

Bernard Malamud's Fiction and the Rise of Ethnic Literary Studies : *Lectio praecursoria*¹

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The increasing visibility of a number of previously marginalized literary cultures is one of the most challenging developments in postwar American fiction. My dissertation deals with the novels of Bernard Malamud (1914–1986), a contemporary Jewish-American author, whose work is linked with this phenomenon as well as other significant trends in the recent literature of the United States.

The first novel published by Malamud in 1952 is a mythic baseball story, while his last work is a novel manuscript unfinished at the time of his death. Set in the late 19th century, the posthumously published draft of this novel tells about a Jewish peddler who is adopted by an Indian tribe as their chief. All in all Malamud's career lasted for over forty years. Containing a wide variety of subjects and characterized by engaging narrative solutions, his *oeuvre* offers promising research material. Besides, the value of Malamud's work is enhanced if one looks at it in the context of its dynamically developing social and historical backdrop.

When discussing Malamud's prize-winning work, now approaching a period of reassessment that is normally thought to follow an author's demise, I have focussed on the Adamic protagonists as my principle subject. In my readings of the novels I concentrate on questions pertaining to the identities of those living in a bi-cultural context. While paying attention to the process of combining different kinds

of cultural and social elements, I also have tried to explore Malamud's fiction by drawing on more recent critical approaches than those used in the traditional investigations of his work.

The background of Malamud's literary career is linked with the postwar Jewish breakthrough in American letters. This "movement" has its roots in the Eastern European Jews' mass migration to the United States at the turn of this century. The Eastern European immigrants created a body of literature that is currently being researched by numerous scholars. Like the fiction written by many Jewish-American authors in the Depression period, this body of literature has been marginalized by the makers of the American canon.

The so-called Jewish-American renaissance dates back to a later period: it has been said to have lasted from the mid-1940s to the mid-1960s. In addition to Malamud, the two other best known authors of this period are Saul Bellow, a Nobel Prize winner, and Philip Roth. Collectively they have been called either the "troika" or the "triumvirate" of Jewish-American fiction.

It is noteworthy that the rise of Jewish-American literature coincides with the period during which the study of American writing has generated many theoretical attempts to locate the characteristically American element in the literature of the United States. By and large, the essential tradition as conceived these

modern theorists was the New England tradition. Even if it was supplemented from time to time with some new names, it was nevertheless identified with the dominant culture created by white Anglo-Saxon Protestants (WASPs).

Partly out of a renewed sense of nationalism following the war, the definition of Americanness was linked with the central themes, metaphors, and the typical landscape of American literature. Taken together, these elements were understood both to reflect and to reinforce the dominant American myth. According to this myth, the United States is the new promised land of regeneration, and as such it is accepted as the privileged location of a better life and of a new self. Thus the study of the American literature of the 1950s and of the 1960s projected ancient paradisaical images onto the United States, perceiving the country as the second garden of Eden. Indeed, it has been recently suggested that the images of paradise that can be linked with the Puritan heritage ultimately help to form the political unconscious of American literature.²

The scholars of Americanness were men, and they also identified a mythic male hero whom R.W.B. Lewis designated the American Adam. This second Adam was an independent New World character who, untrammelled by the restrictions of society, went forth to test the promises of the American myth. This is how the construct of Americanness was linked with the ideals of solitary and rugged individualism.

Many writers have suggested that because of its promise of freedom and emancipation the idea of America was particularly appealing to the Eastern European Jews who arrived in the States to put the Old World ghettos and *stetlach* behind themselves for good. Considering American history and the traditional allure of the country as a "melting pot of nations," it is also natural that the promises of equal opportunity appealed to all the authors who were marginalized by the mainstream culture. However, these authors experienced a sense of alienation from the preeminence of the middle-class male norm. Fiction produced by women and the minorities did not conform to the definition of the canon offered by the masculine and

ethnocentric literary institution, and therefore these writers were also denied its patronage. No wonder that when the marginalized groups began to demand their rights, they also emphasized the importance of reconstructing the canon.

The critical scrutiny of the role of the literary institution in creating and maintaining the reputation of masterpieces has led to a serious questioning of the "universal" literary values in the United States. The new scholarship of the past two decades has intended to show that the formation of the canon not only depends on the theories that have helped to shape it, but also is connected with the historical situation that has given rise to it. There is evidence to support the thesis that, like Americanness, the American canon, which was established relatively late and which has been regarded as relatively fixed, is actually a historically changing construct.

As far as Jewish-American fiction is concerned, most critics recall that the sonnet inscribed on the Statue of Liberty was composed by Emma Lazarus who was of Sephardic origin. In spite of this, Jewish-American literature suffered for a long time from the anti-Semitic stereotypes of the dominant culture.

As a whole, the literature of the United States can be conceived as consisting of different regional literatures. Southern fiction played an important role in preparing the ground for the reception of Jewish-American literature. Many other factors have been mentioned as contributing to its rise. They range from a weakening of mainstream fiction to the wave of philo-Semitism that followed the Nazi holocaust. The importance of the theme of alienation has also been stressed. Alienation was a familiar psychic condition peculiar to uprooted Jews who, for historical reasons, have always lived in a state of alterity. As a matter of fact, a well-known Jewish-American scholar claims "their muchvaunted alienation to be their passport into the heart of Gentile American culture."³

The gradual reduction of the mechanisms of discrimination also shows in postwar scholarship. It is worth keeping in mind that in the United States, the English departments in

which British and American literatures were taught discriminated against Jews longer than other university departments. In principle, women and non-WASP faculty members were welcomed by the English departments only after World War II. This gradual change is reflected in the lives of many Jewish-American authors: like Malamud, they have worked as university teachers.

The careers of the Jewish authors of Malamud's generation have been intertwined with the activities of a loosely connected literary group called the New York Intellectuals. After having been originally interested in political radicalism and in avant-garde fiction, many Jewish members of this group began to study Jewish-American literature after they had finally established themselves in the late 1940s and the early 1950s. In fact, they can be regarded somewhat as pioneers in the field of ethnic literature and its academic study. Later on, the development of ethnic literary scholarship benefitted from the liberation movements of the 1960s as well as from the almost simultaneously emerging new critical approaches that drew on poststructuralism.

Like the study of any other marginalized literature, the beginnings of Jewish-American literary scholarship involved efforts devoted to charting its cultural and literary traditions. In addition to translating previously unknown texts into English, scholars were restoring to print "forgotten" or suppressed works of literature. Suffice it to mention here that Henry Roth's fine modernist novel about childhood entitled *Call It Sleep* from 1934 was reissued in hardcover as late as in 1960. Several anthologies of Jewish literature also belong to the landmarks.

Recovering one's 'hidden history' offered a way of imposing an imaginary coherence on the Jews' ancient experience of dispersal and fragmentation. This was also of great significance to the marginalized minority authors who had been forced to look for their literary models only in the mainstream literature.

In the first place, many scholars regarded Jewishness as a self-evident cultural identity that they, in one way or another, attempted to define in terms of the authors' descent. Quite

uncritically, they also conceived of literature as a rather straight-forward reflection of reality. When so doing, they tended to emphasize the authors' links with immigrant culture and its Yiddish-speaking European background. While some critics employed religious criteria, other approaches were rooted in traditional Jewish values or in Jewish life-styles.

Many scholars referred to what they called the authentic essence of Jewishness, and thereby their definition of Jewish ethnicity involved an idealizing tendency that amounted to patronizing attitudes. Denying the social and psychological construction of individual identities as an ongoing process linked with the differences within, these attitudes contributed to acts of exclusion of certain Jewish-American authors. This phenomenon is familiar from other marginalized cultures: the underlying assumption is that the authors should speak for the communities they come from as if they were their delegates to the mainstream culture.

As far as the themes of Jewish-American fiction are concerned, the Jewishness of the immigrant culture was originally associated with everything that is old and irrelevant, while the Americanness of the dominant culture connoted newness and other properties that were regarded as desirable. In general, Americanness was connected with social mobility, but more familiarity with the American experience with its emphasis on material values evoked responses of detachment and irony. At the same time the Jewish community was once again understood as the repository of meaningful spiritual values.

Scholars of Jewish-American literature have often discussed the topics of Americanization and assimilation into the mainstream culture as the common features of Jewish-American fiction. Moreover, they have tried to define its special qualities by focussing their attention on the interaction between the dominant and the marginalized cultures. This approach is closer to the theoretical notions of the ethnically grounded literary scholarship that began to emerge in the 1970s and which is critical of essentialist definitions. The new scholarship does not want to define "ethnicity-as-such" because it does not wish to refer to a

thing-in-itself but to a relationship. The representatives of this approach argue that like race and nationality, ethnicity is typically based on a *contrast*. In addition to paying attention to the differences that pertain to a power imbalance between the dominant and marginalized groups, they discuss the internal differences within the ethnic communities as well as the unstable points of collective and individual identities.

The construction of a new conception of ethnicity is related to a new way of understanding both identities and subjectivities. In this view, the new scholarship holds that they are continually being constituted in relation to the interplay of different elements of history, language, and culture. When Jewish-American fiction, to give an example of a bi-cultural expression of experience, represents a more complex idea of ethnicity, it shows that such concepts as Jewishness and Americanness are both fluid and contradictory. Moreover, they share a complex relationship to each other as well as to other ethnic groups.

Indeed, the new scholarship not only questions the traditional homogeneous idea of a nation and of a national literature, but it also deconstructs the prevailing image of ethnic communities as "always already" unified and unitary. This entails the centrality of other concepts that refer to boundaries and hierarchical differences. Among these, the most important ones include gender, class, race, and sexual preference. These differences are understood to be social and cultural constructs, but their denial is always linked with power relations and the prevailing ideologies of dominant discourses.

Like mainstream literature, ethnic literature is usually perceived in terms of a male bias. Substantiating their claims with their impressive accumulation of scholarly achievements, American feminist critics argue that women are oppressed in their own culture. Although many well-known ethnic authors are women, it is nevertheless true that their fiction does not always receive the attention it deserves.

The rise of feminism, gender studies, and the study of masculinity no longer allow us to

look at male Americans or at the works written by male ethnic authors in the same way in which we used to study them in the past. As I pointed out, due to American mythmaking and history, mainstream American literature has been regarded as distinctly masculine. Even though there is no question about male dominance and power, deconstructing a monolithic concept of masculinity will help us to see that all men do not occupy the same power positions. Malamud's novels, for instance, show how the male protagonists try to identify themselves with the dominant culture by realizing—often to their own disadvantage—its ideals of masculinity. Frequently these ideals are in opposition to the more fluid models of masculine identities that are connected with Jewish culture.

In calling coherent identities into question the new scholarship, in accordance with post-structuralist theories, also holds a new notion of authorship. If one agrees that texts are not created in a vacuum but in relation to culture and literature, one can no longer speak about the author as an originary and original source of meaning existing outside history any more than one can speak about the existence of authentic ethnic literature. In spite of this, ethnic literary scholarship stresses the need for text-specific concepts that have been derived from the marginalized culture. As far as intertextual relations are concerned, even the biographical facts and information about an author can be treated as texts.

The Jews have traditionally been called the "People of the Book." While this name originally referred to the Jews' devotion to the holy texts, it can also be applied to secular literature. Quoting George Steiner, one can argue that for contemporary Jewish authors, with their consciousness of literary traditions, "the homeland is always the text."⁴ The various and sustained allusions to other texts that lie at the heart of Malamud's fiction lend support to the claim about the centrality of rich intertextuality in Jewish writing. While Malamud's attention to constant intertextuality allies him with other assimilated writers such as Bellow and Roth, one of their major concerns appears to be the establishment of literary con-

nections with other authors, most whom represent the dominant culture.

The Western tradition has frequently been perceived as the battle ground of male authors' rivalry about imaginative space. In emphasizing the dialogic properties of literary texts, Malamud's novels call this idea into question. In addition to its rich networks of intertextuality, his *oeuvre* is characterized by another cultural concept that links it with the Jewish community. This is the Jewish ethic of *mentshlekhty*. In Malamud's novels, as well as elsewhere, this code embodies individual and social responsibility, and therefore is also connected to the dialogic principle that transcends the borders between gender and culture.

It is customary to think that ethnic authors write within the older realist or naturalist traditions. The new scholarship, however, claims that literary forms are not organically connected with ethnic groups. Jewish-American fiction offers much evidence that ethnicity and modernism form a false set of opposites.

The innovative potential of Malamud's fiction is most salient in the later novels which were written when the currents of modernism and postmodernism intersected in literary history. In them the drive toward experimentation suggests a complex but responsible process of negotiation between the literary trends and traditions.

NOTES

1. Pirjo Ahokas's doctoral dissertation has the title *Forging a New Self: The Adamic Protagonist and the Emergence of a Jewish-American Author as Revealed*

through the Novels of Bernard Malamud (Annales Universitatis Turkuensis. Ser. B. Tom. 192). The public defense took place at the University of Turku on March 18, 1991.

2. See Sam B. Girgus, *Desire and the Political Unconscious in American Literature* (Macmillan: Houndmills, 1990), pp. 3, 8, 28.

3. Leslie A. Fiedler, *Waiting for the End: The American Literary Scene from Hemingway to Baldwin* (1964; Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1967), p. 72.

4. See George Steiner, "Our Homeland, The Text," *Salmagundi*, No. 66 (Winter-Spring 1985), pp. 5, 8.

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