing this so-called abomination. (20-21)

It is interesting that in this passage, as well as the ensuing diatribe on why Moses, who must have known, never acknowledged the souls of things, the pagan rabbi tries to live up to his name and his all-encompassing credo by

joining the two separate spheres of existence, the Jewish and the Greek. Just as his sacred tree stands at the threshold between life and decay, so Isaac attempts to intellectually reconcile his new ideas with the Law that categorically opposes them. It is a futile, if valiant, attempt, as the warring entries in his notebook suggest, Leviticus and Deuteronomy versus the English Romantics (16-17); and thus the designation of the tree by Ozick as a mocking symbol of the limitation that is instead of the desired transcendence: "there is always the easy, the sweet, the beckoning, the lenient, the interesting lure of the instead of: the wood of the tree instead of God..." (*Art & Ardor* 208).

But this is not simply due to the utter incompatibility of Judaism and Hellenism; it bespeaks, rather, one of the many faults in Isaac's approach to the pagan universe, which, despite principles like Pan, is inherently and above all dualistic. If there is one reason why theories like structuralism continue to hold a firm flourishing foothold in classical studies, it is because, as G.E.R. Lloyd, among many classicist scholars, suggests, a morally-charged dualism is the basis of Greek philosophical and mythical thought from its beginning until Aristotle's time (25-26). Empirical contraries, such as life and death, male and female, but also conceptual polarities such as body and soul, matter and spirit, the mundane and the mystical regulate myth and classical philosophy, but also appear in Ozick's story as significant catalysts of action. In an ironic sense, the very premise of exclusion that the author advocates from her Judaic viewpoint—Strandberg calls it "Ozick's obsessive theme of dualities—her way of portraying her own conflicted affinities," and "this schizoid condition" (179)—brings the text squarely within the Greek tradition; and prisms the reader back to earlier-voiced question of the possibility of systemic purism. At the same time, these ordering faultlines within each system ensure Isaac's failure: for a mere renouncement of Jewish identity doesn't necessarily lead to true "omonoiea" when a teenage immortal Greek dryad from Trilham's Inlet park is wooed by a myopic mortal "barbarian" professor of Mishnaic Studies; if the Jewish Law has its Fence, so does the code of myth. By definition, "Tripononoiea" lies.

Tripononoiea perhaps also lies by habit, too: in leaving the view of myths qua myths in "The Pagan Rabbi" and by adopting Isaac's immersed point-of-view, we can discover facets that deconstruct the aforementioned observations regarding Ozick's use of Greek myth into a new meaning. To begin with, what Isaac leaves out of his passionate discourse on nymphs is their—and other similar creatures—well-attested capacity for being harmful in their immortality, a motif that goes back to *The Epic of Gilgamesh's* Siduri and Innana, and later leads to tales of succubi, changelings (like Isaac's raid story had potential of being), and "La Belle Dame Sans Merci"-figures. Nymphs abduct Hyllas from Heracles' protection (Grimal 207); and in *The Odyssey*, the nymph Calypso keeps Odysseus prisoner for three years, while at the same time she does not hesitate to enumerate the evils that befall mortals that have consorted with immortal women (5:145-94). In fact, of the examples of favored mortals that Isaac gives in his invocation to the nymph (29), only Numa Pompilius, second king of Rome, enjoys full benefits from his association with the nymph Egéria (Grimal 295-96). But when it comes to the earlier examples taken directly from Greek myth, despite the fact that they not all related to nymphs, they all nevertheless lead their mortal protagonists to a bad end: Tithonus, the husband of Eos, the goddess of Dawn, ends up as a cricket in a jar (Grimal 441); Endymion, beloved of Selene, the Moon, is caught in a condition of eternal sleep (and in myth, sleep and death are related), during which the goddess enjoys his favors unilaterally (Grimal 136); and Cadmus,



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married to Ares' daughter Harmonia, is turned into a serpent (Grimal 78-80).

The only relevant example in Isaac's list is king Rhoeus, with whom the rabbi shares several traits. Rhoeus ordered his servants to build a support for an aged oak, thereby saving the lives of the Hamadryads inside; they in turn granted him their favors, with the condition that he would always be respectful to them. Rhoeus forgot his promise and treated the dryads' messenger, a bee, with disrespect, for which he was abandoned by the nymphs and blinded by the bee's sting (Grimal 389). This myth shows how, even when the metaphysical side of nature seems to be in need of human aid, there is a line of respect toward the mysteries of immortal natural energies that can never be crossed. Isaac's animistic set of beliefs diverges from the Greek rules of the game at that point, for the acknowledgment of a universal soul does not erase for the Greeks the strict polarities and hierarchies between the human race and natural creatures (ergo the negative view of the "poignant miscegenation of hybrid races," which Isaac mistakenly valorizes—27), the physical and the divine-metaphysical. Iripomnoeia's world is a threatened one: instead of the sacred woods, what the narrator describes as the park is a landscape of dying relics, ruins of monuments "and the rolled carcasses of the sacrificed trees," whose offering of fragrant sap runs in vain against the stench of the bay (4-5). The association with the "glory that was Greece" is too clamorous to miss here, and denotes a world whose magic has forever faded, and whose physical evidence is about to be "silenced by the victory of the peace machines," the bulldozers (4). Iripomnoeia's oak, moreover, shows signs of strangulation along with its victim: "the comely neck of the next-to-the-lowest limb" has been rubbed and marked by the rabbi's prayer-shawl (5); by losing its only devotee, the dryad has been "profaned by ugliness" and has thus brought about her own destruction by a society that does not acknowledge her world. The nymph is likewise repulsed by Isaac's soul, which she sees as a threat of negation to all she represents; still, in her initial conversation with Isaac, she displays a contemptuous disconcert, characteristic to an eternal, for all affairs mortal, and underlines the fickleness that rules the bestowing of immortal favors, which never correspond to human expectations (32).

It is up to the reader to choose whether to consider this discrepancy an inevitable element of a dryad's character, or rather as an attempt on the part of the nymph to extend her existence by "consuming" the living and spiritual energies of her devotee. This would explain the sudden turn in Iripomnoeia's character after the rabbi has lost his soul: the "extraordinary redolence" with which she questions him only sharpens the revelation of his destruction and her inevitable loss of interest on him, for he is now an "empty packer" (of what? Who is responsible for emptying it?) And "spoils [their] pretty game" (33). At once, the dryad begins exhaling "the leeklike mist" of ugliness, and contempt: "Poor man," she answered, "you have only to look and you will see the thing [his soul]." Her speech had now turned as acid as an herb, and all that place reeked bitterly" (33). This possibility, that the dryad has tricked the mortal, is obliquely referred to in the beginning of the story, where the narrator, following Isaac's footsteps into this archaic landscape, experiences a gradual loss of identity, as if his very substance were sapped by the beckoning of the dying world around him: the tree "looked curiously like a photograph, but then regresses further into the "flat" status of "a licked postage stamp," "while the sewage smell "came up like a veil in the nostril" dulling, in combination with the rain and fog, all of the narrator's senses (5). Finally, as the tree loses all materiality, the narrator is drawn into its unreality, identifying briefly with Isaac as the subject of yesterday's newspapers: "It seemed to me

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I was a man in a photograph standing next to a gray blur of a tree. I would stand through eternity beside Isaac's guilt if I did not run, so I ran that night to Sheindel herself" (5). The narrator's escape, an instinctive recognition of the power of this pagan past, saves his identity from assimilation, but also curiously denies him a sort of immortality, the "eternity" that Isaac craves—and gets, in a manner of speaking. This initial encounter, however, sets the tone for the rest of the story, and provides an implicit warning of the potentially sinister nature of things unseen that prey—unwittingly or not—on the human soul.

In a related manner, the second repudiation of a "pagan victory" comes in considering the phrase scrawled on Isaac's notebook, "Great Pan lives" (17), and what is taken in this essay to be a conscious choice on the part of the author regarding the presentation of this mythic tradition. Instead of plunging into the available primary Pan myths of classical Greece, Ozick chooses to locate the image of Pan in the later context of the organized cult of the deity, who at some time, in the decline of the ancient world, was the only god to supposedly be pronounced dead, according to the testimony of an Egyptian traveler, Thamus (Plutarch, *Why Oracles are Silent* 17; qtd in Graves 1:102-103). To maintain as living—or resurrected—something that its own context has repudiated thus appears as an anachronistic fallacy, similar to the folly of Julian the Apostate, the Byzantine emperor who tried in vain during his reign to resurrect the gods of ancient Greece.

Another point that should be made in relation to Pan references in the story concerns the manner of Isaac's initiation into the cult, and his subsequent reactions to it (29-30). Although Isaac later rationalizes that it was Iripomnoeia that "ravished" him in that initial encounter, so he is free of defilement (32), the mode and description of that episode make it clear that he was sodomized by Pan, the interweaving of repulsive details (Isaac violently flung to the ground, tasting dirt, vomiting, weeping in self-disgust, afraid that his attacker still lurks behind him—all the negative elements of an actual rape) with the lyrical language of flaring "superb" sexual "voluptuousness" and gratification capture the essence of experiencing "pan," the totality of being. Isaac, in his own words, assumes an androgynous sexual capacity: "though I performed as with my own wife, I felt as if a preternatural rapine had been committed upon me" (29); this in turn expands to an all-encompassing awareness of abstractions: "In me were linked, in the same instant, appetite and fulfillment, delicacy and power, mastery and submissiveness, and other paradoxes of entirely remarkable emotional import" (30).

Yet what at first appears as a fulfillment of Isaac's penetration into a metaphysical antiquity, especially since homosexuality and bisexuality were part and parcel of ancient Greek life and thought, actually constitutes, in the same classical context, a severe condemnation of Isaac and his endeavor. For by losing control of the act, by failing to maintain the strict standards of polarity in his interaction with the feminine-natural element, Isaac is considered tainted, spiritually as well as physically. Foucault's second volume of *The History of Sexuality*, "The Use of Pleasure," explains how male control of sexuality and the sexual act, which extends beyond any notions of pleasure, is the key to virtue and the mastery of knowledge, while feminine focus on pleasure is a factor of instability and inferiority, tying one to the body. Thus, while ped-erasty and homosexuality were male privileges, the effeminate male was the object of derision and contempt. Of course, cult worship of such gods as Dionysus and Pan had strong elements of matrilarchy androgyny and/or adoption of feminine behavior by the male devotees, and as such these cults clashed violently with the patriarchal system of the Greek society (as its well

delineated, for example, in Euripides' tragedy *Bacchae*, so Isaac's experience is justified within that context. However, two points should be noted here: first, that both Dionysus (in the *Bacchae*) and Pan display, respectively, control and virility to an extreme degree, whenever this is necessary. Similarly, nous seer Teiresias—see Bell 2577) does so in order to achieve higher spiritual knowledge, and can subsume his anima under male control at any point. But Isaac is overwhelmed by the sensuality of his ravishment, lacks the masculine capacity—in classical terms—for control: at several points in the text, subtle signs of his "lack" prepare the reader for this outcome: the pagan rabbi's fear of sexual depletion in anticipation of the encounter (28), his sevenfold-female progeny, with all the mystical implications that number seven affords (9), and the metaphorical emasculation that occurs right after his ravishment, when he brings to his defense against Iriponoëa a "laughable" tiny phallic pen (30). It is not therefore surprising that Isaac loses control of his spiritual—or rather soulvision—quest at first contact, and ends up used (by a nymph that comes to him at her own whim, not because he called), cheated, an empty flesh-pouch running desperately after bodily pleasure (such as ancient myth and philosophy, in its sharply polarized worldvision, pictured woman to be).

But perhaps the greatest reason of all why, from a pagan point of view, Isaac Kornfeld would be so sadly cheated in his quest for a free soul is the very excellence which is attributed to him from the start. The concept of *hubris*, even the most excellent is one of the best-known motifs and trademarks of ancient Greek myth. Like the tragic hero, Isaac undertakes his quest at the peak of his physical maturity and intellectual apotheosis, as is evident from his eulogy (4). His prodigious nature is never questioned, not even in the face of the revelation of his dark secret, whose delivery the narrator and Sheindel acknowledge as "brilliant" and "beautiful" (23). And it would be very hard not to take, as readers, a sympathetic view of this man, whose life and actions, narrated by his friend as a flash-back, mark him as an unassuming, kind-hearted man, humorous, dedicated, and of a humanistic spirit that charms everyone: Isaac is an utterly likable genius. Still, it is this precise combination of virtues that leads Isaac on the road to distinction, and inevitably to the need to trespass his allotted limitations and rise above his fellow mortals. Like Sophocles' King Oedipus, the rabbi trusts his own intellectual keenness to solve the mystery of his own being, the way he has already bested the Mishnaic Sphinx's riddles; like his tragic predecessor, Isaac learns too late that human excellence is dwarfed before the unknown agencies of the macrocosm; and like Jocasta, unable to deal with the consequences, he hangs himself. Ironically, in that sense Isaac is, according to Orzick's definition, quintessentially Jewish: while the point of every Greek tragedy is the graceful submission to Fate, to whom even the gods are subject, the rabbi risks the curse of the Law in order to bring about a positive change in his life, to redeem himself from what he calls a meaningless life of "my insipidness, my bookishness, my pitiable conjecture and wishfulness in a time when...I knew nothing" (30). As Orzick points out in *Art & Ardor*, redemption in literature is based on "the singular idea that is the opposite to the Greek idea of fate: the idea that insists on the freedom to change one's life" (245). The final act of the rabbi, therefore, in using his prayer shawl of all things to reclaim the "Loveliness" (as a kind of "life") that was once his at all costs, the very element that critics like Stranberg have seen as the victory of Pan, can actually reveal the final redemption of Isaac according to his own heritage, and the reputation of both

the hubris curse and Iriponoëa's prophecy through an escape from his fate of withering decay (37).

This redemptive capacity of "The Pagan Rabbi" as exemplified in the person of the protagonist, leads us to the final classical Greek motif that Cynthia Orzick touches upon in her story, one that can be approached only through a mythical-metaphorical interpretation of the story's human triangle of relationships: the story of the Titan Prometheus, and Pandora's box. According to the myth, as presented in Hesiod's *Works and Days* (1.43-105), the high-god Zeus, in order to punish Prometheus, the trickster-god that rose against the Olympians to champion humankind by providing them with fire and sacrificial privileges, had an artificial woman, Pandora (her name means "all-gifted") sent to Prometheus, and eventually to his brother, Epimetheus, who was in no way an intellectual match for either of the adversaries. Pandora brought along with her a mysterious box, given to her by the gods who had fashioned her, which she was told never to open; however, her feminine curiosity got the better of her, and, overcoming Epimetheus' weak control over her through the use of her charms, opened the box and released to the world every evil and curse trapped inside. The only thing Pandora managed to detain was Hope, which is the only consolation left to humankind since. The theme of this Greek myth, grappling with the problem of evil in a universe supposedly created by just gods, as well as the equal measure of triumph and tragedy that results from opposing divine will parallels Isaac's deliberations in his perception of inconsistencies in the Mosaic Law (22-23), as well as the ambiguous ending his efforts bring about to the story and all the characters involved in it (even Iriponoëa). Isaac Kornfeld is, if nothing else, an intellectual Titan, and the uncompromising, humanistic spirit that Prometheus is depicted as being: as the god looks at humankind shivering in the dark and pities them, so Isaac, from his vantage point of superiority and success, looks at the plight of an unenlightened species and decides to give them a vision of truth. And even though his quest soon takes an abandoned, selfish, turn towards eschewing death, the fact that he leaves a record of his experiences (as imprudent as this bookkeeping seems at certain points, like Isaac recording—with liberal dotting—his own hanging) attests the messianic turn of his mind. Even the name of Prometheus, "Fore-sighted One," echoes the narrator's observation, concerning Isaac's extraordinary innovative visions: "Now you, you could answer questions that weren't even invented yet. Then you invented them" (6). Other related elements strengthen the identification, like the seven daughters, which recall the seven Titanesses, and other sibling-sevens found in Greek myth, or the loss of the voice the narrator's father experiences, which alludes to a loss of power of influence, of potency, akin to the one experienced by the older generations of grim creator-gods (like Uranos or Cronos in Hesiod's *Theogony*—1.137-210 and 456-505, respectively), or even the defiant attitude towards the voice of Zeus Thunderer that leads to the creation of the Promethean figure.

The intriguing character of Isaac's widow Sheindel fits well the character of Pandora, in the strange, almost artificial manner of her creation ("she had no mother to show, she had no father to show, but she had, extraordinarily, God to show" and in her all-encompassing talents: a pious beauty "known to be, for age and sex, astonishingly learned" (7). Her remarkable nature is reinforced by the presence of several monomyth (archetype for all heroic models as defined by Lord Raglan; see Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*) traits in her origin story: she survives an attempt against her life in childhood, is raised as an orphan, and marries illustriously, dancing on her one shoe like the "one-sandaled" hero Jason (7). She is undoubtedly of heroic

disposition, as evidenced in her overwhelming, imperious control of the encounter with the narrator, rendering his thoughts of marriage futile, and her larger-than-life rage. There are elements in her description, moreover, that allude in a general manner to the prototype of the Greek fertility goddess, and the cosmic creation forces such a model represents: Sheindel at the lobby of the hotel "sitting perfectly still: the babies, female infants in long stockings...asleep in her arms" (6), a veritable statue of the mother-goddess; Sheindel twirling in the center of the feast circle (7-8), like the goddess Eurynome setting the wheel of universal creation—and all its formidable forces described in the marriage scene—in motion with her dancing (Graves 1:27-28).

Yet despite her potential for creativity and her formidable mind, Sheindel's character comes out a dry, cold, inhumanly rigid and eventually—through the reader can sympathize with her plight—unlikeable. This is best exemplified in the image of her plant-devoid house and her dining-room table, whose function as a locus of nourishment and image of plenty is erased by its denotation "as large as a desert"—an arid land "divided," moreover, "into two nations" (10). This indication of the motif of the fence that marks Sheindel—literally—at childhood and follows her in marriage (and in the garland of girls in the water during the naiad incident—25), and in ideology as the unscalable "fence of the Law" does not let her develop into a full human being; a tragic fact that the narrator recognizes when he begins to understand her: "She was an orphan and had been saved by magic and had a terror of it. The coldness fled" (14-15). That Sheindel's polemic would be rooted on an implicit recognition of the universe she seems to refute is a paradox so logical, or a logic so ironic, as to actually make perfect classical sense—it pits her as the polar opposite on the spectrum of values with which the narrator and the reader are faced. As a Pandora, an automaton of the gods with a single purpose, in the narrator's eyes Sheindel's gifts amount to nothing when it comes to the understanding and pitying of the human condition that her opposite, Prometheus, represents:

- "Stop!" I cried.  
 "I will not," said the widow.  
 "Please, you told me he burned his fairy tales."  
 "Did I lie to you? Will you say I lied?"  
 "Then for Isaac's sake why didn't you? If this isn't a fairy tale what do you want me to think it could be?"  
 "Think what you like."  
 "Sheindel," I said, "I beg you, don't destroy a dead man's honor. Don't look at this thing again, tear it to pieces, don't continue with it."  
 "I don't destroy his honor. He had none."  
 "Please! Listen to yourself! My God, who was the man? Rabbi Isaac Kornfeld! Talk of honor! Wasn't he a teacher? Wasn't he a scholar?"  
 "He was a pagan." (22)

Sheindel's box is the gradual revelation of evils that pertain to Isaac; but ultimately also to herself. She first of all represents the lure of the unknown that is inside the box, as in her last encounter with the narrator, when her overly-austere hat only heightens the seductive capacity of the "streaming black shine" of the hair he imagines hidden under it (6). She then fulfills her function by letting information damaging to Isaac slip out piece by piece, be it an anecdote, the opening of a notebook, or a letter; and it is such the effect of

the gradual, cryptic, methodical enlightenment of her secret that at certain points it is perceived as worse than it is, as in when the narrator mistakes the sex of Isaac's liaison (19). As Pandora damages Prometheus' reputation by the introduction of evils to counterbalance the gift of fire, letting thus Zeus' revenge be fulfilled, so Sheindel in her revelations assumes at a point "her master's voice," the identical voice of the narrator's father, the old Thunderer god (21). At the same time, as the story progresses, the narrator's initial fascination (5) is turned into embarrassment under her irony (10-11), frank shock at Sheindel's raw hatred (14), fear of her incapacity to experience Love (27), and finally, pity at her inhuman condition that will not allow her to understand, forgive, and heal (37). The self-exposition of this living Pandora's box puts the narrator through all the tragic motions of pity, fear, and finally katharsis, as the one positive element left.

Which brings us to the final apex of the triangle, the narrator, who here would assume the role of Epimetheus, "Hindsight" or "Moral of the Story." The two male characters are connected through polarized sets of parallelisms that mirror the "wise Titan-foolish Titan" motif, or, to explicate the classical myth better, the divine capacity within humans for providence on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the all-too human learning process through-trial-and-error. One is a rabbi of intense spirituality, the other a secular man in the trade of flesh (fur and leather book jackets); one leaves Sheindel, the other craves her but has no control over her; one proceeds from the mind to a total abandon to the body, the other moves from worldliness to thought and spirit. As such, the narrator remains appropriately nameless, the Everyman who starts out in curiosity at the very beginning of the story to look at the tree first of all (2), but in the end, having learned to "beware of Greeks (or nymphs, or Pandoras for that matter) bearing gifts," flushes his plants down the toilet to join Iriopomoeia's lot at the bay of Trilham's Inlet (37).

In conclusion, the narrator chooses neither Isaac's misguided paganism, nor—eventually—Sheindel's equally blind hatred. He leaves Sheindel with appropriate respect, but with all his illusions purged: "Only the pitiless are illusory. Go back to that park, Rebbeztin.... Your husband's soul is in that park. Consult it." In a manner of speaking, he represents the fruition of his "brother's" efforts to enlighten humankind: for he has glimpsed, through the pages of Isaac's testimony, the mystery of the human soul, and the knowledge it entails (now appropriately Greek that this gift of the gods would be administered to the one that never sought it). Through Isaac Kornfeld's—unintentional?—sacrifice, the narrator is therefore redeemed in the canonical sense of the word. By reinstituting the spirituality, the consciousness of a Judaism in constant struggle, in a man that was fallen into a heedless identification with outside elements (marrying a "Puritan," engaging in a secular profession, and eventually despairing of himself and his worth as a living being inside his Cellar), the rabbi redeems the doomed pagan inside himself and the story, as the story eventually redeems, in spite of Ozick's conclusion that "[t]o be an artist...is to serve pagan gods" (Strandberg 25), its own moral purpose of being.

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Mark D. Hawthorne  
James Madison University

## AUTHOR AS TEXT: KOSINSKI'S THE HERMIT OF 69TH STREET

In *The Hermit of 69th Street* Jerzy Kosinski constructed a novel about the writing of the novel that we are reading. Widely panned when it first appeared, *Hermit* describes itself as the product of sexual acts between the fictional author and his editors, their resulting orgasms marking the conception of a self-referential text at once masturbatory ("hermit") and the product of a non-productive sexual act ("69"). Similarly, the relation between text and reader develops through another "soixante-neuf, also known as the English vice" (20), a symbolic version, as it were, of Barthes's *jouissance*; thus interpretation grows from seed planted in the reader by the text through a sexual position that is, by definition, solitary and non-productive. Identifying the fictional author with two historical Poles, Sabbatai Sevi and Alessandro di Cagliostro, Kosinski merges this textual sexuality with his experiences in Poland as a child, the Holocaust, the attacks on him by *The Village Voice*, and literary criticism in such a manner that the reader is never sure whether Koski's *brudnopis* reveals him as a sham (as Cagliostro may have been), as thwarted messiah (such as Sevi) or a genuinely honest but misunderstood Polish Jew in the wilderness of New York City. On the one hand, the novel that we read is the offspring of sterility (itself a contradiction) and the justification of fecundity (itself lacking in the creative nexus), and we are not sure whether we are the butt of Kosinski/Kosky's ultimate joke (readers who are duped by the master mountebank) or the jury that must redeem the wrongly accused, persecuted author. On the other hand, Kosinski/Kosky/Jay Kay/J.K. has so successfully interwoven fact and fiction into this self-designated autofiction that the author himself becomes the mirror of his opposite, fictional character and factual author coalescing into the symbolic 69.

After its initial hardback publication by Seaver Books in 1988, Kosinski thoroughly revised the text for paperback edition published by the Zebra Books in 1991 shortly before his suicide. The revision greatly expands the original text while keeping its self-referential nature as a continuous manuscript. In the 1991 text (the text that I will use throughout this paper), Kosinski sharpened descriptions and dialogue, for the most part improving the narrative line; he also added many allusions to the Holocaust and revised many other references so that they point specifically toward 1988-1990, the years during which he revised the text. Still, many typographical errors mar into the 1991 text. For example, it repeats a line on 46-47, and several parentheses lack closure (e.g. 66). A few passages seem to blend earlier text and incomplete revision: for example, the fragmented "...no longer befouled." *Anti-Semite and Jew* (1965). Means enough said" (90) where the 1988 text read "1965). 1965 means enough said" (55). Nevertheless, the fuller 1991 text illustrates that the text is fluid, a hydraulic symbol that Kosky frequently emphasizes by calling attention to himself as "swimmer" or "floater"—symbols of the author's manipulation of words; on a different level, Kosinski (or his publishers) reinforces this symbol through the covers of both editions: each features a photograph of Kosinski floating in water, sort of a submerged image of the way we last see Peter Sellers in *Being There*.