Jewish Self-Hatred in Malamud's "The Jewbird"

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"The Jewbird" is a fable in which a black bird named Schwartz flies through an open window of the Cohens' New York City penthouse apartment. Schwartz explains that he is running from "anti-Semeets." Harry Cohen, a frozen food salesman, persecutes and torments the Jewbird, who befriends Maurie, the family's young son. In the dead of winter, Cohen physically throws out the bird, whose mangled carcass Maurie finds in the spring. In tears, Maurie asks who could have killed Mr. Schwartz. His mother answers, "Anti-Semeets."

Ruth Wisse and Sidney have seen "The Jewbird" as Malamud's "Jewish Everyman, a displaced loner," and as "an exemplary image of the Malamudian victim...constantly pursued by anti-Semites and fate...opportunist and saint who tests...the humanity and compassion of others" (Wisse 110, Richman 126). On a broader scale, Robert Alter has written that imprisonment is Malamud's central metaphor for Jewishness (210). I would like to suggest that imprisonment here has a roommate—tenancy. For tenancy corresponds uncannily to the Jews' status in America, if not throughout the diaspora. The only home that Jews "own" is Israel.

After two thousand years of being tenants in other people's lands, in other people's cities, in other people's buildings, Jews have come to internalize a tenant mentality: follow the rules, don't make waves, or you will be evicted. Malamud's novel *The Tenants* incorporates the metaphor of tenancy not only into Jewish/Black relations, but into the artist's need for approval and acceptance. Harry Lesser's obsession with getting published (i.e., approval and acceptance by the establishment) parallels the Jewish obsession with wanting to be accepted into WASP society. (It might be worth noting that Lesser's inability to finish his novel bespeaks a subconscious need to delay the final judgment. Don't decide whether or not to reject me; I'm not finished yet.)

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In the tenancy metaphor, it is the tenant who (historically and prerent control) is at the mercy of the landlord's acceptance and approval. And Willie Spearmint, the black writer and illegal tenant in the novel, looks to Lesser for approval when he gives the white Jew his manuscript to read. *The Tenants* knits together four strands of the tenancy metaphor: political, social, psychological, and literary. "The Jewbird" omits the literary and racial components, but still has much to say about Jew as tenant.

Living for so long by others' standards of behavior, dress, and especially language has contributed to the self-hatred that many assimilated American Jews project onto unassimilated Jews, whether greenhorns right off the boat or American-born Hasidim. Philip Roth's "Eli, the Fanatic," written in 1957, five years before "The Jewbird," expresses this internalized devaluation of Eastern European Jewishness in a letter to the headmaster of the town of Woodenton's unwanted Yeshivah. Eli Peck, a lawyer hired by the town to evict the school and its caftanned Rebbe, demands that

> the members of our community dress in a manner appropriate to the time and place.
>
> Woodenton, as you may not know, has long been the home of well-to-do Protestants. It is only since the war that Jews have been able to buy property here, and for Jews and Gentiles to live beside each other in amity. For this adjustment to be made, both Jews and Gentiles alike have had to give up some of their more extreme practices in order not to threaten or offend the other. Certainly such amity is to be desired. (262)

The letter goes on to demand that "the religious, educational, and social activities of the Yeshivah of Woodenton will be confined to the Yeshivah" and that "Yeshivah personnel are welcomed in the streets and stores of Woodenton provided they are attired in clothing usually associated with American life in the 20th century" (262).

In other words, if you want to dress or "look" Jewish, stay on the Yeshivah grounds; if you want to be part of the community, dress American—don't look Jewish. Otherwise, get out. (It is interesting to note the clothing connection with the prophet Elijah in 2 Kings, 2. Soon after convincing the people of the falseness of Baal's prophets and overseeing their destruction [1 Kings 17], Elijah rolls up his cloak and strikes the water of the Jordan River with it, whereupon the waters part so that Elijah can cross the river on his way back to God.) "The Jewbird" forces the confrontation, albeit allegorically, of assimilated Jew (Cohen, the penthouse-renting frozen-food salesman) and Schwartz, the Jewbird. Their interaction lays bare the political, social, and psychological fallout of assimilated Jew as good tenant, unas-

similated Jew as bad, and, of course, Gentile as landlord. This study seeks to examine these issues in Malamud's treatment of Jewish immigrant as bird and tenant in an anti-Semitic Jewish community that is prospering (financially) in an anti-Semitic Gentile environment.

The story's opening paragraph is a fable of the diaspora in general and immigration quotas in particular. The story begins: "The window was open so the skinny bird flew in. Flappity-flap with its frazzled black wings. That's how it goes. It's open, you're in. Closed, you're out and that's your fate" (144). If the borders of a politically sympathetic country are open, you enter; if they're closed, you go someplace else. It seems the fate of Jews to be scattered in countries not their own (Israel excepted, of course), to be tenants in other people's countries. The paragraph continues: "The bird wearily flapped through the open kitchen window of Harry Cohen's top-floor apartment.... On a rod on the wall hung an escaped canary cage, its door wide open..." (144).

Cohen, who is eating lamb chops, is an established frozen foods salesman. But he is still a tenant, living in an apartment; and he owns an empty canary cage. He is the landlord of an "escaped" tenant, a bird. These details set the stage for the socially and psychologically anti-Semitic aspects of the story. Cohen is a more or less assimilated immigrant, living in a penthouse apartment, but an apartment nonetheless—a modern ghetto—receiving a newly arrived immigrant (Schwartz, the Jewbird) as shabbily as his immigrant parents were no doubt received by this country.

Cohen's dealing in frozen foods (why not fresh produce?) resonates with his icy humanity and cold compassion—his frozen Jewish identity. But he has not only frozen his own Jewish heart, he metaphorically sells it to others, Jew and Gentile. Food is life, nourishment, but frozen it is useless. The implication here is that Cohen is still a Jew, whose frozen heart need only be thawed. Schwartz tries to warm it, but can't. Perhaps Cohen has been in frozen foods too long, or it has paid too well. For it is worth noting that even the Angel of Death in the figure of Ginsberg in "Idiots First" can be moved to allow poor Isaac on the train. For Malamud, it seems that Death can be humanized more easily than the self-hating Jew.

To return to Cohen's apartment, the cage within a cage images sociological double-layered anti-Semitism: Gentile over Jew in the form of the rented penthouse, assimilated Jew over unassimilated Jew in the form of the empty bird cage. The escaped canary's cage suggests that it is possible for new immigrants to escape Jewish anti-Semitism: lose the thick accent, black hat, *payos*, dietary laws—don't look or sound Jewish.

Cohen is put off by and perhaps ashamed of Schwartz's Yiddish. Cohen calls him a "wise guy" for saying *gevalt*. The bird only wants some food, but Cohen, who has food in abundance, grudgingly offers him only scraps on the balcony. Schwartz wants real food—good herring, rye bread, schnapps—but Cohen brings home a bird feeder filled with corn, which Schwartz refuses. Here we see Cohen refusing to treat his new tenant (refugee) like a human being. He says:

> What's the matter cross-eyes, is your life getting too good for you? Are you forgetting what it means to be migratory? I'll bet a helluva lot of crows you happen to be acquainted with, Jews or otherwise, would give their eyeteeth to eat this corn. (148)

Here Cohen articulates an unexpressed feeling in this country about immigrants: you're lucky to be here; be happy with what little you have. We are led to assume that Cohen was born in America, so his anti-Semitism is really an American strain internalized, I suggest, from this country's milder, but more insidious brand. Thirty years ago, when this story was written, restricted neighborhoods and country clubs and quotas in higher education were even more widespread and blatant. Cohen, whose name ironically invokes the High Priest tribe of Kohanes (those who should know better), is the mouthpiece for Gentile anti-Semitism. This bring us to the psychology of self-hatred.

Sander Gilman's *Jewish Self-Hatred: Anti-Semitism and the Hidden Language of the Jews* provides an excellent education on the history of anti-Semitism in Europe reaching back to the Middle Ages and the pathology of self-hatred with the Jewish anti-Semitism it engenders. Gilman explains that "Self-hatred results from outsiders' acceptance of the mirage of themselves generated by their reference group—that group in society which they see as defining them—as a reality." The outsiders, or Others, hear the dominant group's message: "Become like us—abandon your difference—and you may be one with us." But the metamorphosis is as impossible as the acceptance, because, says Gilman, "The more you are like me, the more I know the true value of my power, which you wish to share, and the more I am aware that you are but a shoddy counterfeit, an outsider." For indeed, the privileged group is conflicted. It wants both the integration of the Other to "remove the image of its own potential loss of power" and the distancing of the Other "to preserve the reification of its power through the presence of the powerless." "Thus," writes Gilman, "the liberal promise and the conservative curse exist on both sides of the abyss that divides the outsider from the world of privilege" (2).

The marginalized group is therefore in a double bind and reacts predictably. The coping mechanism here seems to be to repress the conflict, "saying, in effect, The contradiction must be within me, since that which I wish to become cannot be flawed. Perhaps I truly am different, a parody of that which I wish to be" (2). All of this goes a long way to explaining Cohen's anger at Schwartz's Yiddish and "broken" English and, for that matter, Woodenton's shame and revulsion by the Hasidim. If taking on the language, behavior, and values of the privileged class constitutes assimilation, then feeling superior to the marginalized group is also required. In the case of Gentile and Jew, this takes the form of anti-Semitism, and thus, for the Jew, self-hatred. The more anti-Semitic one is, the more assimilated, the more American.

Cohen's bitter and seemingly arbitrary hatred of Schwartz, the black bird, is an allegory of Jewish anti-Semitism as a projection of self-hatred and, perhaps, failure. For example, like a traditional Jewish father (and in return for food), Schwartz educates Cohen's ten-year-old son, Maurie. The bird takes on the role of father (which Cohen has apparently abdicated), reads to him, helps him with his homework and violin lessons. Cohen sees Maurie's improvement in school and exclaims, "If he keeps up like this, I'll get him in an Ivy League college for sure" (149). Having one's child accepted by an Ivy League college is tantamount to being accepted by WASP society in America. Alas, Cohen is still a tenant.

Despite Schwartz's success with Maurie, Cohen's treatment of the bird degenerates. Schwartz sleeps outside in the cage, even in winter, and smells like fish because Cohen feeds him nothing but herring. When Cohen complains about the bird's smell, Schwartz replies to Cohen's wife, Edie: "Everybody smells. Some people smell because of their thoughts or because of who they are. My bad smell comes from the food I eat. What does his come from?" (151).

Cohen stinks of the arrogance and self-hatred engendered by living in a subtly anti-Semitic society. He has absorbed the Gentile's airs of superiority and directs them toward embarrassing "greenhorns." He is probably ashamed of and looks down on the behavior and speech of low-class, eastern European Jews—in other words, we presume, the behavior of Cohen's own parents. (Recall Gilman's discussion of devalued identity.) When Schwartz begs of Cohen, "Why do you hate me so much?... What did I ever do to you?" Cohen gives the Gentile reply, "Because you're an A-number-one-trouble maker that's why" (152). Nothing specific, mind you, just a scapegoat in general. Cohen's justification for anti-Semitism is exactly the same as the Gen-

tile's—Jews are trouble-makers. Cohen then tries to make life as miserable as possible for Schwartz, hoping to drive him away.

Cohen begins a program (pogrom?) of harassment worthy of prewar Germany:

> The frozen foods salesman began his campaign against the bird by mixing watery cat food with the herring slices in Schwartz's dish. He also blew up and popped numerous paper bags outside the birdhouse as the bird slept, and when he had got Schwartz good and nervous, though not enough to leave, he brought a full-grown cat into the house, supposedly a gift for little Maurie.... (152)

When they are alone, Cohen finally physically attacks the bird, whirling it around his head twice in a parody of *shlogen kappores*, a ritual performed just before Yom Kippur in which a chicken symbolically receives one's sins, is flung around one's head and then discarded. This scene makes perfect allegorical sense. For the frozen-hearted Cohen, Jewish ritual is meaningless. He acknowledges no sin to atone for. After Cohen flings the bird out the window, the narrator comments, "Nobody said no," though Cohen's wife begins to weep and their son cries when told of Schwartz's departure (154).

For a long time, no one said no to Hitler and no one said no to "No Dogs or Jews" signs or restricted neighborhoods and country clubs. When, in the spring, Maurie wanders around looking for Schwartz, he finds "a dead black bird...his two wings broken, neck twisted, and both bird-eyes plucked clean." "Who did this to you, Mr. Schwartz?" Maurie wept. "Anti-Semeets," Edie said later (154).

So ends the story. Here, the worst anti-Semeets are the Jewish ones, who evidently don't even know who they are. Unfortunately, when Gentiles see Jews hating Jews, it only strengthens and validates their own anti-Semitism. Here the Yiddish pronunciation of anti-Semeets is significant. When Schwartz first flies through the Cohens' window he explains, "I'm running. I'm flying, but I'm also running." Edie asks, "From whom?" Schwartz answers, "Anti-Semeets," to which the whole family responds, "Anti-Semites?" The American, Gentile, assimilated pronunciation of anti-Semites has by the story's end given way to the Yiddish pronunciation, at least for Edie. There is nothing like anti-Semitism to bring out the Jew in one, even if the anti-Semeet is another Jew.

We are told in the story's first paragraph that the family has just returned to the Lower East Side from Kingston, "because Cohen's mother was dying." As the generation of Jewish immigrants "mit hexents" dies out (Russian immigrants now arrive with Russian ac-

cents), Jewish anti-Semitism takes new forms. We now deride one another with JAP jokes or on the basis of class.

All this is in the service of what Roth's Eli Peck calls "adjustment," so that Jews and Gentiles can co-exist in amity. Recall Eli's letter to the Yeshivah: "For the adjustment to be made, both Jews and Gentiles alike have had to give up some of their more extreme practices in order not to threaten or offend the other." Who has been doing the threatening and the offending? And what extreme practices? Clearly, Eli's not-so-subtle implication is that Jews have offended and Gentiles have threatened. But what of the extreme practices? Gentiles have adjusted by not restricting so many of their country clubs, neighborhoods, and universities, and Jews have adjusted by not dressing or speaking so much like Jews.

All of this gives even richer meaning to Cynthia Ozick's poignant line, "Whoever wants to kill the Jew has already killed the human being himself" (97). And what of Eli (the Fanatic) Peck? He exchanges clothes with the Hasid and walks throughout the town looking like a Rebbe. Eli(jah) is still destroying false gods and using his cloak to return to God. But the doctors sedate Eli Peck. Diagnosis: nervous breakdown. This is, after all, American life in the twentieth century.

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