

The Nature of Jewishness in Bernard Malamud's Fiction

Martín Urdiales Shaw

Universidad de Vigo

La construcción de la(s) identidad(es) judías en los personajes de Bernard Malamud (1914-1986) es, sin duda, una de las características más llamativas en una gran parte de la narrativa de este autor, tanto en sus novelas como en sus relatos. La intención de este artículo es analizar cómo y con qué objetivos Malamud define el judaísmo, (o la “judeidad,” por traducir un término *ad hoc* [‘jewishness’] que, sin connotaciones ortodoxas, señale simplemente la condición de “ser judío”) a través de algunos de sus protagonistas, concretamente los que –parcial o fundamentalmente- aparecen caracterizados en relación directa a esta identidad, ya sea de forma étnica, de forma cultural o de forma religiosa. Este estudio, por tanto, no pretende hacer un análisis exhaustivo de todos los personajes judíos de Malamud; intenta abarcar una parte de su obra en la que el origen judío de los personajes es clave en relación a la línea argumental de la novela o relato en la/el que estos se inscriben, con el fin último de concretar la ideología subyacente de un autor que tuvo que conciliar valores judíos inculcados por padres emigrantes del este de Europa, con la realidad personal de criarse en el contexto del Nuevo Mundo anglosajón, muy ajeno a tales valores.

When speaking of American-born or American-raised writers of Jewish origin in the context of 20th century American literature, a recurrent yet fascinatingly elusive and complex issue arises time and again: in what terms and to what degree do Jewish-American writers illustrate Jewishness –in the broadest sense of the word- in their literary productions? The answer to this question is difficult, insofar as it is conditioned by varied factors, ranging from the personal family background of these writers, their upbringing at home, often by parents culturally rooted in the Eastern European Jewish tradition, and their education outside the home, in contact with a new struggling multiethnic American society. A further key influence

in the representation(s) of Jewishness –also related to these two aspects– is the generational context in which these writings are produced. Naturally these representations will vary considerably between, let's say, the fiction produced before 1939 and that produced after 1945, even if most American Jews did not live the Holocaust experience directly. But there are other generational factors too, besides this massacre, which condition the representations of Jewishness in Jewish American writing. The evolution of Jewish literary themes in a long-lived writer such as Saul Bellow, who began writing in the 1940s and continues to write today, is an interesting case in point.

Broadly speaking, a specific literary tradition of Jewish-American literature (to use a general although not universally accepted label) does not become consolidated until mid-century, although from the turn of the century and throughout its first decades, there is a clearly identifiable number of “immigrant writings” by Jewish authors who were born in the old country and brought to the United States as children.¹

But it is not until the 1940s and 50s, the decades which brought to light the first writings of Bernard Malamud (1914-1985), Saul Bellow (1915-) and, in the late fifties, Philip Roth (1933-), that critics start using the label “Jewish-American” to identify a specific literary tradition within modern American literature. The first generation of the “Jewish-American” tradition was, and continues to be, centrally identified with these three writers, in spite of later re(dis)coveries of earlier isolated texts, such as Anzia Yezierska's *Bread Givers* (1925) or Henry Roth's modernistic *Call It Sleep* (1934), which have recently been incorporated as seminal works of the Jewish American canon.

Although convenient in critical terms, “Jewish American” is a problematic label, if not used in a strictly biographical sense. Jewish literary themes were, up to the 19th century, rooted in the (pre migratory) Eastern European cultural communities of the urban ghetto and the rural *shtetl*: the “Jewish” half of the compound is all but American, and thus, in the earlier part of the century, cultural or literary Jewish themes could not be identified as forming part of an American superstructure, but rather as a juxtaposition or blending of a very different tradition onto the wide, all-absorbing American context.²

Together with Bellow and Roth, Bernard Malamud was particularly uneasy about the “Jewish American” bag into which they had been thrust by the critics of their time. Malamud claimed that although identity-wise he regarded himself as both an American and a Jew, the label seemed to constrain the scope of (his) literature, which was meant to reflect universal themes (Field & Field 1975: 11-12).

Malamud's point was proven by his writings, a considerable part of which were totally unconnected to a combined “Jewish-American” framework, although he created Jewish characters who were not Americans, or, conversely, American characters who were not specified as Jewish. More often, the Jewishness of Malamud's protagonists is incidental for the workings of the story or simply reflects one facet of the multiethnic society of modern urban America, side by side with characters of Italian, Irish or African American extraction.

Thus, although most of Malamud's fiction involves Jewish characters, only a relatively small part of his work is directly concerned with the definition and implications of the Jewish condition: two novels - *The Assistant* and *The Fixer*- and three short stories - “The Last Mohican”, “The Lady of the Lake” and “The Jewbird”- focus, to a significant degree, on this issue as a key theme. My purpose in this paper is to outline the significance and implications of Jewishness for the characters in these works, considering not only their portrayals as Jews but also their attitudes to this heritage, in order to establish a definition of Malamud's literary vision of Jews and Jewishness, and thus ultimately reveal his own attitude towards his ethnic origin.

Morris Bober, inspired by Malamud's father, and probably one of his most superbly portrayed characters, embodies the essence of unorthodox Judaism in *The Assistant*. Toiling long hours in a grocery store which barely makes the family a living, Morris is “the soul of honesty” (*The Assistant* 19), a simple man who has been cheated by an ex-partner, gives trust to customers who will never pay and, out of pity, employs an assistant he cannot afford. When his gentile assistant Frank Alpine questions his Jewishness on the grounds that Morris doesn't go to the synagogue, eat kosher, wear a skull-cap or keep Jewish holidays, the grocer replies:

“Nobody will tell me that I am not Jewish because I put in my mouth once in a while, when my tongue is dry, a piece ham. But they will tell me, and I will believe them, if I forget the Law. This means to do what is right, to be honest, to be good. This means to other people. ... For everybody should be the best, not only for you or me. We ain’t animals. This is why we need the Law. This is what a Jew believes.” (*The Assistant* 112-3)

Morris’s identification of goodness and morality with the Jewish Law, together with his disregard of the ritualistic orthodox ways of the Jewish faith, points to a concept of Jewishness which is expanded, beyond a specific religion, to a more universal humanistic/ethical concept:

Morris’s Jewish Law is synonymous with Malamud’s secular moral code. The Jew himself is not used in a religious or ethnic sense: he is a symbol of modern man, a symbol of hopefulness, humility, and self-identity in the face of suffering and isolation. ... If a Malamud hero denies his Jewishness, his humanity, he is lost. (Mandel 262)

The denial of or indifference to Jewishness are precisely key themes in Malamud’s third novel *The Fixer* and two evocative short stories: “Lady of the Lake” and “The Jewbird”.

In *The Fixer*, a novel inspired directly by the historical Mendel Beiliss case³, the Jewish protagonist Yakov Bok happens to land at the wrong place -a hostile anti-semitic Kiev- at the wrong time -the murder of a Russian boy- and is used as scapegoat by the Russian authorities who, without evidence, charge him with the crime, committed “for ritual purposes”, a charge based on the infamous belief of the blood accusation, according to which Jews use the blood of Christians in their religious practices. The great irony of the novel is that Yakov, at the outset, is portrayed as a “freethinker” who reads Spinoza’s works and has no use for his Jewish origins which he considers cumbersome and antagonistic to progress. These reasons, among others, lead him to abandon the eternally impoverished shtetl where he lives among fellow Jews for Kiev, the big city which is no more than a conglomerate of ghettos where Jews and Russians do not mix.

After an irregular imprisonment and while awaiting an indictment deliberately being delayed, Yakov considers that the fact “that he was a Jew, willing or unwilling, was not enough to explain his fate” (*The Fixer* 89), although he later realizes his mistake and sees the irony of his predicament: “It could have happened to a more dedicated Jew, but it had happened instead to a recent freethinker because he was Yakov Bok” (*The Fixer* 127). And finally he comes to the conclusion that “We’re all in history, that’s sure, but some are more than others, Jews more than some” (*The Fixer* 255).

As the novel progresses, the authorities having only circumstantial evidence against Yakov and being unable to make him confess, the accusation is first changed to his being a mercenary of the Jews, and later to his simply being a witness to a crime committed by fellow Jews. In exchange for signing these confessions Yakov is offered freedom. But Yakov has learnt that to deny his Jewish origins is to deny his self and by his courageous resistance to these payoffs he becomes the unwitting symbol of the Jewish people. The assumption of his Jewishness, under the circumstances, is presented as the acknowledgement of a moral responsibility unto others, not so much for the sake of Jewishness as for the sake of humanity; in Morris Bober’s words, “.to do what is right, to be honest, to be good. This means to other people” (*The Assistant* 112-3). As he is finally taken to the long-awaited trial which the authorities dread, after two and a half years of unjustified imprisonment and humiliations, Yakov muses: “One thing I’ve learnt, he thought, there’s no such thing as an unpolitical man, especially a Jew. You can’t be one without the other, that’s clear enough. You can’t sit still and see yourself destroyed.” (*The Fixer* 271)

Malamud’s Italian story “Lady of the Lake” also deals with the denial of Jewishness of Henry Levin, who during a European tour, decides to change his surname to Freeman and thus cut himself off from the past. During a visit to Isola del Dongo on lake Maggiore in Italy, after deliberately escaping the guided group, he accidentally meets a mysterious woman and senses a mutual attraction. One of her first questions to Freeman is if he is Jewish; instinctively Freeman replies “no”. The woman introduces herself as Isabella del Dongo, thus a member of the noble family who owned the island. Although Freeman later wonders at her question -

because he does not look particularly Jewish- he feels he has done the right thing, sensing she wanted “...to determine his “eligibility” “(*Magic Barrel* 103) and “...being Jewish - what had it brought him but headaches, inferiorities, unhappy memories?” (*Magic Barrel* 113). But as is characteristic of Malamud’s Italy, nothing is what it appears to be: Isabella eventually reveals to him that her real surname is della Setta and that she and her father -also boatman and guide- are the caretakers of the now vacated del Dongo palace, where the Titians hanging on the walls are copies, and Freeman worries that “...he couldn’t tell the fake from the real” (*Magic Barrel* 109). But unlike Isabella, “Freeman cannot match her partial shedding of false identity” (Solotaroff 61) and when she later suggests to him the word *Menorah*, a clue for him to reveal his Jewishness, he feigns ignorance. In their last encounter, when Freeman proposes marriage, she asks point-blank, “Are you a Jew?” (*Magic Barrel* 118) and he -like the apostle Peter- denies a third time. Isabella then bares her breasts, revealing a tattooed bluish number from Buchenwald and says: “I can’t marry you. We are Jews. My past is meaningful to me. I treasure what I suffered for” (*Magic Barrel* 118). And she disappears into the night before Freeman can react and affirm his own Jewishness.

The irony of the story lies in the fact that Levin/Freeman disclaims a Jewishness which has brought him mild miseries only to fall in love with a woman whose suffering for Jewishness has been incomparably greater, and thus meaningful to the point of restricting her choice of partner to a Jew. The protagonist’s attitude to suffering is explained by critic Robert Solotaroff in Kierkegaardian terms: Levin/Freeman seeks satisfaction at a purely aesthetical level, “...but wants no part of the ethical imperatives or the suffering Malamud implicitly argues are also a Jew’s inheritance” (Solotaroff 61). His inability to pass from the aesthetical to the ethical level, in Kierkegaardian terms, reveals his immaturity and is morally punished by the loss of Isabella, in parable-like fashion. The symbolic denial of Jewishness implicit in his surname change, also ironically evidences his loss of freedom as Freeman, since his deceiving Isabella in this respect, binds him rather than liberates him.

In “The Jewbird”, one of his few fantastic stories, Malamud confronts Schwartz, a self-termed “old radical” Jewish bird and Harry Cohen, a second-generation Jewish immigrant who is intent on becoming “a fully assimilated American” (Hershinow 124). Schwartz flies through

the Cohen family's kitchen window one evening, when Harry Cohen, his wife Maurie and their son Edie are at dinner. Although Edie and Maurie are logically surprised to hear the bird talk -his first words are "Gevalt, a pogrom!" (*Idiots First* 95) when Harry swats at him- Cohen is not impressed; he asks the bird: "Wise guy, ... So if you can talk, say what's your business" (*Idiots First* 95). Schwartz affirms he is a "Jewbird" and *dovens*⁴ to prove his point. Although his wife and son listen respectfully, Cohen remains indifferent to the bird's dovening, the first indication of a disowning of his Jewish origins. In fact, the gradual hatred he develops towards the bird throughout the story reveals that "Schwartz does embody to Cohen the Jewish origin he would like to expunge" (Solotaroff 79). The contrast between Schwartz and Cohen in relation to speech also reveals "the central conflict between Jewish heritage and assimilative ambition" (Hershinow 125). Schwartz speaks the Yiddish-English of the Bobers in *The Assistant*, whereas Cohen's English is totally colloquial American:

[Schwartz]: "If you'll open for me the jar I'll eat marinated. Do you have also, if you don't mind, a piece of rye bread - the spitz?" (*Idiots First* 97).

[H.Cohen]: "My goddamn patience is wearing out. That cross-eyes butts into everything" (*Idiots First* 99).

Cohen reluctantly allows the bird to stay in the apartment for two reasons: on the one hand, his "relationship to his mother [who is dying in hospital] preserves a vestigial tie to his Jewish past" (Solotaroff 78) and thus the Jewish moral duty of hospitality. On the other hand, Schwartz undertakes the task of being Maurie's tutor, playing the role of the traditional Jewish uncle, ostensibly helping improve the boy's grades. Cohen selfishly dreams of getting Maurie "into an Ivy League School" (*Idiots First* 99) because this "...would extend his, Harry Cohen's, rise in WASP society..." (Solotaroff 79). Ironically, the Jewish bird is potentially -in Cohen's vision- an instrument on his way to renounce his Jewish origins and become a fully assimilated American. When Cohen's mother dies and Maurie brings home a zero in a math test, two events deliberately synchronized, Harry is freed of the two reasons which had made him keep Schwartz, and he throws out the bird, probably killing him. Although in general terms, "The Lady of the Lake" and "The Jewbird" are largely dissimilar, the former story being focused as a biblical parable with a moral lesson and the latter -despite the

fantastic character- as a tale of grim social realism involving the problem of assimilation, the common underlying theme of the denial of Jewishness as a shameful origin is patent in both stories: Harry Cohen and Henry Levin/Freeman reject the implicit suffering which is a part of the Jewish inheritance, for the sake of their acceptance in a WASP society or in an (apparently) Catholic family.

“The Last Mohican” deals with the theme of Jewishness as a binding experience. The student of art and failed painter Arthur Fidelman, an American Jew preparing a study on Giotto, arrives in Italy, where shortly after stepping off the train, he is accosted by Shimon Susskind, who tentatively greets him with a “Shalom”, correctly guessing his Jewishness.⁵ Susskind is a jobless Israeli refugee who lives in poverty, who after repeatedly begging from Fidelman, eventually asks him for his extra suit, complaining of the approaching winter. Tired of Susskind’s demands, Fidelman asks him at one point why he should be responsible for him:

“You know what responsibility means?”

“I think so.”

“Then you are responsible. Because you are a man. Because you are a Jew, aren’t you?” (*Magic Barrel* 145)

Henceforth, Fidelman refuses Susskind any help. On returning to his hotel one evening he finds that his briefcase, containing a completed initial chapter of his work on the Italian painter Giotto, has disappeared. While trying in vain to rewrite the lost chapter, Fidelman -suspecting Susskind- looks for the Jewish refugee everywhere:

His search takes him to the local reminders of the fateful intertwinings of Jews with Italians and their Nazi allies: to a synagogue where a beadle laments the Nazi’s murder of his son; to the Jewish cemetery where one gravestone commemorates “My beloved father / Betrayed by the damned Fascists / Murdered at Auschwitz by the barbarous Nazis/ *O Crime Orribile*”; to the ghetto where (...) he sees “impoverished houses...dark holes ending in jeweled interiors...” (*TMB*, 175-76). (Solotaroff 57-8)

The search for Susskind thus becomes also a symbolical journey into a Jewish past of suffering, also specifically embodied by the subsequent discovery of Susskind's "home", a dark freezing cave in a ghetto alley which brings on Fidelman's gradual awakening "to the hard realities of Susskind's life" (Solotaroff:58). Fidelman's growing awareness of Jewish reality culminates in a biblical dream of revelation, where entering a marble synagogue in the company of Susskind's ghost who asks "Why is art?" (*Magic Barrel* 159), Fidelman contemplates a fresco painted on its vault: "Giotto. San Francesco dona le vesti al cavaliere povero" (*Magic Barrel* 159). Fidelman awakes suddenly and runs to Susskind's place to give him a coat; Susskind then produces Fidelman's briefcase, but the manuscript he has burnt - to the enraged Fidelman he cries: "Have Mercy! ... I did you a favor ... The words were there but the spirit was missing" (*Magic Barrel* 160). As the furious Fidelman is running in pursuit of Susskind through the Jewish ghetto, he suddenly stops, and "...moved by all he had lately learned, [he] had a triumphant insight. 'Susskind, come back,'" he shouted, half sobbing. "The suit is yours. All is forgiven." (*Magic Barrel* 160).

The story is complex, since Malamud juxtaposes in it two complementary themes: that being a Jew requires a moral duty, which is also implicit in art. Through his journey into the Jewish experience in Italy, Fidelman eventually learns that Susskind has burnt his chapter because, by refusing him the suit, he has failed to grasp Giotto's message in the painting: the exaltation of responsibility, which, although portrayed in Christian terms, is meant to apply universally, beyond specific creeds, just as Morris's Jewishness is posited in *The Assistant*.

Malamud's view of Judaism is wide and unorthodox: it is often secularized into Jewishness. Yet insofar as this Jewishness is an inextricable part of ethnicity, an essential aspect of humanity in Malamud's vision, it becomes also unrenounceable: through Morris Bober in *The Assistant* he asserts precisely this view of Jewishness; through the coming of age and rites of passage of Yakov Bok and Arthur Fidelman, respectively (in *The Fixer* and "Last Mohican") he proclaims the necessity for its acceptance; through the failure of the frivolous Henry Freeman and the cruelty of the brutal Harry Cohen ("The Lady of the Lake"; "The Jewbird"), he reveals the inhumanity involved in its denial. As a writer belonging to a generation from which the old country has physically receded, yet is

kept alive through the memories of childhood and of immigrant parents, the essence of Jewishness was to Malamud not so much a liturgical ideal as a prideful heritage from a traditional, humanized and sensitive world of collective suffering and hopefulness, a refuge from modern America's driving individualism and materialism.

NOTES

1. Abraham Cahan (1860-1951), Anzia Yezierska (1885-1970) and Henry Roth (1906-1995) to name the most representative.
2. In a similar fashion to more recent coinages of other hybrid labels such as "Chinese American" or "Asian American", which again reflect the juxtaposition of an old world cultural tradition onto the American context.
3. Narrated by Maurice Samuel in *Blood Accusation. The Strange History of the Beiliss Case*.
4. To "doven" (usually "daven" or "davven"): to pray in Hebrew. Frequently applies to the blessing for the bread.
5. In "Man in the Drawer" (*Rembrandt's Hat*), this approach is also used. However, and although the story has a few points in common with "The Last Mohican", Jewishness is not eventually presented as a binding argument. (Solotaroff 129).

WORKS CITED

- Field L. & Field J. 1970. *Bernard Malamud and the Critics*. N.Y.: New York University Press.
- Field L. & Field J. 1975. *Bernard Malamud. A Collection of Critical Essays*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc.
- Field L. & Field, J. 1975. "An Interview with Bernard Malamud" in Field & Field. *Bernard Malamud. A Collection of Critical Essays*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc. (pp. 8-17)
- Hershinow, S.J. 1980. *Bernard Malamud*. New York: Frederick Ungar Publ.

- Malamud, B. 1966. *The Magic Barrel*. New York: Dell Books.
_____ 1966. *Idiots First*. New York: Dell Books.
_____ 1967. *The Assistant*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.
_____ 1967. *The Fixer*. New York: Dell Books.
_____ 1974. *Rembrandt's Hat*. New York: Pocket Books.
- Mandel, R. 1970. "Ironic Affirmation" in Field & Field. *Bernard Malamud and the Critics*. N.Y.: New York University Press. (pp. 261-274)
- Samuel, M. 1966. *Blood Accusation. The Strange History of the Beiliss Case*. Philadelphia : The Jewish Publication Society of America.
- Solotaroff, R. 1989. *Bernard Malamud. A Study of the Short Fiction*. Boston: Twayne Publishers.
- Urdiales Shaw, M.. 2000. *Ethnic Identities in Bernard Malamud's Fiction*. Oviedo: Servicio de Publicaciones de la Universidad de Oviedo.
- Wade, S. 1999. *Jewish American Literature since 1945*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.