

likely have rejected them. "The Death of Me" supports Mark Shechner's claim that Malamud distrusted the instinctual and Philip Roth's point that Malamud habitually posited Jews as creatures of restraint, sublimation, and moral aspiration, and gentiles as often dangerous creatures of instinctual release. For all of the power of the characterizations, they are schematic enough for the grossness of one, the hissing malice of another, and the lyrical humaneness of the third to seem representative of what it is for many to be a Pole, a Sicilian, a Jew.

It is tempting to compare this story—of one employee who is fleshy and drinks and another who is thin and talks to himself—with Melville's masterpiece "Bartleby the Scrivener." The comparisons and contrasts are many and fascinating, but I will only suggest that Turkey's and Nipper's unhappiness is easily explainable and, until Bartleby appears in the office, the lawyer-narrator is just able to harness their eccentric ways so that he runs a smooth if somewhat zany operation. Real strife only comes to the office with the arrival of Bartleby, that "bit of wreck in the mid Atlantic,"<sup>99</sup> and the apparently perverse uses to which he puts his free will. The closing line of the story—"Ah, Bartleby! Ah, humanity!"<sup>100</sup>—is first of all an evocation of the forlornness, the essential contactlessness of the human condition. "Monstrous employees! Monstrous humanity!" is the implicit closing line of "The Death of Me."

Although hesitant to discuss the sources of his stories, Malamud did offer some background for "The Jewbird." Upon reading Howard Nemerov's "Digressions Upon a Crow," a sketch the poet published in the spring 1962 *Carleton Miscellany*, Malamud "said to myself, thinking of a jewfish, suppose the bird had been Jewish. At that point the story came to life."<sup>101</sup> Schwartz, the Jewbird of Malamud's story, would have fared well had he flown into the home of the narrator of Nemerov's sketch. But instead of finding a haven in the suburban or rural house of Nemerov's bookish, witty man—so kindly that he has fed the area's grosbeak population for years and is horrified by a gamekeeper's suggestion that he wring the neck or run his car over a sick gull that he has been nursing—Schwartz flies into Harry Cohen's apartment, on the east side of Manhattan. There he lands "if not smack on Cohen's thick lamb chop, at least on the table, close by" (*IF*, 101). The thickness of his chop, like the thickness of his hairy-chested body and his up-to-

date job selling food frozen in hardened masses, complement Cohen's gross, obdurate sensibility; "Grubber yung [slob, lout]" (*IF*, 108), Schwartz later caws at the frozen food salesman. When Schwartz responds to Cohen's first gestures—a curse and a missed blow—with "Gevalt [heaven], a pogrom!," Cohen's wife, Edie, and Maurie, his ten-year-old son, are appropriately astonished. But Cohen has little time for the improbabilities of either the physical or moral world and can only demand to know what the bird wants. Correspondingly, when Schwartz proves he's a Jew by fervently dovening (or praying in Hebrew), Cohen wants to know why the bird wears no hat and no phylacteries, as the ritual requires, and if he's not "some kind of ghost or dybbuk" (*IF*, 102–3).

Schwartz is neither, just somebody's cranky, sly, Old World Jewish uncle who moves into crowded quarters for a while and who, at his advanced age, likes "the warm, the windows, the smell of cooking . . . to see once in while the *Jewish Morning Journal* and have now and then a schnapps because it helps my breathing, thanks God." He is also a bird with dusky, bedraggled feathers and, like Susskind, that other skinny-legged fugitive from anti-Semitism, an opportunist, though he uses wheedling instead of Susskind's arrogant onslaughts. On the surface Schwartz is one of those "just boil me a potato" visitors: "whatever you give me, you won't hear complaints." But when Cohen brings home a bird feeder full of dried corn, Schwartz rejects the food with a haughty "Impossible" (*IF*, 105). Still, the old bird is physically and emotionally vulnerable in many ways that Susskind is not, and it is the combination of the bird's fragility, decency, and opportunism that tests the humanness of each member of the Cohen family.

If the story mixes modes in a new way, with the Jewish uncle/talking bird dropped into a realistic setting, the ethical framework is familiar: each character is defined in terms of his or her Jewishness. For once, Malamud associates morality with response to ritual: Cohen is unmoved by the bird's praying, but Edie bows her head and Maurie rocks back and forth; mother and son want to offer the weary traveler the traditional sanctuary the father would deny. Edie and Maurie are able to house Schwartz for four months for two reasons. First, Cohen's relationship to his mother preserves a vestigial tie to his Jewish past. On the August night that Schwartz first flies through their open window, the Cohens have returned early from vacation only because Harry's mother is ill. Second, "though nobody had asked him, Schwartz took on full responsibility for Maurie's performance in school," and the

good-hearted but unintelligent boy's grades improve enough for Cohen to boast "If he keeps up like this. . . . I'll get him into an Ivy League college for sure" (*IF*, 106–7).

To an unusual degree for a Malamud story, "The Jewbird" deals with that great theme of twentieth-century Jewish-American fiction, assimilation. Malamud's usual position is that the degree to which a Jew is assimilated corresponds to the degree that he has been corrupted by contemporary American society, and he does not deviate from this stance in the story. Racism in large part follows from the projection onto others of qualities that secretly frighten or shame the racist, and Schwartz does embody to Cohen the Jewish origins that he would like to expunge. The bird also represents difference—in the workings of the story a comically uncanny sort—that excites the racist's characteristic xenophobia: "whoever heard of a Jewbird?" (*IF*, 110) is one of Cohen's many objections to the bird's presence. Malamud interestingly complicates things by making the Jewbird seem to Cohen able to help complete his flight from his Jewishness. To have a son in an Ivy league school would extend his, Harry Cohen's, rise in WASP society and for this he needs the more patient, erudite Schwartz—though the bird tries to puncture his grand design for Maurie's academic future.

Of course the qualities that make Schwartz a fine companion for Maurie and Edie also threaten Cohen's sense of himself as the dominant male in the house. In a characteristically comic but telling moment, he accuses Schwartz of wanting to sleep next to his wife. The bird's reply typifies the way in which the comic possibilities of his characterization usually work to lessen the seriousness with which we respond to the conflict between him and the frozen food salesman: "Mr. Cohen, . . . on this rest assured. A bird is a bird" (*IF*, 108).

Though Cohen's solution is similar to that of a good many anti-Semitic countries, who permitted the Jews to stay but subjected them to increasing torments, the comic slipperiness generated by Schwartz's dual identity as bird and Jewish uncle lessens the pain of the parable. Malamud finally explodes the strange blend of the antic and the upsetting by having Cohen's mother die on the same day Maurie receives a zero on an arithmetic test. Cohen's restraints are loosed as surely as were those of the Cossacks or a gentile mob before they descended upon a shtetl; he either kills "the broken hearted bird" or badly damages Schwartz and leaves him for the other predators of the world to finish off. When Maurie finds, with the melting of the snow in the spring, "a dead black bird in a small lot near the river, his two wings

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broken, neck twisted, and both bird-eyes plucked clean,” the reader suddenly falls through the comic afterglow to the painful remembrance of what many humans have done and what many humans (and perhaps animals) have suffered. Edie tells her son that Schwartz was killed by “Anti-Semeets” (*IF*, 112–13), but the implicit accusation of her husband does not at all suggest that “Edie, in skinny yellow shorts” will now be able to stand up to her husband “with . . . beefy shorts” (*IF*, 102). Beneath all of the story’s wonderful comedy is the sense that the brutes still run things.

Another way that some of Malamud’s short stories of the early sixties differ from those of the late forties and the fifties is in their use of point of view. When “Black Is My Favorite Color” appeared in the *Reporter* of 18 July 1963, it marked the first time that Malamud published a story told in the first person. The monologue of Nat Lime, a forty-four-year-old bachelor who owns a liquor store in Harlem, is a prolonged lament over the different ways in which blacks have rejected his offers of assistance, friendship, and love. Although Nat volubly asserts moral truths (like the importance of brotherhood and the need to communicate the truths of one’s heart) that the author holds, his insight into himself and others is not high. The distance between what Nat is aware of and what the careful reader perceives brings added tension and hopelessness to a narrative already crackling with the racial tensions of the early 1960s.

In the first of his recollections, Nat relates how “once in the jungle in New Guinea in the Second War, I got the idea when I shot at a running Jap and missed him, that I had some kind of a talent” (*IF*, 19). The talent for valuing all kinds of humans, whether their skins are yellow, black, or white, is a worthy one, but some of the causes of the valuation are not as admirable as the sentiment Nat expresses.

The son of an arthritic, unemployed cutter and a mother who supported the family by selling paper bags from a pushcart, the young Nat moved with his parents from Manhattan to a “not-so-hot” section of Brooklyn. He perceived that the block inhabited by blacks was much grimmer than the others: “In those days though I had little myself I was old enough to know who was better off, and the whole block of colored houses made me feel bad in the daylight. But I went there as much as I could because the street was full of life.” This sort of ambivalence toward black behavior and appearance is repeated so many times in the story that it is indicative of Nat’s confusion and lack of