

"Envy": Cynthia Ozick Meets Melanie Klein

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Cynthia Ozick's story "Envy; or, Yiddish in America" shows the corrosive effects of envy on the life of the lonely, aging Yiddish poet Edelshtein. Edelshtein is consumed with envy of Ostrover, a famous Yiddish novelist known from English translations of his stories. He feels that Ostrover has both cuckolded him and bested him in literary success. Edelshtein believes he could become as famous as Ostrover if he too had a translator into English. Without the translator, he fears his poems will die along with him and the dying Yiddish language. The story seems to illustrate the psychological insights of Melanie Klein about the unconscious mechanisms behind envy: "I consider that envy is an oral-sadistic and anal-sadistic expression of destructive impulses, operative from the beginning of life. . ." (Klein, ix). So long as Edelshtein operates out of envy, he will remain caught in a vicious cycle, in an infantile, self-destructive state, thwarted in his attempts to love or to be creative. He will continue to feel persecuted by Ostrover, which is really a form of internal persecution. As Klein says, "When this occurs, the good object is felt to be lost, and with it inner security" (84).

"Envy," which is included in Ozick's 1969 collection, The Pagan Rabbi, is reminiscent of Bellow's Herzog (1965). Both are profound psychological anatomies, detailed dissections of a single suffering character, a victim who is nevertheless in many ways his own worst enemy. Both stories are delicately poised between the comic and the tragic. Both protagonists are intellectuals who rail against the "Wasteland

outlook” and defend Jewish humanism. Herzog rejects “the commonplaces of the Wasteland outlook, the cheap mental stimulants of Alienation, the cant and rant of pipsqueaks about Inauthenticity and Forlornness” (Bellow 75). And Edelshtein writes, “*Mamaloshen* doesn’t produce *Wastelands*. No alienation, no nihilism, no dadism” (Ozick163). But aside from their insights and eloquence, both men are also cuckolds and *shlimazels*, obsessed and half-crazy, consumed with jealousy or envy and the desire for revenge, and both compose many mental letters they never send. What Gersbach is for Herzog, Ostover is for Edelshtein. The difference is that Herzog is twenty years younger than Edelshtein, has family and friends and more inner resources, and thus is more capable of love and of recovery. Herzog ends with the hero at peace, in the summertime in the country, putting his house in order, and awaiting the visit of a woman who loves him. “Envy” ends with the hero in the winter in New York City, alone and embittered, raging on the phone at an anti-Semite. Herzog matures a bit in the course of the narrative, but Edelshtein, despite being much older than Herzog, is prevented from growing up by the force of his all-consuming envy.

Edelshtein is in many ways sympathetic, a little guy struggling to survive, lost in America. Although, as the opening sentence says, Edelshtein has been “an American for forty years,” he is not really American but feels like a displaced person (129). He talks with an accent, and he cannot write poetry in English. There is no old country to which he can return, for the European Jewish culture and the Yiddish language has been practically eradicated by the Holocaust. Even Israel is hostile to Yiddish: “Yiddish was inhabited by the past, the new Jews did not want it” (135). So the only hope, as the title suggests, is “Yiddish in America.” Yet, ironically, in America, Yiddish is a lost

cause. Edelshtein makes a meager living lecturing on the subject to bored audiences of elderly Jews. "To speak of Yiddish was to preside over a funeral. He was a rabbi who had survived his whole congregation" (131). The story is filled with images of death, of a murdered people and a murdered language, and of Yiddish speakers as the living dead, corpses, or ghosts.

To make matters worse, Edelshtein is 67, facing mortality and pondering the meaning of his life and his legacy. Because he is a widower with no children, his only heirs are his poems, which no one reads any more because so few read Yiddish. So he searches for someone to translate them into English, but in vain. Judging from the samples of his work in the story, Edelshtein had talent in his youth, but he is a minor poet writing in a minor language, poetry loses more than fiction in translation, and there is little money in it for translators or publishers.

So one cannot help but feel sorry for this old man who mourns the death of Yiddish, which has contributed to his sense of isolation and failure. Nevertheless, Edelshtein is also, as mentioned, a comic fool, a *shlimazel*, and his own worst enemy. He defends Yiddish and the Jews who perished in the Holocaust, but even as he does so, "he knew he lied, lied, lied. . . . He felt himself an obscenity. What did the dead of Jews have to do with his own troubles? His cry was ego and more ego. His own stew, foul. Whoever mourns the dead mourns himself" (157).

As Melanie Klein says, "envy is an oral-sadistic and anal-sadistic expression of destructive impulses." Thus the "foul stew" of Edelshtein's ego. The story is filled with anal imagery; it is, as Victor Strandberg says, "a catalogue of decay" (Strandberg 89). There are references to "mud," to "urine and dirt" (Ozick 130), to "rubble and offal" (140), to "turds"(155), to "a sewer" (170), numerous mentions of snot, mucus, and

vomit, and lots of spitting, burping, and belching. In one of his dreams, Edelshtein cries out, "Thou shalt see my asshole!"(132).

In Vorovsky, one of Ostrover's translators, Ozick creates a double for Edelshtein who expresses Edelshtein's envy and anal sadism. Both men blame their wasted lives on the hated Ostrover. "I would like to make a good strong b.m. on your friend Ostrover," says Vorovsky (Ozick 148). Vorovsky spent 17 years writing a dictionary no one wants to buy and Edelshtein has spent his entire life writing Yiddish poems no one wants to read. Vorovsky says, "Do you know what a bilingual German-English mathematical dictionary is good for? Toilet paper. . . . Do you know what poems are good for? The same" (149). The living room of Vorovsky's apartment is lined with 75 cardboard boxes filled with unsold copies of the dictionary. Edelshtein thinks of Vorovsky, "It was his fate to swallow what he first excreted" (171). As Elaine M. Kauvar notes, "that situation mirrors Edelshtein's" (Kauvar 55).

In one scene, Edelshtein even wishes he could stop caring and completely let go, becoming a crazy drunk like Vorovsky, and he imagines Vorovsky telling him that first he needs to study failure some more. Like Edelshtein, Vorovsky is an old man driven so crazy by failure that he loses self-control and wallows in "his own stew, foul." Vorovsky's anal and urethral sadism turn against himself. He suffers from bouts of hysterical laughter at the absurdity of his life, during which he loses all bodily control:

Vorovsky laughed and said 'Messiah' and sucked the pillow spitting. His face was a flood: tears ran upside down into his eyes, over his forehead, saliva sprang up in puddles around his ears. He was spitting, crying, burbling, he gasped, wept, spat. His eyes were bloodshot, the whites showed like slashes, wounds; he still wore his hat. He laughed, he was still laughing. His pants were wet, the fly open, now and then seeping (170).

With his crying, drooling, and incontinence, Vorovsky is an old man reverting to infancy, exaggerating some tendencies present in Edelshtein.

Edelshtein is not so much an infant as an overgrown boy, and his married friends the Baumzweigs his substitute parents. He hangs around their apartment and even spends the night sleeping in the room formerly occupied by their sons. Significantly, he connects Paula Baumzweig with his own mother. When Edelshtein recites one of his poems in their apartment, Paula “would always kiss Edelshtein on the forehead,” like a proud mother rewarding a son (133). He notices “the tiny blue veins all over Paula’s neck” (157), and soon after he remembers that “his mother’s neck too was finely veined” (158).

According to Klein, envy originates in a disturbance of the primary object relation with the mother. Envy, she claims, is a kind of oral attack on the mother and the mother’s breast. As young Hannah, Vorovsky’s niece, accuses Vorovsky and Edelshtein, “you envy, you eat people up with your disgusting old age—cannibals. . . .” (175). She also calls them “parasites”(175) and “bloodsuckers”(172) and labels Edelshtein “Mr. Vampire” (173). Hannah’s cruel accusations, although exaggerated, express some truth about the unconscious origins of envy in infantile sadism.

Although Edelshtein’s memory of his mother seems positive, all his relationships with women in the story are contentious. He quarreled with his late wife Mireleh, who was barren due to multiple miscarriages, “was vindictive about Edelshtein’s sperm count,” and was also unfaithful to Edelshtein with Ostrover (135). He has a falling out with his friend Paula Baumzweig. And although he tries to flatter Hannah into being his translator, when she refuses, he hits her in the mouth and curses her. Earlier he referred to a young boy he loved as being “nearer than my mother’s mouth” (162), yet

now he strikes a woman in the mouth. His hostility suggest an ambivalence toward women, perhaps rooted in an unstable relationship with his mother. It is then not surprising that he insults Paula as “mother of puppydogs” (151).

According to Klein, envy originates in an unconscious attack on the mother’s breast, and Pesha, Ostrover’s wife, Edelshtein deprecates as cowlike, “a cube with low-slung udders” (134). Later, when he spies on the Baumzweigs as they sleep, he notes that Paula’s “breasts had dropped sidewise and, although still very fat, hung in pitiful creased bags of mole-dappled skin” (158). He says that she is like a “cow to the sight”(157). As Klein writes, envy aims “to put badness, primarily bad excrements and bad parts of the self, into the mother, and first of all into her breast, in order to spoil and destroy her. In the deepest sense this means destroying her creativeness” (Ozick 7). Thus the ugly, bovine breasts in the story qualify as what Klein calls “the bad breast.”

Envy is among the seven deadly sins and, says Klein, “it is unconsciously felt to be the greatest sin of all, because it spoils and harms the good object which is the source of life. . . . The feeling of having injured and destroyed the primal object impairs the individual’s trust in the sincerity of his later relationships and makes him doubt his capacity for love and goodness” (Klein 20). Thus envy is inevitably self-destructive. Edelshtein is filled with rage: against Nazis, against American Jews, and against the hand that life has dealt him. He spends a lot of the story in juvenile temper tantrums. He needs an object to hate, so he settles on Ostover. But his envy of Ostover is corrosive, eating him up, destroying his enjoyment of life and his creativity.

The Baumzweigs share his envy of Ostrover; in fact, it is the main bond of their friendship. Yet Paula Baumzweig correctly calls their trip to hear Ostrover speak at the Y “self-mortification” and “self-flagellation” (Ozick 141). Waiting in the auditorium for

Ostrover to appear, "Edelshtein felt paralyzed." He thinks of a poem he could be writing and wishes he were home to write it; "the hall around him seemed preposterous, unnecessary, why was he here?" (142). As Melanie Klein writes, "envy of creativeness is a fundamental element in the disturbance of the creative process. . . . The super-ego figure on which strong envy has been projected becomes particularly persecutory and interferes with thought processes and with every productive activity, ultimately with creativeness" (Klein 40). Edelshtein is there because his obsession with Ostrover is really a form of self-punishment. Ostrover is a projection of Edelshtein's persecutory super-ego, and the more he envies Ostrover, the more his hatred returns to persecute him.

The only hope for Edelshtein lies in clinging to the remnants of the good object, which is Yiddish, the *mamaloshen* (mother tongue) which in this story represents the good mother. Edelshtein writes to Hannah, "Fifty years ago my mother lived in Russia and spoke only broken Russian, but her Yiddish was like silk" (157). But as Yiddish fades, Edelshtein becomes increasingly desperate. He fantasizes that young Hannah will save him by translating his poetry and also save Yiddish for future generations. For Ostrover, Hannah is both a symbolic daughter, substitute for the child he never had, and a symbolic mother who will carry Yiddish in her womb and bear him into the future, reborn. "Grow old in Yiddish, Hannah, and carry fathers and uncles into the future with you," he writes (156). But Hannah, who hates the old and has no use for Yiddish, denounces Edelshtein and cruelly rejects him. In his fantasy, he turned Hannah into an idealized object, a recreation of the good mother, the *yiddishe mama*. But when he encounters the real Hannah, she turns instead into the spoiled, bad object, destroying his fantasy. Writes Klein, "The idealized object is much less integrated in the ego than

the good object, since it stems predominantly from persecutory anxiety and much less from the capacity for love.” (Klein 26) Idealized objects cannot be sustained, which lead to “instability in relationships” (27).

Thus the story ends with Edelshtein in despair, rejected by Hannah, yet ironically phoning a Christian evangelist for consolation, only to be subjected to a vicious anti-Semitic harangue. Why this self-punishing maneuver? As Klein writes of the envious person, “The need for punishment, which finds satisfaction by the increased devaluation of the self, leads to a vicious circle” (85).

Yet Edelshtein, as Joseph Lowin says, “lacks a tragic dimension” (Lowin 28). Even at the end, railing on the phone against the anti-Semite, he is still the *shlimazel*, more pathetic clown than tragic figure. “In ‘Envy,’” writes Sarah Blacher Cohen, “Ozick continually alternates from the dour to the droll” (Cohen 48). Jealousy can be the subject of a tragedy, as in *Othello* , but envy cannot. Envy “implies the subject’s relation to one person only and goes back to the earliest exclusive relationship with the mother. Jealousy is based on envy, but involves a relationship to at least two people” (Klein 6). Tragedy occurs in the realm of oedipal conflict, but the envious person never reaches that stage and thus never really grows up.

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