

Horror and Ethnic Identity in "The Jewbird"

by Philip Hanson

The resemblance of Malamud's Harry Cohen in "The Jewbird" to Poe's narrator in "The Raven," each with a desire to forget, is no coincidence. Malamud's interest in retracing Poe's nineteenth-century horror poem with his 1970 comic short story results from a desire to offer a twentieth-century redefinition of horror in Jewish ethnic terms.¹ The story opens up a dialogue with generations of Jewish immigrants whose traditional ethnic and familial values have undergone a marked evolution, an evolution that was accelerating in 1963 when "The Jewbird" appeared. While critics have discussed the story's anti-Semitism, the particular historical changes pertinent to the story and their relevance to Poe's poem have not been fully explored.

As one recognizes actions from Poe's poem in Malamud's story, the effect at first seems purely comic. Poe's "stately Raven," described as an "ebony bird" with "mien of lord or lady," is marked by "the grave and stern decorum of the countenance it wore" (Poe 366). Malamud describes Schwartz as a "skinny bird" flying into the Cohen family's kitchen on "frazzled wings"; "this black-type longbeaked bird—its ruffled head and small, dull eyes, crossed a little, making it look like a dissipated crow"—suffers from breathing problems and rheumatism, and talks like an early vaudevillean (Malamud 144).

What constitutes horror in "The Raven," however, points to a more significant connection between the two works. The Byronic element in Poe's

¹Only Kennedy has made an effort to explain the connections between Malamud's "Jewbird" and Poe's "Raven." From his structuralist perspective, Kennedy argues that "critical emphasis on ethnic, Jewish elements in his fiction has obscured Malamud's response to goyish literature." Kennedy sees the story as a parody of the poem, motivated by the "over-influence of genius upon genius." Kennedy finds the casting out of Schwartz at the story's end, "on one level," to signify Malamud's effort to cast out Poe, to be free of the burden of his influence. See Kennedy 161-68. For readings of some relevance to my own, see Alter 262; Baumgarten 40-44; Solotaroff 77-80; Vandyke 105-17.

American Romantic mind-set emerges in his presentation of an ego freed from earlier Christian hierarchical constraints and able to occupy the center of his poetic cosmos. Poe's narrator's enlarged consciousness, once fulfilled by having found a female soul mate, becomes, after her death, vulnerable to hyperintense pain and psychological imbalance. From the perspective of the nineteenth-century American Romantic such a loss epitomizes an engulfing horror. After centuries of ethnic persecution and flight, and especially after Dachau and Auschwitz, Malamud finds horror in the denial and suppression of one's ethnic self and all that the loss of that ethnic identity entails.

The dispute between Schwartz and Cohen in "The Jewbird" over what it means to be a Jew exemplifies Bakhtin's assertion that "the word" in language "lies on the border between oneself and the other. . . . [it] is half someone else's" (Bakhtin 293). The word carries traces of its own social history; a procession of previous users of the word have contributed to its meaning. Thus ensuing users find themselves in a dialogue with previous users. The disputed word in Malamud's story is "Jew." When Cohen's wife, Edie, asks Cohen what he has against Schwartz, Cohen answers, "He's a foxy bastard. He thinks he's a Jew" (Malamud 147). Examining Cohen's objection to Schwartz's applying "Jew" to himself clarifies the stakes in a dispute over fixing this word's definition.

At one point Poe's narrator cries out, "thy God hath lent thee—by these angels he hath sent thee" (Poe 368). His accusation reinforces the sense that the Raven represents the narrator's final fate. However, fate in "The Jewbird" is defined in more historical terms. Schwartz is in flight from persecutors. He finds an open window purely by chance: "It's open, you're in. closed, you're out and that's your fate" (Malamud 144). The inevitability of the Raven's fate becomes the luck of Schwartz's situation. Like many fleeing Jews before him, his fate will depend on the charity of another. Schwartz immediately makes apparent his claim to being an orthodox Jew and to being persecuted. His claim that he is chased by "Anti-Semeets" complicates the issue. Schwartz names his persecutors as "eagles, vultures, and hawks. And once in a while some crows will take your eyes out" (145). Edie points out that Schwartz appears to be a crow, making his persecutors his own kind. Such a significant distinction separates this story from the literature of Gentile persecuting Jew and places the question of ethnic identity, of defining "Jew," at the center of the story.

Cohen's question of Schwartz, "Are you forgetting what it means to be migratory?," loaded as it is with historical irony, points to the gap in understanding the word "Jew." In a short story, Arthur Miller has written of the Jewish experience, "The whole history is packing bundles and getting away" (Miller 65). Cohen rather than Schwartz has forgotten this history. He has sought to assimilate. When Schwartz prays with passion, Cohen

mockingly asks him, "No hat, no phylacteries?" (145-46). Cohen has forgotten more than the persecution of his own ancestors; he has forgotten the tradition of charity in Jewish history. Schwartz says, "If you can't spare a lamb chop . . . I'll settle for a piece of herring with a crust of bread. You can't live on your nerve forever." Cohen responds, "This ain't a restaurant" (145). Yet history offers other responses to a Jewish discourse on "charity." Eighteenth-century synagogue minute books document a history of Jewish charity toward the elderly: ". . . it is unanimously agreed to allow Rachel Campenel the sum of Twenty Pounds Current money pr. annum in consideration of her age and infirmities" (Feldstein 18).

Cohen's resentment recalls early twentieth-century disputes between Jew and Jew. Many early German Jews had sought to remove practices and garb that identified them as Jews. They wished to be accepted by established Christian Americans. Embarrassed by the more recently arrived Russian Jewish immigrants' long beards, the women's wigs, and the orthodox rabbis' side locks, the German Jews shunned the Russian Jewish immigrants. *The Hebrew Standard* announced, "The thoroughly acclimated American Jew . . . has no religious, social or intellectual sympathies with them. He is closer to the Christian sentiment around him than to the Judaism of these miserable darkened Hebrews" (Feldstein 186). Detroit Jews felt embarrassed by the Russian Jews; the *Jewish American* lamented, "The conditions among the newcomers breed discontent, which opens the way for orthodoxy and anarchism" (Feldstein 189). Henry Feingold suggests that the ethnic slur, "kike," was invented by German Jews to disparage immigrants from Eastern Europe, whose names ended with "ki" (Feingold 126). Descended himself from Russian Jewish immigrants, Malamud knew well the history of such Semitic anti-Semitism.

Thus Cohen and Schwartz's dispute becomes part of a historical discourse over Jewish identity and the price of assimilation. To Cohen's criticisms of his orthodoxy, Schwartz answers, "I'm an old radical" (146). When Cohen asks Schwartz in which direction he is headed, Schwartz tells him, "Where there's charity, I'll go" (147). When Cohen swats at Schwartz, Schwartz cries, "a pogrom!," connecting Cohen's attitude to centuries of Jewish persecution.

Nor does Schwartz make a request for pure charity. He soon occupies a role akin to Maurie's grandfather. He tutors Maurie after school, with the result that Maurie's grades markedly improve. He endures overseeing Maurie's violin lessons, and he reads comic books to Maurie when he is ill. Schwartz's role in the family connects the story to changes that had been occurring in Jewish family life during the period contemporary with the story's composition. Bakhtin's point that the "living utterance" taking "shape at a particular moment in a socially special environment . . . cannot fail to become an active participant in social dialogue" illuminates connections

between "The Jewbird" and mid-twentieth century changes in Jewish family relationships (276). Connecting traditional notions of Jewish family relationships to the larger ethnic community, Fred L. Strodbeck writes, "The Jewish family was traditionally a close-knit one, but it was the entire Jewish *shtetl* community rather than the family which was considered the inclusive social unit and world. Although relatives were more important than friends, all Jews were considered to be bound to each other" (151).

By the 1960s various changes were eroding such traditional ethnic and familial networks. Political activist Jerry Rubin complained about the loss of traditional values: "Judaism no longer means much to us because the Jude-Christian has died of hypocrisy, Jews have become landlords, businessmen, and prosecutors in Amerika" (Feldstein 525). In 1966, Eli Ginzberg lamented the erosion of traditional familial relationships: "There was a closer tie between my grandmother, who was a distinguished layman first in Kovno and later in Amsterdam, Holland, and a member of our family who lived in Hillel, than there is between my son and his grandfather. Two thousand years of capital, continuity, commitment, and relationship have been dissipated in less than eighty years" (282).

Even given the comic terms of "The Jewbird," Malamud is unwilling to sentimentalize Schwartz. Apparently wanting to use the story to examine some of the realistic demands life was making on traditional Jewish familial values, Malamud makes Schwartz's demands for charity somewhat strident and demanding. Schwartz's ironic tone makes him at times sound more like Henny Youngman than an enfeebled grandfather in need of charity. Addressing the realities of caring for the Jewish aged, Dr. Maurice E. Linden asked in 1954,

Well, what do you expect of older people? They're rigid, unyielding, unmodifiable and cantankerous. Is not the resultant do-nothingness an invitation to indolence, stagnation and regression? . . . our passive neglect of them has caused annihilation, just as surely as if our mode of action had been more direct. (81)

In some significant ways, Cohen's break from traditional Jewish values of charity and family result from his falling into one of Jerry Rubin's categories. Cohen's occupation, frozen foods salesman, seems to have contributed to removing him from the immigrant traditions embodied in Schwartz. Echoing complaints Americanized Jews leveled at Eastern European immigrants, Cohen asks Schwartz, "For Christ sake, why don't you wash yourself sometimes? Why must you always stink like a dead fish?" (150). Schwartz answers that the food he eats makes him smell as he does; in contrast, Cohen literally deals in a kind of sanitized food.

In the article from which I quoted above, Linden asked, "Is not the reactive suffering of the older group, thus hastily bypassed in the stream of

life murderous?" (81). Malamud's response to such a question materializes in "The Jewbird." After Cohen's efforts to harass Schwartz into leaving fail (by mixing "watery catfood" with Schwartz's food, by popping "numerous bags outside the birdhouse as the bird slept," and by buying Maurie a predatory full-grown cat), Cohen assaults and murders Schwartz. Schwartz's death closely follows that of Cohen's mother, a woman of the same generation as Schwartz. This action at the close of a story that resembles an extended cartoon makes for a curious mix of the comic and the tragic. Malamud, after all, chose not to make Schwartz human, perhaps some distant relative of the Cohens. His comic creation of the wise-cracking and wise grandfatherly bird raises questions about his sense of ethnic identity. He does not find it in the trappings of traditional Judaism. When Schwartz prays, he does so "without Book or tallith" (145).

The use of the cartoon black bird does enable Malamud to evoke a connection between his story and Poe's nineteenth-century poem. After Poe's narrator fails to eject the Raven, his whole being seems to become filled with the horror of the bird's presence. At one point, the narrator remarks, "Then, methought, the air grew denser, perfumed from an unseen censer. . . ." In each case the bird's smell threatens to overwhelm a central character. The connection of the two birds to the question of identity is strengthened by the Raven's possessing an uncertain identity, as Schwartz does. Poe's narrator cries,

"Prophet!" said I, "thing of evil—prophet still, if bird or devil!—
Whether Tempter sent, or whether tempest tossed thee here
ashore,
Desolate yet all undaunted, on this desert land enchanted—
On this Home by horror haunted—. . ." (Poe 368)

Schwartz also possesses uncertain identity. In addition to questions of Schwartz's Jewishness, Cohen asks him, "You're sure you're not some kind of a ghost or dybbuk?" (146). Schwartz too has been metaphorically "tossed ashore." Similarly the effect of the story's end is to leave Cohen's "home by horror haunted."

As "The Jewbird" implies, a dybbuk, a wandering soul, had the power to possess someone. In a sense, Schwartz does possess the Cohen family. Early in the story, when Schwartz prayed, "Edie bowed her head though not Cohen" (Malamud 145). Appearing possessed, "Maurie rocked back and forth with the prayers" (146). In the poem, when the Raven speaks, the narrator remarks, "Much I marvelled this ungainly fowl to hear discourse so plainly, / Though its answer little meaning—little relevancy bore" (Poe 366). When Schwartz first speaks, he cries, "Gevalt, a pogrom!" Astonished, Edie responds, "It's a talking bird." Maurie adds, "In Jewish" (Malamud 145). But language, meaning, and relevance are all lost on the family at this point.

Poe's narrator wanted to know if there would be an afterlife where his pain could be eased and he might be reunited with his lost love. His characterization of the Raven's speech as meaningless results from a kind of willed blindness on his part, an unwillingness to accept "Nevermore" for an answer, to hear a possibility that he doesn't want to confront. Schwartz's message is clear. He is in flight, both as a bird and as a persecuted Jew. He needs charity. By the nature of his identity, rather than through biology, he is connected to the Cohens. Cohen's failure—or refusal—to interpret Schwartz's plight in historical terms results from a forced blindness like that of Poe's narrator.

The meaning of Cohen's name intensifies the irony of his failure to interpret and respond to Schwartz's plight in the traditional way. "Cohen" comes from the Hebrew word for priest. Traditionally descendants of the priesthood, whose descent is indicated by their names (Cohen, Katz, etc.) are granted certain preferences in the synagogue. But Cohen's form of assimilation, based as it is on a denial of his ties to Jewish tradition, cuts him off from his ethnic identity. In the poem, when the pain of the Raven's presence becomes too much for Poe's narrator, he cries, "Take thy beak from out my heart" (Poe 369). The story's comic-tragic version of this occurs just before Cohen kills Schwartz: Cohen "whirled the bird around and around his head. But Schwartz, as he moved in circles, managed to swoop down and catch Cohen's nose in his beak and hung on for dear life. Cohen cried out in great pain" (Malamud 153). After the murder, Cohen tells Edie, "Look . . . what that sonofabitchy bird did. It's a permanent scar" (154). Malamud makes the permanence of Schwartz's presence an ironic ethnic joke on Cohen. The bird's beak scars Cohen's nose. The permanence of the Jewbird's presence in the family's lives is implied when Maurie finds the dead bird, "his eyes plucked clean." Giving Maurie something to think about as he grows up, Edie tells Maurie the murder was committed by "Anti-Semeets" (154). Her use of the immigrant pronunciation of "Semite" evokes the prejudice of the Americanized Jews toward the Eastern European Jewish immigrants, of Jew against Jew, and of Schwartz's prophetic remark that crows (his own kind) would "take your eyes out" (145).

The nose joking of the story illuminates its particular definition of anti-Semitism. At one point, Cohen tells Schwartz, "If I were you . . . I'd keep my big snoot out of other people's private business." But Cohen says this in a dispute that conveys his lost sense of values, and by implication, a sense of what he loses by denying his ethnic identity. Responding to the improved grades Maurie receives after being tutored by Schwartz, Cohen remarks, "I'll get him in an Ivy League college for sure." Cohen's concern is for status and the potential to succeed in the material world, the sort of priority Jerry Rubin complained about. Recognizing that such an appraisal, based on Maurie's "C minuses" will set up unrealistic expectations of Maurie, Schwartz replies,

"He's a good boy—you don't have to worry. He won't be a shicker or a wife beater, God forbid, but a scholar he'll never be" (149).

Given the conflicting sets of values in this exchange, Cohen's metonymical rebuff of Schwartz's "big snoot" carries unpleasant ethnic connotations. The unabridged *Webster's Third New International Dictionary* includes entries for "Jewbird" and "jew crow." "Jewbird" is a slang name for the ani of the southern US and South America. The nickname is applied "for its conspicuous beak." "Jew crow" is slang for the English chough, a bird closely related to the raven. Similarly the dictionary remarks of the chough that the bird is "probably so called for its prominent beak." The pejorative slang names for these birds come out of a tradition of ethnic stereotyping and slurring, a tradition in which Cohen participates. His actions suggest a consequence of assimilation that Malamud finds unpleasant, the loss of a capacity for charity, of taking care of one's own, and a motivation springing from self-hatred leading to a forgetting of where one came from.

Summarizing the efforts of a generation of Jewish American writers, Stanley Feldstein writes,

By the 1950's, the best of the young Jewish writers—Saul Bellow, Philip Roth, Bernard Malamud, Norman Mailer . . . had come a long way from that dream of full assimilation, the desire to become thoroughly Americanized, that obsessed a previous generation. They rejected the Judaism and the tainted (because it was 'foreign') Jewishness of their parents and grandparents. . . . There were to be no more grandfathers with Talmudic wisdom who still contained the essence of Jewish life. Jewish writers rejected the questions: What is it to be a Jew? What is it to be a Jew in America? (514)

Malamud's "The Jewbird" suggests that his fiction and his own thinking was more complex than this characterization makes it out to be. In "The Jewbird," rather than rushing to abandon the grandfather with Talmudic wisdom, he carefully examines the motivations for wishing to do so. He assesses the cost to everyone of such an abandonment and he mourns the grandfather's passing.

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