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FABLE AND FANTASY:

THE ATTENUATION OF REALISM IN THE NOVELS OF BERNARD MALAMUD

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ABSTRACT

FABLE AND FANTASY

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The critical focus of this thesis is the delineation of the elements of fable and fantasy as they obtain in Bernard Malamud's The Natural, The Assistant, The Fixer, and The Tenants. To a greater or lesser extent, each of this writer's novels employs both realism and something approximating "dream", each novel in its way availing itself of the artifices of fable and the abstracting quality of fantasy. There is present in these works, therefore, both a familiar obedience to the demands of conventional surface realism and an attenuation of that realism in the suggestion of fantastic improbabilities or renderings of independent imagination. Naturalistic detail, for example, is often presented and established in Malamud's novels, only to be subsequently muted or dissolved, deprived of immediacy in a surreal or dream-like objectification of an inner landscape.

In his willingness to forego the conventions of realistic of naturalistic fiction, Malamud is, of course, not unique in contemporary American literature. Yet he is, in his craft, vision, and idiom, a distinctive writer. It is the intention of this thesis, therefore, to analyze his style, themes, and technique vis à vis fable and fantasy, and to indicate, to some extent at least, the manner in which his novels tend to diverge from or conform to the trends present in modern fiction.

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'You must discard the word Fancy altogether. You have nothing to do with it. You are not to have, in any object of use or ornament, what would be a contradiction in fact. You don't walk upon flowers in fact; you cannot be allowed to walk upon flowers in carpets. You don't find that foreign birds and butterflies come and perch upon your crockery; you cannot be permitted to paint foreign birds and butterflies upon your crockery. You never meet with quadrupeds going up and down walls; you must not have quadrupeds represented upon walls. You must use,' said the gentleman, 'for all these purposes, combinations and modifications (in primary colours) of mathematical figures which are susceptible of proof and demonstration. This is the new discovery. This is fact. This is taste.'

Mr. Bounderby in Charles Dickens'
Hard Times

Steiner recommended the contemplation of a cross wreathed with roses but for reasons of perhaps Jewish origin I preferred a lamppost. The object didn't matter as long as you went out of the sensible world. When you got out of the sensible world, you might feel parts of the soul awakening that never had been awake before.

Charlie Citrine in Saul Bellow's
Humboldt's Gift

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Introduction

> After all, what impressed us most in Kafka is precisely this power of his to achieve a simultaneity of contrary effects, to fit the known into the unknown, the actual into the mythic and vice-versa, to combine within one framework a conscientiously empirical account of the visibly real with a magical decomposition of it. In this paradox lies the pathos of his approach to human existence. [1]

The "simultaneity of contrary effects" and the formal "paradox" which Philip Rahv observes in the work of Franz Kafka are also to be found in the fiction of Bernard Malamud. Not unrelated in literary descent, the novels of Kafka and Malamud reveal a shared willingness to turn techniques of verisimilitude to a depiction of unreal landscapes. It is not inappropriate, therefore, that an observation of Kafka's technique should head this introduction to Malamud's literary milieu and descent.

The introductory pages which follow are designed to create a general literary-historical perspective: a preamble to the examination of Malamud's longer fiction, these pages refer only intermittently to this fiction, focusing instead on the nineteenth and twentieth century background to specific aspects of Malamud's art. This format has been chosen for several reasons. The first, alluded to by the Rahv quotation and the a-

[1] Philip Rahv, "Notes on the Decline of Naturalism," Image and Idea: Twenty Essays on Literary Themes (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1957), p.144.

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bove paragraph, is that Malamud's work does not exist in isolation from European and American traditions. The question of fable, fantasy, and the attenuation of realism is central to twentieth century fictional considerations, and twentieth century fictional considerations are central to a discussion of Bernard Malamud. The second reason is that of expediency: it is hoped that this Introduction, structured and constituted in the manner chosen, will liberate the main body of the thesis from excessive digression. The third and most important of the reasons is that this thesis, though primarily an examination of Malamud's novels, is also a study of the extent to which the attenuation of realism will contribute to and/or subtract from the rendering of human situations and moral themes. Since we are dealing with a problem of literary theory, it seems sensible to establish some of the terms of discussion as soon as possible.

Through this cursory examination of nineteenth and twentieth century notions of realism, romance, fantasy, and fabulation, this Introduction will anticipate later discussions of those elements in Malamud's work which suggest either Mr. Bounderby's world of "fact" or, alternatively, Charlie Citrine's transcendence of "the sensible world" and Franz Kafka's "simultaneity of contrary effects." It should also be noted that this Introduction will be complemented by the thesis' Conclusion. Coming full circle from the particular, this Conclusion, on the basis of the text's analysis of Malamud's major novels, will examine more closely some of the general matters introduced in these first pages.

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(i)

Basic to any discussion of the twentieth century novel is the observation that it differs in fundamental respects from the nineteenth century novel. Indeed, the rather protean identity of twentieth century fiction may seem to derive from its advocacy of a divergence from established forms, and from its insistence upon the necessity of experimentation. There is a sense, however, in which the transformation of fiction has been more or less involuntary, and it is of this sense, as it pertains to twentieth century innovative fiction, that W. J. Harvey writes:

> . . . [the] point to be noted about the experimental novel is that its technical features which so intrigue critics--the complication of narrative methods, the elimination of the omniscient author, the expressive manipulation of style, the greater stress on image and symbol, stream of consciousness techniques and so on--that all of these reflect a changed conception of the relation of art to reality, a change largely determined by the modern novelist's sense of increasing alienation. Behind this changed conception often lie radical doubts about the very nature of reality. [2]

The calling into question of reality's terms must inevitably throw established novelistic conventions into doubt. With the dissolution of traditional philosophical notions, the representational reliability of any fictional mode based on an assumption of those notions will be radically qualified. So it was that the European novel of social realism waned in importance in the 1880's and 1890's, and English and continental writers began to evolve more subjective fictional forms. As philosophical nat-

[2] W. J. Harvey, Character and the Novel (London: Chatto & Windus, 1965), p. 194.

uralism lost general credence, and as an epistemological uncertainty deepened, reality came increasingly to be ascribed to the internal nature of man. As a result, the term "realism," adjusting to changed conditions, came gradually to denote forms of psychological as well as social realism. In short, the novel as a "mirror passing down a road"[3] was joined, then superceded, by the novel as a mirror reflecting both the mind of its creator and the imagined interior landscape of his imagined characters.

Mr. Bounderby's insistence on (and Dickens' contempt for) an unwavering verisimilitude suggests the extreme nature of nineteenth century photographic realism. In its distrust of the abstract, the poetic, and the fanciful, this attitude, lampooned by the author of Hard Times, emerged in concert with philosophical materialism and determinism. Patterning itself on, and indeed jealous of, science and the scientific procedure, this form has come to be thought of as naturalist realism or simply as naturalism. Characterized by attention to full specificity of detail, by an interest in depicting the principles of environmental determinism and heredity, and by a rejection of the romantic faith in imagination, naturalism of this Zolaesque variety represents extreme materiality in art.

Though much writing in the latter half of the nineteenth century conformed to the tenets of naturalism, such tenets do not wholly define the fiction of that period. Indeed, the novels we tend to value today are those "realist" works in which we find both "the objective represen-

[3] Stendhal (Henri Marie Beyle), Scarlet and Black (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin Books Ltd., 1953), p.93

tation of contemporary social reality"[4] and an adherence to the selective principle and the disciplone of aesthetic form and craft. In general, however, nineteenth century realism tended to share with "experimental" or scientific naturalism a suspicion of the imagination. For realism was in large part a reaction to the romantic impulse and, historically, the less systematic precursor to naturalism. It is logical, therefore, that nineteenth century realism should, as René Wellek points out, reject "the fantastic, the fairy-tale-like, the allegorical and the symbolic, the highly stylized, the purely abstract and decorative."[5]

As a means by which we may measure the appoximation of Malamud's novels to a "clear, orderly imitation of life,"[6] and hence to a condition of realism, W.J. Harvey's concept of the mimetic "arc" or "angle" will prove useful:

> .... I wish to coin for future use a trope derived from geometry and speak of the angle of mimesis. The "normal" work--a member of the Middlemarch family--we may metaphorically regard as lying very nearly parallel to life itself--it has a narrow mimetic angle. On the other hand, a fantasy like Alice in Wonderland stands almost at right-angles to life. The novel is the most inclusive and plastic of art-forms; if, for example, we move from War and Peace to The Possessed to Moby Dick to The Trial, we can see the novel subtending a wider and wider mimetic arc. [7]

[4] René Wellek, Concepts of Criticism (New Haven and London: Yale Univ. Press, 1963), pp.240-241.

[5] Wellek, p.241.

[6] Harvey, p.205.

[7] Harvey, p.16.

Though the above quotation assigns specific novels to certain mimetic regions, we should be aware that some works of fiction do not "subtend" a consistent angle of mimesis. For, as Harvey observes elsewhere in relation to Dickens' Oliver Twist, there may exist "two mimetic angles—realism and fantasy--within the same book."[8] This divergence in the techniques of a single work may indeed suggest a fractured art, but it may also indicate a complexity of vision and sensibility. If such a complexity is to "work" in a novel, however, the author must prove able to resolve or to fuse disparate approaches to the rendering of fictional experience. It is part of the intention of this thesis, therefore, to indicate the manner in which mimetic angles vary in Malamud's novels and to show the ways in which he succeeds, and fails to succeed, in such technical variations.

Given, then, that realism has generally derived from the concept of an imitative art and of a depiction of the external world in its natural and social aspects, we may say that the realistic approach tends to demonstrate a narrow mimetic arc. In its nineteenth century sense (the sense, that is, in which most of us understand the term), it dedicates its resources to a close rendering of representative, quotidien experience. It takes as its subject as much of the real world as can be safely accommodated, and attempts, in general, to be as "objective" as possible

[8] Harvey, p. 184. Harvey, it must be noted, does not regard this as a favourable quality.

in its treatment of real conditions.[9] Taking note of realism's subsequent forms, we must acknowledge that all recent developments notwithstanding, our general definition of "realism" conforms to that conception current a hundred years ago. "General usage," as Damian Grant writes, "still intends by realism the close rendering of ordinary experience."[10] In later references to realism, therefore, the traditional meaning is invoked.

When in 1863 Dostoevsky wrote that he had "quite different conceptions of reality and realism than our realists and critics,"[11] he was in effect anticipating the movement of writers in the 1890's away from a simple mimetic treatment of experience. Given his technique of "extra-realism" and the value he placed on the depiction of "all the depths of the human soul,"[12] he seems in fact less akin to his contemporaries than to those innovators of the 1890's and early twentieth century. For with the work of writers like Proust, Kafka, Joyce, and Woolf, there emerged a more generous reliance on the subjective and symbolic aspects of art. The "attenuation of actuality" criticized by Georg Lukacs[13] became increasingly evident in fiction, and there occurred an inversion of realist

[9] Whether realism succeeds in being truly non-didactic is an uncertain matter: Flaubert and Auerbach, Wellek suggests, do not adequately acknowledge the "moralistic" and "reformist" content of nineteenth century realism. Realism, Wellek writes, does not always realize "the conflict" between description and prescription." (Wellek, p. 253)

[10] Damian Grant, Realism (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1970). p.73.

[11] Wellek, p.232.

[12] Wellek, p.232.

[13] Grant, p.77.

principles. "Obliquity, deliberate distortion, a retreat from the merely representational--these," W.J. Harvey writes, now became the general features of the modern novel.[14] These subjective, symbolic, and non-naturalistic features came to characterize serious experiment in fiction, and specificity of detail, when present, was to be found not only in an itemizing of external phenomena but also in a depiction or evocation of the internal life. In sum, the dream, the dream-like, the illusory, the irrational, and the fanciful came more frequently to be appropriated by writers of fiction.

In post-World War II fiction, it is the American rather than the English or European novel which tends to demonstrate the symbolic, the allegorical, and the mythic element. For as the French "new novelists" attempt to divest their fiction of metaphor,[15] and as mainstream British fiction tends toward a certain technical conservatism, a great many American writers seem to substitute the abstract and the ideational for the concrete. Many of these novelists are apt, therefore, to accentuate the demands of art and to minimize the conventional elements of surface realism and felt life.

This is not to suggest that realistic fiction is wholly absent from contemporary American literature, nor is it to suggest that innovative fiction is utterly absent from contemporary British or European fiction. For on the one hand, Mailer, Updike and James Jones have produced realist or naturalist work, and on the other hand, as Robert Scholes has shown,

[14] Harvey, p.205

[15] Grant, p.75.

British authors like Lawrence Durrell; Iris Murdoch, and William Golding have demonstrated considerable interest in technical experimentation.[16] It remains true, nevertheless, that British fiction seems "more conventionally realistic than 'Twenties' fiction,"[17] and that American post-war novels seem less realistic than the mainstream early twentieth century American fiction. This last point should be clarified by this passage from Tony Tanner's City of Words:

> . . . it is relevant to bring into focus the fact that in considering the fiction written in America during the last twenty years, we have had few occasions to refer to realism or naturalism--fictional genres in which American writers of the past have secured some of their most honourable achievements. Rather than simply attempting to transcribe the state of affairs which obtains in what Burroughs called the cycle of conditioned action, the majority of contemporary American writers try to offset or challenge the realm of conditioned action with gestures of verbal autonomy of one kind or another. This is not to say that aspects of contemporary American society are not admitted into contemporary fiction; of course they are. But even while recognizing these aspects the style of the writer seems to make clear its right to break free from them, or transmute them into something more amenable to their lexical organizings.[18]

In brief, then, Malamud's literary milieu has been characterized by an uncertain observance of straight realistic depiction.

[16] Robert Scholes, The Fabulators (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), passim.

[17] Park Honan, ed., "Realism, Reality, and the Novel," Novel 2 (1969), p. 203. This point is made by David Lodge.

[18] Tony Tanner, City of Words: American Fiction 1950-1970 (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), p. 344.

(ii).

America has been something of a special case. For as the great realistic literatures of Europe and England were being formed, many of the "classical" American novelists were writing a fiction defined by oblique angles of mimesis and by an interest in the "sensational," the uncommon, and the essentially ahistorical. America, writes Daniel Hoffman, could not but produce a literature different in fundamental respects from that of the Old World:

> Not only was our history short, but it was colonial. This circumstance produced the inevitable cultural lag between the province and the motherland; and, more important perhaps, our Puritan founders represented a minority culture in the homeland itself. With their predilection for allegory and distaste for mimesis which we have observed, the realistic fashion emerging in late eighteenth century fiction made small impact in America. Instead our prose writers were attracted to a fictional mode which in England flourished briefly as a minor, obverse reaction to the dominant realism of Defoe and Fielding and the sentimentalized depiction of manners in Richardson.[19]

This fictional mode is the romance, and though it may not be treated fully in the space of two or three pages, we are obliged to note its dominant features. For the romance, with its "obvious qualities of the picturesque and the heroic," its "assumed freedom from the ordinary novelistic requirements of verisimilitude, development, and continuity," and its Dostoevskian "tendency to plunge into the underside of consciousness,"[20] is

[19] Daniel G. Hoffman, Form and Fable in American Fiction (New York: Oxford University Press, 1961), p. 7.

[20] Richard Chase, The American Novel and Its Tradition (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1957), p. ix.

clearly central to any consideration of American realism and counter-realism.

The post-war American novel, as Jonathan Baumbach notes, "has certain blood ties with the romance":

> Its concerns tend to be cosmic rather than societal, its view of the world hallucinatory rather than objective, its moral alternatives metaphysical rather than practical. As in the romance, the "underside of consciousness" becomes topside, assumes the prerogatives of consciousness. [21]

Though it is clear that contemporary American non-naturalistic writing is indebted to the innovative fiction of novelists like Proust, Joyce, and Kafka, it must also be recognized that there has existed in America a native semifantastic literature predating the European influence by many decades. In this tradition, anchored by the work of Poe, Hawthorne, Melville, Twain, and Faulkner, elements of myth, symbol, fantasy, and allegory have fused with or accompanied the mimetic properties of the novel. In this American "poetry of romance,"[22] the importance of the fanciful has been demonstrated by the fact that the romance's characterization and action have often shown a certain arbitrariness, and by the fact that Gothicism, the picaresque, and allegorical manipulation have frequently been manifested.

It is the romance's most attractive quality that it lacks a set of formal principles. For in the absence of any defined code or discipline,

[21] Jonathan Baumbach, The Landscape of Nightmare: Studies in the Contemporary American Novel (New York: New York University Press, 1965), p. 5.

[22] Chase, p. 17.

it has been able to emphasize both the elements of fantasy and a realistic depiction of the world:

> The combinations our authors have made of mythic patterns, folklore themes, ritual actions, and observed social conditions proved capable of encompassing both the 'real' and the 'marvellous,' of moving from the natural to the supernatural, of dealing with the imagined past and the observed present in terms of comparable intensity. The language they have used has varied from Hawthorne's formal diction of public discourse to Twain's mastery of the vernacular; [23]

In the romance mode we have, then, an approach to the rendering of experience which encompasses both the actual and the fanciful. And it is in this respect that the American romance has its greatest relevance to the material of this thesis.

Brought by Nathaniel Hawthorne to an awareness of its potential for psychological depiction, the romance showed itself capable of presenting fictional worlds both apparently "real" and yet relatively free of what Henry James referred to as the "fatal futility of Fact."[24] By conceiving a "field of action" as "a state of mind--the borderland of the human mind where the actual and the imaginary intermingle,"[25] Hawthorne and his successors were often able to render the unreal or the improbable in terms which compelled conviction. At their best maintaining a balance between the real and the fanciful, these writers seem naturally to have enlarged the range of the novel.

[23] Hoffman, p. 358.

[24] Henry James, The Art of the Novel (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1934), p. 122.

[25] Chase, p. 19.

In a shared Gothic touch and in the use of a fictional form suggestive of the romance, the work of Hawthorne and Malamud shows a strong similarity. In this connection the two quotations which follow are relevant. The first is from the Introduction to The Scarlet Letter, the second from the statement made by the National Book Award committee regarding Malamud's The Magic Barrel. First, Hawthorne:

> Thus, therefore, the floor of our familiar room has become a neutral territory, somewhere between the real world and fairy-land, where the Actual and the Imaginary may meet, and each imbue itself with the nature of the other. Ghosts might enter here, without affrighting us.[26]

And the National Book Award statement (cited in Granville Hicks's "Literary Horizons"):

> The fiction prize has been awarded to Bernard Malamud for The Magic Barrel, a work radiant with personal vision. Compassionate and profound in its wry humor, it captures the poetry of human relationships at the point where reality and imagination meet.[27]

It is clear, therefore, that the "borderland" quality to be examined in Malamud's work is not unique in American literary history. Integral to the American romance tradition, this quality has simply found its most dramatic recent expression in Malamud's fiction.

26 Nathaniel Hawthorne, The Scarlet Letter (New York and Scarborough, Ontario: New American Library, 1959), p. 45.

27 Granville Hicks, "Literary Horizons," in Saturday Review (October 12, 1963), p. 32.

(iii)

As Tony Tanner has pointed out, there exists a strong predilection for fantasy in post-war American fiction.[28] It has been this tendency, in fact, which has best defined the special nature of contemporary American writing and distinguished it from the predominantly social, representational fiction of the pre-war era. As we have seen, however, there is nothing truly novel in the presence of fantasy in American literature. In the sense of "Imagination . . . Extravagant or visionary fancy,"[29] the "fantastic" has been a literary staple in the New World. To the extent, however, that contemporary novelists have vied with one another to produce extreme forms of hallucinatory or dislocated fiction, we have a form which is distinct and idiosyncratic, a fiction of the funhouse. Here, worlds are built and destroyed in a day, and even John Barth, the master-fabricator, must admit: "Alas: for where Fancy's springs are unlevee'd by hard Experience they run too free, flooding every situation with possibilities until Prudence and even Common Sense are drowned."[30]

In an examination of Malamud's fiction, we shall see that fantastic elements of dream and imaginative play obtain throughout. These particular features show a tendency, however, to be less incredible or abstract than one might expect. In this connection, it is necessary to note Malamud's probable reliance on European Jewish materials. As Robert Alter

[28] Tanner, p. 415.

[29] Oxford English Dictionary (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1933), IV, 68.

[30] Tanner, p. 241.

remarks:

> Malamud . . . is by no means a "folk" artist, but . . . I suspect that the piquant juxtaposition in his fiction of tough, ground-gripping realism and high-flying fantasy ultimately derives from the paradoxical conjoining of those same qualities that has often characterized Jewish folklore. [31]

In other words, Malamud's "juxtaposition," though it may derive from the work of Nathaniel Hawthorne, may also have as its source the techniques of Yiddish writing. In either case, it is through this juxtaposition that Malamud is able to incorporate the fantastic into his work without foregoing the reader's ability to suspend disbelief. By giving realistic, even earthy language to fantastic characters, for example, he is able to compel his reader's belief in those figures or in highly unrealistic situations. Hence, too, he is able to avoid excessive abstraction and to maintain a sense of felt life even in apologues like "Jewbird" and "Talking Horse."[32] Like the folk-realist Yiddish masters, he has tended to draw on the material of two worlds. Unlike these Yiddish writers, however, Malamud's fusion of the sacred and profane has been thoroughly secular in nature. For, as Alfred Kazin observes:

> The otherworldly feeling in the great Jewish writers of the past was supported by a conviction that earth and heaven are connected. Malamud captures the strangeness

31 Robert Alter, "Jewishness as Metaphor," in Bernard Malamud and the Critics, ed. Leslie A. and Joyce W. Field (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1970), pp. 30-31.

32 Sheldon Norman Grebstein, "Bernard Malamud and the Jewish Movement," Bernard Malamud: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Leslie A. and Joyce W. Field (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1974), p. 27.

> of Jewish experience brilliantly, but he relies on compassion, not on the covenant.[33]

By the emphatic suggestion of a human ethical quality, and by the incorporation into his fiction of attributes associated with the fable, Malamud is able to straddle heaven and earth:

(iv)

In its treatment of the term "fable," the Oxford English Dictionary stresses elements of deception, fabrication, idleness, and falsehood. It does, however, allow for interpretation of the fable as "A short story devised to convey some useful lesson,"[34] and it is in this latter sense (though with regard to longer fiction as well) that we shall use the term. In its tendency to apply narration to highly defined themes, the fable or parable will be seen to operate in Malamud's art as a means to develop a specifically moral or spiritual dimension. There is, however, some point in acknowledging the O.E.D.'s first notions of the fable, for in its sense of the "fabulous," the fabricated, and the "extraordinary," fabulation is clearly integral to contemporary fiction.

In The Fabulators, Robert Scholes analyzes recent fabulation in terms of its "delight in design," its concern with imaginative and verbal play,[35] and its willingness to suspend the conventions of realism:

[33] Alfred Kazin, "The Magic and the Dread," in his Contemporaries (Boston and Toronto: Little, Brown and Company, 1962), p. 206.

[34] O.E.D., IV, 1.

[35] Scholes, passim.

> . . . modern fabulation, like the ancient fabling of Aesop, tends away from the representation of reality but returns toward actual human life by way of ethically controlled fantasy. Many fabulators are allegorists. But the modern fabulators allegorize in peculiarly modern ways.[36]

Though Scholes does not discuss Malamud in the course of The Fabulators, there is no reason to exclude Malamud's work entirely from a consideration of "fabulous" and innovative contemporary writing. For if his short stories and novels show an unusual dedication to the moral being of men and women, his fiction remains capable of extraordinary delight in fancy. Then, too, as Marcus Klein observes:

> Moreover, his special note has been a mysticism which compels all the discrete actualities of his knowledge to extremes. The fiction has hurried reality into myth, or into parable or exemplem or allegory, and its typical process has been a sudden transition of particularities.[37]

Therefore, though Malamud is, as Klein says, a "special case,"[38] his work is by no means without relation to that "less realistic and more artistic kind of narrative" which Scholes terms "fabulation."[39]

As a moral allegorist, Malamud gives to his fiction a sense of the ordering potential of the human spirit. "All his novels," writes Tony

[36] Scholes, p. 11.

[37] Marcus Klein, After Alienation: American Novels in Mid-Century, (Cleveland and New York: The World Publishing Company, 1962), p. 248.

[38] Klein, p. 249.

[39] Scholes, p. 12.

Tanner, "are fables or parables of the painful process from immaturity to maturity--maturity of attitudes, not of years."[40] Through allegory, the confluence of naturalist and symbolist methods, and the use of mythic and ritual archetypes, he constructs fictional worlds in which characters may dance their ageless dance. By making his novelistic worlds neither wholly "real" or "unreal," he lends to these characters a representativeness and imparts to their actions an eternal quality. By eliding realism into parable, the particular into the mythic, and the concrete into fantasy, he creates a form of the novel which conforms to Melville's dictum that fiction "should present another world, and yet one to which we feel the tie."[41] And by allowing realism, the particular, and the concrete to be reconstituted, he upholds Hawthorne's belief that romance must not "swerve aside from the truth of the human heart."[42] In sum, as Baumbach writes, Bernard Malamud, a "moral fabler and fantasist," "has extended the tradition of the American romance novel, has made the form into something uniquely and significantly his own."[43]

In the main body of this thesis we shall note the degree to which the principles of realism and attenuation of realism operate in Malamud's major fiction. Examining The Natural, The Assistant, The Fixer, and The Tenants, we shall observe both the manner in which Malamud's fictional worlds tend to approximate or diverge from the conventions of realism,

40 Tanner, p. 323.

41 Chase, p. 25.

42 Chase, p. 19.

43 Baumbach, p. 102.

and the function of those novelistic elements which have a bearing on matters of fable and fantasy.

Two points require clarification. First, it is necessary to note the rationale for A New Life's absence from this survey of Malamud's novels. The reason for this absence is simple: A New Life, though warranting critical consideration elsewhere, does not prove relevant to the conterns of this thesis. Intended by Malamud as a work in the Stendhalian tradition, it resembles the other novels in theme only. Realism prevails, undisputed in any consistent manner. Though satire and an occasional fantasy sporadically undercut its imitation of American life, no "borderland" is created, no "simultaneity of contrary effects" or "magical decomposition" is established.

The format to be followed by the parts of this thesis should also be specified. As each novel is taken up for consideration, it will be examined according to certain criteria: as a rule, the novel's approximation to realism will be noted first, and then its stylistic characteristics and its counter-realistic techniques or modes; these will tend to be followed by an examination of the novel's "fabulous" or homiletic features and by an assessment of its technical integrity.

Chapter One

The Early Novels: The Natural and The Assistant

> The metaphor is perhaps one of man's most fruitful potentialities. Its efficacy verges on magic, and it seems a tool for creation which God forgot inside one of His creatures when He made him.
>
> All our other faculties keep us within the realm of the real, of what is already there. The most we can do is to combine things or to break them up. The metaphor alone furnishes an escape; between the real things, it lets escape imaginary reefs, a crop of floating islands. [44]

(i)

The Natural

Both the first page of The Natural and the last page of The Tenants incorporate dream or fantasy. The pages which intervene, however, do not demonstrate a uniform reliance on the fantastic technique. Passages of realistic depiction alternate with those of fancy and illusion, while individual novels appear to favour one approach or the other. In this regard, The Natural,[45] a work of romance, tends to approximate the fantastic mode of fiction. It does so, however, while frequently maintaining the reader's suspension of disbelief. Indeed, through calculated varia-

[44] José Ortega y Gasset, The Dehumanization of Art (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., n.d.), pp. 30-31.

[45] Bernard Malamud, The Natural (New York, 1952; rpt. Richmond Hill, Ontario, Canada: Pocket Book, 1973). All future references are to this Pocket Book edition.

tions in style and technique, The Natural creates a world which, though impossible, is often convincing. And the reader, dazzled by the novel's rapid pace and imaginativeness, is generally prepared to concede probability to pleasure: he is willing, in effect, to assist the author in his sleight-of-hand. Where The Natural does not convince, however, is in its attempted accommodation of moral content. Because of a radical emphasis on playful fancy and non-realistic effect, its didactic features often seem extraneous. Ultimately, these features betray the novel's failure to balance and meld diverse modes and materials. That is, they manifest the technical strain implicit in the fabulist's attempt to recognize both the demands of entertainment and those of moral earnestness.

An analysis of The Natural reveals the presence of two styles. The first, that which introduces the novel, is best described as lyrical or poetic.[46] The second, easily discerned, is that of the vulgate. The latter draws on common speech, idiom, argot, or the American baseball dialect, while the former confines itself to language appropriate to the belletristic mode. By alternating or melding these two styles, Malamud attempts to evoke an interior landscape while maintaining the impression of an actual, familiar territory. Conversely, he quickens the concrete and familiar, leavening the actual with an exaggerated or lyrical diction.

As an example of Malamud's use of language, the following passage attests to craft and to an unusual conjoining of descriptive modes:

[46] Sidney Richman, Bernard Malamud (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1967), p. 46.

> Roy raised his leg. He smelled the Whammer's blood and wanted it, and through him the worm's he had with him, for the way he had insulted Sam.
>
> The third ball slithered at the batter like a meteor, the flame swallowing itself. He lifted his club to crush it into a universe of sparks but the heavy wood dragged, and though he willed to destroy the sound he heard a gong bong and realized with sadness that the ball he had expected to hit had long since been part of the past; and though Max could not cough the fatal word out of his throat, the Whammer understood he was, in the truest sense of it, out.
>
> The crowd was silent as the violet evening fell on their shoulders. (23) [47]

In this passage we are given a simple event, the strike-out of a batter. We are encouraged, however, to visualize the event not as a natural and rather ordinary occurrence, but as something of gigantic significance and legendary proportions. There is a sense, in fact, that what we are witnessing is the materialization of a mythic meeting between two gods from the celestial league. This effect derives largely from the conjoining of the mundane ("He lifted his club") with an inflated language ("to crush it into a universe of sparks").

Malamud tries through the agency of style to lend a certain resonance to potentially simple occurrences. He makes a natural event, a two-man baseball match, for example, into something both more and less than real. In this connection, Sidney Richman writes:

> Moreover, the style imposes on the novel a sense of unreality which in itself suspends disbelief in much the same fashion a fairy tale does. . . . The Natural unfolds in a never-never land in which reality and unreality have been usurped by the patterns of imagery and by the style.

[47] In all excerpts from the novels, page references will be noted in parentheses after the cited portion of the text.

> If the novel seems at times a pure psychodrama, there are other moments when it seems like nothing so much as a romance intoned by a sports-minded Brooklyner.[48]

In its application of exaggerated or poetic language to commonplace events, the novel's style renders experience on a grand scale and adapts itself with ease to the inclusion of mythic and allegorical referents.

Constructed from Homeric, Arthurian, and native American materials, The Natural is a painstakingly metaphoric rendering of life. Extended into allegory, its metaphoric structure incorporates the world in a baseball pennant race, a contest in which man may learn heroism or personal failure:

> The sweat oozed out of him. "I wanted everything." His voice boomed out in the silence.
> She waited.
> "I had a lot to give to the game."
> "Life?"
> "Baseball. If I had started out fifteen years ago like I tried to, I'da been the king of them all by now.
> "The king of what?"
> "The best in the game," he said impatiently. (141)

Roy Hobbs, the "natural," ultimately fails to enact his heroic role not so much because he confuses baseball with life, but because he fails to discern the "life," the metaphoric richness, in baseball.

If The Natural's metaphoric dimension serves as a structural device, the novel's adoption of symbols and emblems serves to fill out the text. These symbols, chosen for their resonance and decorative value, tend to be drawn from the natural world. As James Mellard writes:

[48] Richman, p. 47.

> Because of his idealization of benevolent nature, Malamud finds his dominant symbols in natural objects, the major symbols in the novels being unusually consistent with the symbolism of vegetative myths and Grail quests. For example, three symbols consistently used are birds, fish, and flowers.[49]

In The Natural, symbolism tends to be unusually obvious. Fanciful, even bizarre, it frequently forces the reader to acknowledge the novel's artifice. In the following passage, for example, we are given an unmistakably symbolic episode described in the fantastic manner:

> It happened that a woman who lived on the sixth floor of an appartment house overlooking the stadium was cleaning out her bird cage, near the end of the game, which the Knights took handily, when her canary flew out of the window and darted down across the field. Roy, who was waiting for the last out, saw something coming at him in the low rays of the sun, and leaping high, bagged it in his glove.
>
> He got rid of the bloody mess in the clubhouse can.
>
> (75)

In the context of the entire novel, this event adds to Roy Hobbs's ambiguous characterization; it suggests both his prowess and his capacity to cause harm, and symbolizes the consequences of misdirected love and misplaced ambition. Technically, it shows a defiance of novelistic probability and an abrupt departure from a relatively naturalistic baseball account. By forfeiting a degree of credibility, it gains a fantastic and symbolic effect.

The symbolic texture of The Natural is ultimately inseparable from the novel's use of myth. As with symbolism, myth tends to make itself

[49] James M. Hellard, "Four Versions of Pastoral," Bernard Malamud and the Critics, ed. Leslie A. and Joyce W. Field (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1970), p. 75.

obvious in this work, forcing its multiple allusions upon the reader and undermining an already compromised realistic narrative. In fact, through the repetition of explicit or implicit references to Homeric, Arthurian, and native American myths, The Natural takes on an added sense of artifice and allies itself with a fabulous realm.

Based loosely on various events in the history of baseball, the plot summons up the legend of America's national sport. Like Shoeless Joe Jackson in 1919, for example, Roy Hobbs participates in the fixing of a crucial game; and like Babe Ruth, he is a great slugger who succumbs to "a monumental bellyache."[50] In general, however, such allusions to specific players, teams, and athletic events are of secondary importance to baseball's role as a ritual formula for heroic action. In the tragicomic world of Malamud's fable, baseball provides the microcosm of triumph and defeat which Hemingway and Wright Morris found in the bull-ring. All life seems poured into the ball-park, all America seems in attendance. Humanity watches a few select men ennact a ritual recapitulation of the mythic life.

A further aspect of baseball's fictional role is its capacity to give a sense of condensed form and concrete actuality. It is used to give a feeling of terse immediacy and to maintain both the novel's movement and the reader's interest. In the end, however, through the accretion of other ritual and mythic systems, the nature and function of baseball is modified. By superimposing allusions to David and Goliath, for

[50] Earl R. Wasserman, "The Natural: World Ceres," Bernard Malamud and the Critics, ed., Leslie A. and Joyce W. Field (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1970), p. 46.

example, or to Sir Percy and Sir Maldemar, Malamud emphasizes baseball's kinship to other ritual and mythic cycles. Should we miss the Odyssean reference, for example:

> No, that wasn't what she meant, Harriet said. Had he ever read Homer?
> Try as he would he could only think of four bases and not a book. His head spun at her allusions. He found her lingo strange with all the college stuff and hoped she would stop it because he wanted to talk about baseball. (25)

Malamud intends the elements of baseball to act dialectically with the other elements of the novel to produce a synthesis of the real and the mythic: the solidity of one, acted upon by the imaginativeness of the others, is intended to give a tangible quality to the novel and is expected in turn to become less tangible. The application of this purpose, however, is both a success and a failure. For though the symbolic and the literal aspects succeed in a partial melding of qualities, the novel's inclusion of non-realistic elements proves too liberal for the maintenance of a general realistic effect.

It would be pointless to delineate all the mythic references and parallels in The Natural, for this subject has been well handled by the critics.[51] It is sufficient to note that mythic elements occur with great frequency, and to observe the manner in which Roy's identity differs from the image of the true fertility god.

[51] Norman Podhoretz (in "Achilles in Left Field"), for example, has dealt with the Homeric similarities; Earl Wasserman (in "The Natural: World Ceres") has commented on the Arthurian and fertility cycle parallels; and Robert Ducharme (in Art and Idea in the Novels of Bernard Malamud) has noted correspondences between Roy as an American quester and Daniel Boone, Ike McCaslin, Ahab, and Jay Gatsby.

Modeled after the fertility god and the Grail knight, Roy has a position which implies a certain potential for good. Unlike these figures, however, he is not in the "game" to redeem a social situation or to serve a highest good. Rather, he wants to be "the best in the game," the player to break the most records, and for this reason his failure is inevitable. For in the final analysis, no individual in Malamud's moral universe is entitled to success if he seeks only for himself. Success can come only with a willingness to serve and to suffer for others, and Roy learns this, if at all, when it is too late. There is, therefore, no final victory for the "natural" and no infusion by him of spiritual life into the community. In the end, though Iris Lemon is pregnant with Roy's child and though Roy understands he must "suffer again" (217), the novel closes on a bleak note. The only hope left to the world of the novel is the brief suggestion that Herman Youngberry, the new natural, may be a less selfish--and hence a less vulnerable--fertility god.

Malamud's novel is finally less like an account of actual events than a vision or a nightmare. Indeed, as Baumbach remarks, The Natural "is fluid and magical--the landscape of a dream."[52] Beyond the inclusion of isolated surrealistic elements, in other words, there exists a general sense of unreality, of unconscious phantasm: it often seems, in fact, that The Natural transpires beneath the surface of reality. This indicates the dialectically subordinate position of the realistic principle. That is, despite Malamud's organization of The Natural around a baseball narrative, the relatively realistic narrative line is so qualified and

[52] Baumbach, p. 108.

obscured by non-representational elements as to be subordinated to a general non-realistic effect.

Quite apart from those scenes which fuse fantasy and objective description, there are many episodes in The Natural which do not demonstrate a realistic texture. Some of these scenes turn the novel's focus from a description of externals to a rendering of dream experience, thereby reinforcing an extreme subjective or surreal quality and evoking a sense of mysterious, even occult, spirit. Cumulatively, these dream sequences give the impression of a solid but limited waking world poised over undefined depths. Similarly, The Natural contains an hypnotic episode which suggests an awesome and bottomless quality to the subconscious:

> . . . Roy felt himself going off . . . way way down, drifting through the tides into golden water as he searched for this fish, or mermaid, or whatever you called her. His eyes grew big in the seeking, first fish eyes, then bulbous frog eyes. Sailing lower into the pale green sea, he sought everywhere for the reddish glint of her scales, until the water became dense and dark green and then everything gradually got so black he lost all sight of where he was. When he tried to rise up into the light he couldn't find it. (63)

If the mind's inner workings are used to suggest a mysterious and unreal reality, a symbolic natural world is used to invoke a sense of primitive and superstitious immediacy. Nature, in apparent complicity with the novel's events, shows a tendency to reflect or react to specifically human situations. At times its intimacy can be oppressive:

> Time was after them with a bludgeon. Any game they lost was the last to lose. It was autumn almost. They saw leaves falling and shivered at the thought of the barren winds of winter. (160)

Both the sun and the moon figure prominently in The Natural. Indeed, with the novel's frequent juxtaposition of night to day and dark to light, the two luminaries seem central and polar symbols. Hence, if the surface world of baseball appears ruled by the sun, the subconscious world of the psyche seems ruled by the moon.

When Roy dives beneath the surface of Lake Michigan, he does so in moonlight. Recapitulating the hypnosis episode, this experience probes the dark depths of his history:

> As he sank lower it got darker and colder but he kept going down. Before long the water turned murky yet there was no bottom he could feel with his hands. . . . At last in the murk he touched the liquid mud at the bottom. . . .
>
> So he forced himself, though sleepily, to somersault up and begin the slow task of climbing through all the iron bars of the currents . . . too slow, too tasteless, and he wondered was it worth it.
>
> Opening his bloodshot eyes he was surprised how far down the moonlight had filtered. It dripped down like oil in the black water. (145-146)

Like the sub-surface worlds of the lake and of Roy's soul, the mood underlying much of this text is night-bound and lunar. Appropriately, it is the night which closes the novel, bringing to fulfillment Roy's vision of the man "who had been walking in bright sunshine" disappearing into a "mist." (179)

By stressing the peculiar intimacy of nature, Malamud contrives to suggest a magical or mythic quality to life. Similarly, by emphasizing dreams and the subconscious, he correlates the human psyche and the subterranean spirit of that natural world. What we are given, therefore, is something akin to that "magical decomposition" referred to at the be-

ginning of this thesis. Though specificity of detail is evident in the novel, the realistic nature of this work is deliberately attenuated. Contours are softened or dissolved, and even the "natural" is inferred to have a real mystery. In sum, the novel allows a certain denial of actuality, tending to imply the presence of a coterminous dimension in which the strange, the surreal, and the unfathomable are intimated.

Like Saul Bellow's Henderson the Rain King, The Natural is a work of romance and an exercise in the fantastic.[53] However, unlike Bellow's relatively homogeneous comic fantasy, Malamud's novel tends to evoke a sinister as well as a comic landscape. Therefore, though the level of baseball narrative is modified by fantastic comedy, the haunted subconscious level of The Natural is characterized by a fantasy of dark suggestiveness. An example of the latter form is the scene in which Roy fears that Memo Paris has struck a young boy on a country road. Here, amid several references to the moon, Roy sees what is clearly an image of his own youth:

> Squinting through the windshield, he was unable to tell if the kid was an illusion thrown forth by the trees or someone really alive. After fifteen seconds he was still there. Roy yelled to Memo to slow down in case he wanted to cross the road. Instead, the car shot forward so fast the woods blurred, the trees racing along like shadows in weak light, then skipping into black and white, finally all black and the moon was gone. (110)

More or less convinced that Memo has hit the boy, he orders her to stop. She refuses, claims she has struck nothing animate, and tells Roy that

[53] Baumbach, p. 35.

the groan he heard was his own. Intended to symbolize the killing of Roy's potential (and to symbolize also his passive cooperation in this death), this scene ennacts in dark fantasy what has been happening in fact. In this way, the fantastic is used to mirror and heighten the "real," and is in turn invested with greater realism.

Elements of fantasy and the fantastic abound in The Natural. Some of these elements reflect a comic impulse while others serve a tragic sense, but each acts to undermine the novel's realistic surface. Through the use of fantasy and the fantastic mode, the world of the novel is further dissociated from conventional naturalistic conceptions of reality. Sentences like the following, for example, with their wide mimetic angle and counter-realist content, can only further the dissolution of realistic texture: "The raft with the singing green-eyed siren guarding the forbidden flame gave off into the rotting flood a scuttering one-eyed rat." (174)

The "fable," whether in a short or an extended form, can express or refrain from expressing a didactic purpose.[54] If it chooses to incorporate a didactic element, we may refer to it as a moral fable, noting the manner in which it tends to organize around a moral centre. In addition, the fable will show a predilection for vividness of story, narrative fancy, and delight in exaggeration of style. In the event, however, that such a work is concerned more with the "moral" than with the tale, it will tend to restrain the openness of its "formal and verbal dexterity"[55] in

[54] Scholes, passim.

[55] Scholes, p. 67.

favour of didactic content. It will put the "message" before the tale and will subordinate autonomous fancy to some sort of concentrated depiction. In general, the more this message is meant to affect the reader, the more the fable will tend to embody a realistic rendering of the world.[56]

The Natural implies, essentially through the character of Iris Lemon, that man must be willing to suffer for others, that "Suffering is what brings us toward happiness" (143), and that the hero can be heroic only if he works for the good of all. Therefore, if the fable is a story with a moral concern radiating outwards from its centre, The Natural is by definition a fable. In the course of reading this work--and more particularly in retrospect--one receives the impression of a very conscious didactic purpose. In The Natural, we do not have the conventional novel's adherence to objectivity, analysis, and mimetic responsibility: rather, we are given a work founded on a priori assumptions and making no claim to induction and impartiality. The Natural's apparent first priority is revealed to be nothing more than the promotion of a good moral in a good tale. Significantly, the fanciful, the illusory, and the poetic are not eschewed, their trifling with probability being held no doubt to generate fictional excitement. In sum, we have in The Natural an example of the extended parable: in its insistence upon the preconceived moral (upon a

[56] It is clear, therefore, that the presentation of a moral fable, especially in the extended form incorporating both realistic and fantastic qualities, requires great control. For if the realistic side of a fable is over-emphasized, the moral may seem unnatural or "fantastic," and if the fable's fantastic side is allowed to predominate, the same moral may seem a thematic afterthought.

lesson which relates to human nature or conduct), in its willingness to indulge in narrative fancy, and in its enthusiasm for the telling of a good tale, this novel reflects the general features of the fable.

"At his worst," writes Jonathan Baumbach, "Malamud has a predilection for manipulating his characters, denying them self-motion, in order to accommodate the anti-novelistic demands of his moral allegory."[57] In The Natural, this predilection declares itself in an immediate tendency to invent rather than develop character. Here, one has the sense that the familiar accretion of attributes is all but absent. Instead, identity seems subject to instant creation, the relative value of each figure being decided by its capacity to typify or represent a particular facet of creation.[58] Hence, even in the figures of Roy and Iris, The Natural's characters seem two-dimensional emblems. Representing greed, hypocrisy, goodness, corruption, and so on, they stand in an identifiable relation to each other, forming a specific configuration of human experience. Moreover, the many mythic and legendary allusions add to this sense of emblematic preordination.

As an allegory, The Natural constructs a more or less complete, if idiosyncratic, ideational frame of reference. In this connection, Robert Scholes's comments on realism and allegory are pertinent:

> Allegory amounts to seeing life through ideational filters

[57] Baumbach, p. 111.

[58] This thesis distinguishes between allegory and fable by stressing the former's articulation of two "levels" and its development of an "analogous structure of ideas or events" (Karl Beckson and Arthur Ganz, Literary Terms: A Dictionary, p. 8).

> provided by philosophy or theology. When realism supplanted allegory as the great form of serious narrative, it claimed to be superior because it looked directly at life—without filters of any kind. . . .
>
> Allegory also depends upon types, but the types of allegory are referable to a philosophy and theology concerned with ideals and essences; while the types of realism are referable to social sciences concerned with recording and understanding the processes that govern existence. [59]

If we read "moral vision" for "philosophy and theology," Scholes's remarks are applicable to The Natural. It is evident that, in this novel at least, Malamud's intention is to create a moral allegory from the elements of his narrative. As a result, The Natural is finally an exploration and delineation of Roy Hobbs's soul: the novel does not attempt to allegorize from Roy to some theological or political world-view; rather, it refers, through the traditional agents of journey, quest, and emblem, to the depths and the potential for moral strength which are present in the human soul.

In the epigraph to this chapter, Ortega y Gasset comments on the magical efficacy of the metaphor. Its role, he says, is to provide an escape from the merely literal by coaxing forth imaginary worlds from the simple texture of the real; its function, in his view, is a defiance of mimetic consistency and of the limits of actuality. This understanding of metaphor and of imaginative creation is objectified in The Natural; this romance, employing a variety of metaphoric and non-realistic techniques, defies probability as often as it recognizes it. By an impressive manipulation of technical modes, it presents a world in which imagination does

[59] Scholes, pp. 100-101.

justice to the "floating islands" referred to by Ortega y Gasset.

In general, The Natural suspends disbelief. Its metaphoric creations engage and hold our interest, and its modulation of techniques compels a certain credibility. Nevertheless, two problems arise. The first is an occasional creation of disbelief by the novel's periodic inclusion of immoderate fantasy. When credibility is undermined in this manner, the artifice of the work is exposed and the author's hand revealed. This, however, is a relatively minor problem.

The second and more serious problem, alluded to at the beginning of this chapter, is The Natural's failure to balance its dialectical components vis à vis its didactic content. Insofar as this moral content is concerned, the novel fails to provide an adequate impression of actuality; by favouring fancy and fantasy rather than realism, it undercuts the fundamental sense of reality necessary to the affective power of ethical or humanistic considerations. This imbalance causes too great a "magical decomposition" for the moral and human aspects of the novel. This decomposition is effective, therefore, only in connection with the non-didactic side of The Natural.

The second problem is the difficulty faced by most fabulists. In an attempt to compose a work which will both please and instruct, the writer of extended fables must always be aware of the conflicting demands implicit in his purpose. On one hand, the element of delight in fabrication is bound to assert an almost independent energy; on the other hand, the element of moral instruction will insist on imagination's restraint. The question is clearly one of balance, of the author's finding the correct

ratio between the play of the imagination and the inclusion of didactic material. There can be no simple formula, for there exists an infinite variety of "morals" and as many narrative variables. Some fables will embody a human and affective content, while others, perhaps more concerned with delight in story and artifice, will settle for the appropriation of a less profound truth. Success will depend in either case on the author's ability to guage and structure the properties and effects of his diverse materials. This thesis holds that The Assistant and The Fixer, for example, though very different works, demonstrate a balanced apportioning of elements. On the other hand, it holds that The Natural succeeds only in its parts. Taken either as a fantasy or as a moral tale, this novel is a more or less satisfying fiction. Taken as a single work of art incorporating both facets, it seems poorly coordinated.

To reiterate: whatever value non-representational modes may offer a non-didactic fiction (or a satirically didactic literature as consistently fantastic as Gulliver's Travels), these modes may represent a danger to that species of "moral" literature which stresses recognizably human situations. If used in conjunction with the depiction of a familiar human predicament, these modes must be sensitively handled. They must not be permitted to dominate the fiction. Therefore, given that The Natural is informed by, and periodically stresses, a relatively familiar human situation and moral problem, this work cannot afford to place imaginative autonomy before realistic fidelity. In this sense, the absence of "flesh and blood human beings" can only subvert The Nat-

ural's thematic intention.[60]

In conclusion, this is a novel at odds with itself; it seems finally either an entertainment weighed down by extraneous moral considerations or a moral fable vitiated by excessive play. Despite its considerable triumphs, it must be said to demonstrate a technical imbalance, a formal ambiguity, and a failure to resolve the disparate claims of imaginative autonomy and moral seriousness. Though its rendering of a fantastic world unquestionably charms, engrosses, and haunts, it is simply too unreal too often to bear the solid matter of basic moral themes. Precisely for this reason, however, The Natural, Malamud's most "fantastic" novel, provides a model against which we may measure the attenuation of realism in the author's later work.

[60] Baumbach, p. 8.

(ii)

The Assistant

If The Natural is primarily a work of fantasy, The Assistant,[61] Malamud's second novel, is for the most part a realistic creation. Here again, however, the novel's realism is modified by non-mimetic techniques. Indeed, while adhering to the conventions of realistic fiction, The Assistant evokes a sense of metaphoric as well as mimetic particularity. Eliding realism into fable, it transmutes a naturalistic account of hope and hardship into a parable of human potential.

In Love and Death in the American Novel, Leslie Fiedler writes:

> . . . The Natural creates a magical universe-- . . . The special tone of The Natural, its lovely, absurd madness, tends to disappear from Malamud's later work, except in the title story of his short-story collection The Magic Barrel; and with that tone goes the poetic language that sustained it. In The Assistant, he turns back to the muted, drab world of the Depression as remembered two decades later, and the quality of his prose is adapted to the denial of the marvelous to which he has committed himself.[62]

Fiedler's lament for the "marvelous," however, represents a shallow reading of The Assistant. Though it is true that a "lovely, absurd madness" belongs to The Natural and not to the later novel, it is not true that The Assistant is, as Fiedler would suggest, without magic. In fact, both

[61] Bernard Malamud, The Assistant (New York, 1957; rpt. New York: Dell, 1971). All references are to this Dell edition.

[62] Leslie Fiedler, Love and Death in the American Novel (New York: Dell Publishing Company, 1966), p. 493.

the marvelous and a "poetic language" are present in this work and are instrumental in determining its final, not unmagical effect. Hence, though they are not as obvious here as in the first novel, these elements continue to obtain and to attest to Malamud's denial not of the marvelous but of materialism. In the pages which follow, we shall note the manner in which these elements enliven and transform the realistic landscape. First establishing the ways in which the novel's conventional aspects determine its texture and surface, we shall examine the extent to which this fable benefits from the inclusion of specific non-conventional features.

Reflecting the growth of realism in Malamud's early fiction, The Assistant gives a detailed specificity to its limited environment. The world in which Frank Alpine and the Bobers move is described in a precise and thorough manner: the Bober house and store and the immediate milieu in Brooklyn are given a detailed rendering and a definite solidity of setting. Curiously static and heavy in its naturalistic delineation and ambience, this circumscribed environment is endowed--by passages like the following--with a general substantiality:

> Morris went back to waiting. In twenty-one years the store had changed little. Twice he had painted all over, once added new shelving. The old-fashioned double windows at the front a carpenter had made into a large single one. Ten years ago the sign hanging outside fell to the ground but he had never replaced it. Once, when business hit a long good spell, he had had the wooden icebox ripped out and a new white refrigerated showcase put in. The showcase stood at the front in line with the old counter and he often leaned against it as he stared out of the window. Otherwise the store was the same. Years ago it was more a delicatessen; now, though he still sold a little delicatessen, it was

more a poor grocery. (3)

As The Assistant's predominant setting, this dark but carefully articulated world defines the novel's geographical centre.

In terms of characterization, too, The Assistant reflects a realistic impulse. As Theodore Solotaroff writes:

> If The Assistant came as a revelation, as it did for me, partly the reason was that it restored a sense of the dynamics of character and of the older intention of fiction to show the ways men change. Despite its small compass and thinness of social reference, The Assistant could thus take on some of the power and clarity of the great 19th-century novels. . . ." [63]

Hence, in its development of complex characterization, and in its depiction of an individual's maturation, this novel allies itself with the realistic tradition. Its central characters, described or revealed with subtlety, do not manifest the allegorical shallowness of The Natural's figures, but tend to demonstrate an approximation to recognizable human conduct and personality. Morris, for example, is not merely a personification of goodness. A moral exemplar, he is nevertheless a realistic character capable of bitterness, weakness, anger, error, and ill-will. Similarly, Frank, Helen, and Ida reveal both positive and negative moral attributes.

If not the most important of the means by which The Assistant's realism is attenuated, style is the most subtle. One notable stylistic

[63] Theodore Solotaroff, "The Old Life and the New," Bernard Malamud and the Critics, ed., Leslie A. and Joyce W. Field (New York: New York University Press, 1970), p. 241.

factor is the marked interrogative quality present in many passages: that is, an unusual number of sentences imply or indicate a question of some kind. Often this interrogative sense is simply a matter of inflection or rhetoric, but in context and cumulatively it contributes an overtone of mundane and metaphysical uncertainty. Moreover, the Job-like character of many of these questions occasionally makes the work seem a moral enquiry into the nature of human existence, and this tends slightly to diminish the prominence of the realistic narrative.

Many of the interrogative passages are influenced by The Assistant's use of Yiddish syntactical and rhetorical structures. On a larger scale, this accommodation of Yiddish idiom and syntactical mannerisms is one of the novel's essential stylistic components. The speech of Morris, Ida, Breitbart, and Helen (at least in conversation with her parents) reflects not merely the Anglo-Yiddish dialect's interesting constructions, but incorporates also its capacity to render human uncertainty. It is an idiom, writes John Alexander Allen, "from which non-essentials have been pared away as though by centuries of understatement and forbearance."[64] As such, it seems well suited to a depiction of reduced circumstances.

In her study of the schlemiel-figure, Ruth Wisse remarks that "the richness of the language" in East European Yiddish literature "in some way compensates for the poverty it describes."[65] And in The Assistant,

[64] John Alexander Allen, "The Promised End: Bernard Malamud's The Tenants," Bernard Malamud: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Leslie A. and Joyce W. Field (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1974), p. 111.

[65] Ruth R. Wisse, The Schlemiel as Modern Hero (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), p. 54.

this compensating factor accounts in large part for the fact that Bober's world does not impress us as totally dark and void. If there is some sense of animation in Morris' grocery store, that sense derives in part from the emotional language which graces or afflicts it. Without that language, the naturalistic account of poverty into which it is woven would be a great deal more oppressive. Even in the form of Ida's sarcastic and unforbearing overstatements--"Give him for twenty-nine dollars five rooms so he should spit in your face" (6)--this idiomatic speech has an enlivening vigour.

In an essay entitled "The Magic and the Dread," Alfred Kazin observes that there is a provisional quality in the dialogue of Malamud's Jewish characters:

> This is the talk of people who are not merely on edge but who really live on the edge. Their tense expressiveness is one of the cultural symbols of the Jews, in art as in religion; . . . there is a Doomsday terseness to Jewish speech--as if the book of life were about to close shut with a bang. Malamud has caught this quality with an intimacy of understanding that is utterly remarkable. [66]

Uneasy and unsettled, the language of The Assistant's Jewish characters both undercuts the technical "solidity" of the external landscape and reinforces or upholds that landscape in terms of its precarious permanence. Furthermore, by stressing without parodying the idiomatic speech of his several characters, Malamud focuses greater attention upon their inner worlds.

[66] Alfred Kazin, Contemporaries (Boston and Toronto: Little, Brown and Company, 1962), p. 204.

The Assistant's narrative style is composed of different but not contradictory modes. On the one hand, the narrative voice itself frequently accommodates the impression of dialect:

> During the week that Morris lay in bed with a thickly bandaged head, Ida tended the store fitfully. She went up and down twenty times a day until her bones ached and her head hurt with all her worries. Helen stayed home Saturday, a half-day in her place, and Monday, to help her mother, but she could not risk longer than that, so Ida, who ate in snatches and worked up a massive nervousness, had to shut the store for a full day, although Morris angrily protested. (31)

On the other hand, when not focusing on the older Jewish characters, the style often takes on a lyrical quality. In concentrating on Helen and Frank, for example, as on Morris' memories of youth or of his dead son Ephraim, the narrative voice generally embodies a lyrical element:

> She listened to the quiet sound of the rain in the street, making it in her mind into spring rain, though spring was weeks away; and within the rain grew all sorts of flowers; and amid the spring flowers, in this flowering dark--a sweet spring night--she lay with him in the open under new stars and a cry rose to her throat. (167)

By using both an idiomatic vulgate and a belletristic style, Malamud gives to his novel a more complex definition and a slightly less naturalistic ambience. For as Richman notes, the novel's alternation between or conjoining of different modes creates a "poetic" effect:

> Even if not idiomatic for the most part, the style swings constantly between the countering claims of ironic understatement and lyricism, harshness and softness; or it fuses together into what Baumbach has called a "gnarled poetry." But it is, in effect, the poetry of the actual and the pos-

sible.[67]

The influence of this "gnarled poetry" is extensive and very subtle. Through its fusion of a lyrical and rhythmical expression with an earthy language, The Assistant's texture is made less photographic and more imaginative, its naturalistic surface is lightened in tone, and its attention to harsh actuality moderated. In this manner, the poetic style, by suggesting the "possible" as well as the actual, causes The Assistant's over-all mimetic angle to be slightly widened.

It stands to reason that The Assistant's style should demonstrate a poetic level; given the novel's concern with human spiritual potential, it is likely to employ techniques less naturalistic than those used by writers like Zola or Dreiser. For where these latter novelists wished to emphasize the involuntary and deterministic relationships existing between man and environment, Malamud wishes to emphasize the individual's ability to grow spiritually and in moral freedom from his surroundings. As a result, Malamud, unlike the naturalists, stresses not only material details as they obtain in environment and character, but stresses also the independence of character from external materiality. In consequence of this, and in adjusting form to content, he gives to his novel stylistic and technical elements designed to suggest an internal as well as an external reality. For example, in style, as we have seen, he gives a resonance of language to his main characters: their speech, intended to establish a breadth and depth of personality, is allowed considerable

[67] Richman, p. 77.

play; in order to refine and deepen their identities, Malamud gives their expression poetic or lyrical dimensions.

Similarly, various techniques are used in The Assistant to impart a "magic" to essentially dismal conditions. In essence, these techniques are somewhat counter-naturalistic. Ultimately, they affirm the potency of human attributes and suggest the reality of spirit rather than that of matter and environment. In the technique of symbolism, for example, the novel finds a means to transform and leaven its immediate naturalistic context.

By incorporating symbolic patterns into his narrative, Malamud gives to his story a greater representativeness. As a result, realistic particularity is slightly attenuated, but because of the simplicity of the basic patterns, narrative intensity is not lost. The symbols most commonly used are related to very ordinary circumstances: they reflect a close rendering of immediate experience and draw heavily from the natural world. Symbolic patterns of light and dark, for example, organize the motion of the novel with great consistency. Similarly, bird, beast, and flower imagery appears with marked frequency, and emblematic items are displayed for special effect.

As an example of The Assistant's symbolic technique, the following passage indicates the manner in which Malamud gives resonance to the depiction of event. In this episode, Morris has just collapsed. He will need time to recover from his ill-health, and Frank, seeking a means to expiate past sins, seizes the opportunity to step into the grocer's role:

As he ran down the stairs he could hear Ida moaning. Frank

> hurried into the back of the store. The Jew lay white and motionless on the couch. Frank gently removed his apron. Draping the loop over his own head, he tied the tapes around him.
>
> "I need the experience," he muttered. (63)

In context, this episode is extremely significant, for it marks the point at which Frank is invested with his initial responsibilities as a grocer. This is a ritual moment in that process of succession and regeneration which forms the structural continuum of the novel. At this point, Morris and Frank stand in ritual relation to each other: Morris, "the Jew," represents an old father, old god figure, while Frank implies the inevitability of youthful succession. In other words, given Frank's donning of the apron, we are meant to understand this passage as signifying a ritual succession from master to disciple, or from priest to novice, or from failing god to potent god. The apron represents a ritual garment related to the prayer-shawl or cowl, and as such symbolizes the acceptance of responsibility, obeisance, and self-abnegation. Symbolically, therefore, by his simple act of taking Morris' apron, Frank marks himself as a ritual and a literal successor to the grocer.

In the manner noted above, The Assistant's symbolism contributes to the novel's ritual and mythic level. Indeed, by melding symbol and reality, Malamud, as Richman observes, is able to synthesize "a ritual form utterly original and harmonious."[68] This form, based on the mythic elements of a seasonal cycle of death and renewal, provides The Assistant with an added structural cogency.

[68] Richman, p. 97.

The novel's action parallels the seasonal round to an extent unusual even in twentieth century literature. Examples of climatic synchronicity abound. Cumulatively they suggest that man and nature are held in a relentless pattern of interrelationship, the seasonal index serving to reflect the synchronous activities of man:

> Malamud uses the changing of the seasons and the seasons themselves as physical symbols, providing his timeless and placeless New York landscape with a kind of metaphysical climate.[69]

In this "metaphysical climate," man must be wary of nature's power. Morris, hungry for spring, ignores the seasonal cues, and dies. On March the thirty-first, saying "What kind of winter can be in April?" (269), he goes out to shovel snow and gets pneumonia. Similarly, a month or so earlier, an unseasonably warm February had served as the background to Helen and Frank's disastrous meeting in the park. A period of false spring, it marked the destruction of premature hopes for fulfillment.

This thorough seasonal paralleling helps create the impression of a mythic tale, an impression which causes a slight diminution of the novel's sense of narrative realism. However, because the social and family drama is sufficiently self-sustaining to absorb most non-realistic effects, this seasonal paralleling results primarily in the addition of resonance to the narrative. Similarly, though The Assistant's ritual relationships may seem somewhat contrived, they qualify the impression of narrative objectivity without decreasing the story's effective impact.

[69] Baumbach, p. 120.

The dominant relationship in the novel is that of father to son: Sam and Nat Pearl, Julius and Louis Karp, Detective and Ward Minogue, are all father and son pairs. The most important pair, however, is clearly that of Morris and Frank. Morris, like Leopold Bloom, is a father in search of a son, a paternal figure with one daughter and a dead son. Like Bloom, he is an incarnation of fatherhood, an almost archetypal father-figure.

The relationship between Morris and Frank is resonant with mythic and ritual overtones. There is something biblical in their situation--"But the grocer had set his heart against his assistant and would not let him stay" (241)--and there is a sense that these two characters are re-capitulating an ageless and fundamental action. This action, culminating in the burial scene in which Frank "dances" on Morris' coffin, is an expression of what Tony Tanner refers to as "Malamud's favourite regeneration myth--the ritual slaying of the old failing father figure."[70] This myth in turn represents the form given to the pattern of moral redemption and rebirth which is at the heart of the novel.

Before the novel's action is half completed, Helen and Frank engage in the following conversation:

> They walked in silence. Helen was moved. But why, she thought, all the sad music?
> "I'm awfully sorry."
> "It was years ago."
> "It was a tragic thing to happen."
> "I couldn't expect better," he said.
> "Life renews itself."
> "My luck stays the same."

[70] Tanner, p. 332.

> "Go on with your plans for an education."
> "That's about it," Frank said. "That's what I got to do." (121)

The education he has to "go on with," however, is not the college education to which they refer. Rather, it is a ritual tutelage under Helen's father. Indeed, the instruction received in this manner represents the only means by which Frank's "luck" can be changed and his life renewed. Only by taking up Morris' burden, literally as well as figuratively, can his "new life" be established.

By the novel's end, Frank's regeneration is complete. Taking over Morris' role in order to atone for his crimes and to gain Helen's forgiveness and love, his "heart," his identity, is acquired through self-sacrifice. Ultimately, his function is recognized even by Ida and Helen:

> As they toiled up the stairs they heard the dull cling of the register in the store and knew the grocer was the one who had danced on the grocer's coffin. (280)

Finally, with the ritualistic circumcision and conversion to Judaism, Frank's rebirth and incarnation of Morris' role is established. At this point, Frank has in effect become Morris' spiritual son and has completed the novel's ultimate paternal relationship.

The rendering of Frank's moral development, notes Jonathan Baumbach, unites "the disparate concerns of mythic ritual and conventional realism."[71] This partially symbolic and mythic depiction of Frank's spiritual rebirth effects a certain qualification of the novel's realistic

[71] Baumbach, p. 121.

texture, but it does so without causing The Assistant to lose affective power. The reason for this successful accommodation of myth and "lyrical symbolism"[72] is twofold: first, unlike The Natural, this novel blends and assimilates its myth and symbols into the material of the text; and second, The Assistant anchors its narrative so firmly in an immediate and realistic context that the story, bearing the moral content of the novel, cannot be displaced or seriously weakened.

In the end, by stressing a consistent intensity, The Assistant is able to use mythic ritual and symbol to the creation of an original effect. In fact, as Richman observes:

> Ambivalent from first to last, undercut by currents of ritual and realism, The Assistant seems to belong to no convention unless it be to Dostoevsky's fiercely visionary "extra-realism." [73]

Indeed, like the Russian's extra-realism, the over-all technique of The Assistant generates a unique kind of realistic conviction. Despite its inclusion of improbability and exaggeration, it impresses us with the real-ness of its world.

It is necessary to remark that an impression of felt life need not depend upon a strict adherence to the rendering of ordinary reality. By heightening or exaggerating certain effects beyond the limits of probability, a work may convey the sensation of intense actuality. Hence the success of Dostoevsky's extra-realism and of Malamud's best fiction. In

[72] Richman, p. 48.

[73] Richman, p. 143.

The Assistant, this heightening of effect takes many forms. It appears, for example, in an exaggeration of diction and description: "He coughed harshly, his face lit like a tomato." (6) It appears in a semifantastic rendering of event, and it is evident in the novel's superstition and fatalism.

Regarding the last of these qualities, it must be noted that The Assistant reflects a primitive and deterministic view of circumstances. As the seasons order life, so there seems a fixed wheel of fate regulating the quotidien fortunes of the characters. Luck seems a finite commodity distributed without regard for merit but with great consistency. Morris, for example, unlike the undeserving Karp, can rely only on difficulty:

> The grocer, on the other hand, had never altered his fortune, unless degrees of poverty meant alteration, for luck and he were, if not natural enemies, not good friends. (17)

In fact, Morris and luck exclude and draw apart from each other. Similarly, as Baumbach notes, "Melodramatic circumstances (fate as authorial prerogative)"[74] conspire against Frank and Helen. Indeed, the situation of each of the characters appears fixed in a fatalistic pattern. For the Karps and the Pearls, that pattern is beneficent, but for the others it is malign. Breitbart, for example, his very name an irony, is possessed of a damned life. Cursed with the "seven year itch," his existence is emblematic of static poverty and hopelessness.

The influence of fatalism upon The Assistant is extensive and generalized. Ultimately, it causes the novel to seem both slightly more and

[74] Baumbach, p. 119.

slightly less than real. But precisely because its effect is general and not periodic, it does not disturb the text's credibility. That is, by informing rather than punctuating the novel, it is able to envelop the action, to pervade it, and to give The Assistant an atmosphere of ambivalent mystery. Naturalism is obscured, but to the benefit of a primitive human sense of vulnerability and dark predestination.

Added to a fictional context already influenced by myth, symbol, and fatalism, fantasy further qualifies the realistic texture of The Assistant. But if fantasy was permitted extensive play in The Natural, this second novel, as H. E. Francis points out, restrains its expression:

> Like The Natural (1952) and The Magic Barrel (1958), this novel is a mixture of fantasy and naturalism. But here Malamud minimizes the fantasy, used unsuccessfully in The Natural, . . . [75]

In The Assistant, fantasy does not represent a contradiction of physical possibility, for there are in this novel none of the impossible marvels encountered in The Natural. Rather, fantasy and fantastic description are used to promote poetic effect, to leaven the real, and to refine depictions of the inner reality of characters and of situations.

As an example of The Assistant's fantasy, the following passage demonstrates evocative compression. In this episode, Frank is dreaming of Helen:

> That night he dreamed he was standing in the snow outside her window. His feet were bare yet not cold. He had

[75] H. E. Francis, "Bernard Malamud's Everyman," Midstream (Winter, 1961), p. 93.

> waited a long time in the falling snow, and some of it lay on his head and had all but frozen his face; but he waited longer until, moved by pity, she opened the window and flung something out. It floated down; . . . Then when he looked again the window was shut tight, sealed with ice. Even as he dreamed, he knew it had never been open. There was no such window. He gazed down at his hand for the flower and before he could see it wasn't there, felt himself wake. (223-224)

Explicitly embodied in the framework of a dream, this fantasy is intended not as outright counter-realism, but as a means by which the inner reality of Frank Alpine may be evoked in as direct a manner as possible. And this, in effect, is the purpose of most of The Assistant's fantasy. In H. E. Francis' words, this device is "woven into" The Assistant's "realism with all the rich suggestiveness of poetry."[76] It is meant, in other words, to supplant straight naturalistic depiction without denying realistic effect.

Another example of The Assistant's moderate fantasy is the episode in which a "skinny stranger" offers to set fire to Morris' store. In this episode Malamud deliberately balances the narrative between actuality and fantasy. Implying through a grotesqueness of depiction the possible unreality of this scene, he melds the fantastic and the realistic in a description of great suggestiveness:

> At the counter stood a skinny man in an old hat and a dark overcoat down to his ankles. His nose was long, throat gaunt, and he wore a wisp of red beard on his bony chin.
>
> "A gut shabos," said the scarecrow.
>
> "A gut shabos," Morris answered, though shabos was a day away.

[76] Francis, p. 93.

> "It smells here," said the skinny stranger, his small eyes shrewd, "like a open grave." (254)

Devilish, this stranger is related to Al Marcus' personification of death:

> "If I stay home, somebody in a high hat is gonna walk up the stairs and put a knock on my door. This way let him at least move his bony ass around and try to find me." (103)

In both cases, we are given a mildly fantastic description designed to deepen the immediacy of character, event, and atmosphere.

Though The Assistant qualifies its realistic texture through the restrained use of devices like dream and exaggeration, its final extra-realistic effect is determined largely by more generalized means. In particular, by constructing the novel from metaphoric materials and by making The Assistant's setting a situational metaphor, Malamud gives to his novel a subjective and imaginative condition.

For Malamud, the Jew serves as a representative man and the history of the Jews as a dramatization of the human situation:

> " . . . I handle the Jew as a symbol of the tragic experience of man existentially. I try to see the Jew as universal man. Every man is a Jew though he may not know it. The Jewish drama is a . . . symbol of the fight for existence in the highest possible human terms. Jewish history is God's gift of drama." [77]

In turn, as Robert Alter notes, "Malamud's central metaphor for Jewishness is imprisonment."[78] As a result, in his three finest novels to date,

[77] Leslie A. and Joyce W. Field, eds., Bernard Malamud: A Collection of Critical Essays (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1974), p. 7. The quotation is found in the Fields's Introduction.

[78] Alter, p. 33.

The Assistant, The Fixer, and The Tenants, we discover a metaphoric drama, an imprisonment of some description, and at least one Jewish character at the centre of the narrative action.

In The Assistant, the "prison" takes shape as Morris' grocery. The situational metaphor for precarious survival and the curtailment of human expression, it serves as the setting for a dramatization of timeless desperation:

> His store was always a marginal one, up today, down tomorrow--as the wind blew. Overnight business could go down enough to hurt; yet as a rule it slowly recovered--sometimes it seemed to take forever--went up, not high enough to be really up, only not down. (10)

In this set of oppressive circumstances, Morris, Frank reflects, is a natural victim:

> What kind of a man did you have to be born to shut yourself up in an overgrown coffin and never once during the day, so help you, outside of going for your Yiddish newspaper, poke your beak out of the door for a snootful of air? The answer wasn't hard to say--you had to be a Jew. They were born prisoners. (102)

As one of the epigraphs to The Joys of Yiddish, Leo Rosten includes the statement that "The Jews are just like everyone else--only more so."[79] And if we read "Morris Bober" for "The Jews," we are given a succinct definition of Morris' (and later Frank's) function in the world of The Assistant. He is meant as a heightened expression of mankind. He is intended as an incarnation of the human dimensions seldom demonstrated in

[79] Leo Rosten, The Joys of Yiddish (New York: Pocket Books, 1970), p. xxxix.

an exceptional individual and never in an ordinary one. He is meant, in effect, to be slightly larger than life. Similarly, the metaphoric setting of the book is designed to imply a suggestive representativeness. Organized around the grocery, but rather vague in time and outline, it is meant to evoke a sense of the poverty attendant upon personal failure and impersonal victimization.

The metaphoric dimension of The Assistant has a profound influence upon the text. Because it tends to incorporate a depth rather than a breadth of experience, it causes the novel to seem intense and psychologically "real," but not necessarily realistic. That is, the emphasis upon metaphor gives the novel a representative but not a representational quality. Hence, despite its careful specificity and solidity of descriptive or narrative detail, The Assistant is often more allusive than mimetic.

Two factors not yet examined contribute to The Assistant's over-all extra-realistic effect. The first is Malamud's tendency to make the "actual" seem slightly more than real by constricting the novel's "field of vision" and by repeatedly stressing the ordinary phenomena within that field. By doing so, the author causes these phenomena to usurp realistic perspective and to take on unnatural proportions. This practice approximates what Ortega y Gasset refers to as the infrarealist technique of making "the small events of life appear in the foreground with monumental dimensions."[80]

The second factor has an effect similar to that of Malamud's use of

[80] Ortega y Gasset, p. 33.

metaphor. In this book, metaphor causes the text to assume a rather spiritual cast and--in a profundity of psychological and moral implication--to adumbrate an "inner world." So, too, this second factor, the general "internalization" of action, causes The Assistant's vision to turn inwards and to supplant the external landscape in immediacy and importance. Nowhere is this better demonstrated than in the following passage. Here, Morris is knocked unconscious by Ward Minogue:

> The one in the dirty handkerchief raised his gun. The other, staring into the mirror, waved frantically, his black eyes bulging, but Morris saw the blow descend and felt sick of himself, of soured expectations, endless frustration, the years gone up in smoke, he could not begin to count how many. He had hoped for much in America and got little. And because of him Helen and Ida had less. He had defrauded them, he and the bloodsucking store.
>
> He fell without a cry. The end fitted the day. It was his luck, others had better. (29-30)

In this passage we have a concrete and immediate event framing a remarkable amount of internal action. This passage, however, simply demonstrates in brief the novel's over-all method. For in the interstices of a realistic presentation, The Assistant embodies a highly articulated set of inner worlds. These worlds define the internal life of the novel's characters--as well as the internal life of the novel itself--and are in turn defined by abstract and irrational categories.

Because of the subjective and frequently subconscious nature of its internal landscapes, The Assistant's realism is, as Richman observes, transformed:

> And if, in its unremitting sense of defeated character, the novel reminds us of the Dreiserian mode, the "real-

> ism" is suffused not only with psychological acuteness but with an equally persistent if enigmatic sense of the Dostoevskian mysteries that enlarge human potential. In fact, although Malamud maintains his omniscience carefully (though not too carefully), the pattern of The Assistant is powerfully supported by dream vision. In the intensity of suffering, each character moves in a world which, though substantial, threatens at any moment to turn spectral. [81]

On the basis of Richman's observation, a crucial distinction may be made between The Natural and The Assistant: where the former novel actively dissolves its elements of realistic texture, the latter merely "threatens . . . to turn spectral." Now, on the one hand, because it implies the potential for imminent dissolution, The Assistant's internal suggestiveness is increased; this threat, as a formal equivalent to the book's content, implies radical change, possibility, and visionary experience. On the other hand, because the novel does not actually dissolve its naturalistic surface, it is able to retain its realistic basis. Hence, by balancing between a full expression of fantasy and a philosophical naturalism, The Assistant conjoins the best of both worlds. It is able to suggest Dostoevskian mystery without relinquishing its particular realism, to imply "dream vision" with little or no loss to its naturalistic setting, and to incorporate a magical simultaneity of the mysterious and the mundane.

Through vision and technical contrivance, The Assistant demonstrates a very moderate "magical decomposition." The restraint with which this dissolution is effected is determined by the novel's thematic intention, by its conscientious adherence to ethical considerations. Openly incor-

[81] Richman, p. 75.

porating Judaic and Catholic materials, and constructing a drama based on the interaction of Morris, Helen, and Frank, it is in essence a moral fable. In spite of its basic naturalistic framework, its realism serves a didactic purpose. As Tony Tanner remarks:

> The main focus of the novel is not on the economic misery of the Bobers, but on the moral transformation of Frank Alpine. In taking on the shop, replacing the father, and becoming a Jew, he is really coming to man's estate and putting away childish things. He suffers for others now, not simply for self: in this sense he is the 'new man' he wanted to be. He has learned what Roy Hobbs failed to learn, and he has won his 'new life'. Thus realism becomes parable in Malamud's imagination and vision. [82]

In The Assistant we are given the first of Malamud's technically balanced novels. Here, because a "simultaneity of contrary effects" is crafted with subtlety and discretion, fable is not overcome by fantasy. Non-mimetic elements, though present and functional, are not obtrusive; diffused in and blended with the novel's fundamental realism, they inform and transform the text without betraying artifice. In essence, as suggested above, this technical feat is accomplished by means of restraint and by the careful anchoring of imaginative depiction in apparent actuality.

"At the heart of The Assistant," writes Sidney Richman, "is a ritual composed of fragments of myth, Catholicism and Judaic thought—all pressed into the service of the author's 'mystical' humanism."[83] Radi-

[82] Tanner, pp. 328-329.

[83] Richman, p. 71.

ating outwards from the novel's moral centre, this "ritual"--with its emphasis on the ethical and transcendent qualities of the human heart--infuses The Assistant with a spiritual and hence a counter-naturalistic quality. Primarily responsible for the novel's magical "borderland," this spiritual sense, because of its diffuse, intangible, and affective character, is one of the novel's most influential techniques. Above all, it alters but does not negate the text's realism: allowed to inform the work, it introduces a non-naturalistic ambience without drawing attention to the author's sleight-of-hand. Because its effect is not concentrated in an intermittent negation of mimetic fidelity, its action remains unobtrusive: permeating the work with a consistent visionary quality, it vitalizes the realistic texture, transforming it into something greater than realism without foregoing realism's specificity and solidity.

The key to The Assistant's success is its stable realistic foundation. This foundation continues to root the novel's internal and external action in a "sensible" milieu and provides the realistic credibility necessary to the affective success of a humanist fable. Because of this foundation, The Assistant's over-all mimetic angle is of only moderate width. And it is in this moderation--in the novel's anchoring of "dream vision," metaphor, and internal landscape in a palpably realistic setting--that The Assistant most resembles the novel to which we now turn, The Fixer. In The Fixer, as in The Assistant, the arc of mimesis described by the work as a whole is as moderate as The Natural's was extreme.

Chapter Two

The Later Novels: The Fixer and The Tenants

> "It's all a fantasy," the fixer muttered.
>
> His fate nauseated him. Escaping from the Pale he had at once been entrapped in prison. From birth a black horse had followed him, a Jewish nightmare. [84]

> "Sorry I interrupted you. Better be getting back to my own work now—on my third novel."
>
> No response from Willie other than the absent-minded descent of a nod.
>
> "It was a surprise to find somebody else up here typing away. I had got used to being the only man on the island." [85]

(i)

The Fixer

If the development of Malamud's early fiction shows a gradual approximation to mimetic fidelity, his subsequent writing often embodies a highly non-mimetic description and tone. Even The Fixer, though it demonstrates a relatively thorough attention to verisimilitude, describes a significant angle of mimesis. It is the object of this second chapter, therefore, to analyze the manner in which realism is both established and

[84] Bernard Malamud, The Fixer (New York, 1966; rpt. New York: Dell, 1968), p. 187. All references are to this edition.

[85] Bernard Malamud, The Tenants (New York, 1971; rpt. Richmond Hill, Ontario, Canada: Pocket Book, 1972), p. 29. All references are to this edition.

attenuated in The Fixer (1966) and The Tenants (1971).

The Fixer appears at first to be a work of conventional realism. Like The Assistant and A New Life, it is set in a realistic locale: its physical context is a recognizable reflection of historical actuality, its rendering of social conditions a relatively objective account of a specific time and place. Described with attention to material detail and with great vividness and immediacy, its action centres on the imprisonment and brutal mistreatment of Yakov Bok, this action lending a powerful sense of realism to the novel. In general, therefore, set in an environment even more circumscribed and airless than that of The Assistant, The Fixer asserts an impression of verisimilitude, of realistic specificity and solidity.

Despite its construction from realistic materials, however, this novel is not a simple naturalistic account. Though it ultimately conveys a sense of painful actuality, it incorporates many elements of a non-representational nature. These elements, usually subtle in effect, cause The Fixer to become more elaborate and spiritually resonant. In this regard, we may note the impact of stylistic devices upon the novel's texture.

As Sheldon Grebstein points out, The Fixer derives a mild "comic potentiality" from its use of the Yiddish idiom: this device, he notes, "helps to enliven The Fixer and prevent it from unbearable morbidity."[86] In a like manner, this novel's stylistic fusion of the mundane and the

[86] Grebstein, p. 42.

imaginative causes a certain textual modulation. In the following description of Yakov's father-in-law, for example, realism is leavened by exaggerated or extreme depiction:

> Five months ago, on a mild Friday in early November, before the first snow had snowed on the shtetl, Yakov's father-in-law, a skinny worried man in clothes about to fall apart, who looked as though he had been assembled out of sticks and whipped air, drove up with his skeletal horse and rickety wagon. (10)

In this description, Shmuel is made to seem a semifantastic character, a "grotesque." He is made to take on a suggestion of an extra-realistic, a folk or a mythic character. Similarly, through stylistic shaping of description, the naturalistic landscape of Yakov's prison life intermittently assumes a mythic cast. In this next passage, for example, the repetitive and balanced phrasing of the sentences invokes the Psalms or Ecclesiastes. As a result, the realistic particularity of this passage is infused with and softened by a timeless quality:

> There was cleaning out ashes, and making and lighting the stove. There was the sweeping of the cell to do, urinating in the can, walking back and forth until one began to count; or sitting at the table with nothing to do. There was the going for, and eating of, his meager meals. There was trying to remember and trying to forget. There was the counting of each day; there was reciting the psalm he had put together. He also watched the light and dark change. The morning dark was different from the night dark. The morning dark had a little freshness, a little anticipation in it, though what he anticipated he could not say. The night dark was heavy with thickened and compounded shadows. (176)

The Fixer's style acts first to determine a realistic immediacy, and then to bend that realism to an unusual effect. The following sentences,

coming at the end of a long and essentially naturalistic paragraph, represent the "antithesis" in the novel's stylistic dialectic:

> He waited with boredom sticking its fingers down his throat. . . . In the winter, time fell like hissing snow through the crack in the barred window, and never stopped snowing. He stood in it as it piled up around him and there was no end to drowning. (177)

Metaphoric, lyric, or fanciful, this aspect of The Fixer's style is juxtaposed to simple and objective description. As a result, a certain effect is created. This juxtaposition causes the realistic objectivity of the text to be intermittently muted, and introduces a psychological or metaphysical quality. Hence, though its influence is far from obvious, this stylistic juxtaposition or fusion helps to balance description of states of feeling and that of scene and action.

On the level of narration, The Fixer exhibits a tendency to interject an alternative first person form: that is, on a number of occasions the third person narrative mode is briefly supplanted by Yakov's own voice:

> But he couldn't reach the window bars, and even if he found some way to get the rope behind them and down to him, hanging himself was not what he wanted. It would leave them out of it. He wanted them involved. He thought of Fetyukov shot by the guard. That's how I have to do it. They want me to die but not directly by their hand. They'll keep me in chains, making searches until my heart gives out. Then they can say I died of natural causes "while awaiting trial." I'll make it unnatural causes. I'll make it by their hand. I'll provoke them to kill me. He had made up his mind. (218)

Though this narrative change is infrequent, it reflects a significant

phenomenon: the first person displacement of the prevailing narrative mode points to the proximity of the two voices. As Grebstein observes, the narrator's voice in this novel is close to that of the hero: "Malamud's voice, employing the fused style of an omniscient narrator outside the hero but never very far away, merges with Yakov's." Bok and the narrator share a common manner of expression: both speak "lucidly; candidly, sometimes earthily, sometimes in short lyric flights."[87]

The implications of this narrative device are important, for the proximity of the hero's voice to that of the narrator indicates the extent to which the novel is Yakov's story. This proximity reflects The Fixer's foregrounding of and focusing on the thoughts, sensations, and emotions of the hero, revealing The Fixer's over-all internalization of action in the mind of its protagonist.

As in The Assistant, The Fixer's fantastic devices--like its stylistic and narrative features or like the occasional employment of a grotesque comedy--are of limited impact. Nevertheless, their influence is not inconsequential. Varied and widely deployed, they act to lighten or enliven the novel's oppressive reality.

As Marc Ratner notes, the incorporation of "dream and surrealistic situation juxtaposed with reality" is a basic technique of Malamud's craft.[88] By this introduction of non-realistic elements to the fundamental realism of his work, Malamud is able to encompass a broader spec-

[87] Grebstein, p. 42.

[88] Marc L. Ratner, "Style and Humanity in Malamud's Fiction," Massachusetts Review, 5:4 (1964), p. 667.

trum of experience and to render the psychological or subconscious movements of his characters. By balancing the effect of disembodied experience against that of rendered actuality, he is able to anchor his fiction in "fact" while evoking a series of internal landscapes. Examples of these non-realistic elements abound in The Fixer, but since they are intended to amplify as well as relieve the novel's realism, they tend to display a curious restraint. In this connection, Robert Alter writes:

> Malamud has always known the art of counterpointing a flat, understated style with flights of whimsy and poetic invention, but never before has he written such taut, vigorous prose--as, for example, in this prisoner's nightmare, with its staccato parade of short declarative sentences and sharply-etched physical images that give fantasy the weight and tactile hardness of palpable fact: . . . [89]

If The Fixer's fantastic elements sometimes lighten its naturalistic account of Yakov's imprisonment, they act at other times to reinforce its sense of nightmarish horror. When the latter situation obtains, as it does in the following passage, the effect is to internalize the narrative reality in Bok's mind:

> All night the fixer sat huddled in the corner of the cell, filled with the dread of dying. If he slept a minute his sleep was steeped in the taste, smell, horror of dying. He lay motionless in a graveyard, rigid, terrified. In the black sky were black stars. If he stirred he would topple into an open grave, amid the rotting dead, their dead flesh and putrifying bones. (150)

Cumulatively, The Fixer's fantastic passages--incorporating dream, reverie, hallucination, and delirium--add to the novel's psychological real-

[89] Alter, p. 36.

ism. They act upon the realistic surface of the novel, extending its dimensions into the realm of the subconscious and the phantasm. They contribute to the delineation of an interior landscape and assist in the novel's correlation of material and abstract realities. By etching visions and "Dostoevskian hallucinations,"[90] these brief passages cause the novel to describe a wider angle of mimesis. It is important to note, however, that these fantastic passages, because of an inherent moderation, do not subvert the moral or visionary purpose of the novel. Instead, by tending to amplify or parallel the realistic material, they extend but do not transcend the novel's natural parameters.

Similarly, The Fixer's embodiment of a mythic structure and ambience does not change the text's meaning. It does, however, cause the novel to take on a special resonance. Mildly non-realistic in effect, this resonance derives from myth's capacity to lend a universal or ritualistic sense to any work of fiction. In the present work, with its peculiar fusion of the historical and the timeless, this use of myth is largely responsible for the novel's somber magic.

In an essay entitled "Myth Inside and Out: The Natural," Frederick W. Turner quotes Malamud as saying that The Fixer "has a mythological quality. It has to be treated as a myth, an endless story. . . ."[91] This "mythological quality," by infusing the text with a sense of timelessness and of ritual repetition, is the single most important factor in

[90] Alter, p. 36.

[91] Frederick W. Turner, III, "Myth Inside and Out: The Natural," Bernard Malamud and the Critics, ed. Leslie A. and Joyce W. Field (New York University Press, 1970), p. 110.

the novel's attenuation of naturalism. It causes The Fixer's contours to be softened; it implies a partial identification of Yakov and Jesus, and of Yakov and the Jewish people; it suggests a ritual patterning of events more or less independent from historical particularity, and it implies a quasi-spiritual dimension of human potentiality.

Some of the mythic passages present in The Fixer contain specific allusions to ritual figures or patterns. Other passages tend primarily to communicate a sense of mythic implication. A clear example of the latter is the three page episode in which Yakov crosses the Dneiper on his way to Kiev. Here, early in the novel, a strong mythic sense is interwoven with the narrative.

Yakov, leaving behind Shmuel's old horse, is taken across the river by a "Charon-like boatman."[92] The crossing is a night-journey fraught with ominous significance and a foreshadowing of future evil. The diabolic boatman, "The white of his right eye . . . streaked with blood," (27) anticipates the features and extent of anti-Semitism in the novel:

> "At first I thought you were a goddam Pole. Pan whosis, Pani whatsis." The boatman laughed, then snickered. "Or maybe a motherfucking Jew. . . ."
>
> "Latvian," said Yakov.
>
> "Anyway, God save us all from the bloody Jews," the boatman said as he rowed, . . . (28)

Yakov's denial, with its implications of a mythic betrayal, is further expressed in his dropping of the phylacteries into the Dneiper, and in his desertion of Shmuel's horse. Indicative of a spiritual immaturity,

92 Robert Ducharme, Art and Idea in the Novels of Bernard Malamud (The Hague and Paris: Mouton, 1974), p. 24.

the latter action adumbrates a rejection of origins and of personal identity:

> The nag, tethered to a paling, watched from the moonlit shore. Like an old Jew he looks, thought the fixer. (28)

The sense communicated by this episode is that of mythic realism. The symbolic crossing of the river, the journey shrouded in night, and the ominous anticipation of event conjoin with the familiar "denial" to create a mythological ambience. Because of these elements, the passage is imbued with a quality unavailable in conventional realistic description. This mythic sense, contributing to a subversion of temporal particularity, derives from the rendering of condensed and sinister dream-like experience.

If the Dneiper episode represents the author's attempt to create a mythic atmosphere, other passages indicate the development of a specific mythological structure. This structure, as Robert Ducharme notes, is defined principally by Yakov's resemblance to Jesus:

> At the beginning of Chapter II, the controlling archetypal motif appears for the first time. Like Jesus who must go up to Jerusalem to suffer, Yakov Bok enters Kiev "the Jerusalem of Russia" situated on three hills (p. 30). He is greeted by a crowd of beggars, cripples, and the blind just as Christ frequently was.[93]

As "Holy Kiev, mother of Russian cities" (22) is paralleled to Jerusalem, so Bok's misadventure is made to parallel Christ's. Both men have had a rural background; both have made a simple living from carpentry; both

[93] Ducharme, pp. 24-25.

have, at approximately the same age, left the country and journeyed to the city; in the city, after a relatively brief period of time, both have been seized and brutally mistreated. These correlations, though left more or less implicit by the author, are obvious enough to attract the reader's attention.

The connection between Yakov and Jesus is reinforced by the former's intermittent reflections on Christ's suffering and passion:

> Jesus cried out help to God but God gave no help. There was a man crying out in anguish in the dark, but God was on the other side of his mountain. He heard but he heard everything. What was there to hear that he hadn't heard before? Christ died and they took him down. The fixer wiped his eyes. Afterwards he thought if that's how it happened and it's part of the Christian religion, and they believe it, how can they keep me in prison, knowing I am innocent? Why don't they have pity and let me go? (190)

It is evident that Yakov's experience is intended as a ritual re-enactment of Christ's. The repetition of pattern, the felt presence of Jesus' story as a "controlling archetypal motif," points to a deliberate evocation of the parallel. Moreover, the novel is punctuated by specific echoes of the biblical model. In one episode, for example, Yakov's feet become infected by the nails which protrude from his boots; here, the allusion to Christ's crucifixion is self-evident. Elsewhere, Yakov's lawyer unwittingly draws attention to the prisoner's moral paradigm and predecessor: "You suffer for us all" (247), he says to Bok.

As a fable, The Fixer softens its realistic outline in an effort to accommodate a moral. To this end, the novel avails itself of the mythic potency inherent in the pattern of Christ's redemptive suffering. On the

other hand, this fiction also embodies a didactic element relatively independent of moral fable. This element, though peripheral to a consideration of myth, should be noted in connection with it. I refer to The Fixer's paradoxical use of the Christian motif. It is apparent that though Jesus may serve as a moral exemplar and as a paradigmatic scapegoat figure, the religion created in his name is found wanting. Hence the double meaning in the following passage. Here, Yakov's illness and near-insanity is evoked:

> He remembers having gone mad once. Where do you look if you lose your mind? That's the end of it. He would, in his mind, be forever locked in prison, no longer knowing why or what he is locked in. Locked in his final fate, the last unknowing.
> "Die," says Berezhinsky. "For Christ's sake, die."
> He dies. He dies. (224)

In one sense, this passage implies that Yakov's is a Christian and redemptive self-sacrifice. In another sense, it simply points to the fact that Bok (whose first name recalls the biblical Jacob, and whose surname in Russian means "goat") is being tortured for the Jews's putative murder of Jesus. The latter point is made most explicit when Yakov receives his final indictment:

> After he had finished reading the document the fixer, in exhaustion, thought, there's no getting rid of the blood any more. It's stained every word of the indictment and can't be washed out. When they try me it will be for the crucifixion. (241)

The paradox is clear: Yakov is both a Christ-figure and a man being murdered in Christ's name.

Because of this bitterly ironic situation--increasingly ironic because of Bok's gradual approximation to the Christian model--a peculiar inversion takes place: the representative Jew displaces the Christian in terms of the latter's religious drama. In essence, The Fixer suggests that the Jew has become the "Christian" of the twentieth century. The following passage, part of Bibikov's conversation, reinforces this inversion:

> "Interestingly, I learned that this very same blood accusation made against the Jews was used by pagans of the first century to justify the oppression and slaughter of the early Christians. They too were called 'blood drinkers,' for reasons you would understand if you knew the Catholic mass." (142)

In a relatively recent interview, Malamud remarked that "The Fixer is largely an invention. That is, I've tried to bring it as close to a folk tale as I could."[94] This folk aspect is an important fictional characteristic, for it tends, like the mythic element, to create a mildly non-realistic effect. Because it emphasizes a simplicity of narrative development and a representativeness based on racial or group experience, it generates a special fictional world. The quality of "invention" referred to by Malamud hence reflects a rendering of unique settings or series of events as well as an adaption of novelistic material to preconceived patterns. As the following quotation from City of Words indicates, such an adaption is accomplished by means of artistic economy, selective delineation of detail, and concentration of focus. In a discussion of The Fixer, Tanner writes:

94 Field and Field, Critical Essays, p. 10.

> And yet the book does not read like history. Despite the intense vividness of the local details it seems more like something between a folk-tale and a dream. The environment is not given full specificity; the characters are far from being fully individuated; the time, despite that one date, is any time in human history. And the impersonal tone of the narrator, telling the tale with brooding economy and drawing the various scenes with the firm, incisive contours of a woodcut, suggests that it is a tale which could be told over and over again.[95]

Reinforcing the impression of The Fixer as a folk tale based on Jewish historical patterns is the novel's peristent sense of a "bad dream." More important than the narrative's actual nightmares, this sense embodies a quality of fatalism. Hence, in the epigraph to this chapter, Yakov reflects that "From birth a black horse had followed him, a Jewish nightmare." This quality of fatalism, in conjunction with the sequence of lies, betrayals, and cruelties encountered by Yakov, contributes to a feverish atmosphere of peril and misfortune. In turn, this atmosphere represents the uncertain position of Jews since the Diaspora. Suggestive of their tenuous hold on peace and well-being, it evokes a sense--a nightmarish sense--of vulnerability before vindictive historical forces.

The question of The Fixer's historicity is essential to any consideration of its technique. Loosely based on the actual imprisonment of Mendel Beilis, the narrative traces the events resulting from the Czarist accusation of ritual murder. The treatment accorded to the Jewish victim of such a charge is noted; the anti-Semitic organizations and temper of the period are specified; actual pogroms, events, decrees, and

[95] Tanner, p. 334.

historical and social developments are mentioned.[96] In brief, the narrative takes pains to develop a web of objective fact, to project a fair representation of a particular historical actuality. However, in spite of this attention to the Russian social reality in the years just prior to the First World War, The Fixer belies its status as a work of historical realism. It qualifies its mimetic fidelity by means of an authorial predilection for the timeless:

> . . . while Malamud can certainly take cognizance of historical facts, he also resists history with his inventions. The pain experienced in time and place is eased by the timelessness and placelessness conferred by his own style.[97]

The Fixer's historicity is hence a complex matter. Compounded of fact and "invention," or of actuality and myth, the novel presents a fusion of two distinct modes.

The Fixer is a fable revealing, in a manner not unlike that of The Assistant, the basic characteristics of Malamud's moral narrative: for example, it embodies a central character in the form of a young man in need of redemption, as well as an older man as a figure of maturity and wisdom and a young woman with whom the hero may in the future be reconciled. Further parallels between this work and Malamud's other novels do

[96] In 1911, Mendel Beilis, a Jewish brickyard worker, was arrested in Kiev and charged with ritual murder. He remained in prison until 1913 when he was at last brought to trial. Though formally acquitted and released from prison, no official judgment was passed on the patently anti-Semitic nature of his arrest and detention. Beilis subsequently left Russia, lived for a time in Palestine, and eventually died impoverished in America. A good brief account of the Beilis case will be found in Louis Greenberg's The Jews in Russia, Volume 2, pages 88-94.

[97] Tanner, p. 323.

not require explication. It is important to note, however, that because The Fixer wishes to maintain a consistency of focus, the characters of Shmuel and Raisl do not receive the attention given in The Assistant to Morris and Helen.

The Fixer's unwavering focus points to the novel's thematic intention. Throughout this work, in its unremitting concentration upon Yakov's character and imprisonment, Malamud is concerned with describing both an impersonal historical injustice and an individual's moral redemption through suffering. The two thematic strands are not, of course, unrelated: Yakov's gradual transformation implies a defiance of social injustice, even as social injustice implies the need for individual maturity. Hence, the focus upon solitary confinement, for example, serves to develop both themes. In relation to the novel's political considerations, it functions as a metaphor for the oppression of European Jewry. In relation to the moral fable, on the other hand, it serves to symbolize the individual's "dark night of the soul."

In its depiction of Bok's moral growth, The Fixer repeats the process of transformation present in The Assistant and A New Life. As the narrative progresses, Yakov comes to accept responsibility for his actions and for the well-being of his people. He ceases to curse his estranged wife Raisl and recognizes his own culpability in the dissolution of their marriage. By the novel's close, he has acknowledged as his own Raisl's child by another man; he has learned to forgive the blameless and to defy a political system almost certain to destroy him; above all, he has learned to love and to suffer for others:

> "Shmuel, are you dead?" the fixer cries, and the old man, if not in peace, at least in repose, for once has nothing to say.
> The fixer awakens, grieving, his beard damp with salt tears.
> "Live, Shmuel," he sighs, "live. Let me die for you." (222)

Against the background of Russian history--and marked by Yakov's initial irresponsibility, by his subsequent "dark night," and by his eventual awakening--The Fixer's moral fable describes a ritual pattern of rebirth.

The Fixer's role as a redemptive fable is reinforced by its periodic inclusion of philosophical reflections. Generating the impression that this work is in large part a moral enquiry into the behaviour of God and man, these reflections, like the fable itself, further the creation of a sense of timelessness. Moreover, some of these reflections tend to imply that Yakov's progress--his defiance, suffering, and recognition--is a ritual recapitulation of the Jewish experience:

> God talks. He has chosen, he says, the Hebrews to preserve him. He covenants, therefore he is. He offers and Israel accepts, or when will history begin? Abraham, Moses, Noah, Jeremiah, Hosea, Ezra, even Job, make their personal covenant in order to break it. That's the mysterious purpose: they need the experience. . . . Suffering, they say, awakens repentance, at least in those who can repent. Thus the people of the covenant wear out their sins against the Lord. . . . The purpose of the covenant, Yakov thinks, is to create human experience, . . . (196-197)

In the line of descent from Abraham and Job, Yakov, though a Spinozistic free-thinker, is an embodiment of the Judaic spirit. A marginal Jew throughout most of the novel, he comes in the end to assert a particular expression of the Jewish identity. By the time of his trial, he too has made a personal covenant. Though that covenant is made with humanity and

not with God, he has, at least in Malamud's estimation, become a Jew by virtue of it. As far as Malamud is concerned, Yakov's decision to suffer for his people and for the truth marks him as a Jew. This decision indicates the completion of the "mysterious purpose" and the end of personal exile.

As The Fixer looks to the distant past, it looks also to the future. Through its description of Yakov's passage from disobedience--the denial of his Jewish heritage and identity--to his return from exile, the novel recapitulates the past and implies a potential for harmony. As with Yakov, Malamud suggests, so with the Jews: "they need the experience." And from Yakov's experience comes this resolution:

> So what can Yakov Bok do about it? All he can do is not make things worse. He's half a Jew himself, yet enough of one to protect them. After all, he knows the people; and he believes in their right to be Jews and live in the world like men. He is against those who are against them. He will protect them to the extent that he can. This is his covenant with himself. If God's not a man he has to be. Therefore he must endure to the trial and let them confirm his innocence by their lies. He has no future but to hold on, wait it out. (223)

Like the biblical Jacob, Yakov eventually acquires a limp. For the former, this affliction signified a personal rebirth as "Israel"; in Yakov's case, therefore, the limp is conceivably a prefiguration of Israel's political rebirth. For Yakov is, ultimately, a specifically political Jew. Radicalized by his prison experience--a foreshadowing of the Holocaust--he comes to represent the political determination with which the State of Israel was established, to epitomize the spirit of liberty and to antici-

pate the struggle for Israel's creation.[98]

But Yakov is, above all, an everyman. Whatever his possible symbolic function in terms of modern politics, the course of his life is meant to articulate a pattern of moral redemption. That pattern, needless to say, obtains for both Jew and Gentile. Hence, Yakov's progress from the shtetl to his trial--his progress from estrangement to "community"--is meant to exemplify an archetypal journey available to all men.

Most of these pages devoted to The Fixer have been given over to a consideration of moral and myth. Fantasy and the more obvious counter-realistic techniques have received less attention. This situation, however, simply reflects the novel's ratio of fact to fantasy. Judging, no doubt, that his special didactic purposes would best be served by the subordination of fantasy to fact, Malamud emphasizes actuality in The Fixer. Though its mimetic fidelity is frequently modified by a non-realistic style and technical verve, this work retains its sense of verisimilitude. Yakov's arrest and imprisonment, despite the novel's inclusion of fantasy, remains a tangible and credible experience.

[98] It is interesting to note that Malamud, in this his "Holocaust" novel, chose the vantage point of those years immediately preceding the First World War. One may surmise--in full knowledge of the inconclusiveness of such conjecture--that he wished to span the history of Jewish repression and to insist upon the continuity of Jewish experience. It is possible also that he felt unequal to the task of presenting in fictional form an account of the actual Holocaust. Even had he chosen the latter approach--working perhaps from the point of view of a single character, one man to stand for many--he would still have had to contend with a set of circumstances the very nature of which must defy the fictional resources and assurance of a North American writer.

On the other hand, the non-mimetic qualities noted above effect a subtle dissolution of the realistic texture. Softening the novel's contours and introducing a timeless and metaphoric sense, they create that "simultaneity of contrary effects" referred to earlier. As in The Assistant, this fusion of the "Actual and the Imaginary" represents a successful apportioning of elements. A certain "magic" is coaxed from the novel's subject matter and a ritual or symbolic inclusiveness is developed; moreover, the "mystical humanism" noted in The Assistant is accommodated to the narrative and is used to "spiritualize" the novel's grim account of inhumanity.

It is The Fixer's mythic atmosphere and structure which is most responsible for its subtle "magical decomposition." Because of myth's inherent capacity to generalize from a set of particulars, it lends a universal quality to the novel. In turn, this quality of mythic inclusiveness helps create a milieu into which the moral fable may be incorporated. This milieu, defined in part by its mild "decomposition" of quotidien reality, must balance the principle of mimesis with that of imaginative autonomy. It must discover the angle of mimesis most compatible with the expression of specific themes and events. Given that The Fixer intends to do justice not merely to the theme of individual redemption through suffering and love, but also to the depiction of a particular historical reality, this novel cannot properly describe an extreme mimetic angle: it must show a certain over-all restraint vis à vis the expression of fancy. Such a restraint, this thesis would argue, is one of The Fixer's triumphs.

It is the opinion of this thesis that Malamud's synthetic powers are

most apparent in The Assistant and The Fixer. In both works, cogent themes and didactic purposes are embedded in and vitalized by a concrete and affecting actuality. In both works also, the moral and social content is imbued with a reality derived not only from a sense of verisimilitude; a great part of its capacity to compel belief stems from its correlation of historical and quotidien actuality with a mythic or metaphysical dimension. It is a case, therefore, of the particular and the concrete being held in near-perfect suspension with the universal and the abstract. It is a case of "magical borderlands" and of the author's attempt, in his own words, to create "more than the merely realistic."[99]

[99] Richman, p. 48.

(ii)

The Tenants

In 1969, Malamud's Pictures of Fidelman: An Exhibition was published.[100] Composed of six related stories--three of them previously published in The Magic Barrel and Idiots First--this work manifests a picaresque attention to bawdy and violent comedy. Tracing Arthur Fidelman's ill-conceived and poorly executed peregrinations through Italy, it renders the hero's misadventures in a context of comic reduction and burlesqued action. As a whole, Pictures of Fidelman demonstrates the innovative edge to Malamud's craft. In the first story, for example, Arthur undergoes a series of reversals described in a semifantastic manner. The atmosphere is that of a Jamesian romance infused with religious experience and low comedy. Fidelman's nemesis, a dybbuk-like figure named Susskind, hounds the young American in a way designed to bring him to a recognition of compassion and mercy. In the following passage, Fidelman, an aspiring painter and art critic, is led in a dream by "Virgilio Susskind" to a perception of art's "life":

> "Why is art?" asked the shade, drifting off.
> Fidelman, willy-nilly, followed, and the ghost, as it vanished, led him up steps going through the ghetto and into a marble synagogue.
> The student, left alone, because he could not resist the impulse, lay down upon the stone floor, his shoulders keeping strangely warm as he stared at the sunlit vault above. The fresco therein revealed this saint in fading blue, the sky flowing from his head, handing an old knight in a thin

[100] Bernard Malamud, Pictures of Fidelman: An Exhibition (New York, 1969; rpt. Richmond Hill, Ontario, Canada: Pocket Book, 1975). All references are to this edition.

> red robe his gold cloak. Nearby stood a humble horse and two stone hills.
> Giotto. San Francesco dona le vesti al cavaliere povero. (40-41)

Replete with visionary experience, a Christian fresco in an Italian synagogue, a Jewish cemetery, and a "hound of heaven," this story exhibits Malamud's fancy and technical playfulness. Dialogue is terse, inordinately suggestive, and designed to sustain the improbable. Dreams and visions vie with the concrete, and style fuses the spirit and the flesh.

This first story, however, entitled "Last Mohican," is realistic in comparison to the fifth piece. Entitled "Pictures of the Artist," the latter piece is as surreal, hallucinatory, and experimental as anything in Malamud's canon. Written in the late 1960's, it reflects the developments in post-war innovative fiction. In fact, as Fidelman trifles with toilet-seat pop-art and Claes Oldenburg sculpted holes, Malamud appears to parody and exaggerate recent fictional techniques. The effect is ambiguous: on one hand, the reader must admire the author's ingenuity and peculiar talent for the ridiculous and the neurasthenic; on the other hand, the playfulness and parody evident in passages like the following disrupt narrative continuity and coherence:

> On the Mount of Olives appeareth the painter amid a multitude with swords, staves, and lengths of lead pipe. Also came the chief priest, the chief of police, scribes, elders, the guards with dogs, the onlookers to look on. Fidelman goeth to the master and kisseth him full on the lips. / Twice, saith Susskind. / He wept. (155)

By creating a "story" from passages like the above, Malamud gives to his Pictures a wholly fantastic interlude from realism. Puzzling and daz-

zlingly varied, this diversion incorporates the author's attempt to both lampoon recent techniques and to play with their peculiarities.

In The Tenants, fantasy and the fantastic exist to an extent comparable to that present in the Fidelman stories. Here, as in Pictures and The Natural, realistic conventions are often displaced or radically transformed. Because of the primacy and seriousness of The Tenants' thematic concerns, however, the fantasy obtaining in this work differs from that evident in the earlier fiction. Similarly, though written at approximately the same time as "Pictures of the Artist" and incorporating that story's interest in experimental technique, The Tenants uses avant-garde fictional modes in a different manner and to a different effect.

The Tenants' first paragraph reads:

> LESSER CATCHING SIGHT OF HIMSELF in his lonely glass wakes to finish his book. He smelled the living earth in the dead of winter. In the distance mournful blasts of a vessel departing the harbor. Ah, if I could go where it's going. He wrestles to sleep again but can't, unease like a horse dragging him by both bound legs out of bed. I've got to get up to write, otherwise there's no peace in me. In this regard I have no choice. "My God, the years." He flings aside the blanket and standing unsteadily by the loose-legged chair that holds his clothes slowly draws on his cold pants. Today's another day. (1)

In this passage, prefaced by no explanatory material, we are introduced to the world of the novel. As though wishing to advise the reader of The Tenants' unusual and frequently "difficult" style, Malamud incorporates into this paragraph a sample of the work's stylistic idiosyncrasies. The name "Lesser" itself invites the reader's consideration. The phrase

"his lonely glass" is unclear in meaning. Also unclear is why Lesser should smell "the living earth in the dead of winter." The sentence "In the distance mournful blasts of a vessel departing the harbor" is not a sentence at all. Then, shifting from third person to first person voice, then back to third, to first, to third again, the text is contorted and the style foregrounded. The choice of language itself is unusual: the simile of "unease" as a "horse" and the insistence upon descriptive adjectives exemplify a deliberate selection of startling images.

The Tenants' first paragraph anticipates the novel's experimentation with a wide variety of unconventional modes. Throughout this fiction an independence from accustomed form and delivery is manifest. Some of the technical elements present in the earlier novels reappear, but they tend to assume altered proportions. The familiar seasonal motif, for example, though frequently noted in the text, carries little symbolic significance.

Because The Tenants' style contributes heavily to the novel's fantastic effect, it is of considerable interest to this study. The stylistic elements of this work, by virtue of their predilection for the extraordinary, tend to deny conventional textual expectations. Frequent changes of voice and tense, for example, disrupt narrative continuity. In the following passage, these changes, organized around an image of Harry Lesser holding onto his landlord's genitals, are exemplified:

> The others had accepted the landlord's pay-off but Lesser stayed on and would for a time so he could finish his book where it was born. Not sentiment, he lived on habit; it saves time. Letting go of Levenspiel's frozen nuts he raced home in the snow.
>
> Home is where my book is. (4)

By alternating voice and tense, Malamud lends an uneasiness to the text. It is difficult to assess the precise effect of this alternation, but it seems to elicit a sense of the unnatural, of the mildly sinister. The exact nature of the narrative is called into question. It is not a matter of confusing Lesser with the narrator, but rather one of a felt inappropriateness: there is something odd in the first person intrusion into the narrative, something slightly mysterious and disquieting.

At various points in the novel different technical idiosyncrasies are manifested. At times, for example, dialogue takes place without the use of quotation marks. This authorial quirk, though fairly insignificant in itself, points to the novel's use of fashionable mannerisms. Another minor example of this phenomenon is Malamud's inclusion of two premature "ends" to the work: one, reading "END OF NOVEL," falls on page 20; the other, reading "THE END," appears on the penultimate page. Of more significance are those passages in The Tenants which are explicitly "experimental." These passages manifest an overt use of techniques frequently employed more subtly elsewhere in the text. One such nexus of "innovative" writing appears on pages 131-133 in the form of a fantastic poem. The following lines are excerpted from that poem:

> Rotten fish slop in the sea,
> Storm wake up Lesser,
> He hang onto his bed,
> Know it pitch black without tryin no light,
> He try his light,
> It pitch black,
> He run down them shadow-flying stairs, (132)

Later, some of Willie Spearmint's experimental writings are included on

pages 186-189, and the novel itself ends on the word "mercy" repeated ninety-eight times. In a more general sense, however, The Tenants incorporates and is distinguished by a less insistent species of experimental writing. The text as a whole tends to exhibit a steady reflection of innovative or avant-garde art. Virtually every page reveals the literary eccentricities of a contemporary writer committed to the "exploitation" of language. Sentences are allowed to approximate informal American speech patterns; parts of speech make unscheduled arrivals and departures; idiom and "street rhetoric" displace or transform the standard belletristic mode, and sentence structure becomes infinitely plastic. Though it is clear that The Tenants does not demonstrate the extreme techniques of a writer like William Burroughs, this work contains a variety of the literary mannerisms found in the "Beat" and the "hip" writings of the 1950's and 1960's.

It would be a mistake, however, to attribute the experimental writing in some of the Fidelman stories or The Tenants to the author's desire for avant-garde expression. Though he doubtless enjoys the freedom implicit in such forms, their raison d'être in the books derives from the nature of the fiction's subject matter. In relation to both Arthur Fidelman and Harry Lesser, Malamud's fiction deals with a relatively young artist. Fidelman, in perpetual flux, lapses into a state of artistic and spiritual bankruptcy; as he does so, producing perfect holes and soul-less forms, the textual style of Pictures becomes increasingly "innovative." Contemporary visual art is parodied, and so is contemporary writing. In Lesser's case, the situation is different but not unrelated.

Harry is, we are led to believe, a good and disciplined writer. He understands art and subscribes to its highest ideals. But he is, above all, a writer to the exclusion of life. His world and personal experience are fixed and vitiated by his work. Similarly, artistic obsessions and limitations overcome the "life principle" in Willie Spearmint: he, too, becomes a writer to the exclusion of heart.

The Tenants is a writer's book. The voices we hear--with the exception of Irene's and Levenspiel's--are those of men whose lives are ruled by words. When Lesser and Willie speak or ruminate, their reflections are structured by a familiarity with word play. Furthermore, because the novel belongs to two writers--to Lesser the craftsman in particular--The Tenants reflects a consistent attention to the mannerisms appropriate to contemporary fictionists. The Tenants' style is Malamud's only in part: in large measure, its language and prose techniques are those of Harry Lesser. Lesser, a writer once removed from Malamud's literary generation, contributes his personal style and imagination to the work. Indeed, because the novel is to a great extent a study of his mind, he, as an imagined writer writing his life, is ultimately responsible for its form. The substance of his identity, the inner workings of his nature, provide the action and the perceptions which structure and quicken the narrative. It is not surprising, therefore, that, as the following passage suggests, The Tenants is grounded as much in fancy as in fact:

> Lesser unbolted the door and went in his sneakers to Willie's office, expecting momentarily to hear his smoking plak plak, though the formidable typewriter visibly sat under the table by the window as he read. Not a serious inside sound of any sort. Maybe a rat

> scuttled down a toilet hole. Nothing really happening but imagination working overtime, the writer's bag. You worked with it, you had to live with this hyperactive genie. (53)

Like The Natural, The Assistant, and The Fixer, The Tenants is a fable. Unlike these earlier novels, however, it is set in a contemporary milieu. The world inhabited by Harry and Willie is the immediate present of 1970: the locus is a decaying tenement in New York, the environment is conditioned by social tensions and physical wastelands. America's racial crisis is at the centre of the novel. A black writer and a white writer act out the roles of black radical and white liberal. Like gladiators championing rival factions, they are placed in juxtaposition to each other. Each edges around the other, tests or is tested for weakness, and eventually locks in combat with his counterpart. There is, of course, no victor. White slays black, and black castrates white. Whether in fact or fantasy, this "parable of political anxiety"[101] concludes on a note of death and despair.

The Tenants' fable is political, racial, and moral. Drawing its two main characters toward a microcosmic Armageddon, it anticipates the fate of a nation disintegrated and polarized by racial antipathy. Black and white, the fable suggests, will destroy each other if they fail to insist upon their mutual survival and co-existence.

Cynthia Ozick, in an essay entitled "Literary Blacks and Jews," ar-

[101] Cynthia Ozick, "Literary Blacks and Jews," Bernard Malamud: A Collection of Critical Essays (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1974), p. 97.

gues that The Tenants, "a claustrophobic fable,"[102] is in essence an analysis of black anti-Semitism:

> If The Tenants progresses, it is not through plot but through revelation. The revelation is one-sided: it happens inside Lesser. We do not really know what happens inside Willie. And what happens inside Lesser is this: the clear recognition that the black writer who shares his quarters and also his literary hopes is, more than he is writer, more than he is lover, more even than he is fleshly human being, a ferocious, a mythic, anti-Semite.[103]

Ozick's interpretation of the novel--in large part an effort to show the manner in which Malamud subsumes his literary material to the theme of pogrom--makes many valid points. At the same time, however, there is danger in too thoroughly limiting the novel's case. For in addition to its sociological dimension, The Tenants embodies both a simple human fable and a highly articulated depiction of the literary mind. In relation to the moral fable, for example, the novel indicates that Lesser shares responsibility with Willie for the final tragedy. But Lesser's responsibility stems from personal rather than sociological factors: that is, whereas Willie demonstrates the features of racism--features derived from group and ghetto experience--Lesser demonstrates the implications of misplaced love. In the context of the novel, this personal failing is fatal.

In relation to the literary mind, The Tenants develops a schema of artistic creation. Lesser and Willie, both writers, respectively describe and champion an intellectual and an instinctual art. Doppelgangers,

[102] Ozick, p. 97.

[103] Ozick, pp. 91-92.

they are given opposing but interdependent roles. The Jew is credited with cerebral power and creative discipline, the black with raw impassioned spontaneity. Though this dramatization of the creative intelligence clearly bears on the social and racial dimensions of the novel, it also serves a specifically literary theme. If it treats of or alludes to the tension between black and white art, black and white expression, black and white experience, it also describes the basic polarity implicit in the totality of imaginative creation. In this novel neither the intellectual or the instinctual emerges victorious, each being regarded as indispensable to a holistic conception of the creative process. Hence, if Willie's work lacks discipline and form, Lesser's writing seems to lack "life."

Lesser's failure to complete his novel, a work entitled The Promised End,[104] and his inability to balance life and art, reveal the inadequacy of his character. His book, as we are told from time to time, is "about love," his purpose to create love both in fiction and in himself:

> Anyway, this writer sets out to write a novel about someone he conceives to be not he yet himself. He thinks he can teach himself to love in a manner befitting an old

[104] It is curious that this manuscript shares its title with Stanley Edgar Hyman's The Promised End: Essays and Reviews, 1942-1962 (1963). It seems probable that Malamud was aware of Hyman's book. If so, one may surmise that the author wished to evoke an image of recent American literary trends, to allude to or even parody the apocalyptic bent of contemporary writers and critics: note Leslie Fiedler's use of "End" in An to Innocence: Essays on Culture and Politics (1955) and Waiting for the End (1964). The source of Hyman's and Malamud's title is King Lear, Act V, Scene III, lines 314-315:

> Kent. Is this the promised end?
> Edg. Or image of that horror?

> ideal. He has resisted this idea for years; it's a chancy business and may not pay off. Still, if during the course of three books he had written himself into more courage, why not love? (176-177)

But (as he himself dimly perceives) art has a tendency to become life. Hence he comes to love his girlfriend Irene not for herself but for her salutary effect on his writing. He hopes her love will inspire his novel and create its end. Indicative of the manner in which his life is pressed into the service of a fiction, this tacit denial of Irene's humanity seals his bitter fate. In due course, Irene leaves Lesser and removes to San Francisco. Betrayed by two self-absorbed writers, by both Willie and Harry, she flees the isolation into which they have placed her. "No book is as important as me," (208) she writes. And with these words, Malamud's moral fable is pronounced.

The Tenants is a complex tale. On one hand, it presents the familiar moral parable of misplaced love and attendant misfortune; on the other hand, it manifests as a political fable concerned with immediate social crises; yet again, it incorporates in its treatment of black anti-Semitism a version of that "Jewish nightmare" noted by Yakov Bok. In a sense, therefore, this novel represents a consolidation of those themes present in earlier works: like The Natural, The Tenants deals with a failure to love; like The Assistant, it focuses on the tension between Jew and non-Jew in America; and like The Fixer and Pictures of Fidelman respectively, it develops the themes of pogrom and of art supplanting life. The word "mercy," Levenspiel's final word, may be said to cap each of these themes.

In its attenuation of realism, The Tenants most clearly resembles the Fidelman stories and The Natural. Like the latter work, as J. A. Allen remarks, The Tenants incorporates a distinctive element of fantasy:

> Actually, The Tenants is about equal parts realistic and fantastic, a combination which Malamud worked successfully in many of his best short stories and in his epic of baseball, The Natural. It is primarily the admixture of fantasy that keeps the book from bogging down in claustrophobic stereotype: . . . [105]

Since The Tenants is a reflection of the artist's mind, its substance and texture provide a mirror image of the writer's imagination. In turn, that imagination shows a predilection for fantastic digression, for unrealistic perception, and for phantasm. As a result, there are in The Tenants many passages demonstrating extreme angles of mimesis. Ranging in nature from drug hallucination to reverie to precognition, and in length from one sentence to twelve pages, these passages are essential to the novel's effect.

The fantastic world of Lesser's imagination is The Tenants' ultimate reality. The novel's "promised end," for example, the fatal meeting of armed opponents in the tenement hall, seems wholly or predominantly a fantasy. It impresses the reader with a sense of unbearable vividness and realism, yet at the same time asserts its origins in Lesser's mind. Because the novel has gone to great pains to prepare this scene, the reader is able to accept the unique character of its depiction: by the time Harry and Willie attack each other, the text has been given its own

[105] Allen, pp. 106-107.

brand of realism, a fantastic and psychological realism rather than a literal mimetic fidelity.

As early as the second page of the novel, fantasy is introduced to the narrative. Here, dream, precognition, and reverie combine to anticipate future events and to announce the novel's interior landscape:

> What useless dreams intervene? Though he remembers none although his sleep is stuffed with dreams, Lesser reveries one touched with fear: Here's this stranger I meet on the stairs.
> "Who you looking for, brother?"
> "Who you callin brother, mother?"
> Exit intruder. Yesterday's prowler or already today's? Levenspiel in disguise? A thug he's hired to burn or blow up the joint?
> It's my hyperactive imagination working against the grain. (2)

Other examples of reverie interrupt later portions of the narrative. The most significant of these passages is Lesser's imagined incursion into Harlem:

> Here's Lesser enjoying Harlem. . . .
> He sees himself walking on Eighth above 135th, drifting uptown alone on the wide dark sea, though the place is alive with many bright-sailed small craft and colored birds, brothers and sisters of all shades and shapes. (82)

But this reverie, like the novel itself, turns unpleasant. Lesser lifts his hat to a passing black woman, wishes her--in the standard form of the Jewish New Year greeting--"peace and prosperity for this and the coming year," and is rebuffed:

> The other passers-by either ignore him or cut The Man with scornful jibes:
> Show-off cracker.
> Ofay spy.

Goldberg hisself. (82-83)

Eventually, the imagined trespass is terminated by rejection and threat:

> Money? Lesser turns pale. I was hoping to be invited out of friendship and affection.
> Sam flips open his eight-inch mother-of-pearl switchblade, as Lesser, at his desk on Thirty-first near Third, brushes the reverie aside and returns to moving along his lonely sentences. (83)

Reminiscent of Malamud's "Black Is My Favorite Color"--a short story included in the Idiots First collection[106]--this Harlem episode describes the hiatus between black resentment and a white's attempt to ingratiate himself with black acquaintances. The results are, of course, predictable: it is to be expected that Lesser, even in imagination, will not escape some measure of hostility. The point of this reverie, however, is not so much that Lesser is a naif but that he embodies a certain potential for cooperation and friendliness. Though his world disintegrates into violence and chaos, the fault is only partly his own. Met with rejection and hostility, it is reasonable that his response at the novel's end should be characterized by fear and anger.

At several points in the novel ironic parallels are drawn from Lesser and Willie to Robinson Crusoe and Friday, and to Huckleberry Finn and Jim. During Harry's hallucinated experience with cannabis, for example, he imagines himself alone with Willie on "this floating island" rowing down the river:

[106] Bernard Malamud, Idiots First (New York, 1963; rpt. New York: Dell, 1966).

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> Willie rows coolly, sighting ahead in the swift shifting current of the broadening river, watching out for snags and sandbags and the hulks of wrecked ships. (44)

As in the Harlem reverie, however, a rift appears between black and white. In an argument over the meaning and value of "art" in literature and life, Willie says:

> Lesser, don't bug me with that Jewword. Don't work your roots on me. I know what you talkin about, don't think I don't. I know you tryin to steal my manhood. I don't go for that circumcise shmuck stuff. The Jews got to keep us bloods stayin weak so you can take everything for yourself. Jewgirls are the best whores and are tryin to cut the bloods down by makin us go get circumcise, and the Jewdoctors do the job because they are afraid if they don't we gon take over the whole goddam country and wipe you out. (45-46)

Despite Lesser's desire to see himself in the benign role of a Crusoe or a Huck Finn, he knows that in truth no black will accept his offer of friendship or instruction.

In Lesser's fantasized version of the burning of his manuscript, Willie takes revenge for the indignities he has suffered. In this fantasy, the black arrives at the island--said to be "accursed"--accompanied by two friends in a "war canoe." Having landed, they set about destroying Crusoe-Lesser's white legacy in order to erase his corruptive power. Significantly, though Willie sets fire to Harry's manuscript, he shows a vestigial respect for Lesser's work and hence for Lesser himself. Despite Harry's hatred, therefore, he continues, at least in fantasy, to give the black a certain amount of credit.

It is through fantasies like the above that The Tenants is imbued

with a quality of surreal abstractness. It is also the case, however, that the fantasies incorporated in The Tenants contribute to a strange impression of bizarre actuality. Hence the novel's surrealism functions to suggest the more than merely real and lends power to those episodes in which it is embodied. In this connection, it must be noted that The Tenants incorporates few actual dreams. Where this device functioned in The Assistant to relieve a predominantly realistic depiction, it is largely replaced in the present work by outright fantasy.

If The Assistant resolved to undermine its realistic texture without displacing it, The Tenants frequently removes its attention from material actuality altogether. On many occasions the novel enters into a prolonged rendering of Lesser's imagination and fancy. Dislocating the conventional focus, it abstracts itself from all notions of fictional probability. Describing an extreme angle of mimesis, and directing the reader's attention to the quidditas and claritas of Harry's phantasms, it anchors a substantial part of the novel in the air.

It is impossible to note all The Tenants' fantasies, but it is necessary to point to one of its central fantastic motifs. At key moments in the narrative, the fictional environment is described explicitly or implicitly as a jungle. The world, the book would suggest, is in danger of utter atavism. The rank chaos of the jungle seems an imminent threat foreshadowed in this fantastic description of the empty apartment adjacent to Lesser's rooms:

> . . . in a second bedroom a jungle sprouted--huge mysterious trees, white-trunked rising from thick folds, crowding four walls and into the third bedroom, dense ferny under-

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> brush, grasses sharp as razor blades, giant hairy thistles, dwarf palms with saw-toothed rotting leaves, dry thick-corded vines entangling thorny gigantic cactus exuding pus; eye-blinding orchidaceous flowers--plum, red, gold--eating alive a bewildered goat as a gorilla with hand-held penis erectus, and two interested snakes, look on. Deadly jungle. (9)

Toward the end of the novel, however, a fantastic inversion of this primitive world takes place. In a twelve page fantasy peopled by Lesser, Willie, Irene, Mary, family, friends, a rabbi, and members of an African tribe, Harry fantasizes an Edenic accession to peace. Here, the primitive natural world is a place in which accord may be reached. In an African village--not jungle to be sure, but an ageless world extraneous to civilization--Lesser envisages a resolution, an end. A double marriage takes place, the couples composed of a Jew and a black. Palm wine is drunk, and most of the people present seem more or less content.

But this fantasy is, after all, just that. Shortly after Lesser's escape into its pleasant unreality, he is returned to a complex and real situation. Willie, far from having made his peace with civilization through the fantasized marriage to Irene, is consumed with hatred. When he and Lesser meet in the tenement, it is in jungle and not an harmonious village:

> They trailed each other in the halls. Each knew where the other was although the terrain had changed. The trees in Holzheimer's room had moved off the walls onto the dank floors in the flat. Taking root, they thickened there and spread into the hall and down the stairs, growing profusely amid huge ferns, saw-toothed cactus taller than men, putrefying omnivorous plants. (210-211)

Though this, too, is clearly fantastic, it is descriptive of a real sit-

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uation. What follows is ambiguous: whether Lesser and Willie actually clash in the hall is a matter of interpretation. I would contend that the murder and castration is wholly imaginary, that it takes place entirely in Lesser's mind. The text has been so thoroughly shaped by episodes of questionable actuality that it is difficult to accept this event as fact:

> One night Willie and Lesser met in a grassy clearing in the bush. The night was moonless above the moss-dripping, rope-entwined trees. Neither of them could see the other but sensed where he stood. Each heard himself scarcely breathing.
>
> "Bloodsucking Jew Niggerhater."
>
> "Anti-Semitic Ape."
>
> Their metal glinted in hidden light, perhaps starlight filtering greenly through dense trees. Willie's eyeglass frames momentarily gleamed. They aimed at each other accurate blows. Lesser felt his jagged ax sink through bone and brain as the groaning black's razor-sharp saber, in a single boiling stabbing slash, cut the white's balls from the rest of him.
>
> Each, thought the writer, feels the anguish of the other.
>
> THE END
>
> (211)

In this moment of negative oneness, when the two men merge in "the writer," we are given a brief scenario of doom. This apocalypse, however, bears the signature of Lesser's "hyperactive genie." Moreover, by describing the hallway as a "grassy clearing in the bush," and by positing a possible "starlight filtering greenly through dense trees," Malamud invites the reader to link this episode with earlier fantasies, to take this episode seriously, but not literally.

Given Malamud's thematic concerns and his evident resolve to express

these concerns as distinctly as possible--he once said that the writer's purpose is to "keep civilization from destroying itself"[107]--one might imagine The Tenants to be a strident or polemical work. This, however, it is not. Despite its defined purpose and its ethical framework, it refrains from a declamatory over-statement of the argument. Instead, it uses an explicitly fantastic technique to make its case. By attenuating realism to an unusual extent, Malamud is able to freely dramatize his themes; in the absence of realistic criteria, he is at liberty to give full expression to his visionary imaginings. Unfettered by Dreiserian or didactic naturalism, he is able to invest his creation with a fantastic evocation of peril and potential, of hell and heaven. The statements he wishes to make are embedded in the narrative itself; the novel's form--fantasy interwoven or alternating with realism--is flexible and resilient enough to carry the vision.

In The Natural, Malamud's other fantastic novel, fable and fantasy seemed to compete for attention. Each vied with and appeared to exclude the other. In The Tenants, on the other hand, the author proves more adept at reconciling the two principles. In a sense, this novel's fable and fantasy interpenetrate: to an extent, it is possible to say that the fable is in the fantasy and the fantasy in the fable. Lesser's dislocated imagination encompassed a great deal of thematic material, clothing it in the surrealistic tones of a mind accustomed to unreality.

One way of describing The Tenants is to term it "tumid." Malamud uses this word in reference to Willie's bulging, swollen eyes, but it

[107] Field and Field, Critical Essays, p. 7.

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refers equally well to the novel's sense of turgid, teeming life. That that life tends to be located in the writer's imagination merely points to The Tenants' emphasis on a rich interior landscape. This landscape, because of its significance in terms of thematic import, and because of the violence and crudity of the novel's realistic and fantastic description, is imbued with a certain solidity and vividness. The abstractness which plagued The Natural does not afflict The Tenants to the same extent. The latter's potency is not dissipated in academic play; it remains, despite its mimicry of "avant-garde" and black consciousness literature, a novel of immediacy and power.

Where The Tenants does not wholly satisfy is in its failure to demonstrate a final consistency. Despite its impressive immediate effect, and notwithstanding its brilliant vividness, one is left with a somewhat blurred image of the work. The problem lies in the use of fantasy. Though Malamud applies it to The Tenants to great effect, it cannot help but confuse the reader's conception of the novel. It is an inherent property of fantasy, after all, to soften realistic outline. Because of this property, The Tenants' texture takes on a muted or even ambiguous quality.

I do not wish to suggest that fantasy proves primarily harmful to this work: on the contrary, it is the novel's use of fantastic techniques which accounts for its uniqueness. It is necessary to point out, however, that the incorporation of fantasy into the narrative is not without a negative side-effect. Ultimately, because of the extreme admixture of realistic and non-realistic modes, a subtle uncertainty informs the text:

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the reader may well find himself unable to form a clear image of the novel, unable to recall The Tenants as a defined and holistic work of art. As a result, the novel's power to convince--and its capacity to remain in retrospect a cogent experience--is somewhat diminished.

Conclusion

> J. M. Synge once said that the artist displays at once the difficulty and the triumph of his art when picturing the dreamer leaning out to reality or the man of real life lifted out of it. "In all the poets," he wrote, and this test is by no means limited to poetry alone, "the greatest have both these elements, that is they are supremely engrossed with life, and yet with the wildness of their fancy they are always passing out of what is simple and plain." [108]

The first part of this Conclusion focuses on the position of Malamud's novels vis à vis those nineteenth and twentieth century fictional notions and conventions treated in the Introduction. Adhering to the format followed in the various sections of this thesis, I shall first note Malamud's place on the periphery of the realist-naturalist tradition, then his indebtedness to the American romance and to fantasy and fabulation. In the second part of this Conclusion I shall review the literary problem central to this thesis--the means by which Malamud creates a "borderland" world.

(i)

It is one of Malamud's characteristics as a novelist that he selects modes and mannerisms from a wide range of sources. It is not surprising, therefore, that when his fiction is analyzed and evaluated in terms of its approximation to realism and to counter-realism, it is found to con-

[108] Rahv; pp. 144-145.

tain both. Again, when the realistic form and content of his work are examined, they reveal conceptions of imitative art deriving from very different models. For example, as we saw in our study of The Assistant, Malamud may give to his fiction a realism compatible with nineteenth century mimetic and novelistic conventions; on the other hand, realistic aspects present elsewhere in his fiction may reflect a specifically twentieth century conception of representational fidelity.

Since Malamud's longer fiction exhibits an attention to full specificity and solidity of detail, we may say it reflects the character of the conventional novel. As we noted with each of the four works examined in this thesis, such an attention to straightforward verisimilitude attempts to anchor the fiction in an appearance of fact. Even The Natural, the most overtly fantastic of Malamud's novels, often attempts to retain realistic credibility by grounding itself in the mundane matters pertaining to baseball. Similarly, The Tenants, though soaring beyond the limits of naturalist actuality, takes pains to note the fine shades and material details of a circumscribed environment.

If we accept W. J. Harvey's definition of conventional realism as a "clear, orderly imitation of life"[109]--that life conceived in social and empirical terms--we must note that Malamud's work displays an uneven attachment to the assumptions of that mode. With the exception of A New Life, his novels do not assert as predominant those notions fundamental to the great nineteenth century "novel of society." They do not, in other words, tend primarily to show characters as "embedded in a total real-

[109] Harvey, p. 205.

ity, political, social, and economic, which is concrete and constantly evolving."[110] They do, however, each to a different extent, incorporate some of the features of this genre. Even The Natural represents an effort to describe a quasi-national reality, for, as Malamud said in an interview, it attempts to "symbolize and explicate an ethical dilemma of American life."[111] Admittedly homiletic and mythic, it nevertheless reflects the author's involvement with actuality.

Philosophical naturalism, "that type of realism in which the individual is portrayed not merely as subordinate to his background but as wholly determined by it,"[112] is seldom apparent in Malamud's fiction. The one character that might be construed as "wholly determined" (in a sociological sense) is the rather stereotyped Willie Spearmint. Even Willie, however, though his origins and development are allowed a marked specificity, does not seem contained within a naturalistic framework. Like Malamud's other central characters, he infers a certain fictional independence.

If naturalism may be said to obtain in these novels, it exists in the realm of environment. Bober's store and street, Bok's cell, and Lesser's tenement are all imbued with an actuality and grim detail reminiscent of earlier works of naturalist realism. Indeed, there are passages, especially in The Assistant, echoing Dreiser and Farrell, passages which

[110] Erich Auerbach, Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature (1946; rpt. Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1957), p. 408.

[111] Field and Field, Critical Essays, p. 9.

[112] Rahv, p. 146.

seem influenced "as much by O. Henry's milieu as by Sholem Aleichem's spirit."[113]

Also apparent in The Assistant is Malamud's creation of the traditionally "rounded" character. One of the main features of the realist novel, this full characterization helps to distinguish the relatively conventional works in Malamud's canon from those which are more experimental. Commenting on Theodore Solotaroff's claim that The Assistant has, because of its "dynamics of character," "some of the power and clarity of the great 19th-century novels," Sidney Richman writes:

> Solotaroff's insight is correct, for it is substantially supported by Malamud's own contention that the chief business of the writer is "the drama of personality fulfilling itself." The figures in The Assistant have an amplitude and concretion deeper than gesture and more complex than particular passions.[114]

The same may be said of most of Malamud's other central characters. Roy Hobbs of The Natural and Sy Levin of A New Life excepted, the main figures in the novels are sufficiently complex and credible to ensure their autonomous reality.

If Malamud's fiction tends to incorporate many of the elements common to the traditional or nineteenth century realistic novel, it does not share the nineteenth century's general rejection of "the fantastic, the fairy-tale-like, the allegorical and the symbolic, the highly stylized,

[113] Sam Bluefarb, "The Scope of Caricature," Bernard Malamud and the Critics, ed., Leslie A. and Joyce W. Field (New York: New York University Press, 1970), p. 142.

[114] Richman, p. 52.

the purely abstract and decorative."[115] This, I trust, has been adequately noted in the body of this thesis. The point is that there exists—in relation to the above literary concepts—a particular pattern of development in Malamud's writing. This over-all pattern becomes evident when the body of his novels is viewed chronologically and with an eye to its arc of mimesis.

If Malamud's longer works are placed side by side and in order of publication, they will be seen to describe what might be termed a "V" pattern. That is, taken sequentially, the novels seem to gradually approach and then draw away from a mimetic "zero point": beginning with The Natural and progressing to The Assistant and A New Life, the early fiction becomes increasingly realistic. The mean mimetic angle described by each work decreases to the point, in A New Life, of least width.[116] After this third novel, however, the arc of mimesis demonstrated by Malamud's writing gradually begins to widen. Fantasy enters a period of ascendancy by becoming subtly influential in The Fixer: here, stressing myth and dream, it suffuses the text with a nightmarish quality. Then, several years later, with the publication of the last Fidelman stories and The Tenants, the fantastic is re-established as an overt and extensive influence.

In the Introduction we noted the "inversion of realist principles"

[115] Wellek, p. 241. See page 5 of this thesis.

[116] This is not to say that A New Life is a work of mundane or photographic realism. On the contrary, because of its burlesqued action it often seems all too unreal. This unreality depends, however, less on the fantastic than on comedy. Moreover, it represents a vitiation rather than a "magical decomposition" of the novel's emphasis on the "visibly real."

which occurred in the last years of the nineteenth century and the first years of the twentieth. And in the main body of this thesis we observed the ways in which Malamud's novels manifest the fictional characteristics associated with that inversion: that is, we sketched the fantastic and symbolic features of the novels, their subjective and irrational qualities. We delineated the specifically "modern" aspects of Malamud's craft, the "Obliquity, deliberate distortion, . . . retreat from the merely representational" cited by Harvey as the signature of twentieth century fiction.[117] Here it should be necessary only to reiterate that Malamud straddles the conventional and the non-realistic. As we have seen, he draws from both the traditional and the experimental. In general, he holds to a moderate course, denying neither the mimetic or the subjective but juxtaposing and fusing their disparate properties. In terms of realism and the attenuation of realism, therefore, it is possible to say that Malamud is of the "middle ground," a writer drawing equally from nineteenth and twentieth century conceptions of the novel.

Malamud's interest in the "more than merely realistic" is, as the Introduction suggested, in part the result of a native American influence, of that American fictional tradition based less on mimesis than on the "poetry of romance."[118] This romance tradition, "capable of encompassing both the 'real' and the 'marvellous,'" of moving from the natural

[117] Harvey, p. 205. See page 8 of this thesis.

[118] Chase, p. 17.

to the supernatural,"[119] has a bearing on Malamud's fiction, even on those works which are ostensibly realistic.

Of Malamud's novels, The Natural most resembles a romance. Fanciful and structured by the compelling actions of a supernatural hero, it tends, despite the inclusion of baseball actualities, to manifest a casual attitude toward the demands of realism. Because of its predominantly non-realistic character, however, this novel--perhaps precisely because it remains a novel—fails to convince wholly. In Malamud's later fiction, on the other hand, credibility is not a serious problem. Withdrawing the "marvellous" from the exterior landscape and placing it more thoroughly in the minds of his characters, Malamud is able to compel belief in the imaginary. And in so doing, he is in effect recapitulating the history of nineteenth century American romance.

Malamud's work frequently bears a strong resemblance to that of Nathaniel Hawthorne. Significantly, it was Hawthorne who brought to the romance a conviction that it could best serve the rendering of full human experience. Psychologizing the romance, he conceived of its "field of action" as a "state of mind--the borderland of the human mind where the actual and the imaginary intermingle."[120] Hence, when Malamud a century later creates a borderland world in The Natural, The Assistant, The Fixer, and The Tenants, he is in effect working from within an established American tradition. This point is clarified by the following quotation from Renee Winegarten's "Malamud's Head":

[119] Hoffman, p. 358.

[120] Chase, p. 19. See page 12 of this thesis.

> Paradoxically, however, it is when Malamud is most vigorously fiddling on the roof amid lit candles that he seems (to the present non-American outsider at least) to be at his most American. His magic barrels and silver crowns, whatever their scale, firmly belong in the moral, allegorical realm of scarlet letters, white whales and golden bowls. [121]

If Malamud's novels reflect the influence of American romance, they also partake of the post-war American interest in fantasy. This contemporary predilection for fantasy manifests to a varying degree in each of the works. Since this matter has already been discussed, I wish to make only one or two concluding remarks regarding it. The first, alluded to above, is the fact that Malamud's use of the fantastic tends to remain moderate. In this connection his work seems more conventional than that of post-war American comic-apocalyptic writers like Kurt Vonnegut, John Hawkes, and William Burroughs.

In the Introduction's discussion of fabulation, Robert Scholes is quoted as saying that "like the ancient fabling of Aesop," modern fabulation "tends away from the representation of reality but returns toward actual human life by way of ethically controlled fantasy."[122] This statement embodies Malamud's formula for a balanced rendering of the objective and subjective facets of his art. Indeed, without the ethical quality to which Scholes refers—without, in other words, an affective and human ambience--Malamud's fantasies would seem merely abstract and dissociated

[121] Renee Winegarten, "Malamud's Head," Bernard Malamud: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed., Leslie A. and Joyce W. Field (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1974), p. 100.

[122] Scholes, p. 11. See pages 16-17 of this thesis.

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digressions from the fiction's realistic foundation. Because of their human simplicity, especially as they obtain in The Assistant and The Fixer, these fantasies are often able to defy their own insubstantiality. Furthermore, imbued with a certain familiarity, they are less likely to conflict with the text's realistic elements.

As realism and romance are fused in much of Malamud's writing, so his novels are frequently transformed by the introduction of a fable. In fact, it is possible to view the form of Malamud's longer fiction as an amalgam of the novel and the fable. So influential are the qualities of didacticism, parable, and homily that they cause this fiction to stand slightly apart from most nineteenth and twentieth century writing. In relation to contemporary fiction, for example, Malamud's morals seem uniquely and almost anachronistically simple and direct. Easily perceived and reduced to their common essentials, they often cause the fiction to appear less than worldly, even less than clever. Hence, as Tony Tanner points out, there exists in Malamud scholarship a body of criticism taking issue with his form and craft:

> Some critics complain of this kind of surrealistic fantasy in Malamud just as they suggest that his reliance on fable and myth indicates a somewhat impoverished appreciation of the actual stuff of the world.

But Tanner himself disagrees:

> It seems to me more profitable to see Malamud as a writer who has an instinctual feeling for the folk-tale, the wry fable with an only half-hidden moral--his best work com-

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bines both real and 'fabulous' elements.[123]

Deceptively effortless, Malamud's novel-fable is in fact highly crafted. And, as we shall see in the next section, the complexity of its technique derives from its attempt to coordinate "real and 'fabulous' elements" with a very simple story.

(ii)

Summary Remarks

There is a school of thought which holds that a novel's symbolic meaning has substance and power only if "flesh and blood human beings" are incorporated in the novel.[124] This principle is defined in the following quotation from Earl Rovit's "The Jewish Literary Tradition":

> . . . the writer of fiction is automatically committed to at least a minimal surface realism in the depiction of his characters and his milieu, and, speaking generally, his degree of success in presenting a convincing "slice" of simulated life will determine the cogency of his symbols.[125]

This principle, the imperative of minimal surface realism, is crucial to an understanding and evaluation of Malamud's fiction.

The Natural demonstrates a failure of perspective and proportion.

[123] Tanner, p. 331.

[124] Baumbach, p. 8.

[125] Earl H. Rovit, "The Jewish Literary Tradition," Bernard Malamud and the Critics, ed., Leslie A. and Joyce W. Field (New York: New York University Press, 1970), p. 3.

Seen as a technical prototype, however, as an initial attempt to organize experience and symbol, it points to Malamud's subsequent discovery of a formula for balanced expression. In this first novel--"the only one in which the underpinnings of reality are finally pulled away by the powerful tug of fantasy"[126]--minimal surface realism does not obtain. Though an attempt is made to fasten the book to reality by means of an extensive baseball narrative, there is an insufficient evocation of material actuality. As a result, a large measure of the novel's capacity to convince and affect is lost.

In Malamud's later work, as we have seen, a more generous inclusion of the actual creates a foundation for fantastic expression. As the characters are "fleshed out"--in large part through the development of their Jewishness--and as their environment takes on a greater specificity and solidity, fantasy and the transcendence of the real come to be less dissociated from the realistic narrative. In The Assistant, for example, as H. E. Francis notes, Malamud demonstrates that he "has learned to employ fantasy in support of his action rather than to impose it upon the action as he did in The Natural."[127] Furthermore, by locating his irrational or transcendent visions within the subjective and internal experience of his characters, he is able to flout the conventions of realism without foregoing his reader's capacity to believe. Employing psychological fantasy rather than fantastic description of exaggerated events, he maintains narrative credibility.

[126] Alter, p. 31.

[127] Francis, p. 94.

The key to Malamud's art is the fusion or association of opposites. His best fiction reveals a series of intersections, of meetings between fantasy and fact, history and myth, heaven and earth, dream and reality, internal and external landscape. His fictional worlds seem crafted in such a way as to make polarities effortlessly commingle; he brings the tangible and the intangible into proximity with each other, accommodating language to the evocation of the "edge." His idiom, syntactically malleable, contributes to a borderland world, bending the syntax of experience to his own ends.

The hallmark of Malamud's fiction is its capacity to "make the fantastic real and the real fantastic, as in a dream."[128] Its capacity to do this, its ability to elide the actual into the imaginary, derives from the author's conjoining of the "realistic novel with the poetic and symbolic novel."[129] Where this union is complete, Malamud's borderland is most successful. In this borderland, at the intersection of Bounderby's science and Bellow's transcendence, a semifantastic world of possibility exists.

If Malamud's fiction represents a subtle departure from the mundane and deterministic, it is necessary to query the nature of its alternate reality. To what extent, for example, does this reality imply a loss of ethical seriousness? And what is the potential moral efficacy of a borderland world? The answers to these questions are essential to an evalu-

[128] Jonathan Baumbach and Arthur Edelstein, Moderns and Contemporaries: Nine Masters of the Short Story (New York: Random House, 1968), p. 306.

[129] Richman, p. 48.

ation of Malamud's work. To begin, we may answer by saying that Malamud's magical borderland is often not "magical" at all. Though frequently embracing the improbable or the impossible, its primary task is to provide a setting for spiritual change. Therefore, as Harry Lesser looks for "some miracle of transformation" (177), Malamud's novels look for a middle ground between flesh and soul where that secular miracle may take place. Carving out a reality, this fiction attempts to project a world less than normally inimical to human or spiritual renewal. In this fictional world the human heart is stronger than environmental forces: the individual is capable, under extreme circumstances, of a full knowledge of responsibility and compassion. He is capable, that is, of redemption, rebirth, and love.

In order to create such a world, emphasis is placed on the individual's subjective reality. The specificity of the environment is countered by an attention to the inner life and fullness of the central characters. This is especially true in The Assistant and The Fixer, novels in which the main figures undergo a thorough transformation. In these works the poetic, symbolic, and visionary properties of the characters penetrate and even displace the objective world. Here, therefore, realistic conventions are sacrificed to the creation of an inner reality.

By favouring a subjective reality, Malamud leaves himself open to certain criticisms. In particular, it is possible to argue that such an approach ignores the existence of social and political imperatives. As Richard Chase notes in connection with romance, however, such a contention is unnecessarily narrow:

> It is not necessarily true that in so far as a novel departs from realism it is obscurantist and disqualified to make moral comments on the world. . . . The very abstractness and profundity of romance allow it to formulate moral truths of universal validity, although it perforce ignores home truths that may be equally or more important. One may point to the power of romance to express dark and complex truths unavailable to realism. The inner facts of political life have been better grasped by romance-melodramas, as they may be called--such as those of Dostoevski and Malraux--than by strictly realistic fiction.[130]

And just as the "romance-melodrama" may be best suited to "the inner facts of political life," the novel-fable may excel in the delineation of an individual's moral reality. If so--and I believe the case to be self-evident--the accusation of irresponsibility is senseless.

The Natural is, on one level at least, an allegory. It exhibits a radical divergence from the realistic form of the novel and assigns a great deal of its moral import to metaphor. There is no reason why this particular procedure should be disputed. As the following passage from The Fabulators suggests, no discrepancy need exist between the extended metaphor and an ethical consideration of life:

> The allegorist acknowledges the visionary power of his linguistic medium. He sees through his language. Metaphor, the vital principle of language, is also the animating force in allegory. It is because life can be seen as a journey, a quest, or a voyage that Dante, the Redcross Knight, or Gulliver can serve as examples of human behaviour, even though they exist for us in imaginary and non-realistic realms.[131]

[130] Chase, p. xi.

[131] Scholes, p. 145.

Insofar as The Natural remains an allegory, it is a remarkable and coherent work. Its allegorical concerns are accommodated to the structure of the novel, and its vision of the American journey given a consistent delineation. Where it runs into difficulty, however, is in its attempt to embody a simple human fable of misplaced love.

Whereas Gulliver's Travels--to cite an example of consistent fantasy--remains very much of a piece, The Natural is a work at war with itself. Attempting to span both allegory and moral fable, it divides and confuses its own identity. It is ultimately an unsatisfying work because it invites certain expectations regarding Roy Hobbs's humanity, then fails to fulfill them. Jonathan Swift, maintaining a consistent distance from the "real," did not make a similar mistake.

Divided, the balance and moral efficacy of The Natural is vitiated. Form does not align with content, and the disparate levels of the novel remain distinct. No melding takes place between the fantastic realm and the proto-human world of Iris and Roy. It is as though the author, in this his first major work, decided to experiment with two different forms, two different literary approaches to the moral nature of existence.

Whether this is indeed the case, Malamud did in fact settle on a less allegorical and more realistic fictional mode. In The Assistant and The Fixer he established the centrality of a human fable and constructed around that fable a fiction of marvellous integrity. Gauging the extent to which the fantastic and the fabulous might contribute to a semi-magical effect (and hence to his "miracle of transformation"), he measured and

introduced these factors to the prevailing realism. In essence, he aligned his technique with the sort of moral reality he wished to project. Realizing that his familiar human themes demanded both a certain technical restraint and a subtle "magical decomposition," he allowed the fantastic only moderate expression. As a result, the Depression landscape of The Assistant and the historical reality of The Fixer remain clear and powerful. The borderland world of these novels succeeds in accommodating both an imaginative realm and a tangible environment.

The Tenants should be considered on its own. For though it follows in the line of The Assistant and The Fixer, it incorporates a far greater degree of fantasy. Like The Natural, it presents a fable of loss and failure by indulging in imaginative play. Perhaps it was precisely its "promised end," its fable of doom, that prompted Malamud to give free rein to fancy. Whatever the reason, The Tenants is far more successful than The Natural but less integrated than The Assistant and The Fixer. In this last novel, fantasy periodically displaces fable. It almost, but not quite, makes two stories out of one.

In "Suppose a Wedding," a short piece published in Idiots First, a retired actor of the Yiddish stage named Maurice Feuer looks back on his career:

> It's from a play I once played in the Second Avenue Theater, "Sein Tochter's Geliebter." I was brilliant in this part--magnificent. All the critics raved about me even though the play was schmaltz. Even the New York Times sent somebody and he wrote in his review that Maurice Feuer is

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> not only a wonderful actor, he is also a magician. What I could do with such a lousy play was unbelievable. I made it come to life. I made it believable. (156)

This could be Malamud speaking. And though he soon turns on his own failure—"Thomashefsky, Jacob Adler, Schwartz—all were better than me. . . . Two years off the stage and my name is dead" (170)—the fact remains that he is truly a magician. He makes it come to life, he makes it believable. If not always, then almost always.

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